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"Abstract 253" by Jim Fuess; www.jimfuessart.com

Welcome to our Fiction section!

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Tremble, Her Throat

By Jeff Mark

Listening to music is like traveling.

You're not supposed to remember it all, just some parts, perhaps the parts best kept in picture frames or in the youthful font of journals. Notes bound out like bubbles floating on their own accord, peacock motley colored with the dimension of shape. They are experienced for halved seconds and they go, not to be remembered. Like traveling. Like the moments spent outside of home, the sounds stick only so long, the moving dancing bodies, flyers waiting to board, a long row of rhythm down the arm of the temporary loading ramp. Chaotic balance. Smooth as warm ice. Congealing like glue. Independent as a castaway. The forms of people dancing, unable to control the involuntary movement of their bodies; dancing and breathing. Throats hum dominants. Octaves. Tonic harmonies. Heel-stuck shoes bounce the toes in bass drum rhythm and the fingers pluck out spinal cord basslines on worn jeans, bent and straightened at the knees to the beat. Breaths of air in a foreign land. In-flight dinners. Satiated and cloistered but miles above the Earth and traveling at great rates of speed. Other customs. Other cultures. Augmented chords. Dissonant chords. Held bar chord sevenths. Bend then pluck and lower blues slow moan draw the mouth into a snarl then a smile. Fucking without a condom. Slow motion up tempo. Swing rudiments perididdle flam triplet two-tom high-hat closure ride ride ride. Tapped keys like rocking seats in a movie theatre, trays in their upright positions. Prepare to land. Cacophony crescendo. Pentatonic slower than moments bow the head chin to chest or bow it back eyes to the stars. Breathe deep and know the breathing. Feel it push back, the violent vibrations from half stacks mic-to-PA linked floor monitors fedoras blown back bald heads revolving around the playful gauntlet of resonate tonal beasts floating. Pinch harmonics squeal. Brass quivers spittle and exhale. Lifting.

Angels a thousand fold grabbing the stitching of your shirt. Lifting.

Moments away from home.

Moments outside of life.

Only to return when the saxophonist loses his breath.

Because you're not supposed to remember it all.

Trying to explain sound to a deaf man is a challenge more futile than asking a child to articulate its choices. The thought of something making sound and it translating to a sense is completely lost on them, but they believe. They believe people who hear when they talk of sound, the way believers know Heaven exists despite the constant feeling that someone's playing a trick on them. God and music, both so intangible to those without the sense or senses to understand or believe.

But there is a beautiful ignorance for those born without the sense, or any sense for that matter. After someone fails at trying to describe sound, the deaf man returns to his non-allegoric cave, content knowing that there are figures dancing outside, but that the shackles keep him adoring the shadows. For him, nothing is lost. He can't lose something that was never given to him.

To him, life is completely fair.

But to lose your hearing.

Slowly, from birth, to feel things get quieter. To ask *what?* The knowledge of the impending stripping of sound. To wake one day to nothing, and think you are dead.

To eventually wish you were.

I watch the throat of my wife as she practices her scales, the veins in her neck grow and pulse with her most strenuous notes. The skin taut around her neck, her chin lifted, her mouth open. During breaths, everything softens, then constricts again with the sounding of the freshest note, her chest pounding air through her voice in gunshot waves that I think rattle the walls. The smooth skin of her throat shakes. In the winter we'll open all the windows and let in the cold so I can watch her breaths, like a steam engine treble and bass (FACE every good boy does fine) notes ride the puffed clouds and long streams of sustained tones missile in the apartment like a tea kettle boiled.

Sometimes she lets me place my hand on her throat while she sings, to feel her larynx as she works a hurried part of something that reminds me of something familiar but the memory is gone. Leaves. Like a dream. She'll allow my fingers pressing against her neck, though I'm sure it hurts her tone. She squeezes her eyes and I hold more tightly. She humors me. She loves me. The pace quickens, she modulates. I squeeze harder. There's a frill, a tremolo, a tremble, and I hold on to my dear for dear life. I feel the tongue deep in her throat move around the sound like masticated food and her eyes are closed but they are rolled up in her head. My palm shakes from the veins pumping more and more blood up through her neck from her heart to her head, my knuckles are white steering wheel oncoming crash tight. I'm so close. Something in my ear, the anvil, the hammer, moves, some waves send down some nerve to some part of my brain. Don't stop. Not yet. I can feel it. Right there. My palm is my ear. She runs through the bars sweaty and tired in a marathon and I am so close. So close.

And I feel her hands on mine and I open my eyes and she has her eyes open looking up at me. They are blue. A little like her face. She smiles. She's stopped singing.

I let go.

When she is cast in a show I attend the first performance and sit in the front row, a dozen or so blue hyacinth stalks across my lap so that, unintentionally, everyone knows that someone I know is up there on stage, singing. As she bows, I clap loudest not because I am the most proud, but because I'm not so sure I'm making noise, so I overcompensate.

Cupped hands colliding. An anarchy of rapid poppings, war time rifles of admiration. The British try to clap in unison, to find a rhythm, a timed beat of appreciation. Bravo. It's noise. Sound. Music to fill the space with sound when the singer stops.

My whole world is this clapping.

My music is the sore hands of applause.

Slowly, all sound follows the Doppler Effect, even into oblivion. There is the

rush of cars, the lowering of the landing gear, lush and lulling like an impending ocean wave strike; it rises to apex and passes with a slap rolled-with punch and distances itself in deeper tones until it is gone. By increments as menial as seconds, sound spirals counter-clockwise down an open sