

The Write Place At the Write Time

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"Knowledge" by Jan Selman; <http://jancollinselman.com/GardenGallery/TheGardenGallery.html>

Welcome to our Fiction section!

Featured Stories:

"A Soldier on the Field"- by Linda Emma

"Ungiftable"- by Stephanie Haddad

"Fragile Things"- by Nicole M. Bouchard

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"Gold Rush"- by Ilan Herman

"Green Satin"- by Meagan Dwyer

Editor's Note: Please note that the following story contains adult content, therefore it is PG-13. "A Soldier on the Field", will be published in installments. Ms. Emma's previous story, "Jump the Gun", ended in the spring issue. This is part one of "A Soldier on the Field". Enjoy!

A Soldier On The Field

by Linda Emma

At twelve, Denny Hall was 5'10" and towering over the kids at recess. In high school, he was the 6'3", 185 pound starting wide receiver for the Jasmine Jaguars. By the time he was a senior he'd caught 112 passes, ran for 2,464 yards and made 38 touchdowns. He also broke the school record for the 100 yard dash in track and led the relay team to Ohio's state competitions.

Denny was an athlete, born for it. Seasoned for it too -by the rigors of rural life on a barely sustainable family farm south of Cleveland. Denny and his two brothers lived under full sovereignty of an unflinching disciplinarian who held a black-and-white vision of the world and everyone in it. Aaron Hall had a chiseled sense of right and wrong and unwavering priorities that started with work, family, God, school. Football didn't even make the first cut. But, as long as it didn't interfere with real life, his boys were welcome to it.

On the field, Denny was grace and speed. Off the field, he was an unassuming shadow with a lanky gait and a slouching posture. Tight muscled, and brown-haired, he had green eyes with thick brows over a nose askew from a break, and a mouth with teeth jammed in a little too tightly. He was quiet, holding back a reservoir of words he seemed reluctant to use up, as if he might be saving them for a time when he'd really need them. He didn't need them on the farm. Or on the field. Rarely did he need them in class. His teachers' expectations of him had little to do with his classroom performance. Even among the girls who flickered about him like the fire flies in summer fields, he needn't use up any extraneous syllables. The girls would be there whether he spoke or not.

Attending college wasn't something Denny thought about. It wasn't that he was a bad student. He liked to read. In the summer, he'd tote a paperback to the fields, consuming the passages like the quenching gulps he'd take from the trickling stream that bordered their land. In the folds of the stories were people he would never meet, places he would never go. He liked knowing they were out there, just the same. The other subjects in school, however, didn't hold much interest for him. Maybe it was because no one seemed to think he would care about atoms and molecules, wars and treaties, cosines and tangents.

Only his English teacher seemed hell-bent that he meet Hamlet, that he know Carl Sandburg, Ernest Hemingway. She was pretty insistent upon it, too. And so, whatever book she discreetly slid upon his desk, whether it was assigned, whether anyone else seemed to be reading it or not, he'd pick it up and read it. Whatever it was.

No, college wasn't in his plans.

Not until that is. George Rafferty witnessed Denny Hall grab a bullet of a pass

NOT until, that is, GEORGE RAFFERTY witnessed Denny Hall grab a bullet of a pass intended for a short yardage play and turn it into a 45 yard blazing, detouring, straddling, hurdling race into the end zone. That play brought Denny's game total yardage to 184.

Rafferty hadn't been looking for Denny, had never even heard of the kid.

His job that day as Assistant Coach for Ohio State was to check out the opposing quarterback, a mid-level star that was on the short list of potential freshman recruits. He and his team were supposed to trounce the Jaguars. Would have too. If anyone had bothered to tell Denny that was the plan.

Denny enrolled at Ohio State amidst the turbulence of American college life in the 1960's. Surrounded by it, yet insulated from it, Denny remained naively unaware of what measures had been taken on his behalf.

Thanks to football and Coach Rafferty's finesse at filling out draft deferral forms, Denny could spend the next four years fighting on a football field instead of a battle field. Even the classes for which he was registered were handled adroitly by Rafferty to ensure that Denny spent most of his time where he belonged: on the gridiron.

Transition from rural to urban life had caught Denny only mildly unawares. Since football was the flood in which he was submerged from the second he stepped cleated-foot onto college campus, his chances to critically observe his surroundings were minimal. Football, his team and Coach Rafferty consumed most all of his waking moments.

The pieces of his life he could still claim as his own were few and isolated. Among them was his daily regimen of a solitary pre-dawn run about the perimeter of the quietly sprawling campus. At home, Denny had always started his day with silent laps around the family farm before tackling the preschool chore list. Lulled by the rhythmic beat of his heart, his feet and the unlabored exhale of his misty breath, Denny could have as easily been plodding through those dew soaked fields of home as through the city oasis he was now coming to understand to be his new home.

The throbbing, coursing heart of his new residence was the massive horseshoe

The throbbing, coursing heart of his new residence was the massive horseshoe-shaped stadium that held no resemblance whatsoever to the television field he'd seen on his friend's 13" black and white Zenith. When Denny first emerged from its cavernous entrails into the body of its golden sunlit sea of gently swaying grasses, he was awestruck. Outside of the skies that dipped to the reaching crops of the rolling farmlands near home, it was bigger than anything Denny had ever seen in his life. He was paralyzed.

And then someone tossed him a football.

And he was home again.

She had seen him on mornings even before the frost had melted into the day, sitting in his denim bottoms and flannel over white t-shirt, beneath one of two trees, always quietly reading, always alone. He seemed oblivious to his environment, the climate and the crowd.

Occasionally, she would venture close enough to catch the titles or the authors: Hawthorne, Miller, Steinbeck, Thoreau, Shakespeare, Wilde, Shaw. There appeared no connection from one to the next, no literary link that bound them all. He seemed to consume them, with satiating ease, like warm liquid on a cool day, in a quiet private reverie. She wondered which course offered such a diverse bounty and yet was reluctant to intrude upon his self-imposed exile.

Maria Colantone was the first of her family to attend college. The daughter of immigrant parents, it was assumed that she would follow along the path trod by her older sisters and continue to stock shelves, ring at the register and greet the customers of her family's small Italian market just off Murray Hill Road in Cleveland. Her father Victor worked hard, long hours, with his wife at his side, to build a tiny business to a thriving market, indispensable to the scores of Italian Americans who daily pushed open their doors. This was success. This was a legacy that he could render proudly to his four daughters. And obligingly, they all agreed.

Except Maria.

From the time she was a baby, Maria gobbled knowledge like food, its sustenance more satisfying. She spoke earlier, read earlier, understood more

sustenance more satisfying. She spoke earlier, read earlier, understood more and sooner than her sisters. She asked more questions and when her parents couldn't provide the answers, successfully sought them out on her own. Happily, she shared her discoveries. Slowly, her parents, her sisters realized that even in her baby steps she was leaps ahead of them.

When Maria, propped up on the stool that allowed her to reach the cash register in their market, told her father one morning that she was going to be a teacher, he just stared at her. In another time, with another child, he would have rebuked the notion. As a father, he had been what his had been to him: stern, emotionless, protective, proprietary. But over the years, engulfed in the blanket of warmth the women in his life had woven, his armor had begun to melt.

“A teacher, huh?”

Maria nodded with confidence.

“Yes, a teacher,” she replied.

In the fall after graduation Maria started at Ohio State. To the idea of his youngest daughter attending college, Victor had finally warmed. To the notion that she would be living away, he had not. Even the scholarship Ohio State was offering was of no enticement to him. He had to be worn down, over time, like the warped spot under Maria's scraping chair at the register. With the gentle but persistent prodding of Maria's mother and sisters, Victor had finally, reluctantly, given in.

Her major would be education, its evolution from elementary concentration to secondary, as natural a progression as the content of her academics became more focused on the subject matters that she most loved. Pulling a grammar school student past Dick and Jane could not measure against the significance to her of opening a young mind to the characters of Dickens, the sonnets of Shakespeare or the passions of Heathcliff and Catherine.

Eventually Maria would be compelled to intrude upon the quiet stranger, to inquire which course so fully offered an abundance of writers. And as surprised as she was to learn that the rotating volumes were of his own choosing, she was

more astonished by the contrast of boy to book. Denny was a pleasant surprise against the back drop of hippies and heroes that regularly invaded the campus vistas. He seemed a black and white photo against the psychedelic haze of reefer smoke wafting through the night air of the commons.

Maria connected to Denny not merely as a kindred soul. The budding educator in her sensed in Denny an untested student in the infancy of his intellectualism. She was befuddled by his course selections and eager to rectify the blatant oversights on his behalf. Didn't he know all that the college had to offer? How could a boy with Shakespeare in his heart be relegated to the abridged novels touted in his rudimentary courses?

Denny, in turn, had never met anyone like Maria. Her mahogany hair was long, wavy and wildly full, her brown eyes so dark that only in bright sunlight did they not appear black and her skin was a deep olive. She was such an anomaly to his world that Denny turned to his books for a familiar reference. She was James Fenimore Cooper's Cora Monro, raven-haired, dark-eyed and independent. She was Victor Hugo's dancing and impassioned Esmeralda, swarthy but golden with great black "eyes of flame." Against Denny's silent self-control, Maria was bold and effusive confidence. To his unambivalent focus, she was plunging and chaotic passion. Maria was the pin tumbler to unlock the emerging man inside of Denny. With the patient determination of a scientist, she excavated his layers, slowly, painstakingly, and was pleasantly astounded by the treasures she unearthed.

Denny and Maria took college in through their pores: the courses, the rallies, the debates and the football games. The Ohio State Buckeyes were emerging undefeated, knocking down even number one ranked Purdue. The air was full of excitement and expectation. Maria became Denny's most avid fan, jumping up and down at the sidelines with a chant of O-H-I-O, chiming in as the band played Hang On Sloopy. When Denny was presented with a small gold football trouser charm after their victory against Michigan, he bought a matching chain and presented it to Maria. He manipulated the tiny clasp and placed it around her neck and she never took it off.

"I don't understand how you can think this is the right thing to do," Maria said, trying not to raise her voice.

“I know you don’t, but it is,” Denny replied.

“With all that’s going on now, with everything you know, how can you possibly think that this war is right?”

“That’s not it and you know it,” Denny pleaded. He came to her side and sat down on the bed, took her hands in his and looked into her eyes.

“I’ve got to do the right thing,” he said.

“How is going over there and maybe getting yourself killed the right thing?”

“It isn’t fair how I’m not there. I gotta do right.”

“Denny, please. It isn’t right. There isn’t anything right about it. Maybe you’re here for a reason, maybe-“

“I’m here because somebody cheated. Someone got me out of doing what I’m supposed to be doing. I’ve got to go,” he said with finality.

Maria shook her head and succumbed to sobs. Denny held her and rocked her until she quieted.

Maria spent days and then weeks researching the Vietnam War. She presented Denny with an arsenal of answers against his participation in such a travesty. She had facts and figures, proof, she insisted. Denny did not have to go.

And when her arguments couldn’t sway him, when her impassioned pleas could not prevail against the black-and-white beginnings of his life she played her last card: herself. Couldn’t he see that if he went away, fought in a war that wasn’t right, that he might never come back to her?

Before he fully opened his dorm room door, Denny’s senses were struck with the light, the scent, the sounds. He flicked the light switch, to no response, but rather than tense at the anomaly, he entered, unguarded.

His room was aglow with candles burning from every surface, the air heavily scented with incense, Diana Ross sweetly crooning "...you came into my heart, so tenderly, with a burning love..."

Seated on Denny's neatly made bed, Maria looked up from her book and smiled. She wore denim cut-offs and Denny's bulky Buckeyes sweatshirt.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

Maria closed her book, got up and came to Denny. She reached up, put her arms around his neck and kissed him. She pulled from the kiss, her arms still about him and smiled warmly.

"This is a nice surprise," he said, smiling back.

While Maria had become a familiar face at Townshend Hall and was as comfortable in Denny's dorm room as he was, she'd never appeared unannounced, and certainly not before him.

"And I got us dinner," Maria said.

Denny looked over to the rumbled bed of his roommate, where a sealed pizza box sat waiting.

"I thought I was taking you out to dinner."

"And I thought it would be nicer if we ate in," Maria said, pecking Denny on the cheek and pulling away. She busied herself with the paper plates and napkins, bottled cokes.

She opened the pizza box and pulled slices for each of them and handed one off to Denny. Denny pulled off his jacket and slid onto the bed, the pizza on his lap. He glanced at the book beside him.

"Anything good?"

Maria came and sat next to him. She nodded.

“You’d like it.”

Denny was an indiscriminate reader, and Maria knew that even if she did not like the book, Denny probably would. Often in the novels she found unimaginative or trite, plodding or predictable, Denny was able to find hidden qualities. It was the way he was with people, too, Maria thought. She couldn’t think of anyone Denny didn’t like.

As they finished eating, Diana started singing from the beginning of the album again.

“Do you want to listen to something else?” Maria asked getting up and clearing the empty plates.

“I don’t care,” Denny answered, leafing through a copy of *The Lantern* and leaning into the propped up pillows of the bed.

Maria covered the remaining slices of pizza on a plate with a napkin and tossed the trash and empty box in the pail under Denny’s desk. She came to Denny and cuddled next to him, moving her closed book aside. Denny folded the newspaper, and put his arm around her.

“Do you want to go out?” he asked. “Catch a movie?”

Maria shook her head.

“What do you want to do?”

Maria was silent, but reached from the crook of his arm to give him a soft kiss.

“That’s always fun,” Denny said, grinning.

Maria rolled from his embrace and sat on her knees, facing him. She looked intently into his eyes.

“What?”

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too,” he answered, satisfied with the simple solution to what he thought would be a puzzle.

Maria broke from his gaze, and took Denny’s hands in hers. She stared down at the long fingers, kneaded the softening calluses of his palms. Trading farm tools for a football full-time had changed more than his hands. Denny gently squeezed the small, warm hands in his. He stayed quiet. Denny had learned to wait out her recent silences. When they had first starting going out, Denny had been amazed at her energy and the guilelessness with which she shared her world. She was open and honest and seemed to include Denny in her most treasured dreams and prodded him to do the same. At the beginning, the only lapses in their conversations were when Denny was contemplating the answer to a query he’d never before considered or when they were both together reading or studying.

Now, they retreated often to the respective recesses of their minds; there were fears in the darkness that neither of them cared to share with the other.

Maria looked up.

“I don’t want you to go,” she said simply.

“I know.”

This was the impasse at which they’d settled. No more words were necessary.

Maria was on her knees. She raised herself, brought her hand to Denny’s cheek and kissed him long and slow. Denny responded, bringing his fingers to the nape of her neck, entwining them in the folds of her long, thick hair. Maria sat back; Denny was smiling, playing at the back of her ear. She gave a small smile but her eyes belied her sadness. She pulled farther away but before Denny could question the move, she brought her arms criss-cross to the bottom of her

sweatshirt, lifted and peeled the hulking mass away to reveal the white of her breasts against her taut and tanned torso.

Denny froze in place, the saliva in his mouth pooling at the back of his throat. He swallowed, hard.

“Ria,” he started, trying not to look at the tight, pointed nipples of her small round breasts.

Maria reached out and touched his lips.

This was something they had talked about -many times. Now, Denny silently wished he'd been more forthcoming about the inadequacy of his training. The only girl he'd been with was the girl from town, the one to whom they'd all lost their virginity. Abetted even with the wellspring of her experience, his was a fumbling effort. He had been inept and embarrassed.

Maria took his hand and brought it to her breast, kneading it gently into her. Denny struggled to control his breathing, the accelerating beat of his heart.

“Ria, I thought-” he started.

“It's okay,” she said, bending in toward him and kissing him.

“It's what I want,” she added.

She kissed him again, harder, circling her tongue inside his mouth. Denny melted into the kiss, felt for Maria's hardened nipple, taking it between his thumb and forefinger, desperate to be gentle, in control. She slid her hand down the contours of his chest to his muscled abdomen, pulling at his t-shirt and letting her hand touch tight skin and fine hairs. Denny felt himself tense with anticipation. Maria reached down farther, fully cupping the rock trapped in the denim constraints of Denny's jeans. He let out a moan, and with it the damn of his own restraint was released.

She refused to play out their last scene at a bus terminal.

When Denny descended the stairs from University Hall after his last final, Maria was waiting for him. She took his hand, gave him a kiss and pulled him along.

“My surprise?” Denny asked.

He had been forewarned of it.

She nodded, smiled.

As they threaded their way through the parking lot, Denny resisted the urge to ask where they were going. When Maria stopped in front of a red Plymouth Valiant, Denny again waited for some clue that made sense.

She opened the driver’s door of the car, got in and put the key in the ignition. Denny just stood, waiting.

“C’mon,” she said.

Denny’s palms were spread in an opened faced gesture toward the automobile.

“Ria?”

“I borrowed it,” Maria said, closing the door and starting the engine.

Denny came around the passenger’s side and slide across the plaid vinyl seat.

Maria had told him not to ask any questions, but he was struggling to maintain his silence.

“From who?” he asked.

“Whom. A friend.”

A guy, Denny thought trying to let go of the uncomfortable feeling he got any time Maria brought up her assortment of friends.

“No hints?” he asked.

Maria gestured toward the back seat.

“I packed you a bag,” she said.

Denny smiled, nodded. He scooted closer to her, put his hand on her leg.

“I didn’t even know you knew how to drive,” Denny said.

“I do,” Maria answered as she pressed the gear button and backed out of the space.

After an hour’s drive of comfortable conversation and silences, Denny tried again.

“How ‘bout another hint?”

Maria laughed.

“I’m kidnapping you,” she answered.

Denny tensed, if only slightly and Maria felt the change. She glanced at him.

“Only the illusion of it, dear,” she assured, “...only make-believe.”

The one rule Maria had set forth before their excursion was that neither of them would talk about where he was going or what he would have to do. She knew the turmoil within her played just as furiously within Denny. She also knew that there would be nothing to change his decision.

“We’ll play twenty questions.” Maria started.

“Is it bigger than a bread box?”

“Do you really want to waste your first question?”

“No, no,” Denny answered, playfully. “Don’t count that one.”

Denny and Maria rode north, following the shoreline of Lake Erie, to a lakeside port. They reveled in a weekend of play, of making love, of swimming and fishing. They picnicked at the base of a lighthouse, then climbed its spiral staircase to take in expansive views of Kelleys and South Bass Island, Sandusky Bay and the rest of Lake Erie. Maria even convinced the marina’s owner that they were qualified to rent one of his boats, in spite of their lack of experience. They anchored out on the lake and quietly read together as their vessel bobbed in the reflecting sunlight. The weather could not have cooperated more, a pair of perfect, warm days, clear cool evenings. They relished even in the Sunday morning drizzle for the excuse it granted them to remain entwined in the sheets for just a little longer.

When Denny insisted on treating them both to a lavish dinner before they returned to campus, they sipped the wine the waiter had chosen for them and melted into the lush fabric seats of the fine restaurant. However, in the lapses of silence, uneasiness crept. When the appetizer arrived, Maria could get past only the first bite. And Denny knew. When the waiter came to take the rest of their order, Denny ordered only the check.

(End of this installment. To be continued...)

Ungiftable

by Stephanie Haddad

The newly-married Mr. and Mrs. Wayne P. McIntyre sat on their hotel bed and opened the gift. It was addressed to them from a distant aunt, on Wayne’s side, and wrapped in an ornately beautiful blue paper. Shirley tossed the paper onto a crumpled pile of wedding wrappings and split open the unmarked brown box. Together, they stared at its contents.

“What an unusual gift,” Shirley mused. Man and wife shrugged nonchalantly and put the box aside into a pile of gifts that would be

nonchalantly and put the box aside, into a pile of gifts that would be dragged back to their home. The gift was left forgotten in an unused bedroom.

Months later, a late-night cleaning of their home uncovered the dusty box. Shirley opened it again, raised an eyebrow and shut the box tightly. Remembering the upcoming wedding of an acquaintance, Shirley dug out a leftover gift bag and wrapped the present again. At the end of the month, Mr. and Mrs. Wayne P. McIntyre brought it to the reception hall and left it on the gift table, where it lay awash in a sea of eccentrically adorned packages.

Several days after the wedding, the newly-married Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Walters sat on their living room floor unwrapping gifts until they came to the last present, contained in an ivory gift bag from Wayne and Shirley. Rebecca peaked into the tissue paper, and scrunched up her nose in disappointment.

Thomas said, politely, "Let's make sure to send them a 'Thank You' card."

This time, the gift stayed inside its decorative bag and wound up tucked into a lonely corner of the third floor attic, where it spent the better part of five years. Then one day Rebecca cleaned out the attic so that contractors could lay down new flooring. When she came upon the gift, she chuckled, remembering her initial response.

The next weekend, she brought it to a Yankee Swap game at her neighbor's Christmas party. Suzy Frank, attracted by the shiny red paper that Rebecca had used, selected the gift and eagerly unwrapped it. Instantly, she recoiled, muttering obscenities before tossing it away.

"Now remember, Suzy," teased Rebecca. "You have to take home what you open!"

No one swapped gifts with her, although Suzy made every effort to negotiate, even offering a payoff for someone to take away the unpleasant gift. Finally, she begrudgingly took the gift home with her and assigned it a damp, dark corner of the garage.

Ten years later, Suzy sold her home and made plans to move abroad, intending to hold a yard sale to make extra money and cover the moving expenses. Her family was helping to clean out the garage one spring day, when her daughter suddenly gasped.

“What on earth is this?” she cried. “Where did it come from?”

Suzy shooed her away, took the item from her hands and placed it into the SELL pile. Two weeks later, the Frank family held their yard sale and made almost \$500. Yet there, on a small table of leftovers, sat the gift – dusty, moldy and unloved. Suzy left it on the curb for trash pick-up the next morning...

As Suzy cleared the trash and clutter from the yard, a woman and her daughter pulled up in front of the house. They got out of the car and began rifling through the mountain of unsold goods, studying the graying stuffed animals and beaten paperbacks with intent. Suddenly, the young girl shrieked with delight, plunging her hands into the bottom of the box.

“I love it!” she exclaimed, extracting the gift from the rubble. Smiling, she turned to her mother, who gazed back at the gift in shocked disbelief. The light refracted through the blue glass and painted a rainbow across the pavement. “May I keep it, Mommy?”

Suzy nodded to the mother, who then smiled at her daughter.

“Yes, Molly. Say thank you to the nice lady,” she said. She didn’t want it, but when Shirley saw the happiness in her young daughter’s eyes, she knew she’d never dissuade her. And how Wayne would laugh when he laid eyes on their discovery! At least now, after all these years, Shirley knew it would have a place in their home.

Someone finally wanted the gift.

Fragile Things

By Nicole M. Bouchard

Fragile things, faded gold rings, twisted metal wings, all become dangerous when they break/ Silent fare, dresses I wear, solemn “I swear”, are there for the heart to ache/ A tumultuous vow is ancient now, where dark secrets of vows lie in your shadowy wake/ Things we made, things that fade, things our lives permanently delayed, sit in the valise you’ll want to take/ Fragile things become dangerous when they break/ Listen for the crash and disruption they will make/

The poem watched their world from between its weathered blue covers. Up on a bookshelf not so high, it saw what was coming before they could feel it. Unnoticed, scarcely read, there it blazed with its message on the white shelf which rested against the white wall in the white house with the white picket fence on Gardener Lane. Its place was particularly observant being between the study and the kitchen. It saw breakfast, lunch and dinner, heard the distracted lulls in the conversations, and later it would hear the furtive phone calls in the study.

It all began the morning that the clock in the kitchen stopped. No one had really noticed the ticking because it had become such a part of their daily life. But not the husband, wife, son or two daughters went without hearing its absence that morning. Mr. Edgrave valiantly offered to be the one to fix it, though when Mrs. Edgrave went dutifully searching through their supply draw

like a magician's assistant, her wavy hair falling to one side like a curtain as she bent prettily over the draw, she discovered that they had no more AA batteries. Ean Edgrave had to drive back to campus for a lecture, Marianne Edgrave was busy painting her face with make-up for another day of warfare at high school, and Lilly Edgrave was to be driven by her mother to ballet lessons. The responsibility of picking up new batteries fell to Mr. Edgrave who happened to take his lunch hour at a mall food court near his law office. Pleasantly, the family members bid one another good day without kisses and hugs or other overt time-wasting gestures.

Twelve o'clock came around all too soon and Mr. Edgrave put down the phone. His stomach growled and his head ached from the run around he was receiving on the Gibbon's life insurance case. While meticulously neatening his papers on the desk before he went to lunch, he stopped for a moment to glance at the picture of his family from their European vacation the previous year. It was damp, cool, and drizzling that day in London. The girls, along with their mother, had insisted upon taking advantage of the London locations of their favorite stores, scooping up clothes items that weren't available in the U.S. He and Ean took advantage of the pubs and they all met up later at the hotel with silly childish grins and matted-down hair. That was the moment the photo was taken. Right there in the lobby, his little world made sense in that snapshot. In his office, he smiled before grabbing his black trench coat and headed for the door.

In line at the electronics store, he drummed his feet agitatedly. He had thought when he saw the display of batteries up front, that this would be an easy errand. Suddenly two long lines emerged out of nowhere and he was in back of a small throng of loud teenagers. Desperately wanting to avoid their flailing arms and crude antics, he switched lines. Now it was just two business men and an older Chinese woman in front of him. A pronounced snuffle and a sudden flush of intense floral perfume in the air made him wonder if one of the teenagers had gotten into his line behind him out of pure spite. He turned slightly and saw what appeared to be a young woman in her twenties crying into her cell phone.

"I know," she said hoarsely, "...that son of a bitch was supposed to pay it until I got on mv feet... No. I haven't heard back from the gallerv vet. Would I be

calling you if I had? No...yeah, I'm sorry. I'm just flipping out over here. Tell me if mom calls you. I don't want her to know about this, ok? Alright. Talk to you later... Love you too. Bye."

Awkwardly, she wiped the running eyeliner with the back of her slender porcelain hands. Digging through her purse, items falling onto the floor, it occurred to him that she might be looking for tissues. He thought about the packet he had stowed in the inner right breast pocket of his coat. It wasn't like him to get involved in others' affairs.

Yet she kept sniffing and searching and it started to seem ludicrous to ignore it. "Tissue?" he said, turning slightly to face her. As he turned, he saw that had he stayed in the other line he would have been well on his way to lunch by now. The annoyance was apparent on his face.

"Yeah, sorry. Just a rough day," she mumbled.

He turned his attention back to her. "Oh, no problem. I'm just realizing that I chose the wrong line... not because of you, of course... but..."

She looked up at him through her long auburn bangs. "I get it. Don't worry about it. Um, thanks for the tissues by the way."

He returned her smile and turned to face forward again. It was his turn to be rung up next. Placing the batteries and the money on the counter, he felt suddenly self-conscious with the intense gray pair of eyes on his back. "In a rush?" the clerk asked cheerfully. "To lunch," he responded with an obligatory grin. He gathered his change and dashed out of the store without so much as a glance behind him.

Once in the food court he could refocus on the task at hand. A salami sandwich piled high with onions, lettuce and tomatoes cured his hunger. It was very nearly inhaled and washed down with decaffeinated iced tea. He sat back in his wiry metal chair and relaxed. The sun came in brilliantly through the glass ceiling framed by large chrome beams. Part of what he enjoyed about his time in the food court was watching strangers from every walk of life drift by with their purchases, carriages, dilemmas and charged dialects. As his gaze swent

the crowd, it unwillingly singled in on the auburn-haired girl from the electronics store. She was a few tables away, working through the small pile of tissues he had given her. A neglected Asian salad rested near her elbow. He felt a strange obligation to her from the simple exchange they'd shared. It was only a few words between strangers, but there was recognition between them now. She'd surely notice if he walked by without saying anything else. Had no one else in the busy mall stopped to ask if she was alright?

Against his normal rather private inclinations, he made his way over to her. "Lunch not going so well either?" he asked.

Without looking up, she answered, "Not as well as yours, Mr. Tissues. You wouldn't happen to have another one would you?"

As he handed her the fourth tissue of the hour, her fingertips lingered on his for a moment. He dismissed it as a general human outreaching for sympathy. Her high-heeled boot pushed out the chair across from her. He took it with a quick glance at his watch for permission. Fifteen minutes left. Three minutes to the office. Doable.

"It just happened so fast!" she began. The sudden outpouring startled him initially, though he knew it was the penalty for accepting the seat.

"...so he leaves me flat out for someone else with kids and after promising to pay the rent of the apartment until I can either get on my feet or find another roommate, he tells me this morning that I'm on my own. He has more money than God and he knows that I'm struggling to launch my art career right now. I can't move home and my sister's married. I know I'll find another job, but I would kill for one of my paintings to sell right now and I can't believe I wasted my time thinking that we'd end up together... Wow- that's a lot to unload on a stranger. Consider yourself my hero and I'll take you out to lunch tomorrow to make up for me blabbing like this today. Really, it was so great to talk it out with somebody."

Five minutes.

"So lunch same time tomorrow same place?" It seemed innocent enough and

So, lunch, same time tomorrow, same place. It seemed innocent enough and he had listened.

“Lunch,” he echoed.

She rose from her seat and stuck out her hand. “Rosemary.” It wasn’t an exotic name exactly, but somehow it fit her.

He went to introduce himself as Mr. Edgrave, but decided it was too formal and patronizing. “I’m Luke.” Five of his forty-five years felt fallen away simply by using his first name in an introduction.

Back in his office, he felt nearly suffocated by the sparseness of his walls, though it had never affected him in such a way before. Images of colors splashing against the tan paint like waves muddled his mind once or twice between meetings that afternoon.

Mrs. Edgrave noted the usual silences during dinner. She kept them in a secret chart in her mind where the overall continuity of each day was accounted for. “Lilly sprained her toe today, I’m afraid.” Lilly looked over at her father and proudly tried to lift her foot above the table to illustrate her mother’s story. Mr. Edgrave, his cheek resting in the palm of his hand didn’t respond. His eyes were tracing the edges of silvery gray around the edge of his plate. Lilly had wiggled her foot enough and lowered it now, losing interest.

“Lukas!” his wife called, shattering his meditative state.

“Oh, sorry honey, what happened?”

It was a little lapse at best and the children continued eating in earnest but Mrs. Edgrave tucked it away in a side pocket before enthusiastically telling the story again.

Twelve o’clock came too slowly the next day. Mr. Edgrave had been positioning and repositioning the pens and pencils in the bronze holder on his desk since quarter of. He listened to them twirl around the sides of the holder that kept them all together. When his phone beeped at five of twelve, the easy rhythm and balance he had attained while twirling the holder on its corner was broken

and balance he had attained while twirling the holder on its corner was broken and they tumbled out over the surface of the desk. The beep belonged to a text message from his secretary that his next meeting would be postponed until two. Absently, he grabbed his coat and headed out the door even as errant writing utensils rolled off the top of his desk onto the floor.

It was a dark rainy day in sharp contrast to the previous afternoon. He was standing in the food court five minutes earlier than agreed upon, yet she was already there. She waved when she saw him. Again, her high-heeled boot had pushed out the chair across from her. Her bangs were swept back with the rest of her hair into a messy French twist, tendrils delicately framing the gray eyes that had been mostly hidden the day before. His breath caught in his throat. She was beautiful obviously, in the typical way that actresses in magazines were beautiful. He felt he couldn't be blamed for noticing what the blind would have seen.

"You must be a glutton for punishment if you're coming back after yesterday's episode..."

He smiled as he sat down. "I believe I was promised lunch."

She sighed and pursed her glossy coral lips. "You must be one big fan of lunch then," she said quietly, leaning forward on the table slightly. "So, what's your pleasure? Italian or Chinese?"

"I think I'll try the salad you wouldn't eat the other day."

"Mmm," she purred, "...good choice. Me too."

They talked more than they ate, finding the fact that they had absolutely nothing in common delightful. Somehow "father of three" didn't come up in the conversation, but the sparseness of his office walls did.

"I know what you mean. Once you're exposed to it, art is a thing you can't help but hunger for. It's like any other obsession. You could die trying to have just a little more of it... But I'll have to look at the space to help you choose the perfect piece. You think that would be ok?" He knew he had ample space in the day.

“You’re the expert,” he said shyly, shoving the weight of the invitation back onto her shoulders. She rose from the table.

“Say when,” she replied playfully.

“When.”

He introduced her at the office as an interior art consultant. She loved the title and said that she ought to make business cards for herself with that on it in bright purple italics. Once in his office, however, she became eerily quiet as though she was putting her ear to the very pulse of the surroundings. Her long fingers stroked fabrics and textures as her eyes scanned the surface of the walls.

After a few minutes or so, she declared that she had something for him. “I want it to be you, but with another dimension.” He found it thrilling to think that there was more than one dimension to him that someone could see...that even he could come to see as though she was painting him to be more interesting, stroke by stroke.

“I could bring by some samples, but if you don’t mind, I’d rather surprise you.”

“That’s fine. How much would a painting that size cost?”

“One night out at a concert. I want to give you the full experience of the art so you see it, hear it, feel it, smell it, taste it... What do you say? It’s a great low-key crowd, great food, and the music is like nothing you’ve ever heard.”

Though he earned a good living, good enough to support the waterfront Victorian he owned with his wife and his updated Thunderbird convertible, what he would have been willing to pay for one of her paintings unnerved him. “Why is it so important to you that I have the artistic experience?”

She grinned and looked up at the cakey, white swirled ceiling above them. “It’s not worth living without.”

Mrs. Edgrave stood at the sink chopping vegetables a week later. She knew that her husband had a late business dinner meeting that night but she couldn’t

Her husband had a late business dinner meeting that night, but she couldn't help but think that he'd be hungry when he came home. Lawyers' dinners never pleased him; he normally came home irritable and exhausted, pillaging through the fridge like a wild animal from the woods behind their home. The last time she went with him to one of his work functions was twenty-four years ago when he proposed. She had on a sapphire blue silk gown and her black hair was smoothed back tightly into an elegant bun. Of course with his burgeoning career, he was a safe choice, but had he been a starving actor, she doubted very much if her decision would have been different. There was a charming, laid-back spark to him that made him separate from his peers. In remembering the details of his young face, she absentmindedly slid the knife across one her fingers. The sharp pain shocked her back to the present and she chided herself for having been so careless. The wound was not deep, but the running water from the faucet drove the trickled blood down the finger to her wedding ring, temporarily washing the stone with red.

He arrived late the night of the concert. He had to stop at his office and change out of his suit into jeans and a lighter oxford shirt. His reflection in the men's room mirror displeased him. In his opinion, he looked older than half the people there. Nervously, he had scanned the perimeter numerous times thinking his son or his son's friends could be in the crowd. Cupping some water in his hands, he splashed it through his hair while his fingers tousled the front. He hated to lie to his wife, but it was too small of a transgression to upset her with the truth.

It didn't take long to locate Rosemary because she was on the side of the stage talking with a male band member with shaggy blonde hair and a tie-dyed tee-shirt. The lights dimmed to blue and purple and the show began. He felt Rosemary's hand on the small of his back as she led him to a bright red curved booth with candles on the table. As the ethereal music began he felt his nervousness melting away as he gave into the sensations of the sound. The songs wound their way around his mind speaking of gods and goddesses, myths, lost love, and deceit. Drums matched the beat of his heart and despite the fact that he had only had one beer with his meal, he felt positively drunk. The haunting lyrics echoed beautifully in his ear as Rosemary sang along quietly beside him.

Her shoulder leaned into him and her crossed legs allowed for her purple

her shoulder leaned into him and her crossed legs allowed for her purple sandals to nudge into his left shin time to time. His watch forgot to warn him of the time, and it was eleven before Rosemary reminded him that he ought to be getting home.

Three days after the concert he looked a wreck in his office. His eyes were bloodshot and sleepless, his clothes were disheveled and he hadn't shaved. His fifteen year old Marianne took no small pleasure in poking fun at his appearance over breakfast. Ean had left too early to notice, and Lilly cared about nothing else besides her best friend's, Sissy Warbank's, Barbie doll party. Mrs. Edgrave scolded Marianne and told her to respect that her father's job was stressful, yet she did not respond when he said goodbye to her that morning. He surmised that she hadn't heard him, but that hardly mattered at the moment. Staring at his phone, willing it ring, had yielded nothing for seventy-two hours. The blank wall across from his desk seemed to be taunting him.

When he had finally succumbed to the silence and ignored the constant music playing in his head, his phone rang. "Lucas, are you prepared for Gibbons tomorrow? You weren't there for the brief this morning and I didn't receive an update yet, so what's going on?" His boss's voice sounded stern and unimpressed with his performance as of late.

Quickly, he regrouped. "Yeah, Bob, I'm on it. I've just immersed myself in it so much lately that I forgot to give you a call and I apologize for that. But absolutely, I'm set for tomorrow. No worries."

How could he have forgotten to prep for the meeting? He was bullshitting his boss, but it seemed to work well enough paired with the evidence of his usual work ethic.

"Great. Just checking in. See you tomorrow afternoon, Lucas."

With his head in hands, his fingertips massaging his forehead, he nearly didn't notice the buzzing of the incoming call. Hesitantly, he picked up hoping that it wasn't one of his colleagues. "Luke?" The feminine voice was cheerful and familiar, but he could hardly answer in kind because part of him felt neglected.

Rosemary heard his hesitation. "I have the painting ready. I just needed a few

Rosemary heard his hesitation. "I have the painting ready. I just needed a few more days with it, but it's all set. Can I bring it by your office? Maybe now?"

"Yeah. That would be ok. See you soon." He clasped the phone shut and tossed it back on the desk. Knowing that he had to get his head on straight, he resolved that this would be a short visit, and he took to rifling through his desk for the Gibbons documents. He was reading through the folder when she came in.

Glancing over the top of it when she knocked on the door, he gave her a quick polite smile. It was when he closed the folder completely that he took in the vision that stood before him. Her hair was wild, wavy and loose with layers touching the outer lines of her pouty lips gone over with a peachy-nude matte lipstick. Her eyes were rimmed in charcoal gray that matched the fitted pencil skirt that hugged her curves and drew subtle attention to her legs beneath the knee. The blouse was low and black but only revealed a hint of the sensuality that lay beneath it. Leaning against the door frame with her ankles daintily crossed, she held the painting wrapped in brown paper against her side.

"You still want it?" she asked, slyly nudging the painting forward on her hip. He walked over to her and took the painting from her hands, ripping off the brown paper as hard as he dared, his blood rising to his skin. She helped him lift to the wall and properly hang it. It took his breath away when he stared at it in full. The colors were deliberate, sensuous, waving and twisting like ballooning silk sleeves in the wind. Violet, turquoise and a delicate maroon streamed out amongst silver lightening.

"God. How much was this priced at in the gallery?" She stood back against his desk right alongside him.

"This? No, this one wasn't in the gallery... I made it for you. That's why it took a little while... So- is it you?"

Staring at the painting wasn't like staring at his soul. It was like staring at what his soul could be if he fulfilled every dream, past and present, of the man he wanted to be. He couldn't describe it because no words would come. What came instead was a visceral, instinctual reaction of his body, his mouth pressed to hers, his hands in her hair. There was no check in the way she held him, no

to hers, his hands in her hair. There was no shock in the way she held him, no resistance or surprise. As the folder of his most important case crashed to the floor off the top of the desk and scattered, he felt his conscious reason go with it.

As Mrs. Edgrave folded her husband's khaki pants into his suitcase, she couldn't help but feel the tension that had replaced the delicate balance in the house. She'd always hated it when he traveled here or there, but now it was a constant thing, leaving her with the problems of the house and kids alone. It wasn't that she couldn't handle everything on her own, she simply didn't want to have to. She worried every time one of her family members walked out the front door and now she had plane rides to worry about in addition. Tears came to the corners of her eyes as she imagined never seeing him again. The careful folding of his black dress socks halted as the phone rang and shook her free of her dark fears.

He couldn't explain the call home from his office to his wife to say that he hadn't shown in over a week, nor could he explain the size of his cell phone bill, all the calls to the unfamiliar number, or the friends of his son that had spotted him out late at artsy clubs and asked Ean about it. He expected it when his wife violently threw the glass vase he'd bought for their anniversary against the wall by his head. He even expected the divorce when it came and the clothes on the lawn of 7 Gardener Lane. It wasn't that he didn't want to scream or fight against losing his family, it was simply that he was numb and could do nothing but close his eyes in a fistful of Rosemary's auburn hair.

It was both sad and thrilling to have a completely new life. He thought of his children, but it seemed for a time like they were another part of another existence entirely and they were absent in this world that had sacrificed them for his freedom. Rosemary kept a tight hold on his attention and often influenced most of the decisions they made as a couple. The condo they bought together was small but beautiful. She had incredible taste and made their combined income spread to accommodate her indulgent lifestyle. Trips to the little art villages of France and Italy were regular expenditures for them. Rosemary loved Sangria and drank it every morning on their balcony. They went hiking, dancing, camping or skating on a regular basis. Head-to-head they would lie at night and talk about art and feelings and history to music until

three and make love until five. How do you see yourself? she would ask him, urging him to paint a verbal picture for her mind to re-envision him every few weeks or so.

No purchase he made was made without first thinking of her and her eclectic taste. The one time he brought home a fern from his old office, she threw it out the three story window, proclaiming it “cliché”. He worked for himself now and kept the hours he wanted. If he worked a great deal, he saw the rewards and if he didn’t work, he saw the consequences, but the benefit was that he never heard complaint from anyone working over him.

The final true visible separation from his former life came from the doctor’s when he received his annual physical exam. When he came and told Rosemary what they’d discovered, she rose up and left the condo wordlessly. He saw her pulling out of the garage in his car. In his living room, he sat alone with a glass of whiskey and stared thinking about the concept of time and how it would affect the choices he made now. He heard Rosemary’s key in the lock four hours later. She sat on the floor by his feet where he hadn’t moved from his chair, his hand still holding the glass of whiskey. “So... so what does this entail?” she asked, finally breaking the silence.

“The cancer?” he asked out of his daze.

“Yeah,” she answered, looking downward at the chipped blue nail polish on her toenails.

His ex-wife swore at him for calling the house and retreated into the space between the kitchen and the study under the shelf of poetry. “Why the hell are you calling here?.. What?” she pretended not to have heard him the first time. Her body sank down the wall, the phone still in her hands.

“Madeleine?” his voice said out of the receiver. She listened to the loud rock music coming from Marianne’s room, the light thumping of Lilly’s steps practicing her new routine in the living room, and the roaring of Ean’s car as he checked it in the driveway.

“Alright,” she said finally, “...I’ll tell the kids and then we’ll go from there.”

“Madeleine? If you want to talk about how to break it to them... I’m here.”

“I said I’d handle it Lucas.” She hung up the phone quickly without saying goodbye as her hands shook. If there was one thing, she didn’t want him to hear how violently she would cry. She didn’t want him to see how he had succeeded in breaking her heart a second time. Though sometimes she wanted to kill him for what he had done to their family, she still couldn’t turn off the twenty-four years of feelings for him like he could for her. Desperately, she had wanted to stay on that phone and work out a way for her to tell her children that their father was going to die soon but pride wouldn’t allow her to.

Ean pounded his fist against the wall and jarred his sisters. “God! Screw him! He left us!”

Marianne wept softly and said nothing. Lilly kept her face serious and solemn. “Do we have to go and see him, Mommy?”

Madeleine felt the tight pain in her forehead increase. “No, baby, you don’t have to, but you can if you want to.” Marianne got up and went over to her mother. She hadn’t done this in years, but now she felt it was something she had to do for herself. She curled up in her mother’s lap as though she was eight years old and closed her eyes.

Between vomiting and sleeping, he would lie in a strange state between consciousness and unconsciousness and think of a feathery light little ballerina dancing across a stage. Rosemary often kept out of their bedroom while he was ill. In the kitchen, she sat on a stool talking to her sister on the phone.

“I didn’t sign up for this, Sabrina. Our life together was supposed to be fun. What did I ever do to deserve this as my happily ever after? I’m no caretaker. I’m no good at this sickness stuff. Of course I want to leave but his ex won’t take him back and the kids want nothing to do with him. If I go, he’s alone. I don’t know what I’ll do. I even tried calling his ex and you can imagine the balls it took to do that... but she won’t budge. She said I drove him to it, can you believe that? I know, I don’t even know if they’ll come to the funeral. Yeah, I

hear something moving around. Gotta go play nursemaid. Talk to you later.”

In the flickering emergency lights, he saw that little ballerina face again. Lilly wasn't sure if he recognized her or not. Marianne held his hand and called out to him, but he couldn't seem to hear her. Ean stood back holding up his mother.

Rosemary honestly felt relief when it was all over. Her freedom was regained. She wore a dark short dress to church and prayed for him, though she hadn't prayed in nearly fifteen years. Walking away on that April afternoon, she knew that he was in a better place than she could ever hope to create for him.

Mr. Edgrave returned to the house at 7 Gardener Lane. Though his cancer had had some progressions, he was healing and in remission. The lulls in the conversations around the table may have been longer, a touch more fragile, but the point was that they were conversing together at all and that was what made the difference- what lay beyond the poem on the shelf in the aftermath.

Helium

by Vince Corvaia

The three of them were sitting around a table at Teacher's, a trendy bar off Central Park West. It was a cold November night in 1979. They had all graduated from college within the last two years and come to Manhattan because, as James put it, "We're living the great American cliché." Cat and Victor had known each other from classes at Wichita State and were aspiring writers. James graduated across the river at Rutgers and wanted to be a graphic designer. So far, no one had produced anything or gotten beyond the jobs that paid their rents.

"So who's doing the family thing tomorrow?" Cat said. She had learned to

smoke just a month ago and was affectedly holding a cigarette with the same fingers she used to hold her glass of Chablis.

“Oh, my God, don’t get me started,” James said. On his cocktail napkin he was making little designs out of the toothpicks that had come with his martinis. “Curt and I are going to his folks’ place in Brooklyn. I don’t even think they know he’s gay.”

“They will tomorrow,” she said.

“Not necessarily,” Victor said.

“I don’t care one way or the other,” James said. “I just hope the woman can cook a decent turkey.”

Victor turned around to survey the crowded, smoky room. He felt as though his head took a split second longer to turn than his upper body did. He wasn’t used to drinking so much.

“I don’t see our waitress,” he said. “Anybody else ready for another round?”

“I think Lisa died in there,” James said.

“Should I go check?” Cat said.

“Did anybody else think she seemed odd when she showed up?” Victor said.

“She looked preoccupied,” James said. “I don’t think she looked one of us in the eve ”

in the eye.

“I’ll go see how she’s doing,” Cat said and got up to sidle her way to the women’s room.

“Do you ever miss college?” James asked Victor.

The waitress walked up to them and asked if they were ready for another round.

“That’s just what I said,” Victor told her. She smiled and walked away.

“I miss college,” James said.

“I miss talking about books. Nobody talks about books.”

“Hey, I work at the Strand,” James said. “I wish everybody would shut up about books.”

“I still work in that mailroom off Wall Street. When I read Trollope on a break, I get these looks like my nose just fell off from leprosy.”

Victor and James had struck up a conversation when Victor was shopping for the poetry of Richard Hugo. Victor had not only known who Hugo was, but he said his favorite poem was “In Your Good Dream” from 31 Letters and 13 Dreams. They had been good friends since then.

“Then you shouldn’t read Trollope on breaks. Try Harold Robbins.”

“You and Cat are so lucky. I wouldn’t mind getting a position at Brentano’s.”

“Brentano’s is to real bookstores what cat food is to caviar.”

James loved to say things other people might end up quoting. It was a kind of immortality for him.

“I’ll take cat food over a capital management company any day.”

“So find another job.”

“I’m living with my aunt in Hackensack. If I just upped and quit it would look like I was depending on her.”

“I meant look while you’re working.”

“I’ve tried that,” Victor said. “I took a morning off and went to an employment agency on Forty-Second Street. The girl kept looking at my resume and going, ‘Oh, you’re just too wonderful.’ She put a note in a sealed envelope and sent me to their downtown office. The guy there read my resume, read the note, wrote another note, taped it into the same envelope, and told me to go back to Forty-Second Street and give it to her. I said, ‘What about a job?’ He said, ‘Jill handles all the employment decisions.’ I said, ‘Then what am I doing here?’ He said, ‘I had to approve your resume.’ I left wondering just how he did that exactly, and once I got on the subway curiosity overtook me and I opened the envelope. Inside it said, ‘I am not stalking you. I just want a date.’ Thus endeth my job hunting for the time being.”

James laughed. "I should be so lucky. Except for Curt, nobody's called me 'wonderful' yet."

"Here you are, gentlemen," the waitress said. She set down Cat's chablis, James' martini, Victor's Vodka Collins, and Lisa's Tab. When she left, Cat appeared and sat back down.

"So how is little Miss Bookbinder?" James said.

"There's a job I'd kill for," Victor added.

"She's OK, but I'm not supposed to tell you what's wrong."

"What do you mean, you're not supposed to tell us," he said.

"I mean it's personal," she said, taking a drag from her cigarette and then stubbing it out in the ashtray. "She didn't want to come tonight, but she thought the company would do her good."

"Well, I hope there's good company in the restroom," James said.

"Cat, you have to tell me. I'm your friend. We go way back," Victor said.

"I'm Lisa's friend, too," Cat said, "and we only go back to senior year."

"Do you miss college?" James asked Cat.

Victor was annoyed by the interruption. He had met Lisa at Shakespeare in

the Park, when the play ended and Lisa was walking back to her room at the Y. Victor was struck by her long, curly black hair and her delicate but hunched shoulders. He saw she was alone and walked up beside her to ask her how she'd liked the production. They began a conversation that ended with them drinking tea in her room. He just had one of those faces that everyone trusted.

"The only thing I miss about college is Botticelli," Cat said.

"You took a painting class?" James said.

"No, goof. Botticelli. The game."

"I'm not familiar."

"You ever play twenty questions?"

"Yes."

"Well, Botticelli is like twenty questions, only to earn the right to ask a question, you have to think of a person yourself and the other person has to try to guess who it is. If he doesn't, you get to ask your question."

"Boy, that would make so much sense to me if only I were sober," James said.

"Come on," Victor said to Cat. "Tell us what's wrong with Lisa and we promise not to let her know you told us."

“What is this ‘we’ business?” James said. “I make no promises after the sixth toothpick.”

“I have a legitimate right to know,” Victor said.

“And what would that be?” Cat said.

“You both have to promise not to tell Lisa.”

“Wait a minute,” Cat said. “I can’t tell Lisa the reason you should know what her secret is?”

Victor took a deep breath and said, “I know that’s stupid, but . . . I’m crazy about her.”

“You’re right,” James said. “That is stupid.”

“All right,” Cat said, “but you really have to keep this to yourselves. Victor, let’s switch places so I can keep an eye on the women’s room in case she comes back.”

“I’ll let you know if I see her.”

“Well, first of all, in case you’re both thinking it, she’s not pregnant.”

“Why would she be pregnant?” James said. “She hasn’t been dating anybody.”

“Oh, damn,” Victor said. “Here she comes.”

James and Cat both turned around. Lisa, looking wan and keeping her face toward the floor, approached the table. Using his foot, Victor slid her chair out between himself and Cat, and she sat down in front of her Tab.

“I’m fine, you guys,” Lisa said weakly. “I just felt lightheaded.”

“Yeah, three Tabs will do that to you,” James said. Cat kicked him.

“So what did I miss?”

“Oh,” James said, “Cat was just telling us how to play Botticelli.”

“Cat and I used to play in the college cafeteria,” Victor said.

“Is it fun?” Lisa said. “Could we play now?”

“The bar would close down before we finished a round at the rate we’re going,” Cat said, lifting her glass in a silent toast.

“Oh,” Lisa said, “but I want to play something.”

“Let’s play secrets,” James said. Cat and Victor looked at him. “We each tell a secret and the others have to guess whether it’s true.”

“You’re just trying to get me to tell you why I was in the restroom so long,”

Lisa said.

“Maybe Botticelli is a good idea,” Victor said.

“No, I’ll go first,” James said. “But only if the rest of you promise to play along.”

“Depends on how good your secret is,” Cat said.

“My secret,” James said, “is that I lost my job at the Strand today.”

Cat and Lisa said, “No way,” at the same time, and Victor said, “What happened?”

“I talked back to a customer. Called him an idiot.”

“Why?” Cat said.

“Because he was one. He wanted every copy of Balzac we had in stock, which would have been fine except that a woman had just come in after him looking for *Lost Illusions*. I mean, he was there first, but he wanted all twenty books we had and wouldn’t let her have this one novel. So I called him an idiot after he called me a name I’d rather not repeat.”

“Good for you,” Cat said.

“Did the woman get her novel?” Lisa asked.

“She got her novel and I got the sack.”

“And here come the holidays,” Cat said.

“That’s OK. Curt has a good job and he said I could take my time looking.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t a single opening at Brentano’s right now with all the Christmas help.”

“Meow,” James said under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing,” James said. “Who’s next?”

“To lose a job?” Victor said. “I’m in.”

“I’ll go,” Cat said. “My secret is I don’t have any plans tomorrow. Anybody know of a good Thanksgiving restaurant?”

“I don’t have anywhere to go, either,” Lisa said.

“Great. Let’s meet in your lobby and see what we can dig up.”

Victor offered with regret, “I’d invite you to my aunt’s if I could have given her more notice. She loves feeding people.”

“That’s OK, Victor,” Lisa said.

There was an awkward silence amid the boisterous talking of the bar.

“So,” Cat began. “Who’s next?”

“Yes,” James added. “As you can see, it’s a fairly painless procedure.”

“OK, you guys,” Lisa said. “I’m going to tell you what’s going on.”

“You don’t have to, Lisa”.

“No, Cat, it’s OK. My father came to visit me,” Lisa said. “He said he and my mother are getting a divorce.”

Cat kept looking at her.

“I’m so sorry,” James said. “But that’s hardly the end of the world.”

“When was this?” Victor said.

“Last weekend. He flew in just to tell me in person. I didn’t even know they were having problems.”

Victor reached out and patted her wrist. “It’ll be OK.”

“Thanks.”

Cat lit a cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke, then took a healthy swig of Chablis.

James looked at Victor. "One more to go."

"Yes," Cat said, "I can't wait."

"Let's play Botticelli like we used to," Victor said to Cat.

"Nope," she said. "You're not weaseling out of this."

"What's your secret?" Lisa said.

"Yeah, blow us away," James said.

"OK, you asked for it," Victor said, reaching out to point to Cat and shoving his glass, sloshing some of the vodka Collins onto the table.

"What did I do?" she said.

"No pun intended, but I'm letting the cat out of the bag. When Cat and I were at Wichita State," Victor said to Lisa and James, "we got high one night and did it."

Lisa blushed and James let out a howl, clapping his hands.

"You bastard," Cat said. "We said we would never tell a soul about that."

“And that’s what makes it a secret,” Victor said.

“Yeah? Well, I have a little secret about Victor,” Cat said, looking at Lisa.

“Hey, now,” Victor said, trying to break through the alcoholic buzz that cocooned his head so he could make some kind of real impact. “Wait.”

“I think it’s getting late, kids,” James interrupted, looking at his wristwatch. “I have to get my beauty sleep for Brooklyn.”

Cat and Victor continued to stare at each other.

“Go on,” Cat said.

“The truth is,” Victor said to the others, “Cat and I never did it. She’s covering for me. The truth is I’m still a virgin. I told her once.”

“Then it’s not a true secret if one of us already knows,” James said.

“James,” Cat said, “you know, you’re right.”

“See?”

“It is getting late. And you do need your beauty sleep.”

She flashed a smile so discreetly toward Victor that he almost missed it.

James stood up and almost stumbled backwards as he reached to pull his overcoat off the back of the chair.

“It’s almost midnight,” Lisa said.

“I’ll walk you back to the Y,” Victor said.

“Victor, you have to go south to the Port Authority. That makes no sense.”

“But I want to. I could use the air.”

Cat stood up and began fishing through her purse. James waved her off and pulled a thin wad of bills from his pants pocket.

“This night’s on me,” he proclaimed proudly. “I can’t remember when I’ve had so much fun.”

Lisa and Victor protested—“You just lost your job”—but finally thanked him.

“Well, since we both live in the Village,” Cat said, “how about a cab ride on me?”

“I love it. Goodnight, all.”

“Goodnight,” Lisa and Victor said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow say at one o’clock,” Cat said to Lisa as she began to follow James away from the table. She put her hand up against his back and he said, “Here, take my arm, darling. The cold is likely to knock you flat.”

Lisa and Victor sat alone at the table and were quiet for a time. The voices had picked up with the lateness of the hour and the spirit of holiday in the air.

“I want to wait until the waitress comes back,” he said. “I don’t feel comfortable leaving James’ money on the table.”

“That’s OK. I don’t mind.”

“I’m really sorry to hear about your parents.”

“It’s not a big deal, believe me,” Lisa said. “I never got along with either of them. To be honest, my father didn’t come visit me at all. He wrote me a letter.”

“Then—“ Victor broke off what he started to say. Fortunately, the waitress appeared at that moment and collected the money.

“Shall we go?” he said to Lisa.

“Sure.”

The cold air was sobering. They both buttoned the top button on their coats and put their hands in their pockets. As they crossed with the light,

Victor noticed a crowd about a block away on a side street, beyond a police barricade.

“I wonder what happened there.”

Lisa smiled broadly for the first time that night.

“You don’t know?” she said. “Come on.”

She walked briskly onto the curb and looked back to see Victor hurrying to keep up. When they reached the people, Lisa led Victor behind everyone and along the sidewalk until they came to a break in the crowd. Victor followed her into the open space and said, “What’s that sound?”

“Helium.”

She walked in front of the onlookers and took a place off the curb. Victor joined her and saw a giant, flat Bullwinkle lying on the ground beyond them. Only its snout was three-dimensional, poking up from the rest of the lifeless face.

“I came here last year, too,” Lisa said. “You have to live in New York to see this side of the parade. Isn’t it great?”

“I live in Hackensack.”

“Silly.”

He was enchanted with the change that had come over her by such a

... was shocked when she thought that had come over her by such a simple, child-like event. He looked at the side of her face, her open smile, her even teeth, her cheek reddened by the cold. He ached to lean over and kiss her on her cheek and tell her the truth he had withheld.

“Can I be honest with you?”

“Sure,” he said.

She looked at him and said, “I was a virgin too when I came to New York. I mean I’d never even slept with a guy. Anyway, I met this actor at the Y on Monday and we went out for drinks. He was the most beautiful human being I’d ever seen. He said he had just auditioned for an off-Broadway play that day and had a really good feeling about it. We sat there for two hours, talking about our whole lives, and I could tell that he really liked me. I was powerfully attracted to him. When we got up to go, he said he would walk me home, like you’re doing. We were just a few blocks from the Y, and when we got to the lobby, I couldn’t believe it. I asked him if he wanted to come upstairs. I was ready for the first time in my life. I felt real love for this person, and I sensed he felt the same way. We went up to my room, and he made love to me. I know I’m blushing as I tell you this, but I want you to understand why I couldn’t come out of the bathroom tonight.

“That was Monday night. Yesterday I went to my doctor and bought an IUD. I knew this guy would want to see me again right away even though we hadn’t made definite plans, and I wanted to be ready. I had discovered love and sex on the same day, and I couldn’t get enough of either.

“I came back to the Y and there he was, crossing to the elevator at the same time I was. The doors opened and we both got in. He wasn’t looking at me, and I thought he was shy and just waiting for us to be alone. When the doors closed, I said, ‘Hi. I missed you.’ He didn’t say a word. He didn’t even look at me. ‘What’s the matter?’ I said. I thought maybe he didn’t get the part. But then why wouldn’t he tell me? And why was he at the Y riding with me in the elevator if he didn’t want to talk to me?

“These were the questions I had going through my head when the doors opened and he stepped into the hall ahead of me. I reached my door and turned to see him continuing down the hall to another door. He didn’t even have to knock. It just opened, and this neighbor girl I knew by sight stepped into the hall and gave him a big kiss. I mean a big kiss. They walked into her room like that, hugging and kissing, and the door closed, and that was that. I haven’t slept since then, and I called in sick today. I almost didn’t show up tonight, but I knew I needed to be among friends.”

She was still smiling, but tears were spilling down her cheeks.

“Honest, I don’t care,” she said. “I had a good time tonight, and I’m so happy to be here with you and Bullwinkle. It reminds me that I live in New York and I have a whole lifetime of possibilities ahead of me. He’s the loser, not me.”

Victor found his voice and replied, “That’s right. I’m glad you see it that way.”

She took his arm and rested her forehead against his shoulder. He froze when he should have reached up and touched the hair that was sticking out from under her wool cap.

She stood upright and said, “Let me ask you something.”

“OK.”

“It’s pretty personal.”

“Hey, it’s been that kind of a night.”

“You said you never really did it with Cat.”

“No, I did. Just that one time.”

“But that wasn’t really your secret. Was it?”

Victor looked over at Bullwinkle, whose whole face was filling up and coming into full view now.

“Yes,” he said. “That was my secret.”

He heard himself saying the words, but he felt detached from them, like watching a word balloon lift up into the night sky.

“Well, I’ll keep yours if you keep mine,” Lisa said.

“OK.”

They stood in the biting cold and watched Bullwinkle’s head bobbing in the breeze like someone just waking from an overpowering dream.

An Eye for an "I"

By Harvey Havel

Maybe he had been too caught up in his own little world to give anyone else a moment's thought, and perhaps it was silly of him to be concentrating on the deal he made with an affiliate of the pharmaceutical company he worked for, but Freddy Katt would no longer be sidelined by his own weakness to feel bad about things over which he had no control. There was a time when he felt guilty about almost everything, especially stuff that went back to his high school years, and even as other burdens of conscience faded away, those events still lingered in his memory, haunting him all the same, whether or not they were repressed behind a locker door in his mind.

He remembered a time at the academy when the school's chaplain took him aside after he had punched another student during soccer practice, an incident he recalled as clearly as the blue sky above him. From that moment on he vowed never to hit anyone in the same manner again and swore that he would commit all of his energies towards good thoughts and a few vague moral rules that would somehow get him through life unscathed. Such a commitment would lead to good deeds that would set the goodness of the universe in motion. Nothing but goodness could result from thinking positively, he thought at the time, and maybe from that point on he could avoid sucker-punching people at play and getting into trouble over it.

But his deal with a well-known distributor to buy truckloads of a new anti-psychotic drug that had gone through rigorous testing and FDA approval just a week earlier needed a signature by the vice president of the company, or basically, the consent of his boss. Freddy's boss, a man he had gone to school with back in the mid-80's, was also a good friend who had engineered his promotion to head sales representative just a few years ago. The man lived on an elaborate estate just south of Innsbrook Harbor, on a sprawling palatial retreat where he took his wife and two young sons to sunbathe and swim in the ocean.

The manor-home sat upon a high dune that sloped into the beach. Freddy thought of the water and how just one visit to his boss' home could cure him of the many ailments that stole the innocence from his life.

His boss seemed to have it all; a beautiful wife, two brilliant sons who would probably attend Ivy league schools when they got older, and of course, a mass amount of wealth.

Freddy also had money, but not the kind that his boss had. His boss was old money, the kind that came with disposition. Freddy, on the other hand, had at one time been flat broke and had to crawl his way to the top by working harder and faster and longer. He lived in the city, while his boss lived in both town and country, making him a well-balanced man altogether, and it seemed that nothing would stop his boss from one day becoming CEO of the company.

Freddy stuck with him, as though he could get to the top also by riding his coattails. But because of this strategy Freddy always played second fiddle to his high school friend. That's how things worked, and it was something he accepted without reservation. He was lucky enough to be working at such a high level in the first place, and for that he should have been thankful instead of constantly wanting more, or at least this is what he told himself, day-by-day at company headquarters as his boss hung around the beach house in his swim-trunks, holding an afternoon cocktail.

He pondered this relationship with his boss as he drove his Porsche convertible along a coastal highway that snaked its way over jagged mountain rocks on either side of him. The sun splashed its warmth over his white button-down, and he tuned his satellite radio to the type of easy listening station that would normally put any other person to sleep but somehow managed to excite him that afternoon.

'There's nothing like commercial-free,' he thought to himself, as the wind tousled his hair.

Secretly, he always looked forward to spending some time at the beach home and his suitcase full of paperwork was good excuse for a road trip. He was lucky enough to get out of the office on such a brilliant afternoon, and he didn't need anything else but a drink and a view of the ocean.

The highway ducked into a valley, and he was soon in a quaint town that bordered the beach and vast flatlands to the east. There were a few restaurants that served vegetarian specialties, a few jewelry stores that advertised in the fancy men's magazines he had subscribed to, and also a small eatery that served all sorts of coffee and teas, the type of place where one could see a music school dropout playing Bob Dylan or a poet reading from a tattered journal.

But there was hardly anyone in the town that afternoon. They all seemed to be at the public beach a few blocks down, as there were several cars and mountain bikes parked near there.

The road split at a dead end, and a long, narrow trail curved down to the beachfront. He was happy to see a few long-legged women in bikinis sunning themselves on the sand and also a group playing volleyball at the ocean's edge. The only noise he could hear were the sounds of the ocean beating on the shoreline, the wind, and the occasional squawking of seagulls that had suspended themselves in mid-air.

The trail itself was unpaved, and he drove slowly so as not to ruin his car's suspension. The road was made more for an SUV than a sports-car, and he turned the stereo low to hear the movement of his car along the bumps, sharp dips, and ascents that typified the beach's changing surface. The beach road ended at another paved road embellished with lush lawns and gated homes on either side of it. The homes were well-guarded by walls of ivy-covered stone too tall to look over. One could only sneak quick looks through the bars of the gates to find meandering driveways that led to pillared mansions, the ocean their backyards. Movie stars lived on this road along with a host of other famous people who had played the game of

road along with a host of other famous people who had played the game of life skillfully enough and seemed to have everything he didn't. He envied these people and couldn't deny that he really wanted to be a part of their crowd. He only got as far as his boss, though, who invited him over every so often like it was a charity event. He could taste the cherry on the Pina Colada already, and maybe he could even stay over if he played with the kids long enough.

His boss' estate was well fortified and secure, almost like a castle that kept the strangers away, with an intercom that had a surveillance camera beamed right at him, following his car onto a circle that curved into the house. He parked his car on the gravel and checked himself in the rearview mirror before ringing the doorbell.

The maid let him inside with a slight grin, and immediately the two young boys, as blonde as sunshine over the beach, scurried up to him from another wing of the house and yelled his name over and over. It felt good to hug a couple of cherubs every once in a while.

Freddy didn't have a family as of yet. He chose a professional life over any sort of family, and while he did miss the company of a wife at home and children of his own, he became used to his bachelorhood and the long hours he put in at headquarters. His boss sometimes tried to set him up with other women, but his blind dates were usually one-night stands. On the 'next-mornings' he had trouble talking of mundane topics, and the conversation always returned to work and his position at the company. His women were never surprised by his suggestion that they take the latest drug for any number of conditions they might be having. He then ran off and left them, usually as they slept.

Some people had to work for it, he figured, and women who talked lazily of their nights out with former boyfriends and far-off trips to islands in the Caribbean never really got the point that he would always have to climb mountains to be comfortable in his own skin, and the women were indeed

incredibly beautiful, both in their looks and their girlish charms, but none of them wanted to commit to his kind of climb. They took the easy route, and they were probably better people for it. He saw his road, however, as hard and gruesome with no end in sight. He'd always be chasing something, and lately it seemed that he wanted everything his boss had. He even wanted the two kids at his knees who seemed a part of the same conspiracy of beauty that had always excluded him. It was an awkward feeling that never went away, and rather than fight the entire conspiracy against him, he went along with it and came to believe that more overtime at company headquarters would rid him of this misfit status within the club of the wealthy few who paid his salary. It worked for a time, but the kids at his knees, still yelling his name, reminded him of how far he had to go in order to become a part of something just a few notches greater than himself. And they were beautiful kids; the type of kids one would find on a cereal box or in a toy commercial. Their success had been predetermined, and patting their heads was the closest Freddy could get to something like that.

"Okay, guys, you don't have to hurt him," called a voice through the screen doors.

"Hello, Bill," said Freddy, fighting the kids off.

"Freddy, why don't ya come out back?" It wasn't so much a suggestion as a command that was reinforced with the gesture of his large hand toward the patio.

His boss was William Foxfield, the Harvard graduate, the second in his class, the Gulf War veteran, the youngest executive hired at the pharmaceutical company, and soon to be a member of the board. Yes, that was him in the pool area having lunch on the patio, his skin tanned by the ocean sun, his body carved of all body fat, the man who jogged three miles every morning, the man who ate three well-balanced meals and took efficient, fifteen-minute showers after his workout. Yes, that was William

Foxfield. Bill seemed happy to see him, although Freddy didn't know why. Freddy only had a few papers for him to sign, and then he'd probably be on his way. He never ceased to feel clumsy and awkward around him, like a rowboat that leans too far into the water or a Martian who tries desperately to hide his true identity among the earthlings he recruits. Yes, it wouldn't be such an easy morning around William Foxfield. Conversing with him at his home was something Freddy often rehearsed on the drive down.

The kids followed Freddy outside. He then took a seat opposite Bill and unloaded his briefcase.

"You worked hard on this one, Fred."

"It's not a big deal. I was just looking at the bottom line."

"Yes, I know. You're bottom line is saving us millions with our distribution... What are we pushing again?"

"It's a new anti-psychotic; time-released, FDA approved last month."

"That should help with the high crime rate in our cities, don't ya think?"

Freddy smiled, but he didn't find the joke funny in the least. It was like biting into an entre that tasted bitter, but still having to look satisfied in front of the cook.

"There's always a market for us," Bill continued, "...the crazies and the criminals. Soon there'll be a pill for everything."

"Our research department says this is almost as good as a cure, or at least that's what they're speculating."

"A cure?"

"Yes."

"What bullshit," Bill chuckled. "You and I both know that these pills don't do squat. R&D will probably get started on a newer version next week. These pills are more powerful than religion. It's amazing how they pay us to offer these lost souls just a tiny bit of hope. All you need is an alarm clock, a full glass of water, and presto!"

Freddy laughed nervously, trying to wipe the disgust from his eyes. His boss could have been joking or he could have been dead serious; Freddy could never tell. Bill's bronzed skin and bleached hair exuded a health that Freddy might never achieve, yet there was a bit of sadness in the eyes that seemed to look out over his shoulder as though he were reminiscing about some faint and distant memory.

"Is everything alright, Bill?"

"I'm a commander by nature," he replied distantly, "...and sometimes I like to find trouble before it finds me."

"A lot of great men are that way," said Freddy with a touch of bewilderment at the odd comment, "...but what's on your mind?"

"Oh, I don't know," he sighed. "There's something missing. I mean, look at all this, Freddy. One day you'll have something like this, assuming you lose a few nounds "

a few pounds.

"Yeah, I'm still working on that, Bill," he responded, swallowing the burn of the insult, patting his belly like a fool for good measure.

"But what I mean is that, well, how many worlds, let's say, did Alexander the Great conquer before realizing he could conquer no more?"

"I don't know. There's a quote that says that Alexander the Great wept when he had nothing left to conquer."

"Y'know, Freddy, I tend to feel the same way. I mean, look at all this. You think all of this takes hard work?"

"I think some of it must come from that, yes."

"I think a lot of it comes from just being who I am. I can't put it any simpler than that."

"Sure, you certainly have had your fill at this stage of the game, no question. You certainly have an advantage at this point."

"And what do you think makes that?"

"Makes the advantage, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I guess it's because you've worked hard, you've made good decisions, you

"I guess it's because you've worked hard, you've made good decisions, you have a solid family."

"But many people have that."

"So, I guess what you're trying to say is that you're someone they didn't see coming."

"Not exactly."

"Then what are you trying to say, Bill?"

"I guess what I'm trying to say, Freddy, is that I'm thinking about leaving this business behind. I've made my mark pushing these pills, and I just think it's time to settle down a bit. Journey in another direction."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Well, that certainly is news."

"It's just between you and me right now, Freddy. Just between you and me."

"Sure. I'll keep this quiet."

Bill's silver fork had poked at the few lettuce leaves left in his bowl when from the other side of the pool came a silhouette draped in a white Turkish

from the other side of the pool came a silhouette draped in a white Turkish robe, drying her wet, blonde locks with a towel. Freddy was keenly aware of her; Francesca, Bill's wife of three years and step-mother to his two children.

"We've been good friends, haven't we, Freddy?"

"Yes. I owe it all to you."

"Do you?"

Bill stared into his eyes. The stare startled him a bit. Freddy had never clashed eyes with him before, and the feeling was so painfully awkward that he couldn't help but pull away in embarrassment.

"What's wrong, Freddy? Is there something you have to say to me?"

Francesca then joined them, the kids running after her.

"You guys don't want to stay in longer?" she asked her children about the pool.

The boys noisily ran upstairs and Francesca took a seat next to her husband.

"Why hello, Freddy!" she said cheerfully.

"Francesca, how are you? You look as pretty as ever."

"Why, thank you."

Bill again steadied his intense gaze on him, and Freddy felt the same feeling of awkwardness rifle through him before his eyes pulled away.

"I guess I can buy that new car now," said Freddy nervously after Bill signed the papers.

"Oh, honey," Francesca broke in, "...we could use a few more guestrooms for the house, especially if we're having company over so often."

"How about we fly away to the islands, just the two of us?" Bill asked, dodging her comment while kissing her bronzed shoulder.

Freddy couldn't help but look away at this point, Bill's piercing stare returning to him and still gripping him as awkwardly as before.

"Well, how long would we be away?" she asked.

"A month, maybe two."

Francesca laughed uneasily.

"But darling," she said, "...what about work?"

"I think Freddy can handle the workload for a while, can't you Freddy? Or Freddy, how about coming along with us? It'll be the three of us. What do you say, old friend? Won't we have a nice time? I'll probably need you

around to take care of some family business, and of course, my wife can have you around too..."

"Darling," Francesca interrupted, "I don't think we should commit to any sort of... Oh, God, Bill. It isn't..." the words fell away as they were unnecessary now.

Her uneasy smile broke just then. Freddy's eyes again clashed with Bill's, only this time Freddy knew that his old friend had known all along.

"I think I better get going," Freddy said with a tremble in his voice, collecting the signed papers.

"And Freddy," called Bill, "...don't think you're also getting away with taking a swing at me like you did when we were kids on the soccer field. When you get back to town, you can clean out your desk at the corner office too."

Gold Rush

by Ilan Herman

Brooding silence accompanied the Johnson family while they sat at the kitchen table. Pete Jr. noisily slurped down diluted potato soup and chomped on crusty bread, but his gurgling stomach remained unappeased. Annabelle, his ten-year-old sister, crinkled her nose, morosely swished her spoon through the broth, and ate only a bit. Pa Johnson did not eat at all. His elbows resting on the table as he braided his fingers, the wrinkles on his brow deepened as he somberly looked at his son and said, "Yer nineteen and ready to be a man. It's time ye be gettin' out to California and diggin' for the gold they're findin' out there."

Ma Johnson wiped a tear and retreated to the kitchen. Pete sat motionless in his chair. He'd heard about the gold found out west, but he didn't want to leave

chair. He'd heard about the gold found out west, but he didn't want to leave home. He'd lately spent his time courting the beautiful Mary Wallace, competing for her affection with Roger Wilson, the carpenter. He met Pa's sad gaze, the one embedded with two decades of toil in the fields to provide for his family. Droughts had plagued the earth for two years, and the crops had failed. Something needed to be done to stave off starvation and losing their land.

Pete's lanky figure slumped in his chair. "Yes, Pa," he said quietly, "...I'll go."

He was appeased later that night, when he told Mary about his upcoming journey and the wonderful gifts he'd bring her. She kissed him passionately and promised to marry him upon his return.

A week afterward, at the break of dawn, the nameless gray mule Pa Johnson had recently inherited from his uncle was loaded with supplies for the two thousand mile journey from Topeka. Pa also gave Pete one hundred dollars, almost all his savings.

The family stood in their front yard. "Goodbye, son," Pa Johnson said in a subdued voice and firmly shook Pete's hand.

Annabelle looked up at her older brother. "Where is the gold?"

"In the ground, far away from here," Pete said with a smile and mussed her hair. "Ye be good to Ma and Pa, ye hear?"

Wearing her tattered apron, Ma hugged Pete for a long time. She caressed the back of his neck and said, "Be careful, be careful." Pa had to gently pry her away from her son.

The Johnson family stood by their house and waved goodbye as Pete and his mule set out for the riverbeds of California. Pete walked stiffly in the cold morning air and turned to look back to see his family almost lost in the mist and still standing by the house. He imagined Ma, teary-eyed, shuffling back into the house and falling to her knees by the fireplace, hands clasped in prayer for her son's welfare.

Pete then looked his mule in the eye and said "Ver name's Seymour "

Pete then looked his mule in the eye and said, "Yer name's Seymour."

The mule grunted.

After a brutal six months journey, with thirty-eight dollars left in his pouch but fresh with hope, Pete and his mule Seymour arrived in Marysville, a mining town on the American River—a one-street hamlet with creaky motels and smelly saloons, and where many a funeral were conducted without absolution—the anonymous casket unceremoniously placed in a muddy hole. The graves were marked with wooden crosses, but when heavy rainfall soaked the earth, many of the crosses floated away, and no one could tell where the graves lay.

For the first week, Pete shared a room with six other men and slept on a flea-infested mattress. After that, he spent his nights under the stars, camped by one riverbed or another. He returned to town once a month to stock up on supplies.

Seymour proved to be a rugged and reliable companion. The mule possessed the most expressive eyes Pete had ever seen on an animal—big and brown with profound sadness tucked into their corners. Sometimes, when Pete shared how he missed the enchanting Mary, he saw a tear roll down the mule's cheek. Pete knew that mules teared a lot, regardless of the tale of woe told to them, but he still took solace in sharing his feelings with Seymour.

The mule, however, had several bad habits, one of which was to awaken Pete at dawn. He would stand over his sleeping master and bray loudly, snout dripping green goo.

"Seymour!" Pete cried. "Yer a mule! Why don't ye leave the duty of announcing dawn to roosters?"

Seymour raised his snout and quivered his nostrils; it appeared he understood his master's demands, but, the next morning, he planted his snout in Pete's face and brayed loud enough to awaken everyone sleeping within a mile's range.

"I'll tie ye to a tree," Pete yelled and shook his raised fists, but he never found the heart to do so.

Seymour was also extremely stubborn and sometimes refused to be coaxed

Seymour was also extremely stubborn and sometimes refused to be coaxed down a hill or over a ridge. The mule's defiance finally led Pete to pretend he was walking away and never coming back, in order to get Seymour concerned and compliant.

The mule liked his master, but not the work he chose to do. Seymour didn't understand why, from dawn to dusk, they carried mud out from the river and sifted through it, and why Pete, dour at arduous day's end, returned the next day to perform the exhausting task all over again.

Six months passed in backbreaking labor, but the young pioneer from Kansas had little to show for his efforts. One night, feeling dejected and missing his family and the fair Mary, Pete squandered much of his meager savings on gambling and liquor.

Waking up the next morning, head on fire, Pete was filled with remorse but also with resolve. He told Seymour they'd scale the mountains one more time, and if they failed to mine five-hundred dollars worth of gold in three weeks, they'd return to Topeka.

'After all,' Pete concluded and harnessed his belongings to the mule's back, 'There's a time for every miner to admit he's been defeated by nature and the men who came before him.'

Three weeks passed with precious little gold found. Leaving the riverbed at dawn, a bleary-eyed Pete tried to navigate Seymour toward the ridge, but the mule refused to budge.

The night before, they'd camped in the company of other miners, and Seymour finally understood what Pete was after. As the mule chewed his meager portion of oats, a man stopped by and proudly displayed yellow rocks from his pouch. Pete's blue eyes clouded over, and he sighed deeply.

Seymour fluttered his thick lips, *You're looking for that? I know where to find that!*

Many readers may ask the fair-minded question: Why did the mule take so goddamn long to understand his master's quest? Sadly, even the writer of this

goddamn long to understand his master's quest. Sadly, even the writer of this tale cannot come up with an acceptable answer, except that, after all, Seymour was a mule, and as such, the author's view into his heart is limited.

Now, atop the ridge, Pete dropped the reins and snapped, "yer a stupid mule, Seymour. We're almost out of supplies and need to leave now. Ye better start moving or," Pete crossed his long arms over his chest, "...I'm leaving and never coming back!"

He walked up the trail, feeling the mule's defiant stare at his back, and then looked back, expecting to see Seymour grudgingly comply. The mule raised his snout and quivered his nostrils, and then turned his back on his master and returned to the riverbed.

Pete shook his fists at the sky and cursed loudly. Then he chased after the mutinous mule.

Seymour drank from the creek and then lumbered upstream, leaving Pete to follow. "Where ye goin?!" the young man cried, sloshing through the water and trying to catch up with the defiant beast of labor.

The mule walked a bit farther and stopped. He turned his big brown eyes on his master and brayed louder than he'd ever brayed, the noisy air rushing out from his snout swift enough to rustle maple leaves twenty feet away.

Arms dangling by his sides, Pete stood confused, when he witnessed the sparkle in the water. He dug his hands into the river's sediment and pulled out a large gold nugget. With shaky hands, Pete held the great find and cried, "How did ye do that?"

The mule wriggled his mucus-stained nostrils and bit into a prickly shrub.

Pete laughed. "Yer snot-dripping snout, the one I despise for waking me at dawn, has become the beacon to riches." He quietly waited for the mule to find more gold and then insisted Seymour do so by tugging sharply on his reins and yelling, "Find me more of 'em nuggets, ye foolish animal."

Nevertheless, even his rare offering of sugar did nothing to sway Seymour, who

nevertheless, even his rare offering of sugar did nothing to sway Seymour, who continued chewing on the prickly shrub.

"Be it as it is," Pete finally muttered. "This here's enough gold to get us back home as heroes."

Finished with melting the nugget into a dozen pea-sized ones and having sewn them into the lining of his jacket, Pete and his mule returned to Marysville, where the young man rented a room that came with a hot roast beef and cabbage dinner and an even hotter bath. Seymour received the best oats in town and was washed and brushed for fleas and ticks.

Pete wrote a letter to his family, informing them about his great find. He promised to return home soon, but mentioned that he wanted to visit San Francisco, the shiny city by the bay that everyone raved about.

Lying in a soft bed and covered with cotton sheets, heart filled with pride, Pete imagined Pa's hearty smile, and Ma's teary, relieved eyes, and the enchanting Mary's hot kisses.

Pete arrived in San Francisco. He placed the mule in a corral and was strolling a wide street filled with stalls stocked with all goods known to man, when, for the first time in his life, he witnessed the ocean; bluish-gray waters stretching to the horizon, a vast gateway for the massive ships that dotted the harbor and the bay. At that moment, more than anything, Pete wanted to join the crew of any ship sailing away. He sat on the beach until dusk settled, smelled the damp salty air, and was seized by the ocean's magical spell.

As he walked back to the corral, Pete came across a shirtless man lying in the street. He may have been dead or only in a drunken stupor, but Pete looked away and hurried off. So much death surrounded him since he'd left Kansas. He was tired of seeing dead people. Pete knew that only a few men survived to tell the tale of good fortune, while the great majority evaporated into the oblivion of wasted lives.

He came to the city square where he saw a drunken and angry mob dragging two men in chains. The mob congregated in the square and hanged the two men. The people cheered and fired guns in the air and then dispersed. Silence

men. The people cheered and fired guns in the air and then dispersed. Silence followed; the ocean breeze swayed the noosed bodies.

"God have mercy on us all," Pete mumbled and hurriedly walked back to the corral.

Seymour was happy to see Pete. He was concerned about his owner. The mules and horses staying at the corral had decided that San Francisco was not a happy place. Even with no work and with a refreshing ocean breeze to temper their brow, their masters were unusually discontent. Returning to the corral, many beat the animals for no reason at all, and sometimes their owners never returned. Seymour hoped they could leave soon. Even carrying buckets of mud from the riverbed seemed acceptable to him.

That night, Pete allotted four dollars to partake in a poker game. He entered the saloon through swinging wooden doors and stood in the entrance. Before him stretched a long bar with swivel stools and tall shelves stacked with hundreds of colorful bottles of liquor. A massive chandelier lit the tavern with a thousand candles. The room was centered by five round poker tables.

Pete played for an hour and won ten dollars. He rose to leave when the burly and red-faced man sitting across from him staggered to his feet. "Ye been cheatin," the man slurred. "Hand over yer money, or I's carvin' ye up!"

"No," Pete said, a quiver in his voice.

The man shoved the table into Pete's stomach. The young pioneer landed on his back. The man charged him with a knife. Pete reached for the sheath attached to his hip and pulled out his knife an instant before the man landed on him. The blade pierced the man's heart.

The body lay on him, gushing blood over his face and clothes. Patrons helped the woozy youngster to his feet and removed his bloodied jacket. The sheriff arrived and justice was swift. By all accounts, Pete had acted in self-defense.

"Drinks on the house," the bartenders hollered as the body was carted out.

Snaky and dizzy, Pete searched for his jacket, the one that had the gold sewn into its seams. The jacket was gone.

"Where's my jacket?" he cried, and was met with shrugs and puzzled looks.

Dawn found Pete slumped on the dock of the bay, watching the tide roll away, and the ships navigate the water. Steering away from shore, their massive sails shrunk, as had his fortune. One small nugget was all that he had left, not remotely enough for the journey back to Kansas. His sad solitude was interrupted by the footsteps of arriving dockworkers. Pete lumbered to his feet and staggered away.

Seeing his master's stooped shoulders, the mule nervously quivered his nostrils. Pete collapsed in the corner of the stall, and Seymour, for the first time, saw him cry. Wanting to comfort the destitute pioneer, the mule shoved his snout in his master's face and discharged green snot in Pete's hair.

"Seymour, look what ye've done," Pete cried and pushed the mule away.

Still wiping the snot off his hand, he then jumped to his feet and whispered, "Ye must help me, Seymour. Please help me one more time." He waved the one tiny remaining nugget in Seymour's face.

The mule rolled his eyes and fluttered his leathery lips. There'd been so much trouble since he found the gold. Seeing Pete's happiness turn to misery confused him.

Seymour, however, could not defy his beloved owner. Eight days later, after the laborious journey back to wretched Marysville and scaling the mountains, they came to a junction that led to several riverbeds. Pete sank to his knees, clasped his hands in prayer, looked up at Seymour and whispered, "Please, my friend, find us some gold."

Seymour raised his snout, widened his nostrils, and carefully sniffed the air. He made his decision and proceeded down a path.

By the creek, the mule quickly sniffed out a generous amount of the yellow

rocks and then would search no more. Pete tugged on his reins, and even offered sugar and oats, but then gave up and melted down the gold.

Master and mule then ascended to the junction. Pete aimed west, down the mountain toward Marysville, where he could buy supplies and join a convoy heading east, but Seymour would not budge.

"Not now, Seymour," Pete said through clenched teeth. The mule stared him down with mild contempt.

About to cuss loudly, Pete then knit his brow and hummed in thought. He leaned closer to the mule. "We do have a little food left, and water can be had from the streams. If we travel east for ten days, we can reach the Oregon Trail, but it's very risky."

Seymour quivered his nostrils. A giant, murky tear rolled down his cheek. Then he turned east and labored up the trail, his waving tail saying, *I'm walking away and never coming back.*

Pete watched his mule's petulant behind, and then shrugged. "Yer a stubborn ass, Seymour," he muttered and docily followed.

Green Satin

by Meagan Dwyer

On Friday nights we would stay up watching music videos on MTV. You could smell our sour cream and vinegar potato chips from two rooms away, and the nail polish stains on Emily's carpeted floor were always hastily wiped clean—you could hardly see them.

We were on her bed, watching Spring Break '99. This was a time when MTV actually played music videos and we were curious about the grown-up world. To us, the whipped-cream bikini-clad Spring Break girls were beyond us. I watched those women walk down a catwalk, with rappers performing in the background, as they strutted almost naked. The sun from Spring Break weather and the beach in the background was so bright and warm. My eyes were drawn

to the scene. We did not yet understand sexuality or adulthood. We had just begun to grow up. I breathed in, and smelled the thick odor of vinegar.

Emily was about my height, but less slim and with strawberry blond hair. She wasn't as freckly as other redheads, but the carrot-colored mop that rested on her head was like a beacon of light, signaling mockery from our peers. Emily was horribly treated by our classmates, namely by the boys, during childhood. So was I.

She was always looking through magazines, at other girls and boys in our class, flipping channels on her TV at home. Emily's spark for something else was what interested me in her. With Emily, everything was always an adventure. Sleepover after sleepover was a pattern that I had grown to recognize as my way out. Even her potato chips were a thrill— my mother never bought them.

Our curiosity sparked another interest, and Emily and I started talking about Catherine. It was by far our favorite thing to do. Catherine was two years older and, in our eyes, already carried with her the infinite wisdom of being a chic teen girl. Catherine was as tall as me, slim, beautiful red hair. She knew how to apply makeup, something I remembered every time I looked into the mirror at my overly rouged cheeks and thickly coated eyelids. We always thought she was happy.

My mind wandered to a time where Catherine had walked in on Emily and I trying on their mother's shoes. She looked us both up and down, raised her eyebrows, and asked, "Are y'all playing dress-up?"

We were embarrassed, but looked to her for approval.

Catherine had gone to live with her father for a year. She was gone, but very much present in that bedroom, and I could almost still get a whiff of her cucumber melon-scented lotion whenever we would go in there.

"I have an idea," Emily piped. "Let's check out Catie's room and look through her stuff."

I hesitated. "Uh, won't we get in trouble?" I asked.

"She won't know."

"OK!"

We got up off of Emily's bed, put the bag of chips on the floor, and turned off the TV. I felt my heart beating faster as we walked down the hallway, toward Catherine's closed door. A smile spread across my face and I clenched my fists with anticipation. Besides the popcorn and late-night facials, sneaking into Catherine's room and opening up her closet was one of the high points of the night. We opened her door and stepped into a room that contained Elle magazine cut-outs, posters of bands, and Homecoming portraits. We both knew that if she ever found out, we would be in big trouble. Emily was so sure that Catherine would never know we were going through her things, but seeing her perfectly made bed and bulletin boards full of pictures made me stop caring.

Emily opened the bedroom door. The first magazine cut-out on the wall that I saw was an ad for Giorgio Armani. The model in the photograph had a short, black bob haircut and dark, smoldering eyes. She was incredibly thin and had the most perfect complexion I had ever seen—just like Catherine's, I thought. I took two steps into the room, the carpet beneath my feet was cold. I could tell the door had been closed for a while, and I could not take my eyes off the model.

"Let's see what she left here," Emily suggested.

We headed straight to the closet door, like young pups who knew exactly where to find their mother's teat. Emily put both hands on the small doorknobs and opened the closet with one swift motion. The doors were high, and they divided down the middle where we stood— I could hear the small whooosshh as they separated. Like an entrance to a grand ballroom, we laid our eyes on many colors, textures, and patterns. They were hanging, folded, or stacked. Her closet smelled like dead air, something flat that I couldn't recognize. Finally, we were able to fully view the yards of clothes, both hanging and folded, which were ours for the taking. My eyes went up and down the different pieces of hanging clothes—the swirls of colors were almost calling us to touch them.

There was the green satin gown that Catherine had worn to Holly Ball, the Little Rock Christmas dance that happened every year with our cotillion. It had a princess-styled bodice with a floor-length, flowing skirt. Catherine had worn it, paired with high-heeled clear plastic strappy sandals, when she was on the royal court during the previous year's ball. The shoes looked like a cheap version of glass slippers. They were tacky; I loved them.

"How'd she get on the court," I asked, putting the shoes on, "...if she wasn't dating anyone at the time?"

"Who knows," Emily quipped. "I mean, she had a lot of friends here. But, she didn't even win, you know."

She took the green dress off its hanger and ran her hands along the bodice. Her fingers moved slowly, as if trying to soak up the feeling of the fabric in every second. She smiled.

"Let me try!" I said.

I unzipped the zipper on the back of the bodice all the way down to the end. The middle hole in the dress almost seemed to be inviting me to step in— I did. The tulle of the inside of the flowing skirt brushed up against my legs. I walked over to the mirror and saw the bodice hanging loosely around my chest.

"Hey, can you zip this?" I asked Emily.

She came over and zipped the zipper up my back. With each cinching inch the dress fitted my body more and more perfectly. It was not too loose, it was not too tight. I looked down and the satin lay straight across my torso, and my breasts just barely stuck out of the top.

We swirled in front of the mirror and admiring our reflections. We were more than careful in making sure that the dress was properly placed back onto the hanger and the closet door shut immediately.

Emily and I took turns trying on the dress and shoes. She ran back to her room, grabbed her camera, and returned to Catherine's room and snap! She took my

picture. This was proof that we had been cool, even for fifteen minutes. I leaned up against the wall, bending my knees forward and posing my feet out in front of me. I put my left heel up in the air, resting on the sole—I could see the light's glare shining off the plastic of the heel. Emily laughed and brought the camera up to her face again. Snap!

Sneaking into Catherine's room was a high for us. I saw her gray and white pleated skirt. This was her old uniform from high school, and she had worn it before she left. I would go to that high school someday, and so would Emily. I grinned and pointed the skirt out to Emily. but searching through her closet was like glimpsing into what we could look like in two years. Her wardrobe was so much cooler than my own. I looked down at my own cotton shirt, with small little nicks in the fabric— too many trips to the washing machine. Skirts with floral prints, dresses with spaghetti straps, blouses with beaded buttons— all purchased at a high cost, in department stores that I could never afford. I thought of my own closet back at my house, with hand-me down drawers inside and old smocked dresses from early childhood. Most of the old outfits were covered in dust at this point, and there was almost zero trace of anything from this season.

"Just look at this top," I remarked. "BCBG? How much did this cost?"

"Probably a lot," Emily replied with hardly any shock. "She probably just had Dad buy it for her when we went out to visit over Christmas."

This was something so foreign to me. I took the top down from its hanger and held it out in front of me. The turquoise beading over the bodice was intricate, and my eyes moved over the patterns with admiration. The fact that so much work went into something so beautiful was completely beyond me. I began to calculate how many weeks of allowance would let me own something like this. My head began to spin.

On Catherine's desk there was a photo of her and a friend, on their first day of high school. She was wearing the gray pleated skirt with a white polo. Her arm was around the neck of her friend. 'That will be us,' I thought. 'That will be Emily and me. I just have to wait.'

I looked over at Emily as she examined the size tag on one of her sister's skirts. She furrowed her brow, knowing full well that her ass was not going to fit any time soon. Most of Catherine's clothes were small, and she wore a size 6 dress—Emily was easily a 10. She put the skirt back on the hanger, which was oddly made of wire and plastic. It was true that she was heavy— I could see the rolls from under her t-shirt.

It seemed as if Catherine's life came straight out of Teen Vogue. I enjoyed imagining looking as cool as her. Her closet was our way to explore the possibilities of our future once adolescence would finally be over. I took so many pieces of her clothing—green satin dress included—and imagined myself in them, walking down the hallway of our Catholic school on free dress day. I fantasized about different days, different looks, a different me. Everyone would love me, because I looked good. I thought of my hand-me-downs compared to Catherine's high-end tops, skirts, and jeans. My cheeks burned. I looked over at Emily again, though trying to not let her know how ashamed I had begun to feel. She didn't look up, and I turned back again to the mirror. She had more or less the same look on her face, but she was far more jaded. Catherine's clothes, for both Emily and me, were a portal. We left our temporary awkwardness of seventh grade, and went into the chic world of ninth grade.

My hands moved over her makeup case, picking up various compacts and observing what pigments, styles, and textures she used. I found a tube of Chanel lipstick that was a bright pink, like a peony at the beginning of its young life. With the tip of my finger, I touched the tip of the lipstick. It was creamy, and its bright pink color made it look like candy. I wanted to put it on my lips, but instead I put the cap back on. I admired Catherine whenever I saw her, or pieces of her in that room.

“Hey, look at that one,” I exclaimed, picking up a long-sleeved white blouse with a peach-colored embroidered collar.

“Oh, I hate that shirt,” Emily said. “Besides, I haven't seen Catie wear it in forever.”

I ignored her. I took the shirt off the hanger and began to unbutton the buttons. I was going to try this on. unfashionable or not. I fumbled with the

faux diamond buttons that seemed like small pebbles in my sausage-like fingers. "Shit. This thing is complicated," I sighed.

"I'm telling you, she never wears it," Emily said.

"I think it might fit me, though. And look, I'm gonna try on those gold shoes next. You know Catherine and I are the same size!"

"No kidding, both of y'all's feet are huge," she said as she started to open a Mootsie Tootsie box.

I put the blouse on, buttoned the little diamonds up, up, up. The polyester fabric almost slithered up and down my body as I tried to position it. I kicked aside the green dress, which had crumpled on the floor, to get closer to the skinny mirror.

"Watch it!" Emily shouted.

"Shhhh! Hey, you said it yourself she'd never know. Besides, it's been on the floor like that for, like, twenty minutes."

She rolled her eyes at me, and she spotted the Clinique Happy bottle on the dresser. It was two-thirds full, and I was surprised Emily hadn't stolen it yet. No, stolen is a bad word—acquired is better. She pointed the nozzle toward her nose, and pushed it down accidentally. I laughed—the perfume had completely covered her face and the smell was traveling in the air toward me. The perfume smelled like oranges. I imagined myself spraying the perfume onto my own neck. Flashes of dates with boys and late nights at the movie theater went through my mind. I wanted Emily to be with me, I wanted us to double date. Emily ran into the bathroom to grab a damp washcloth to get the perfume off her face. The smell still lingered.

I turned back toward the mirror and looked at myself in Catherine's blouse, realizing that Emily was right. The top was completely ugly, and it was far too small for me. I tucked my fingers under the wrists to try to stretch out the sleeves a little, trying to make it fit. It wasn't working. I took a long, deep sigh and thought again to my pitiful mass of clothes that, no matter if it grew in size.

it was still mediocre. No wonder I picked the worst blouse in the bunch.

That was when I saw it. I looked at the reflection in the skinny mirror, then to the left sleeve itself. Some brown marks were beneath the fabric, on the inner side of the top. 'Oh God,' I thought. 'I've ruined it.' I started to take the blouse off when I turned around to see if Emily had seen anything. She hadn't; her nose was buried at the spout of Catherine's perfume bottle. I pulled out the left sleeve and saw the bloodstains, almost perfectly aligned in three rows. The blood hadn't soaked all the way through to the other side, but it was clear it was not going to come out anytime soon. The blouse, abandoned in the back of the closet, was not taken along with Catherine for a reason.

One, two, three smudged lines, and my vision of Emily's sister had changed.

"What are you looking at?" Emily asked.

"Nothing," I said.

She walked over to me and grabbed the sleeve out of my hand— she never believed me when I answered “nothing.” She pulled the sleeve closer to her face, examining the spots.

“What is that,” she asked.

I looked back and forth, from the stain to Emily's face. I didn't answer her.

“You want to go finish watching TV? I think Real World is on now.”

“Yeah, let's do that.” Emily handed me the shirt and walked out the door.

I hung the blouse back on the hanger and hung it up, still inside out.

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Come in...and be captivated...





"Knowledge" by Jan Selman; <http://jancollinselman.com/GardenGallery/TheGardenGallery.html>

Welcome to our Fiction section!

Featured Stories:

"A Soldier on the Field"- by Linda Emma

"Ungiftable"- by Stephanie Haddad

"Fragile Things"- by Nicole M. Bouchard

"Helium"- by Vince Corvaia

"An Eye for an 'I'" - by Harvey Havel

"Gold Rush"- by Ilan Herman

"Green Satin"- by Meagan Dwyer

Editor's Note: Please note that the following story contains adult content, therefore it is PG-13. "A Soldier on the Field", will be published in installments. Ms. Emma's previous story, "Jump the Gun", ended in the spring issue. This is part one of "A Soldier on the Field". Enjoy!

A Soldier On The Field

by Linda Emma

At twelve, Denny Hall was 5'10" and towering over the kids at recess. In high school, he was the 6'3", 185 pound starting wide receiver for the Jasmine Jaguars. By the time he was a senior he'd caught 112 passes, ran for 2,464 yards and made 38 touchdowns. He also broke the school record for the 100 yard dash in track and led the relay team to Ohio's state competitions.

Denny was an athlete, born for it. Seasoned for it too -by the rigors of rural life on a barely sustainable family farm south of Cleveland. Denny and his two brothers lived under full sovereignty of an unflinching disciplinarian who held a black-and-white vision of the world and everyone in it. Aaron Hall had a chiseled sense of right and wrong and unwavering priorities that started with work, family, God, school. Football didn't even make the first cut. But, as long as it didn't interfere with real life, his boys were welcome to it.

On the field, Denny was grace and speed. Off the field, he was an unassuming shadow with a lanky gait and a slouching posture. Tight muscled, and brown-haired, he had green eyes with thick brows over a nose askew from a break, and a mouth with teeth jammed in a little too tightly. He was quiet, holding back a reservoir of words he seemed reluctant to use up, as if he might be saving them for a time when he'd really need them. He didn't need them on the farm. Or on the field. Rarely did he need them in class. His teachers' expectations of him had little to do with his classroom performance. Even among the girls who flickered about him like the fire flies in summer fields, he needn't use up any extraneous syllables. The girls would be there whether he spoke or not.

Attending college wasn't something Denny thought about. It wasn't that he was a bad student. He liked to read. In the summer, he'd tote a paperback to the fields, consuming the passages like the quenching gulps he'd take from the trickling stream that bordered their land. In the folds of the stories were people he would never meet, places he would never go. He liked knowing they were out there, just the same. The other subjects in school, however, didn't hold much interest for him. Maybe it was because no one seemed to think he would care about atoms and molecules, wars and treaties, cosines and tangents.

Only his English teacher seemed hell-bent that he meet Hamlet, that he know Carl Sandburg, Ernest Hemingway. She was pretty insistent upon it, too. And so, whatever book she discreetly slid upon his desk, whether it was assigned, whether anyone else seemed to be reading it or not, he'd pick it up and read it. Whatever it was.

No, college wasn't in his plans.

Not until that is. George Rafferty witnessed Denny Hall grab a bullet of a pass

NOT until, that is, GEORGE RAFFERTY witnessed Denny Hall grab a bullet of a pass intended for a short yardage play and turn it into a 45 yard blazing, detouring, straddling, hurdling race into the end zone. That play brought Denny's game total yardage to 184.

Rafferty hadn't been looking for Denny, had never even heard of the kid.

His job that day as Assistant Coach for Ohio State was to check out the opposing quarterback, a mid-level star that was on the short list of potential freshman recruits. He and his team were supposed to trounce the Jaguars. Would have too. If anyone had bothered to tell Denny that was the plan.

Denny enrolled at Ohio State amidst the turbulence of American college life in the 1960's. Surrounded by it, yet insulated from it, Denny remained naively unaware of what measures had been taken on his behalf.

Thanks to football and Coach Rafferty's finesse at filling out draft deferral forms, Denny could spend the next four years fighting on a football field instead of a battle field. Even the classes for which he was registered were handled adroitly by Rafferty to ensure that Denny spent most of his time where he belonged: on the gridiron.

Transition from rural to urban life had caught Denny only mildly unawares. Since football was the flood in which he was submerged from the second he stepped cleated-foot onto college campus, his chances to critically observe his surroundings were minimal. Football, his team and Coach Rafferty consumed most all of his waking moments.

The pieces of his life he could still claim as his own were few and isolated. Among them was his daily regimen of a solitary pre-dawn run about the perimeter of the quietly sprawling campus. At home, Denny had always started his day with silent laps around the family farm before tackling the preschool chore list. Lulled by the rhythmic beat of his heart, his feet and the unlabored exhale of his misty breath, Denny could have as easily been plodding through those dew soaked fields of home as through the city oasis he was now coming to understand to be his new home.

The throbbing, coursing heart of his new residence was the massive horseshoe

The throbbing, coursing heart of his new residence was the massive horseshoe-shaped stadium that held no resemblance whatsoever to the television field he'd seen on his friend's 13" black and white Zenith. When Denny first emerged from its cavernous entrails into the body of its golden sunlit sea of gently swaying grasses, he was awestruck. Outside of the skies that dipped to the reaching crops of the rolling farmlands near home, it was bigger than anything Denny had ever seen in his life. He was paralyzed.

And then someone tossed him a football.

And he was home again.

She had seen him on mornings even before the frost had melted into the day, sitting in his denim bottoms and flannel over white t-shirt, beneath one of two trees, always quietly reading, always alone. He seemed oblivious to his environment, the climate and the crowd.

Occasionally, she would venture close enough to catch the titles or the authors: Hawthorne, Miller, Steinbeck, Thoreau, Shakespeare, Wilde, Shaw. There appeared no connection from one to the next, no literary link that bound them all. He seemed to consume them, with satiating ease, like warm liquid on a cool day, in a quiet private reverie. She wondered which course offered such a diverse bounty and yet was reluctant to intrude upon his self-imposed exile.

Maria Colantone was the first of her family to attend college. The daughter of immigrant parents, it was assumed that she would follow along the path trod by her older sisters and continue to stock shelves, ring at the register and greet the customers of her family's small Italian market just off Murray Hill Road in Cleveland. Her father Victor worked hard, long hours, with his wife at his side, to build a tiny business to a thriving market, indispensable to the scores of Italian Americans who daily pushed open their doors. This was success. This was a legacy that he could render proudly to his four daughters. And obligingly, they all agreed.

Except Maria.

From the time she was a baby, Maria gobbled knowledge like food, its sustenance more satisfying. She spoke earlier, read earlier, understood more

sustenance more satisfying. She spoke earlier, read earlier, understood more and sooner than her sisters. She asked more questions and when her parents couldn't provide the answers, successfully sought them out on her own. Happily, she shared her discoveries. Slowly, her parents, her sisters realized that even in her baby steps she was leaps ahead of them.

When Maria, propped up on the stool that allowed her to reach the cash register in their market, told her father one morning that she was going to be a teacher, he just stared at her. In another time, with another child, he would have rebuked the notion. As a father, he had been what his had been to him: stern, emotionless, protective, proprietary. But over the years, engulfed in the blanket of warmth the women in his life had woven, his armor had begun to melt.

“A teacher, huh?”

Maria nodded with confidence.

“Yes, a teacher,” she replied.

In the fall after graduation Maria started at Ohio State. To the idea of his youngest daughter attending college, Victor had finally warmed. To the notion that she would be living away, he had not. Even the scholarship Ohio State was offering was of no enticement to him. He had to be worn down, over time, like the warped spot under Maria's scraping chair at the register. With the gentle but persistent prodding of Maria's mother and sisters, Victor had finally, reluctantly, given in.

Her major would be education, its evolution from elementary concentration to secondary, as natural a progression as the content of her academics became more focused on the subject matters that she most loved. Pulling a grammar school student past Dick and Jane could not measure against the significance to her of opening a young mind to the characters of Dickens, the sonnets of Shakespeare or the passions of Heathcliff and Catherine.

Eventually Maria would be compelled to intrude upon the quiet stranger, to inquire which course so fully offered an abundance of writers. And as surprised as she was to learn that the rotating volumes were of his own choosing, she was

more astonished by the contrast of boy to book. Denny was a pleasant surprise against the back drop of hippies and heroes that regularly invaded the campus vistas. He seemed a black and white photo against the psychedelic haze of reefer smoke wafting through the night air of the commons.

Maria connected to Denny not merely as a kindred soul. The budding educator in her sensed in Denny an untested student in the infancy of his intellectualism. She was befuddled by his course selections and eager to rectify the blatant oversights on his behalf. Didn't he know all that the college had to offer? How could a boy with Shakespeare in his heart be relegated to the abridged novels touted in his rudimentary courses?

Denny, in turn, had never met anyone like Maria. Her mahogany hair was long, wavy and wildly full, her brown eyes so dark that only in bright sunlight did they not appear black and her skin was a deep olive. She was such an anomaly to his world that Denny turned to his books for a familiar reference. She was James Fenimore Cooper's Cora Monro, raven-haired, dark-eyed and independent. She was Victor Hugo's dancing and impassioned Esmeralda, swarthy but golden with great black "eyes of flame." Against Denny's silent self-control, Maria was bold and effusive confidence. To his unambivalent focus, she was plunging and chaotic passion. Maria was the pin tumbler to unlock the emerging man inside of Denny. With the patient determination of a scientist, she excavated his layers, slowly, painstakingly, and was pleasantly astounded by the treasures she unearthed.

Denny and Maria took college in through their pores: the courses, the rallies, the debates and the football games. The Ohio State Buckeyes were emerging undefeated, knocking down even number one ranked Purdue. The air was full of excitement and expectation. Maria became Denny's most avid fan, jumping up and down at the sidelines with a chant of O-H-I-O, chiming in as the band played Hang On Sloopy. When Denny was presented with a small gold football trouser charm after their victory against Michigan, he bought a matching chain and presented it to Maria. He manipulated the tiny clasp and placed it around her neck and she never took it off.

"I don't understand how you can think this is the right thing to do," Maria said, trying not to raise her voice.

“I know you don’t, but it is,” Denny replied.

“With all that’s going on now, with everything you know, how can you possibly think that this war is right?”

“That’s not it and you know it,” Denny pleaded. He came to her side and sat down on the bed, took her hands in his and looked into her eyes.

“I’ve got to do the right thing,” he said.

“How is going over there and maybe getting yourself killed the right thing?”

“It isn’t fair how I’m not there. I gotta do right.”

“Denny, please. It isn’t right. There isn’t anything right about it. Maybe you’re here for a reason, maybe-“

“I’m here because somebody cheated. Someone got me out of doing what I’m supposed to be doing. I’ve got to go,” he said with finality.

Maria shook her head and succumbed to sobs. Denny held her and rocked her until she quieted.

Maria spent days and then weeks researching the Vietnam War. She presented Denny with an arsenal of answers against his participation in such a travesty. She had facts and figures, proof, she insisted. Denny did not have to go.

And when her arguments couldn’t sway him, when her impassioned pleas could not prevail against the black-and-white beginnings of his life she played her last card: herself. Couldn’t he see that if he went away, fought in a war that wasn’t right, that he might never come back to her?

Before he fully opened his dorm room door, Denny’s senses were struck with the light, the scent, the sounds. He flicked the light switch, to no response, but rather than tense at the anomaly, he entered, unguarded.

His room was aglow with candles burning from every surface, the air heavily scented with incense, Diana Ross sweetly crooning "...you came into my heart, so tenderly, with a burning love..."

Seated on Denny's neatly made bed, Maria looked up from her book and smiled. She wore denim cut-offs and Denny's bulky Buckeyes sweatshirt.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

Maria closed her book, got up and came to Denny. She reached up, put her arms around his neck and kissed him. She pulled from the kiss, her arms still about him and smiled warmly.

"This is a nice surprise," he said, smiling back.

While Maria had become a familiar face at Townshend Hall and was as comfortable in Denny's dorm room as he was, she'd never appeared unannounced, and certainly not before him.

"And I got us dinner," Maria said.

Denny looked over to the rumbled bed of his roommate, where a sealed pizza box sat waiting.

"I thought I was taking you out to dinner."

"And I thought it would be nicer if we ate in," Maria said, pecking Denny on the cheek and pulling away. She busied herself with the paper plates and napkins, bottled cokes.

She opened the pizza box and pulled slices for each of them and handed one off to Denny. Denny pulled off his jacket and slid onto the bed, the pizza on his lap. He glanced at the book beside him.

"Anything good?"

Maria came and sat next to him. She nodded.

“You’d like it.”

Denny was an indiscriminate reader, and Maria knew that even if she did not like the book, Denny probably would. Often in the novels she found unimaginative or trite, plodding or predictable, Denny was able to find hidden qualities. It was the way he was with people, too, Maria thought. She couldn’t think of anyone Denny didn’t like.

As they finished eating, Diana started singing from the beginning of the album again.

“Do you want to listen to something else?” Maria asked getting up and clearing the empty plates.

“I don’t care,” Denny answered, leafing through a copy of *The Lantern* and leaning into the propped up pillows of the bed.

Maria covered the remaining slices of pizza on a plate with a napkin and tossed the trash and empty box in the pail under Denny’s desk. She came to Denny and cuddled next to him, moving her closed book aside. Denny folded the newspaper, and put his arm around her.

“Do you want to go out?” he asked. “Catch a movie?”

Maria shook her head.

“What do you want to do?”

Maria was silent, but reached from the crook of his arm to give him a soft kiss.

“That’s always fun,” Denny said, grinning.

Maria rolled from his embrace and sat on her knees, facing him. She looked intently into his eyes.

“What?”

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too,” he answered, satisfied with the simple solution to what he thought would be a puzzle.

Maria broke from his gaze, and took Denny’s hands in hers. She stared down at the long fingers, kneaded the softening calluses of his palms. Trading farm tools for a football full-time had changed more than his hands. Denny gently squeezed the small, warm hands in his. He stayed quiet. Denny had learned to wait out her recent silences. When they had first starting going out, Denny had been amazed at her energy and the guilelessness with which she shared her world. She was open and honest and seemed to include Denny in her most treasured dreams and prodded him to do the same. At the beginning, the only lapses in their conversations were when Denny was contemplating the answer to a query he’d never before considered or when they were both together reading or studying.

Now, they retreated often to the respective recesses of their minds; there were fears in the darkness that neither of them cared to share with the other.

Maria looked up.

“I don’t want you to go,” she said simply.

“I know.”

This was the impasse at which they’d settled. No more words were necessary.

Maria was on her knees. She raised herself, brought her hand to Denny’s cheek and kissed him long and slow. Denny responded, bringing his fingers to the nape of her neck, entwining them in the folds of her long, thick hair. Maria sat back; Denny was smiling, playing at the back of her ear. She gave a small smile but her eyes belied her sadness. She pulled farther away but before Denny could question the move, she brought her arms criss-cross to the bottom of her

sweatshirt, lifted and peeled the hulking mass away to reveal the white of her breasts against her taut and tanned torso.

Denny froze in place, the saliva in his mouth pooling at the back of his throat. He swallowed, hard.

“Ria,” he started, trying not to look at the tight, pointed nipples of her small round breasts.

Maria reached out and touched his lips.

This was something they had talked about -many times. Now, Denny silently wished he’d been more forthcoming about the inadequacy of his training. The only girl he’d been with was the girl from town, the one to whom they’d all lost their virginity. Abetted even with the wellspring of her experience, his was a fumbling effort. He had been inept and embarrassed.

Maria took his hand and brought it to her breast, kneading it gently into her. Denny struggled to control his breathing, the accelerating beat of his heart.

“Ria, I thought-” he started.

“It’s okay,” she said, bending in toward him and kissing him.

“It’s what I want,” she added.

She kissed him again, harder, circling her tongue inside his mouth. Denny melted into the kiss, felt for Maria’s hardened nipple, taking it between his thumb and forefinger, desperate to be gentle, in control. She slid her hand down the contours of his chest to his muscled abdomen, pulling at his t-shirt and letting her hand touch tight skin and fine hairs. Denny felt himself tense with anticipation. Maria reached down farther, fully cupping the rock trapped in the denim constraints of Denny’s jeans. He let out a moan, and with it the damn of his own restraint was released.

She refused to play out their last scene at a bus terminal.

When Denny descended the stairs from University Hall after his last final, Maria was waiting for him. She took his hand, gave him a kiss and pulled him along.

“My surprise?” Denny asked.

He had been forewarned of it.

She nodded, smiled.

As they threaded their way through the parking lot, Denny resisted the urge to ask where they were going. When Maria stopped in front of a red Plymouth Valiant, Denny again waited for some clue that made sense.

She opened the driver’s door of the car, got in and put the key in the ignition. Denny just stood, waiting.

“C’mon,” she said.

Denny’s palms were spread in an opened faced gesture toward the automobile.

“Ria?”

“I borrowed it,” Maria said, closing the door and starting the engine.

Denny came around the passenger’s side and slide across the plaid vinyl seat.

Maria had told him not to ask any questions, but he was struggling to maintain his silence.

“From who?” he asked.

“Whom. A friend.”

A guy, Denny thought trying to let go of the uncomfortable feeling he got any time Maria brought up her assortment of friends.

“No hints?” he asked.

Maria gestured toward the back seat.

“I packed you a bag,” she said.

Denny smiled, nodded. He scooted closer to her, put his hand on her leg.

“I didn’t even know you knew how to drive,” Denny said.

“I do,” Maria answered as she pressed the gear button and backed out of the space.

After an hour’s drive of comfortable conversation and silences, Denny tried again.

“How ‘bout another hint?”

Maria laughed.

“I’m kidnapping you,” she answered.

Denny tensed, if only slightly and Maria felt the change. She glanced at him.

“Only the illusion of it, dear,” she assured, “...only make-believe.”

The one rule Maria had set forth before their excursion was that neither of them would talk about where he was going or what he would have to do. She knew the turmoil within her played just as furiously within Denny. She also knew that there would be nothing to change his decision.

“We’ll play twenty questions.” Maria started.

“Is it bigger than a bread box?”

“Do you really want to waste your first question?”

“No, no,” Denny answered, playfully. “Don’t count that one.”

Denny and Maria rode north, following the shoreline of Lake Erie, to a lakeside port. They reveled in a weekend of play, of making love, of swimming and fishing. They picnicked at the base of a lighthouse, then climbed its spiral staircase to take in expansive views of Kelleys and South Bass Island, Sandusky Bay and the rest of Lake Erie. Maria even convinced the marina’s owner that they were qualified to rent one of his boats, in spite of their lack of experience. They anchored out on the lake and quietly read together as their vessel bobbed in the reflecting sunlight. The weather could not have cooperated more, a pair of perfect, warm days, clear cool evenings. They relished even in the Sunday morning drizzle for the excuse it granted them to remain entwined in the sheets for just a little longer.

When Denny insisted on treating them both to a lavish dinner before they returned to campus, they sipped the wine the waiter had chosen for them and melted into the lush fabric seats of the fine restaurant. However, in the lapses of silence, uneasiness crept. When the appetizer arrived, Maria could get past only the first bite. And Denny knew. When the waiter came to take the rest of their order, Denny ordered only the check.

(End of this installment. To be continued...)

Ungiftable

by Stephanie Haddad

The newly-married Mr. and Mrs. Wayne P. McIntyre sat on their hotel bed and opened the gift. It was addressed to them from a distant aunt, on Wayne’s side, and wrapped in an ornately beautiful blue paper. Shirley tossed the paper onto a crumpled pile of wedding wrappings and split open the unmarked brown box. Together, they stared at its contents.

“What an unusual gift,” Shirley mused. Man and wife shrugged nonchalantly and put the box aside into a pile of gifts that would be

nonchalantly and put the box aside, into a pile of gifts that would be dragged back to their home. The gift was left forgotten in an unused bedroom.

Months later, a late-night cleaning of their home uncovered the dusty box. Shirley opened it again, raised an eyebrow and shut the box tightly. Remembering the upcoming wedding of an acquaintance, Shirley dug out a leftover gift bag and wrapped the present again. At the end of the month, Mr. and Mrs. Wayne P. McIntyre brought it to the reception hall and left it on the gift table, where it lay awash in a sea of eccentrically adorned packages.

Several days after the wedding, the newly-married Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Walters sat on their living room floor unwrapping gifts until they came to the last present, contained in an ivory gift bag from Wayne and Shirley. Rebecca peaked into the tissue paper, and scrunched up her nose in disappointment.

Thomas said, politely, "Let's make sure to send them a 'Thank You' card."

This time, the gift stayed inside its decorative bag and wound up tucked into a lonely corner of the third floor attic, where it spent the better part of five years. Then one day Rebecca cleaned out the attic so that contractors could lay down new flooring. When she came upon the gift, she chuckled, remembering her initial response.

The next weekend, she brought it to a Yankee Swap game at her neighbor's Christmas party. Suzy Frank, attracted by the shiny red paper that Rebecca had used, selected the gift and eagerly unwrapped it. Instantly, she recoiled, muttering obscenities before tossing it away.

"Now remember, Suzy," teased Rebecca. "You have to take home what you open!"

No one swapped gifts with her, although Suzy made every effort to negotiate, even offering a payoff for someone to take away the unpleasant gift. Finally, she begrudgingly took the gift home with her and assigned it a damp, dark corner of the garage.

Ten years later, Suzy sold her home and made plans to move abroad, intending to hold a yard sale to make extra money and cover the moving expenses. Her family was helping to clean out the garage one spring day, when her daughter suddenly gasped.

“What on earth is this?” she cried. “Where did it come from?”

Suzy shooed her away, took the item from her hands and placed it into the SELL pile. Two weeks later, the Frank family held their yard sale and made almost \$500. Yet there, on a small table of leftovers, sat the gift – dusty, moldy and unloved. Suzy left it on the curb for trash pick-up the next morning...

As Suzy cleared the trash and clutter from the yard, a woman and her daughter pulled up in front of the house. They got out of the car and began rifling through the mountain of unsold goods, studying the graying stuffed animals and beaten paperbacks with intent. Suddenly, the young girl shrieked with delight, plunging her hands into the bottom of the box.

“I love it!” she exclaimed, extracting the gift from the rubble. Smiling, she turned to her mother, who gazed back at the gift in shocked disbelief. The light refracted through the blue glass and painted a rainbow across the pavement. “May I keep it, Mommy?”

Suzy nodded to the mother, who then smiled at her daughter.

“Yes, Molly. Say thank you to the nice lady,” she said. She didn’t want it, but when Shirley saw the happiness in her young daughter’s eyes, she knew she’d never dissuade her. And how Wayne would laugh when he laid eyes on their discovery! At least now, after all these years, Shirley knew it would have a place in their home.

Someone finally wanted the gift.

Fragile Things

By Nicole M. Bouchard

Fragile things, faded gold rings, twisted metal wings, all become dangerous when they break/ Silent fare, dresses I wear, solemn “I swear”, are there for the heart to ache/ A tumultuous vow is ancient now, where dark secrets of vows lie in your shadowy wake/ Things we made, things that fade, things our lives permanently delayed, sit in the valise you’ll want to take/ Fragile things become dangerous when they break/ Listen for the crash and disruption they will make/

The poem watched their world from between its weathered blue covers. Up on a bookshelf not so high, it saw what was coming before they could feel it. Unnoticed, scarcely read, there it blazed with its message on the white shelf which rested against the white wall in the white house with the white picket fence on Gardener Lane. Its place was particularly observant being between the study and the kitchen. It saw breakfast, lunch and dinner, heard the distracted lulls in the conversations, and later it would hear the furtive phone calls in the study.

It all began the morning that the clock in the kitchen stopped. No one had really noticed the ticking because it had become such a part of their daily life. But not the husband, wife, son or two daughters went without hearing its absence that morning. Mr. Edgrave valiantly offered to be the one to fix it, though when Mrs. Edgrave went dutifully searching through their supply draw

like a magician's assistant, her wavy hair falling to one side like a curtain as she bent prettily over the draw, she discovered that they had no more AA batteries. Ean Edgrave had to drive back to campus for a lecture, Marianne Edgrave was busy painting her face with make-up for another day of warfare at high school, and Lilly Edgrave was to be driven by her mother to ballet lessons. The responsibility of picking up new batteries fell to Mr. Edgrave who happened to take his lunch hour at a mall food court near his law office. Pleasantly, the family members bid one another good day without kisses and hugs or other overt time-wasting gestures.

Twelve o'clock came around all too soon and Mr. Edgrave put down the phone. His stomach growled and his head ached from the run around he was receiving on the Gibbon's life insurance case. While meticulously neatening his papers on the desk before he went to lunch, he stopped for a moment to glance at the picture of his family from their European vacation the previous year. It was damp, cool, and drizzling that day in London. The girls, along with their mother, had insisted upon taking advantage of the London locations of their favorite stores, scooping up clothes items that weren't available in the U.S. He and Ean took advantage of the pubs and they all met up later at the hotel with silly childish grins and matted-down hair. That was the moment the photo was taken. Right there in the lobby, his little world made sense in that snapshot. In his office, he smiled before grabbing his black trench coat and headed for the door.

In line at the electronics store, he drummed his feet agitatedly. He had thought when he saw the display of batteries up front, that this would be an easy errand. Suddenly two long lines emerged out of nowhere and he was in back of a small throng of loud teenagers. Desperately wanting to avoid their flailing arms and crude antics, he switched lines. Now it was just two business men and an older Chinese woman in front of him. A pronounced snuffle and a sudden flush of intense floral perfume in the air made him wonder if one of the teenagers had gotten into his line behind him out of pure spite. He turned slightly and saw what appeared to be a young woman in her twenties crying into her cell phone.

"I know," she said hoarsely, "...that son of a bitch was supposed to pay it until I got on my feet... No. I haven't heard back from the gallery vet. Would I be

calling you if I had? No...yeah, I'm sorry. I'm just flipping out over here. Tell me if mom calls you. I don't want her to know about this, ok? Alright. Talk to you later... Love you too. Bye."

Awkwardly, she wiped the running eyeliner with the back of her slender porcelain hands. Digging through her purse, items falling onto the floor, it occurred to him that she might be looking for tissues. He thought about the packet he had stowed in the inner right breast pocket of his coat. It wasn't like him to get involved in others' affairs.

Yet she kept sniffing and searching and it started to seem ludicrous to ignore it. "Tissue?" he said, turning slightly to face her. As he turned, he saw that had he stayed in the other line he would have been well on his way to lunch by now. The annoyance was apparent on his face.

"Yeah, sorry. Just a rough day," she mumbled.

He turned his attention back to her. "Oh, no problem. I'm just realizing that I chose the wrong line... not because of you, of course... but..."

She looked up at him through her long auburn bangs. "I get it. Don't worry about it. Um, thanks for the tissues by the way."

He returned her smile and turned to face forward again. It was his turn to be rung up next. Placing the batteries and the money on the counter, he felt suddenly self-conscious with the intense gray pair of eyes on his back. "In a rush?" the clerk asked cheerfully. "To lunch," he responded with an obligatory grin. He gathered his change and dashed out of the store without so much as a glance behind him.

Once in the food court he could refocus on the task at hand. A salami sandwich piled high with onions, lettuce and tomatoes cured his hunger. It was very nearly inhaled and washed down with decaffeinated iced tea. He sat back in his wiry metal chair and relaxed. The sun came in brilliantly through the glass ceiling framed by large chrome beams. Part of what he enjoyed about his time in the food court was watching strangers from every walk of life drift by with their purchases, carriages, dilemmas and charged dialects. As his gaze swent

the crowd, it unwillingly singled in on the auburn-haired girl from the electronics store. She was a few tables away, working through the small pile of tissues he had given her. A neglected Asian salad rested near her elbow. He felt a strange obligation to her from the simple exchange they'd shared. It was only a few words between strangers, but there was recognition between them now. She'd surely notice if he walked by without saying anything else. Had no one else in the busy mall stopped to ask if she was alright?

Against his normal rather private inclinations, he made his way over to her. "Lunch not going so well either?" he asked.

Without looking up, she answered, "Not as well as yours, Mr. Tissues. You wouldn't happen to have another one would you?"

As he handed her the fourth tissue of the hour, her fingertips lingered on his for a moment. He dismissed it as a general human outreaching for sympathy. Her high-heeled boot pushed out the chair across from her. He took it with a quick glance at his watch for permission. Fifteen minutes left. Three minutes to the office. Doable.

"It just happened so fast!" she began. The sudden outpouring startled him initially, though he knew it was the penalty for accepting the seat.

"...so he leaves me flat out for someone else with kids and after promising to pay the rent of the apartment until I can either get on my feet or find another roommate, he tells me this morning that I'm on my own. He has more money than God and he knows that I'm struggling to launch my art career right now. I can't move home and my sister's married. I know I'll find another job, but I would kill for one of my paintings to sell right now and I can't believe I wasted my time thinking that we'd end up together... Wow- that's a lot to unload on a stranger. Consider yourself my hero and I'll take you out to lunch tomorrow to make up for me blabbing like this today. Really, it was so great to talk it out with somebody."

Five minutes.

"So lunch same time tomorrow same place?" It seemed innocent enough and

So, lunch, same time tomorrow, same place. It seemed innocent enough and he had listened.

“Lunch,” he echoed.

She rose from her seat and stuck out her hand. “Rosemary.” It wasn’t an exotic name exactly, but somehow it fit her.

He went to introduce himself as Mr. Edgrave, but decided it was too formal and patronizing. “I’m Luke.” Five of his forty-five years felt fallen away simply by using his first name in an introduction.

Back in his office, he felt nearly suffocated by the sparseness of his walls, though it had never affected him in such a way before. Images of colors splashing against the tan paint like waves muddled his mind once or twice between meetings that afternoon.

Mrs. Edgrave noted the usual silences during dinner. She kept them in a secret chart in her mind where the overall continuity of each day was accounted for. “Lilly sprained her toe today, I’m afraid.” Lilly looked over at her father and proudly tried to lift her foot above the table to illustrate her mother’s story. Mr. Edgrave, his cheek resting in the palm of his hand didn’t respond. His eyes were tracing the edges of silvery gray around the edge of his plate. Lilly had wiggled her foot enough and lowered it now, losing interest.

“Lukas!” his wife called, shattering his meditative state.

“Oh, sorry honey, what happened?”

It was a little lapse at best and the children continued eating in earnest but Mrs. Edgrave tucked it away in a side pocket before enthusiastically telling the story again.

Twelve o’clock came too slowly the next day. Mr. Edgrave had been positioning and repositioning the pens and pencils in the bronze holder on his desk since quarter of. He listened to them twirl around the sides of the holder that kept them all together. When his phone beeped at five of twelve, the easy rhythm and balance he had attained while twirling the holder on its corner was broken

and balance he had attained while twirling the holder on its corner was broken and they tumbled out over the surface of the desk. The beep belonged to a text message from his secretary that his next meeting would be postponed until two. Absently, he grabbed his coat and headed out the door even as errant writing utensils rolled off the top of his desk onto the floor.

It was a dark rainy day in sharp contrast to the previous afternoon. He was standing in the food court five minutes earlier than agreed upon, yet she was already there. She waved when she saw him. Again, her high-heeled boot had pushed out the chair across from her. Her bangs were swept back with the rest of her hair into a messy French twist, tendrils delicately framing the gray eyes that had been mostly hidden the day before. His breath caught in his throat. She was beautiful obviously, in the typical way that actresses in magazines were beautiful. He felt he couldn't be blamed for noticing what the blind would have seen.

"You must be a glutton for punishment if you're coming back after yesterday's episode..."

He smiled as he sat down. "I believe I was promised lunch."

She sighed and pursed her glossy coral lips. "You must be one big fan of lunch then," she said quietly, leaning forward on the table slightly. "So, what's your pleasure? Italian or Chinese?"

"I think I'll try the salad you wouldn't eat the other day."

"Mmm," she purred, "...good choice. Me too."

They talked more than they ate, finding the fact that they had absolutely nothing in common delightful. Somehow "father of three" didn't come up in the conversation, but the sparseness of his office walls did.

"I know what you mean. Once you're exposed to it, art is a thing you can't help but hunger for. It's like any other obsession. You could die trying to have just a little more of it... But I'll have to look at the space to help you choose the perfect piece. You think that would be ok?" He knew he had ample space in the day.

“You’re the expert,” he said shyly, shoving the weight of the invitation back onto her shoulders. She rose from the table.

“Say when,” she replied playfully.

“When.”

He introduced her at the office as an interior art consultant. She loved the title and said that she ought to make business cards for herself with that on it in bright purple italics. Once in his office, however, she became eerily quiet as though she was putting her ear to the very pulse of the surroundings. Her long fingers stroked fabrics and textures as her eyes scanned the surface of the walls.

After a few minutes or so, she declared that she had something for him. “I want it to be you, but with another dimension.” He found it thrilling to think that there was more than one dimension to him that someone could see...that even he could come to see as though she was painting him to be more interesting, stroke by stroke.

“I could bring by some samples, but if you don’t mind, I’d rather surprise you.”

“That’s fine. How much would a painting that size cost?”

“One night out at a concert. I want to give you the full experience of the art so you see it, hear it, feel it, smell it, taste it... What do you say? It’s a great low-key crowd, great food, and the music is like nothing you’ve ever heard.”

Though he earned a good living, good enough to support the waterfront Victorian he owned with his wife and his updated Thunderbird convertible, what he would have been willing to pay for one of her paintings unnerved him. “Why is it so important to you that I have the artistic experience?”

She grinned and looked up at the cakey, white swirled ceiling above them. “It’s not worth living without.”

Mrs. Edgrave stood at the sink chopping vegetables a week later. She knew that her husband had a late business dinner meeting that night but she couldn’t

Her husband had a late business dinner meeting that night, but she couldn't help but think that he'd be hungry when he came home. Lawyers' dinners never pleased him; he normally came home irritable and exhausted, pillaging through the fridge like a wild animal from the woods behind their home. The last time she went with him to one of his work functions was twenty-four years ago when he proposed. She had on a sapphire blue silk gown and her black hair was smoothed back tightly into an elegant bun. Of course with his burgeoning career, he was a safe choice, but had he been a starving actor, she doubted very much if her decision would have been different. There was a charming, laid-back spark to him that made him separate from his peers. In remembering the details of his young face, she absentmindedly slid the knife across one her fingers. The sharp pain shocked her back to the present and she chided herself for having been so careless. The wound was not deep, but the running water from the faucet drove the trickled blood down the finger to her wedding ring, temporarily washing the stone with red.

He arrived late the night of the concert. He had to stop at his office and change out of his suit into jeans and a lighter oxford shirt. His reflection in the men's room mirror displeased him. In his opinion, he looked older than half the people there. Nervously, he had scanned the perimeter numerous times thinking his son or his son's friends could be in the crowd. Cupping some water in his hands, he splashed it through his hair while his fingers tousled the front. He hated to lie to his wife, but it was too small of a transgression to upset her with the truth.

It didn't take long to locate Rosemary because she was on the side of the stage talking with a male band member with shaggy blonde hair and a tie-dyed tee-shirt. The lights dimmed to blue and purple and the show began. He felt Rosemary's hand on the small of his back as she led him to a bright red curved booth with candles on the table. As the ethereal music began he felt his nervousness melting away as he gave into the sensations of the sound. The songs wound their way around his mind speaking of gods and goddesses, myths, lost love, and deceit. Drums matched the beat of his heart and despite the fact that he had only had one beer with his meal, he felt positively drunk. The haunting lyrics echoed beautifully in his ear as Rosemary sang along quietly beside him.

Her shoulder leaned into him and her crossed legs allowed for her purple

her shoulder leaned into him and her crossed legs allowed for her purple sandals to nudge into his left shin time to time. His watch forgot to warn him of the time, and it was eleven before Rosemary reminded him that he ought to be getting home.

Three days after the concert he looked a wreck in his office. His eyes were bloodshot and sleepless, his clothes were disheveled and he hadn't shaved. His fifteen year old Marianne took no small pleasure in poking fun at his appearance over breakfast. Ean had left too early to notice, and Lilly cared about nothing else besides her best friend's, Sissy Warbank's, Barbie doll party. Mrs. Edgrave scolded Marianne and told her to respect that her father's job was stressful, yet she did not respond when he said goodbye to her that morning. He surmised that she hadn't heard him, but that hardly mattered at the moment. Staring at his phone, willing it ring, had yielded nothing for seventy-two hours. The blank wall across from his desk seemed to be taunting him.

When he had finally succumbed to the silence and ignored the constant music playing in his head, his phone rang. "Lucas, are you prepared for Gibbons tomorrow? You weren't there for the brief this morning and I didn't receive an update yet, so what's going on?" His boss's voice sounded stern and unimpressed with his performance as of late.

Quickly, he regrouped. "Yeah, Bob, I'm on it. I've just immersed myself in it so much lately that I forgot to give you a call and I apologize for that. But absolutely, I'm set for tomorrow. No worries."

How could he have forgotten to prep for the meeting? He was bullshitting his boss, but it seemed to work well enough paired with the evidence of his usual work ethic.

"Great. Just checking in. See you tomorrow afternoon, Lucas."

With his head in hands, his fingertips massaging his forehead, he nearly didn't notice the buzzing of the incoming call. Hesitantly, he picked up hoping that it wasn't one of his colleagues. "Luke?" The feminine voice was cheerful and familiar, but he could hardly answer in kind because part of him felt neglected.

Rosemary heard his hesitation. "I have the painting ready. I just needed a few

Rosemary heard his hesitation. "I have the painting ready. I just needed a few more days with it, but it's all set. Can I bring it by your office? Maybe now?"

"Yeah. That would be ok. See you soon." He clasped the phone shut and tossed it back on the desk. Knowing that he had to get his head on straight, he resolved that this would be a short visit, and he took to rifling through his desk for the Gibbons documents. He was reading through the folder when she came in.

Glancing over the top of it when she knocked on the door, he gave her a quick polite smile. It was when he closed the folder completely that he took in the vision that stood before him. Her hair was wild, wavy and loose with layers touching the outer lines of her pouty lips gone over with a peachy-nude matte lipstick. Her eyes were rimmed in charcoal gray that matched the fitted pencil skirt that hugged her curves and drew subtle attention to her legs beneath the knee. The blouse was low and black but only revealed a hint of the sensuality that lay beneath it. Leaning against the door frame with her ankles daintily crossed, she held the painting wrapped in brown paper against her side.

"You still want it?" she asked, slyly nudging the painting forward on her hip. He walked over to her and took the painting from her hands, ripping off the brown paper as hard as he dared, his blood rising to his skin. She helped him lift to the wall and properly hang it. It took his breath away when he stared at it in full. The colors were deliberate, sensuous, waving and twisting like ballooning silk sleeves in the wind. Violet, turquoise and a delicate maroon streamed out amongst silver lightening.

"God. How much was this priced at in the gallery?" She stood back against his desk right alongside him.

"This? No, this one wasn't in the gallery... I made it for you. That's why it took a little while... So- is it you?"

Staring at the painting wasn't like staring at his soul. It was like staring at what his soul could be if he fulfilled every dream, past and present, of the man he wanted to be. He couldn't describe it because no words would come. What came instead was a visceral, instinctual reaction of his body, his mouth pressed to hers, his hands in her hair. There was no check in the way she held him, no

to hers, his hands in her hair. There was no shock in the way she held him, no resistance or surprise. As the folder of his most important case crashed to the floor off the top of the desk and scattered, he felt his conscious reason go with it.

As Mrs. Edgrave folded her husband's khaki pants into his suitcase, she couldn't help but feel the tension that had replaced the delicate balance in the house. She'd always hated it when he traveled here or there, but now it was a constant thing, leaving her with the problems of the house and kids alone. It wasn't that she couldn't handle everything on her own, she simply didn't want to have to. She worried every time one of her family members walked out the front door and now she had plane rides to worry about in addition. Tears came to the corners of her eyes as she imagined never seeing him again. The careful folding of his black dress socks halted as the phone rang and shook her free of her dark fears.

He couldn't explain the call home from his office to his wife to say that he hadn't shown in over a week, nor could he explain the size of his cell phone bill, all the calls to the unfamiliar number, or the friends of his son that had spotted him out late at artsy clubs and asked Ean about it. He expected it when his wife violently threw the glass vase he'd bought for their anniversary against the wall by his head. He even expected the divorce when it came and the clothes on the lawn of 7 Gardener Lane. It wasn't that he didn't want to scream or fight against losing his family, it was simply that he was numb and could do nothing but close his eyes in a fistful of Rosemary's auburn hair.

It was both sad and thrilling to have a completely new life. He thought of his children, but it seemed for a time like they were another part of another existence entirely and they were absent in this world that had sacrificed them for his freedom. Rosemary kept a tight hold on his attention and often influenced most of the decisions they made as a couple. The condo they bought together was small but beautiful. She had incredible taste and made their combined income spread to accommodate her indulgent lifestyle. Trips to the little art villages of France and Italy were regular expenditures for them. Rosemary loved Sangria and drank it every morning on their balcony. They went hiking, dancing, camping or skating on a regular basis. Head-to-head they would lie at night and talk about art and feelings and history to music until three and make love until five. "How do you see yourself?" she would ask him

three and make love until five. How do you see yourself? she would ask him, urging him to paint a verbal picture for her mind to re-envision him every few weeks or so.

No purchase he made was made without first thinking of her and her eclectic taste. The one time he brought home a fern from his old office, she threw it out the three story window, proclaiming it “cliché”. He worked for himself now and kept the hours he wanted. If he worked a great deal, he saw the rewards and if he didn’t work, he saw the consequences, but the benefit was that he never heard complaint from anyone working over him.

The final true visible separation from his former life came from the doctor’s when he received his annual physical exam. When he came and told Rosemary what they’d discovered, she rose up and left the condo wordlessly. He saw her pulling out of the garage in his car. In his living room, he sat alone with a glass of whiskey and stared thinking about the concept of time and how it would affect the choices he made now. He heard Rosemary’s key in the lock four hours later. She sat on the floor by his feet where he hadn’t moved from his chair, his hand still holding the glass of whiskey. “So... so what does this entail?” she asked, finally breaking the silence.

“The cancer?” he asked out of his daze.

“Yeah,” she answered, looking downward at the chipped blue nail polish on her toenails.

His ex-wife swore at him for calling the house and retreated into the space between the kitchen and the study under the shelf of poetry. “Why the hell are you calling here?.. What?” she pretended not to have heard him the first time. Her body sank down the wall, the phone still in her hands.

“Madeleine?” his voice said out of the receiver. She listened to the loud rock music coming from Marianne’s room, the light thumping of Lilly’s steps practicing her new routine in the living room, and the roaring of Ean’s car as he checked it in the driveway.

“Alright,” she said finally, “...I’ll tell the kids and then we’ll go from there.”

“Madeleine? If you want to talk about how to break it to them... I’m here.”

“I said I’d handle it Lucas.” She hung up the phone quickly without saying goodbye as her hands shook. If there was one thing, she didn’t want him to hear how violently she would cry. She didn’t want him to see how he had succeeded in breaking her heart a second time. Though sometimes she wanted to kill him for what he had done to their family, she still couldn’t turn off the twenty-four years of feelings for him like he could for her. Desperately, she had wanted to stay on that phone and work out a way for her to tell her children that their father was going to die soon but pride wouldn’t allow her to.

Ean pounded his fist against the wall and jarred his sisters. “God! Screw him! He left us!”

Marianne wept softly and said nothing. Lilly kept her face serious and solemn. “Do we have to go and see him, Mommy?”

Madeleine felt the tight pain in her forehead increase. “No, baby, you don’t have to, but you can if you want to.” Marianne got up and went over to her mother. She hadn’t done this in years, but now she felt it was something she had to do for herself. She curled up in her mother’s lap as though she was eight years old and closed her eyes.

Between vomiting and sleeping, he would lie in a strange state between consciousness and unconsciousness and think of a feathery light little ballerina dancing across a stage. Rosemary often kept out of their bedroom while he was ill. In the kitchen, she sat on a stool talking to her sister on the phone.

“I didn’t sign up for this, Sabrina. Our life together was supposed to be fun. What did I ever do to deserve this as my happily ever after? I’m no caretaker. I’m no good at this sickness stuff. Of course I want to leave but his ex won’t take him back and the kids want nothing to do with him. If I go, he’s alone. I don’t know what I’ll do. I even tried calling his ex and you can imagine the balls it took to do that... but she won’t budge. She said I drove him to it, can you believe that? I know, I don’t even know if they’ll come to the funeral. Yeah, I

hear something moving around. Gotta go play nursemaid. Talk to you later.”

In the flickering emergency lights, he saw that little ballerina face again. Lilly wasn't sure if he recognized her or not. Marianne held his hand and called out to him, but he couldn't seem to hear her. Ean stood back holding up his mother.

Rosemary honestly felt relief when it was all over. Her freedom was regained. She wore a dark short dress to church and prayed for him, though she hadn't prayed in nearly fifteen years. Walking away on that April afternoon, she knew that he was in a better place than she could ever hope to create for him.

Mr. Edgrave returned to the house at 7 Gardener Lane. Though his cancer had had some progressions, he was healing and in remission. The lulls in the conversations around the table may have been longer, a touch more fragile, but the point was that they were conversing together at all and that was what made the difference- what lay beyond the poem on the shelf in the aftermath.

Helium

by Vince Corvaia

The three of them were sitting around a table at Teacher's, a trendy bar off Central Park West. It was a cold November night in 1979. They had all graduated from college within the last two years and come to Manhattan because, as James put it, "We're living the great American cliché." Cat and Victor had known each other from classes at Wichita State and were aspiring writers. James graduated across the river at Rutgers and wanted to be a graphic designer. So far, no one had produced anything or gotten beyond the jobs that paid their rents.

"So who's doing the family thing tomorrow?" Cat said. She had learned to

smoke just a month ago and was affectedly holding a cigarette with the same fingers she used to hold her glass of Chablis.

“Oh, my God, don’t get me started,” James said. On his cocktail napkin he was making little designs out of the toothpicks that had come with his martinis. “Curt and I are going to his folks’ place in Brooklyn. I don’t even think they know he’s gay.”

“They will tomorrow,” she said.

“Not necessarily,” Victor said.

“I don’t care one way or the other,” James said. “I just hope the woman can cook a decent turkey.”

Victor turned around to survey the crowded, smoky room. He felt as though his head took a split second longer to turn than his upper body did. He wasn’t used to drinking so much.

“I don’t see our waitress,” he said. “Anybody else ready for another round?”

“I think Lisa died in there,” James said.

“Should I go check?” Cat said.

“Did anybody else think she seemed odd when she showed up?” Victor said.

“She looked preoccupied,” James said. “I don’t think she looked one of us in the eve ”

in the eye.

“I’ll go see how she’s doing,” Cat said and got up to sidle her way to the women’s room.

“Do you ever miss college?” James asked Victor.

The waitress walked up to them and asked if they were ready for another round.

“That’s just what I said,” Victor told her. She smiled and walked away.

“I miss college,” James said.

“I miss talking about books. Nobody talks about books.”

“Hey, I work at the Strand,” James said. “I wish everybody would shut up about books.”

“I still work in that mailroom off Wall Street. When I read Trollope on a break, I get these looks like my nose just fell off from leprosy.”

Victor and James had struck up a conversation when Victor was shopping for the poetry of Richard Hugo. Victor had not only known who Hugo was, but he said his favorite poem was “In Your Good Dream” from 31 Letters and 13 Dreams. They had been good friends since then.

“Then you shouldn’t read Trollope on breaks. Try Harold Robbins.”

“You and Cat are so lucky. I wouldn’t mind getting a position at Brentano’s.”

“Brentano’s is to real bookstores what cat food is to caviar.”

James loved to say things other people might end up quoting. It was a kind of immortality for him.

“I’ll take cat food over a capital management company any day.”

“So find another job.”

“I’m living with my aunt in Hackensack. If I just upped and quit it would look like I was depending on her.”

“I meant look while you’re working.”

“I’ve tried that,” Victor said. “I took a morning off and went to an employment agency on Forty-Second Street. The girl kept looking at my resume and going, ‘Oh, you’re just too wonderful.’ She put a note in a sealed envelope and sent me to their downtown office. The guy there read my resume, read the note, wrote another note, taped it into the same envelope, and told me to go back to Forty-Second Street and give it to her. I said, ‘What about a job?’ He said, ‘Jill handles all the employment decisions.’ I said, ‘Then what am I doing here?’ He said, ‘I had to approve your resume.’ I left wondering just how he did that exactly, and once I got on the subway curiosity overtook me and I opened the envelope. Inside it said, ‘I am not stalking you. I just want a date.’ Thus endeth my job hunting for the time being.”

James laughed. "I should be so lucky. Except for Curt, nobody's called me 'wonderful' yet."

"Here you are, gentlemen," the waitress said. She set down Cat's chablis, James' martini, Victor's Vodka Collins, and Lisa's Tab. When she left, Cat appeared and sat back down.

"So how is little Miss Bookbinder?" James said.

"There's a job I'd kill for," Victor added.

"She's OK, but I'm not supposed to tell you what's wrong."

"What do you mean, you're not supposed to tell us," he said.

"I mean it's personal," she said, taking a drag from her cigarette and then stubbing it out in the ashtray. "She didn't want to come tonight, but she thought the company would do her good."

"Well, I hope there's good company in the restroom," James said.

"Cat, you have to tell me. I'm your friend. We go way back," Victor said.

"I'm Lisa's friend, too," Cat said, "and we only go back to senior year."

"Do you miss college?" James asked Cat.

Victor was annoyed by the interruption. He had met Lisa at Shakespeare in

the Park, when the play ended and Lisa was walking back to her room at the Y. Victor was struck by her long, curly black hair and her delicate but hunched shoulders. He saw she was alone and walked up beside her to ask her how she'd liked the production. They began a conversation that ended with them drinking tea in her room. He just had one of those faces that everyone trusted.

"The only thing I miss about college is Botticelli," Cat said.

"You took a painting class?" James said.

"No, goof. Botticelli. The game."

"I'm not familiar."

"You ever play twenty questions?"

"Yes."

"Well, Botticelli is like twenty questions, only to earn the right to ask a question, you have to think of a person yourself and the other person has to try to guess who it is. If he doesn't, you get to ask your question."

"Boy, that would make so much sense to me if only I were sober," James said.

"Come on," Victor said to Cat. "Tell us what's wrong with Lisa and we promise not to let her know you told us."

“What is this ‘we’ business?” James said. “I make no promises after the sixth toothpick.”

“I have a legitimate right to know,” Victor said.

“And what would that be?” Cat said.

“You both have to promise not to tell Lisa.”

“Wait a minute,” Cat said. “I can’t tell Lisa the reason you should know what her secret is?”

Victor took a deep breath and said, “I know that’s stupid, but . . . I’m crazy about her.”

“You’re right,” James said. “That is stupid.”

“All right,” Cat said, “but you really have to keep this to yourselves. Victor, let’s switch places so I can keep an eye on the women’s room in case she comes back.”

“I’ll let you know if I see her.”

“Well, first of all, in case you’re both thinking it, she’s not pregnant.”

“Why would she be pregnant?” James said. “She hasn’t been dating anybody.”

“Oh, damn,” Victor said. “Here she comes.”

James and Cat both turned around. Lisa, looking wan and keeping her face toward the floor, approached the table. Using his foot, Victor slid her chair out between himself and Cat, and she sat down in front of her Tab.

“I’m fine, you guys,” Lisa said weakly. “I just felt lightheaded.”

“Yeah, three Tabs will do that to you,” James said. Cat kicked him.

“So what did I miss?”

“Oh,” James said, “Cat was just telling us how to play Botticelli.”

“Cat and I used to play in the college cafeteria,” Victor said.

“Is it fun?” Lisa said. “Could we play now?”

“The bar would close down before we finished a round at the rate we’re going,” Cat said, lifting her glass in a silent toast.

“Oh,” Lisa said, “but I want to play something.”

“Let’s play secrets,” James said. Cat and Victor looked at him. “We each tell a secret and the others have to guess whether it’s true.”

“You’re just trying to get me to tell you why I was in the restroom so long,”

Lisa said.

“Maybe Botticelli is a good idea,” Victor said.

“No, I’ll go first,” James said. “But only if the rest of you promise to play along.”

“Depends on how good your secret is,” Cat said.

“My secret,” James said, “is that I lost my job at the Strand today.”

Cat and Lisa said, “No way,” at the same time, and Victor said, “What happened?”

“I talked back to a customer. Called him an idiot.”

“Why?” Cat said.

“Because he was one. He wanted every copy of Balzac we had in stock, which would have been fine except that a woman had just come in after him looking for *Lost Illusions*. I mean, he was there first, but he wanted all twenty books we had and wouldn’t let her have this one novel. So I called him an idiot after he called me a name I’d rather not repeat.”

“Good for you,” Cat said.

“Did the woman get her novel?” Lisa asked.

“She got her novel and I got the sack.”

“And here come the holidays,” Cat said.

“That’s OK. Curt has a good job and he said I could take my time looking.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t a single opening at Brentano’s right now with all the Christmas help.”

“Meow,” James said under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing,” James said. “Who’s next?”

“To lose a job?” Victor said. “I’m in.”

“I’ll go,” Cat said. “My secret is I don’t have any plans tomorrow. Anybody know of a good Thanksgiving restaurant?”

“I don’t have anywhere to go, either,” Lisa said.

“Great. Let’s meet in your lobby and see what we can dig up.”

Victor offered with regret, “I’d invite you to my aunt’s if I could have given her more notice. She loves feeding people.”

“That’s OK, Victor,” Lisa said.

There was an awkward silence amid the boisterous talking of the bar.

“So,” Cat began. “Who’s next?”

“Yes,” James added. “As you can see, it’s a fairly painless procedure.”

“OK, you guys,” Lisa said. “I’m going to tell you what’s going on.”

“You don’t have to, Lisa”.

“No, Cat, it’s OK. My father came to visit me,” Lisa said. “He said he and my mother are getting a divorce.”

Cat kept looking at her.

“I’m so sorry,” James said. “But that’s hardly the end of the world.”

“When was this?” Victor said.

“Last weekend. He flew in just to tell me in person. I didn’t even know they were having problems.”

Victor reached out and patted her wrist. “It’ll be OK.”

“Thanks.”

Cat lit a cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke, then took a healthy swig of Chablis.

James looked at Victor. "One more to go."

"Yes," Cat said, "I can't wait."

"Let's play Botticelli like we used to," Victor said to Cat.

"Nope," she said. "You're not weaseling out of this."

"What's your secret?" Lisa said.

"Yeah, blow us away," James said.

"OK, you asked for it," Victor said, reaching out to point to Cat and shoving his glass, sloshing some of the vodka Collins onto the table.

"What did I do?" she said.

"No pun intended, but I'm letting the cat out of the bag. When Cat and I were at Wichita State," Victor said to Lisa and James, "we got high one night and did it."

Lisa blushed and James let out a howl, clapping his hands.

"You bastard," Cat said. "We said we would never tell a soul about that."

“And that’s what makes it a secret,” Victor said.

“Yeah? Well, I have a little secret about Victor,” Cat said, looking at Lisa.

“Hey, now,” Victor said, trying to break through the alcoholic buzz that cocooned his head so he could make some kind of real impact. “Wait.”

“I think it’s getting late, kids,” James interrupted, looking at his wristwatch. “I have to get my beauty sleep for Brooklyn.”

Cat and Victor continued to stare at each other.

“Go on,” Cat said.

“The truth is,” Victor said to the others, “Cat and I never did it. She’s covering for me. The truth is I’m still a virgin. I told her once.”

“Then it’s not a true secret if one of us already knows,” James said.

“James,” Cat said, “you know, you’re right.”

“See?”

“It is getting late. And you do need your beauty sleep.”

She flashed a smile so discreetly toward Victor that he almost missed it.

James stood up and almost stumbled backwards as he reached to pull his overcoat off the back of the chair.

“It’s almost midnight,” Lisa said.

“I’ll walk you back to the Y,” Victor said.

“Victor, you have to go south to the Port Authority. That makes no sense.”

“But I want to. I could use the air.”

Cat stood up and began fishing through her purse. James waved her off and pulled a thin wad of bills from his pants pocket.

“This night’s on me,” he proclaimed proudly. “I can’t remember when I’ve had so much fun.”

Lisa and Victor protested—“You just lost your job”—but finally thanked him.

“Well, since we both live in the Village,” Cat said, “how about a cab ride on me?”

“I love it. Goodnight, all.”

“Goodnight,” Lisa and Victor said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow say at one o’clock,” Cat said to Lisa as she began to follow James away from the table. She put her hand up against his back and he said, “Here, take my arm, darling. The cold is likely to knock you flat.”

Lisa and Victor sat alone at the table and were quiet for a time. The voices had picked up with the lateness of the hour and the spirit of holiday in the air.

“I want to wait until the waitress comes back,” he said. “I don’t feel comfortable leaving James’ money on the table.”

“That’s OK. I don’t mind.”

“I’m really sorry to hear about your parents.”

“It’s not a big deal, believe me,” Lisa said. “I never got along with either of them. To be honest, my father didn’t come visit me at all. He wrote me a letter.”

“Then—“ Victor broke off what he started to say. Fortunately, the waitress appeared at that moment and collected the money.

“Shall we go?” he said to Lisa.

“Sure.”

The cold air was sobering. They both buttoned the top button on their coats and put their hands in their pockets. As they crossed with the light,

Victor noticed a crowd about a block away on a side street, beyond a police barricade.

“I wonder what happened there.”

Lisa smiled broadly for the first time that night.

“You don’t know?” she said. “Come on.”

She walked briskly onto the curb and looked back to see Victor hurrying to keep up. When they reached the people, Lisa led Victor behind everyone and along the sidewalk until they came to a break in the crowd. Victor followed her into the open space and said, “What’s that sound?”

“Helium.”

She walked in front of the onlookers and took a place off the curb. Victor joined her and saw a giant, flat Bullwinkle lying on the ground beyond them. Only its snout was three-dimensional, poking up from the rest of the lifeless face.

“I came here last year, too,” Lisa said. “You have to live in New York to see this side of the parade. Isn’t it great?”

“I live in Hackensack.”

“Silly.”

He was enchanted with the change that had come over her by such a

... was shocked when she thought that had come over her by such a simple, child-like event. He looked at the side of her face, her open smile, her even teeth, her cheek reddened by the cold. He ached to lean over and kiss her on her cheek and tell her the truth he had withheld.

“Can I be honest with you?”

“Sure,” he said.

She looked at him and said, “I was a virgin too when I came to New York. I mean I’d never even slept with a guy. Anyway, I met this actor at the Y on Monday and we went out for drinks. He was the most beautiful human being I’d ever seen. He said he had just auditioned for an off-Broadway play that day and had a really good feeling about it. We sat there for two hours, talking about our whole lives, and I could tell that he really liked me. I was powerfully attracted to him. When we got up to go, he said he would walk me home, like you’re doing. We were just a few blocks from the Y, and when we got to the lobby, I couldn’t believe it. I asked him if he wanted to come upstairs. I was ready for the first time in my life. I felt real love for this person, and I sensed he felt the same way. We went up to my room, and he made love to me. I know I’m blushing as I tell you this, but I want you to understand why I couldn’t come out of the bathroom tonight.

“That was Monday night. Yesterday I went to my doctor and bought an IUD. I knew this guy would want to see me again right away even though we hadn’t made definite plans, and I wanted to be ready. I had discovered love and sex on the same day, and I couldn’t get enough of either.

“I came back to the Y and there he was, crossing to the elevator at the same time I was. The doors opened and we both got in. He wasn’t looking at me, and I thought he was shy and just waiting for us to be alone. When the doors closed, I said, ‘Hi. I missed you.’ He didn’t say a word. He didn’t even look at me. ‘What’s the matter?’ I said. I thought maybe he didn’t get the part. But then why wouldn’t he tell me? And why was he at the Y riding with me in the elevator if he didn’t want to talk to me?

“These were the questions I had going through my head when the doors opened and he stepped into the hall ahead of me. I reached my door and turned to see him continuing down the hall to another door. He didn’t even have to knock. It just opened, and this neighbor girl I knew by sight stepped into the hall and gave him a big kiss. I mean a big kiss. They walked into her room like that, hugging and kissing, and the door closed, and that was that. I haven’t slept since then, and I called in sick today. I almost didn’t show up tonight, but I knew I needed to be among friends.”

She was still smiling, but tears were spilling down her cheeks.

“Honest, I don’t care,” she said. “I had a good time tonight, and I’m so happy to be here with you and Bullwinkle. It reminds me that I live in New York and I have a whole lifetime of possibilities ahead of me. He’s the loser, not me.”

Victor found his voice and replied, “That’s right. I’m glad you see it that way.”

She took his arm and rested her forehead against his shoulder. He froze when he should have reached up and touched the hair that was sticking out from under her wool cap.

She stood upright and said, “Let me ask you something.”

“OK.”

“It’s pretty personal.”

“Hey, it’s been that kind of a night.”

“You said you never really did it with Cat.”

“No, I did. Just that one time.”

“But that wasn’t really your secret. Was it?”

Victor looked over at Bullwinkle, whose whole face was filling up and coming into full view now.

“Yes,” he said. “That was my secret.”

He heard himself saying the words, but he felt detached from them, like watching a word balloon lift up into the night sky.

“Well, I’ll keep yours if you keep mine,” Lisa said.

“OK.”

They stood in the biting cold and watched Bullwinkle’s head bobbing in the breeze like someone just waking from an overpowering dream.

An Eye for an "I"

By Harvey Havel

Maybe he had been too caught up in his own little world to give anyone else a moment's thought, and perhaps it was silly of him to be concentrating on the deal he made with an affiliate of the pharmaceutical company he worked for, but Freddy Katt would no longer be sidelined by his own weakness to feel bad about things over which he had no control. There was a time when he felt guilty about almost everything, especially stuff that went back to his high school years, and even as other burdens of conscience faded away, those events still lingered in his memory, haunting him all the same, whether or not they were repressed behind a locker door in his mind.

He remembered a time at the academy when the school's chaplain took him aside after he had punched another student during soccer practice, an incident he recalled as clearly as the blue sky above him. From that moment on he vowed never to hit anyone in the same manner again and swore that he would commit all of his energies towards good thoughts and a few vague moral rules that would somehow get him through life unscathed. Such a commitment would lead to good deeds that would set the goodness of the universe in motion. Nothing but goodness could result from thinking positively, he thought at the time, and maybe from that point on he could avoid sucker-punching people at play and getting into trouble over it.

But his deal with a well-known distributor to buy truckloads of a new anti-psychotic drug that had gone through rigorous testing and FDA approval just a week earlier needed a signature by the vice president of the company, or basically, the consent of his boss. Freddy's boss, a man he had gone to school with back in the mid-80's, was also a good friend who had engineered his promotion to head sales representative just a few years ago. The man lived on an elaborate estate just south of Innsbrook Harbor, on a sprawling palatial retreat where he took his wife and two young sons to sunbathe and swim in the ocean.

The manor-home sat upon a high dune that sloped into the beach. Freddy thought of the water and how just one visit to his boss' home could cure him of the many ailments that stole the innocence from his life.

His boss seemed to have it all; a beautiful wife, two brilliant sons who would probably attend Ivy league schools when they got older, and of course, a mass amount of wealth.

Freddy also had money, but not the kind that his boss had. His boss was old money, the kind that came with disposition. Freddy, on the other hand, had at one time been flat broke and had to crawl his way to the top by working harder and faster and longer. He lived in the city, while his boss lived in both town and country, making him a well-balanced man altogether, and it seemed that nothing would stop his boss from one day becoming CEO of the company.

Freddy stuck with him, as though he could get to the top also by riding his coattails. But because of this strategy Freddy always played second fiddle to his high school friend. That's how things worked, and it was something he accepted without reservation. He was lucky enough to be working at such a high level in the first place, and for that he should have been thankful instead of constantly wanting more, or at least this is what he told himself, day-by-day at company headquarters as his boss hung around the beach house in his swim-trunks, holding an afternoon cocktail.

He pondered this relationship with his boss as he drove his Porsche convertible along a coastal highway that snaked its way over jagged mountain rocks on either side of him. The sun splashed its warmth over his white button-down, and he tuned his satellite radio to the type of easy listening station that would normally put any other person to sleep but somehow managed to excite him that afternoon.

'There's nothing like commercial-free,' he thought to himself, as the wind tousled his hair.

Secretly, he always looked forward to spending some time at the beach home and his suitcase full of paperwork was good excuse for a road trip. He was lucky enough to get out of the office on such a brilliant afternoon, and he didn't need anything else but a drink and a view of the ocean.

The highway ducked into a valley, and he was soon in a quaint town that bordered the beach and vast flatlands to the east. There were a few restaurants that served vegetarian specialties, a few jewelry stores that advertised in the fancy men's magazines he had subscribed to, and also a small eatery that served all sorts of coffee and teas, the type of place where one could see a music school dropout playing Bob Dylan or a poet reading from a tattered journal.

But there was hardly anyone in the town that afternoon. They all seemed to be at the public beach a few blocks down, as there were several cars and mountain bikes parked near there.

The road split at a dead end, and a long, narrow trail curved down to the beachfront. He was happy to see a few long-legged women in bikinis sunning themselves on the sand and also a group playing volleyball at the ocean's edge. The only noise he could hear were the sounds of the ocean beating on the shoreline, the wind, and the occasional squawking of seagulls that had suspended themselves in mid-air.

The trail itself was unpaved, and he drove slowly so as not to ruin his car's suspension. The road was made more for an SUV than a sports-car, and he turned the stereo low to hear the movement of his car along the bumps, sharp dips, and ascents that typified the beach's changing surface. The beach road ended at another paved road embellished with lush lawns and gated homes on either side of it. The homes were well-guarded by walls of ivy-covered stone too tall to look over. One could only sneak quick looks through the bars of the gates to find meandering driveways that led to pillared mansions, the ocean their backyards. Movie stars lived on this road along with a host of other famous people who had played the game of

road along with a host of other famous people who had played the game of life skillfully enough and seemed to have everything he didn't. He envied these people and couldn't deny that he really wanted to be a part of their crowd. He only got as far as his boss, though, who invited him over every so often like it was a charity event. He could taste the cherry on the Pina Colada already, and maybe he could even stay over if he played with the kids long enough.

His boss' estate was well fortified and secure, almost like a castle that kept the strangers away, with an intercom that had a surveillance camera beamed right at him, following his car onto a circle that curved into the house. He parked his car on the gravel and checked himself in the rearview mirror before ringing the doorbell.

The maid let him inside with a slight grin, and immediately the two young boys, as blonde as sunshine over the beach, scurried up to him from another wing of the house and yelled his name over and over. It felt good to hug a couple of cherubs every once in a while.

Freddy didn't have a family as of yet. He chose a professional life over any sort of family, and while he did miss the company of a wife at home and children of his own, he became used to his bachelorhood and the long hours he put in at headquarters. His boss sometimes tried to set him up with other women, but his blind dates were usually one-night stands. On the 'next-mornings' he had trouble talking of mundane topics, and the conversation always returned to work and his position at the company. His women were never surprised by his suggestion that they take the latest drug for any number of conditions they might be having. He then ran off and left them, usually as they slept.

Some people had to work for it, he figured, and women who talked lazily of their nights out with former boyfriends and far-off trips to islands in the Caribbean never really got the point that he would always have to climb mountains to be comfortable in his own skin, and the women were indeed

incredibly beautiful, both in their looks and their girlish charms, but none of them wanted to commit to his kind of climb. They took the easy route, and they were probably better people for it. He saw his road, however, as hard and gruesome with no end in sight. He'd always be chasing something, and lately it seemed that he wanted everything his boss had. He even wanted the two kids at his knees who seemed a part of the same conspiracy of beauty that had always excluded him. It was an awkward feeling that never went away, and rather than fight the entire conspiracy against him, he went along with it and came to believe that more overtime at company headquarters would rid him of this misfit status within the club of the wealthy few who paid his salary. It worked for a time, but the kids at his knees, still yelling his name, reminded him of how far he had to go in order to become a part of something just a few notches greater than himself. And they were beautiful kids; the type of kids one would find on a cereal box or in a toy commercial. Their success had been predetermined, and patting their heads was the closest Freddy could get to something like that.

"Okay, guys, you don't have to hurt him," called a voice through the screen doors.

"Hello, Bill," said Freddy, fighting the kids off.

"Freddy, why don't ya come out back?" It wasn't so much a suggestion as a command that was reinforced with the gesture of his large hand toward the patio.

His boss was William Foxfield, the Harvard graduate, the second in his class, the Gulf War veteran, the youngest executive hired at the pharmaceutical company, and soon to be a member of the board. Yes, that was him in the pool area having lunch on the patio, his skin tanned by the ocean sun, his body carved of all body fat, the man who jogged three miles every morning, the man who ate three well-balanced meals and took efficient, fifteen-minute showers after his workout. Yes, that was William

Foxfield. Bill seemed happy to see him, although Freddy didn't know why. Freddy only had a few papers for him to sign, and then he'd probably be on his way. He never ceased to feel clumsy and awkward around him, like a rowboat that leans too far into the water or a Martian who tries desperately to hide his true identity among the earthlings he recruits. Yes, it wouldn't be such an easy morning around William Foxfield. Conversing with him at his home was something Freddy often rehearsed on the drive down.

The kids followed Freddy outside. He then took a seat opposite Bill and unloaded his briefcase.

"You worked hard on this one, Fred."

"It's not a big deal. I was just looking at the bottom line."

"Yes, I know. You're bottom line is saving us millions with our distribution... What are we pushing again?"

"It's a new anti-psychotic; time-released, FDA approved last month."

"That should help with the high crime rate in our cities, don't ya think?"

Freddy smiled, but he didn't find the joke funny in the least. It was like biting into an entre that tasted bitter, but still having to look satisfied in front of the cook.

"There's always a market for us," Bill continued, "...the crazies and the criminals. Soon there'll be a pill for everything."

"Our research department says this is almost as good as a cure, or at least that's what they're speculating."

"A cure?"

"Yes."

"What bullshit," Bill chuckled. "You and I both know that these pills don't do squat. R&D will probably get started on a newer version next week. These pills are more powerful than religion. It's amazing how they pay us to offer these lost souls just a tiny bit of hope. All you need is an alarm clock, a full glass of water, and presto!"

Freddy laughed nervously, trying to wipe the disgust from his eyes. His boss could have been joking or he could have been dead serious; Freddy could never tell. Bill's bronzed skin and bleached hair exuded a health that Freddy might never achieve, yet there was a bit of sadness in the eyes that seemed to look out over his shoulder as though he were reminiscing about some faint and distant memory.

"Is everything alright, Bill?"

"I'm a commander by nature," he replied distantly, "...and sometimes I like to find trouble before it finds me."

"A lot of great men are that way," said Freddy with a touch of bewilderment at the odd comment, "...but what's on your mind?"

"Oh, I don't know," he sighed. "There's something missing. I mean, look at all this, Freddy. One day you'll have something like this, assuming you lose a few nounds "

a few pounds.

"Yeah, I'm still working on that, Bill," he responded, swallowing the burn of the insult, patting his belly like a fool for good measure.

"But what I mean is that, well, how many worlds, let's say, did Alexander the Great conquer before realizing he could conquer no more?"

"I don't know. There's a quote that says that Alexander the Great wept when he had nothing left to conquer."

"Y'know, Freddy, I tend to feel the same way. I mean, look at all this. You think all of this takes hard work?"

"I think some of it must come from that, yes."

"I think a lot of it comes from just being who I am. I can't put it any simpler than that."

"Sure, you certainly have had your fill at this stage of the game, no question. You certainly have an advantage at this point."

"And what do you think makes that?"

"Makes the advantage, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I guess it's because you've worked hard, you've made good decisions, you

"I guess it's because you've worked hard, you've made good decisions, you have a solid family."

"But many people have that."

"So, I guess what you're trying to say is that you're someone they didn't see coming."

"Not exactly."

"Then what are you trying to say, Bill?"

"I guess what I'm trying to say, Freddy, is that I'm thinking about leaving this business behind. I've made my mark pushing these pills, and I just think it's time to settle down a bit. Journey in another direction."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Well, that certainly is news."

"It's just between you and me right now, Freddy. Just between you and me."

"Sure. I'll keep this quiet."

Bill's silver fork had poked at the few lettuce leaves left in his bowl when from the other side of the pool came a silhouette draped in a white Turkish

from the other side of the pool came a silhouette draped in a white Turkish robe, drying her wet, blonde locks with a towel. Freddy was keenly aware of her; Francesca, Bill's wife of three years and step-mother to his two children.

"We've been good friends, haven't we, Freddy?"

"Yes. I owe it all to you."

"Do you?"

Bill stared into his eyes. The stare startled him a bit. Freddy had never clashed eyes with him before, and the feeling was so painfully awkward that he couldn't help but pull away in embarrassment.

"What's wrong, Freddy? Is there something you have to say to me?"

Francesca then joined them, the kids running after her.

"You guys don't want to stay in longer?" she asked her children about the pool.

The boys noisily ran upstairs and Francesca took a seat next to her husband.

"Why hello, Freddy!" she said cheerfully.

"Francesca, how are you? You look as pretty as ever."

"Why, thank you."

Bill again steadied his intense gaze on him, and Freddy felt the same feeling of awkwardness rifle through him before his eyes pulled away.

"I guess I can buy that new car now," said Freddy nervously after Bill signed the papers.

"Oh, honey," Francesca broke in, "...we could use a few more guestrooms for the house, especially if we're having company over so often."

"How about we fly away to the islands, just the two of us?" Bill asked, dodging her comment while kissing her bronzed shoulder.

Freddy couldn't help but look away at this point, Bill's piercing stare returning to him and still gripping him as awkwardly as before.

"Well, how long would we be away?" she asked.

"A month, maybe two."

Francesca laughed uneasily.

"But darling," she said, "...what about work?"

"I think Freddy can handle the workload for a while, can't you Freddy? Or Freddy, how about coming along with us? It'll be the three of us. What do you say, old friend? Won't we have a nice time? I'll probably need you

around to take care of some family business, and of course, my wife can have you around too..."

"Darling," Francesca interrupted, "I don't think we should commit to any sort of... Oh, God, Bill. It isn't..." the words fell away as they were unnecessary now.

Her uneasy smile broke just then. Freddy's eyes again clashed with Bill's, only this time Freddy knew that his old friend had known all along.

"I think I better get going," Freddy said with a tremble in his voice, collecting the signed papers.

"And Freddy," called Bill, "...don't think you're also getting away with taking a swing at me like you did when we were kids on the soccer field. When you get back to town, you can clean out your desk at the corner office too."

Gold Rush

by Ilan Herman

Brooding silence accompanied the Johnson family while they sat at the kitchen table. Pete Jr. noisily slurped down diluted potato soup and chomped on crusty bread, but his gurgling stomach remained unappeased. Annabelle, his ten-year-old sister, crinkled her nose, morosely swished her spoon through the broth, and ate only a bit. Pa Johnson did not eat at all. His elbows resting on the table as he braided his fingers, the wrinkles on his brow deepened as he somberly looked at his son and said, "Yer nineteen and ready to be a man. It's time ye be gettin' out to California and diggin' for the gold they're findin' out there."

Ma Johnson wiped a tear and retreated to the kitchen. Pete sat motionless in his chair. He'd heard about the gold found out west, but he didn't want to leave

chair. He'd heard about the gold found out west, but he didn't want to leave home. He'd lately spent his time courting the beautiful Mary Wallace, competing for her affection with Roger Wilson, the carpenter. He met Pa's sad gaze, the one embedded with two decades of toil in the fields to provide for his family. Droughts had plagued the earth for two years, and the crops had failed. Something needed to be done to stave off starvation and losing their land.

Pete's lanky figure slumped in his chair. "Yes, Pa," he said quietly, "...I'll go."

He was appeased later that night, when he told Mary about his upcoming journey and the wonderful gifts he'd bring her. She kissed him passionately and promised to marry him upon his return.

A week afterward, at the break of dawn, the nameless gray mule Pa Johnson had recently inherited from his uncle was loaded with supplies for the two thousand mile journey from Topeka. Pa also gave Pete one hundred dollars, almost all his savings.

The family stood in their front yard. "Goodbye, son," Pa Johnson said in a subdued voice and firmly shook Pete's hand.

Annabelle looked up at her older brother. "Where is the gold?"

"In the ground, far away from here," Pete said with a smile and mussed her hair. "Ye be good to Ma and Pa, ye hear?"

Wearing her tattered apron, Ma hugged Pete for a long time. She caressed the back of his neck and said, "Be careful, be careful." Pa had to gently pry her away from her son.

The Johnson family stood by their house and waved goodbye as Pete and his mule set out for the riverbeds of California. Pete walked stiffly in the cold morning air and turned to look back to see his family almost lost in the mist and still standing by the house. He imagined Ma, teary-eyed, shuffling back into the house and falling to her knees by the fireplace, hands clasped in prayer for her son's welfare.

Pete then looked his mule in the eye and said "Ver name's Seymour "

Pete then looked his mule in the eye and said, "Yer name's Seymour."

The mule grunted.

After a brutal six months journey, with thirty-eight dollars left in his pouch but fresh with hope, Pete and his mule Seymour arrived in Marysville, a mining town on the American River—a one-street hamlet with creaky motels and smelly saloons, and where many a funeral were conducted without absolution—the anonymous casket unceremoniously placed in a muddy hole. The graves were marked with wooden crosses, but when heavy rainfall soaked the earth, many of the crosses floated away, and no one could tell where the graves lay.

For the first week, Pete shared a room with six other men and slept on a flea-infested mattress. After that, he spent his nights under the stars, camped by one riverbed or another. He returned to town once a month to stock up on supplies.

Seymour proved to be a rugged and reliable companion. The mule possessed the most expressive eyes Pete had ever seen on an animal—big and brown with profound sadness tucked into their corners. Sometimes, when Pete shared how he missed the enchanting Mary, he saw a tear roll down the mule's cheek. Pete knew that mules teared a lot, regardless of the tale of woe told to them, but he still took solace in sharing his feelings with Seymour.

The mule, however, had several bad habits, one of which was to awaken Pete at dawn. He would stand over his sleeping master and bray loudly, snout dripping green goo.

"Seymour!" Pete cried. "Yer a mule! Why don't ye leave the duty of announcing dawn to roosters?"

Seymour raised his snout and quivered his nostrils; it appeared he understood his master's demands, but, the next morning, he planted his snout in Pete's face and brayed loud enough to awaken everyone sleeping within a mile's range.

"I'll tie ye to a tree," Pete yelled and shook his raised fists, but he never found the heart to do so.

Seymour was also extremely stubborn and sometimes refused to be coaxed

Seymour was also extremely stubborn and sometimes refused to be coaxed down a hill or over a ridge. The mule's defiance finally led Pete to pretend he was walking away and never coming back, in order to get Seymour concerned and compliant.

The mule liked his master, but not the work he chose to do. Seymour didn't understand why, from dawn to dusk, they carried mud out from the river and sifted through it, and why Pete, dour at arduous day's end, returned the next day to perform the exhausting task all over again.

Six months passed in backbreaking labor, but the young pioneer from Kansas had little to show for his efforts. One night, feeling dejected and missing his family and the fair Mary, Pete squandered much of his meager savings on gambling and liquor.

Waking up the next morning, head on fire, Pete was filled with remorse but also with resolve. He told Seymour they'd scale the mountains one more time, and if they failed to mine five-hundred dollars worth of gold in three weeks, they'd return to Topeka.

'After all,' Pete concluded and harnessed his belongings to the mule's back, 'There's a time for every miner to admit he's been defeated by nature and the men who came before him.'

Three weeks passed with precious little gold found. Leaving the riverbed at dawn, a bleary-eyed Pete tried to navigate Seymour toward the ridge, but the mule refused to budge.

The night before, they'd camped in the company of other miners, and Seymour finally understood what Pete was after. As the mule chewed his meager portion of oats, a man stopped by and proudly displayed yellow rocks from his pouch. Pete's blue eyes clouded over, and he sighed deeply.

Seymour fluttered his thick lips, *You're looking for that? I know where to find that!*

Many readers may ask the fair-minded question: Why did the mule take so goddamn long to understand his master's quest? Sadly, even the writer of this

goddamn long to understand his master's quest. Sadly, even the writer of this tale cannot come up with an acceptable answer, except that, after all, Seymour was a mule, and as such, the author's view into his heart is limited.

Now, atop the ridge, Pete dropped the reins and snapped, "yer a stupid mule, Seymour. We're almost out of supplies and need to leave now. Ye better start moving or," Pete crossed his long arms over his chest, "...I'm leaving and never coming back!"

He walked up the trail, feeling the mule's defiant stare at his back, and then looked back, expecting to see Seymour grudgingly comply. The mule raised his snout and quivered his nostrils, and then turned his back on his master and returned to the riverbed.

Pete shook his fists at the sky and cursed loudly. Then he chased after the mutinous mule.

Seymour drank from the creek and then lumbered upstream, leaving Pete to follow. "Where ye goin?!" the young man cried, sloshing through the water and trying to catch up with the defiant beast of labor.

The mule walked a bit farther and stopped. He turned his big brown eyes on his master and brayed louder than he'd ever brayed, the noisy air rushing out from his snout swift enough to rustle maple leaves twenty feet away.

Arms dangling by his sides, Pete stood confused, when he witnessed the sparkle in the water. He dug his hands into the river's sediment and pulled out a large gold nugget. With shaky hands, Pete held the great find and cried, "How did ye do that?"

The mule wriggled his mucus-stained nostrils and bit into a prickly shrub.

Pete laughed. "Yer snot-dripping snout, the one I despise for waking me at dawn, has become the beacon to riches." He quietly waited for the mule to find more gold and then insisted Seymour do so by tugging sharply on his reins and yelling, "Find me more of 'em nuggets, ye foolish animal."

Nevertheless, even his rare offering of sugar did nothing to sway Seymour, who

nevertheless, even his rare offering of sugar did nothing to sway Seymour, who continued chewing on the prickly shrub.

"Be it as it is," Pete finally muttered. "This here's enough gold to get us back home as heroes."

Finished with melting the nugget into a dozen pea-sized ones and having sewn them into the lining of his jacket, Pete and his mule returned to Marysville, where the young man rented a room that came with a hot roast beef and cabbage dinner and an even hotter bath. Seymour received the best oats in town and was washed and brushed for fleas and ticks.

Pete wrote a letter to his family, informing them about his great find. He promised to return home soon, but mentioned that he wanted to visit San Francisco, the shiny city by the bay that everyone raved about.

Lying in a soft bed and covered with cotton sheets, heart filled with pride, Pete imagined Pa's hearty smile, and Ma's teary, relieved eyes, and the enchanting Mary's hot kisses.

Pete arrived in San Francisco. He placed the mule in a corral and was strolling a wide street filled with stalls stocked with all goods known to man, when, for the first time in his life, he witnessed the ocean; bluish-gray waters stretching to the horizon, a vast gateway for the massive ships that dotted the harbor and the bay. At that moment, more than anything, Pete wanted to join the crew of any ship sailing away. He sat on the beach until dusk settled, smelled the damp salty air, and was seized by the ocean's magical spell.

As he walked back to the corral, Pete came across a shirtless man lying in the street. He may have been dead or only in a drunken stupor, but Pete looked away and hurried off. So much death surrounded him since he'd left Kansas. He was tired of seeing dead people. Pete knew that only a few men survived to tell the tale of good fortune, while the great majority evaporated into the oblivion of wasted lives.

He came to the city square where he saw a drunken and angry mob dragging two men in chains. The mob congregated in the square and hanged the two men. The people cheered and fired guns in the air and then dispersed. Silence

men. The people cheered and fired guns in the air and then dispersed. Silence followed; the ocean breeze swayed the noosed bodies.

"God have mercy on us all," Pete mumbled and hurriedly walked back to the corral.

Seymour was happy to see Pete. He was concerned about his owner. The mules and horses staying at the corral had decided that San Francisco was not a happy place. Even with no work and with a refreshing ocean breeze to temper their brow, their masters were unusually discontent. Returning to the corral, many beat the animals for no reason at all, and sometimes their owners never returned. Seymour hoped they could leave soon. Even carrying buckets of mud from the riverbed seemed acceptable to him.

That night, Pete allotted four dollars to partake in a poker game. He entered the saloon through swinging wooden doors and stood in the entrance. Before him stretched a long bar with swivel stools and tall shelves stacked with hundreds of colorful bottles of liquor. A massive chandelier lit the tavern with a thousand candles. The room was centered by five round poker tables.

Pete played for an hour and won ten dollars. He rose to leave when the burly and red-faced man sitting across from him staggered to his feet. "Ye been cheatin," the man slurred. "Hand over yer money, or I's carvin' ye up!"

"No," Pete said, a quiver in his voice.

The man shoved the table into Pete's stomach. The young pioneer landed on his back. The man charged him with a knife. Pete reached for the sheath attached to his hip and pulled out his knife an instant before the man landed on him. The blade pierced the man's heart.

The body lay on him, gushing blood over his face and clothes. Patrons helped the woozy youngster to his feet and removed his bloodied jacket. The sheriff arrived and justice was swift. By all accounts, Pete had acted in self-defense.

"Drinks on the house," the bartenders hollered as the body was carted out.

Snaky and dizzy, Pete searched for his jacket, the one that had the gold sewn into its seams. The jacket was gone.

"Where's my jacket?" he cried, and was met with shrugs and puzzled looks.

Dawn found Pete slumped on the dock of the bay, watching the tide roll away, and the ships navigate the water. Steering away from shore, their massive sails shrunk, as had his fortune. One small nugget was all that he had left, not remotely enough for the journey back to Kansas. His sad solitude was interrupted by the footsteps of arriving dockworkers. Pete lumbered to his feet and staggered away.

Seeing his master's stooped shoulders, the mule nervously quivered his nostrils. Pete collapsed in the corner of the stall, and Seymour, for the first time, saw him cry. Wanting to comfort the destitute pioneer, the mule shoved his snout in his master's face and discharged green snot in Pete's hair.

"Seymour, look what ye've done," Pete cried and pushed the mule away.

Still wiping the snot off his hand, he then jumped to his feet and whispered, "Ye must help me, Seymour. Please help me one more time." He waved the one tiny remaining nugget in Seymour's face.

The mule rolled his eyes and fluttered his leathery lips. There'd been so much trouble since he found the gold. Seeing Pete's happiness turn to misery confused him.

Seymour, however, could not defy his beloved owner. Eight days later, after the laborious journey back to wretched Marysville and scaling the mountains, they came to a junction that led to several riverbeds. Pete sank to his knees, clasped his hands in prayer, looked up at Seymour and whispered, "Please, my friend, find us some gold."

Seymour raised his snout, widened his nostrils, and carefully sniffed the air. He made his decision and proceeded down a path.

By the creek, the mule quickly sniffed out a generous amount of the yellow

rocks and then would search no more. Pete tugged on his reins, and even offered sugar and oats, but then gave up and melted down the gold.

Master and mule then ascended to the junction. Pete aimed west, down the mountain toward Marysville, where he could buy supplies and join a convoy heading east, but Seymour would not budge.

"Not now, Seymour," Pete said through clenched teeth. The mule stared him down with mild contempt.

About to cuss loudly, Pete then knit his brow and hummed in thought. He leaned closer to the mule. "We do have a little food left, and water can be had from the streams. If we travel east for ten days, we can reach the Oregon Trail, but it's very risky."

Seymour quivered his nostrils. A giant, murky tear rolled down his cheek. Then he turned east and labored up the trail, his waving tail saying, *I'm walking away and never coming back.*

Pete watched his mule's petulant behind, and then shrugged. "Yer a stubborn ass, Seymour," he muttered and docily followed.

Green Satin

by Meagan Dwyer

On Friday nights we would stay up watching music videos on MTV. You could smell our sour cream and vinegar potato chips from two rooms away, and the nail polish stains on Emily's carpeted floor were always hastily wiped clean—you could hardly see them.

We were on her bed, watching Spring Break '99. This was a time when MTV actually played music videos and we were curious about the grown-up world. To us, the whipped-cream bikini-clad Spring Break girls were beyond us. I watched those women walk down a catwalk, with rappers performing in the background, as they strutted almost naked. The sun from Spring Break weather and the beach in the background was so bright and warm. My eyes were drawn

to the scene. We did not yet understand sexuality or adulthood. We had just begun to grow up. I breathed in, and smelled the thick odor of vinegar.

Emily was about my height, but less slim and with strawberry blond hair. She wasn't as freckly as other redheads, but the carrot-colored mop that rested on her head was like a beacon of light, signaling mockery from our peers. Emily was horribly treated by our classmates, namely by the boys, during childhood. So was I.

She was always looking through magazines, at other girls and boys in our class, flipping channels on her TV at home. Emily's spark for something else was what interested me in her. With Emily, everything was always an adventure. Sleepover after sleepover was a pattern that I had grown to recognize as my way out. Even her potato chips were a thrill— my mother never bought them.

Our curiosity sparked another interest, and Emily and I started talking about Catherine. It was by far our favorite thing to do. Catherine was two years older and, in our eyes, already carried with her the infinite wisdom of being a chic teen girl. Catherine was as tall as me, slim, beautiful red hair. She knew how to apply makeup, something I remembered every time I looked into the mirror at my overly rouged cheeks and thickly coated eyelids. We always thought she was happy.

My mind wandered to a time where Catherine had walked in on Emily and I trying on their mother's shoes. She looked us both up and down, raised her eyebrows, and asked, "Are y'all playing dress-up?"

We were embarrassed, but looked to her for approval.

Catherine had gone to live with her father for a year. She was gone, but very much present in that bedroom, and I could almost still get a whiff of her cucumber melon-scented lotion whenever we would go in there.

"I have an idea," Emily piped. "Let's check out Catie's room and look through her stuff."

I hesitated. "Uh, won't we get in trouble?" I asked.

"She won't know."

"OK!"

We got up off of Emily's bed, put the bag of chips on the floor, and turned off the TV. I felt my heart beating faster as we walked down the hallway, toward Catherine's closed door. A smile spread across my face and I clenched my fists with anticipation. Besides the popcorn and late-night facials, sneaking into Catherine's room and opening up her closet was one of the high points of the night. We opened her door and stepped into a room that contained Elle magazine cut-outs, posters of bands, and Homecoming portraits. We both knew that if she ever found out, we would be in big trouble. Emily was so sure that Catherine would never know we were going through her things, but seeing her perfectly made bed and bulletin boards full of pictures made me stop caring.

Emily opened the bedroom door. The first magazine cut-out on the wall that I saw was an ad for Giorgio Armani. The model in the photograph had a short, black bob haircut and dark, smoldering eyes. She was incredibly thin and had the most perfect complexion I had ever seen—just like Catherine's, I thought. I took two steps into the room, the carpet beneath my feet was cold. I could tell the door had been closed for a while, and I could not take my eyes off the model.

"Let's see what she left here," Emily suggested.

We headed straight to the closet door, like young pups who knew exactly where to find their mother's teat. Emily put both hands on the small doorknobs and opened the closet with one swift motion. The doors were high, and they divided down the middle where we stood— I could hear the small whooosshh as they separated. Like an entrance to a grand ballroom, we laid our eyes on many colors, textures, and patterns. They were hanging, folded, or stacked. Her closet smelled like dead air, something flat that I couldn't recognize. Finally, we were able to fully view the yards of clothes, both hanging and folded, which were ours for the taking. My eyes went up and down the different pieces of hanging clothes—the swirls of colors were almost calling us to touch them.

There was the green satin gown that Catherine had worn to Holly Ball, the Little Rock Christmas dance that happened every year with our cotillion. It had a princess-styled bodice with a floor-length, flowing skirt. Catherine had worn it, paired with high-heeled clear plastic strappy sandals, when she was on the royal court during the previous year's ball. The shoes looked like a cheap version of glass slippers. They were tacky; I loved them.

"How'd she get on the court," I asked, putting the shoes on, "...if she wasn't dating anyone at the time?"

"Who knows," Emily quipped. "I mean, she had a lot of friends here. But, she didn't even win, you know."

She took the green dress off its hanger and ran her hands along the bodice. Her fingers moved slowly, as if trying to soak up the feeling of the fabric in every second. She smiled.

"Let me try!" I said.

I unzipped the zipper on the back of the bodice all the way down to the end. The middle hole in the dress almost seemed to be inviting me to step in— I did. The tulle of the inside of the flowing skirt brushed up against my legs. I walked over to the mirror and saw the bodice hanging loosely around my chest.

"Hey, can you zip this?" I asked Emily.

She came over and zipped the zipper up my back. With each cinching inch the dress fitted my body more and more perfectly. It was not too loose, it was not too tight. I looked down and the satin lay straight across my torso, and my breasts just barely stuck out of the top.

We swirled in front of the mirror and admiring our reflections. We were more than careful in making sure that the dress was properly placed back onto the hanger and the closet door shut immediately.

Emily and I took turns trying on the dress and shoes. She ran back to her room, grabbed her camera, and returned to Catherine's room and snap! She took my

picture. This was proof that we had been cool, even for fifteen minutes. I leaned up against the wall, bending my knees forward and posing my feet out in front of me. I put my left heel up in the air, resting on the sole—I could see the light's glare shining off the plastic of the heel. Emily laughed and brought the camera up to her face again. Snap!

Sneaking into Catherine's room was a high for us. I saw her gray and white pleated skirt. This was her old uniform from high school, and she had worn it before she left. I would go to that high school someday, and so would Emily. I grinned and pointed the skirt out to Emily. but searching through her closet was like glimpsing into what we could look like in two years. Her wardrobe was so much cooler than my own. I looked down at my own cotton shirt, with small little nicks in the fabric— too many trips to the washing machine. Skirts with floral prints, dresses with spaghetti straps, blouses with beaded buttons— all purchased at a high cost, in department stores that I could never afford. I thought of my own closet back at my house, with hand-me down drawers inside and old smocked dresses from early childhood. Most of the old outfits were covered in dust at this point, and there was almost zero trace of anything from this season.

"Just look at this top," I remarked. "BCBG? How much did this cost?"

"Probably a lot," Emily replied with hardly any shock. "She probably just had Dad buy it for her when we went out to visit over Christmas."

This was something so foreign to me. I took the top down from its hanger and held it out in front of me. The turquoise beading over the bodice was intricate, and my eyes moved over the patterns with admiration. The fact that so much work went into something so beautiful was completely beyond me. I began to calculate how many weeks of allowance would let me own something like this. My head began to spin.

On Catherine's desk there was a photo of her and a friend, on their first day of high school. She was wearing the gray pleated skirt with a white polo. Her arm was around the neck of her friend. 'That will be us,' I thought. 'That will be Emily and me. I just have to wait.'

I looked over at Emily as she examined the size tag on one of her sister's skirts. She furrowed her brow, knowing full well that her ass was not going to fit any time soon. Most of Catherine's clothes were small, and she wore a size 6 dress—Emily was easily a 10. She put the skirt back on the hanger, which was oddly made of wire and plastic. It was true that she was heavy— I could see the rolls from under her t-shirt.

It seemed as if Catherine's life came straight out of Teen Vogue. I enjoyed imagining looking as cool as her. Her closet was our way to explore the possibilities of our future once adolescence would finally be over. I took so many pieces of her clothing—green satin dress included—and imagined myself in them, walking down the hallway of our Catholic school on free dress day. I fantasized about different days, different looks, a different me. Everyone would love me, because I looked good. I thought of my hand-me-downs compared to Catherine's high-end tops, skirts, and jeans. My cheeks burned. I looked over at Emily again, though trying to not let her know how ashamed I had begun to feel. She didn't look up, and I turned back again to the mirror. She had more or less the same look on her face, but she was far more jaded. Catherine's clothes, for both Emily and me, were a portal. We left our temporary awkwardness of seventh grade, and went into the chic world of ninth grade.

My hands moved over her makeup case, picking up various compacts and observing what pigments, styles, and textures she used. I found a tube of Chanel lipstick that was a bright pink, like a peony at the beginning of its young life. With the tip of my finger, I touched the tip of the lipstick. It was creamy, and its bright pink color made it look like candy. I wanted to put it on my lips, but instead I put the cap back on. I admired Catherine whenever I saw her, or pieces of her in that room.

“Hey, look at that one,” I exclaimed, picking up a long-sleeved white blouse with a peach-colored embroidered collar.

“Oh, I hate that shirt,” Emily said. “Besides, I haven't seen Catie wear it in forever.”

I ignored her. I took the shirt off the hanger and began to unbutton the buttons. I was going to try this on. unfashionable or not. I fumbled with the

faux diamond buttons that seemed like small pebbles in my sausage-like fingers. "Shit. This thing is complicated," I sighed.

"I'm telling you, she never wears it," Emily said.

"I think it might fit me, though. And look, I'm gonna try on those gold shoes next. You know Catherine and I are the same size!"

"No kidding, both of y'all's feet are huge," she said as she started to open a Mootsie Tootsie box.

I put the blouse on, buttoned the little diamonds up, up, up. The polyester fabric almost slithered up and down my body as I tried to position it. I kicked aside the green dress, which had crumpled on the floor, to get closer to the skinny mirror.

"Watch it!" Emily shouted.

"Shhhh! Hey, you said it yourself she'd never know. Besides, it's been on the floor like that for, like, twenty minutes."

She rolled her eyes at me, and she spotted the Clinique Happy bottle on the dresser. It was two-thirds full, and I was surprised Emily hadn't stolen it yet. No, stolen is a bad word—acquired is better. She pointed the nozzle toward her nose, and pushed it down accidentally. I laughed—the perfume had completely covered her face and the smell was traveling in the air toward me. The perfume smelled like oranges. I imagined myself spraying the perfume onto my own neck. Flashes of dates with boys and late nights at the movie theater went through my mind. I wanted Emily to be with me, I wanted us to double date. Emily ran into the bathroom to grab a damp washcloth to get the perfume off her face. The smell still lingered.

I turned back toward the mirror and looked at myself in Catherine's blouse, realizing that Emily was right. The top was completely ugly, and it was far too small for me. I tucked my fingers under the wrists to try to stretch out the sleeves a little, trying to make it fit. It wasn't working. I took a long, deep sigh and thought again to my pitiful mass of clothes that, no matter if it grew in size.

it was still mediocre. No wonder I picked the worst blouse in the bunch.

That was when I saw it. I looked at the reflection in the skinny mirror, then to the left sleeve itself. Some brown marks were beneath the fabric, on the inner side of the top. 'Oh God,' I thought. 'I've ruined it.' I started to take the blouse off when I turned around to see if Emily had seen anything. She hadn't; her nose was buried at the spout of Catherine's perfume bottle. I pulled out the left sleeve and saw the bloodstains, almost perfectly aligned in three rows. The blood hadn't soaked all the way through to the other side, but it was clear it was not going to come out anytime soon. The blouse, abandoned in the back of the closet, was not taken along with Catherine for a reason.

One, two, three smudged lines, and my vision of Emily's sister had changed.

"What are you looking at?" Emily asked.

"Nothing," I said.

She walked over to me and grabbed the sleeve out of my hand— she never believed me when I answered “nothing.” She pulled the sleeve closer to her face, examining the spots.

“What is that,” she asked.

I looked back and forth, from the stain to Emily's face. I didn't answer her.

“You want to go finish watching TV? I think Real World is on now.”

“Yeah, let's do that.” Emily handed me the shirt and walked out the door.

I hung the blouse back on the hanger and hung it up, still inside out.

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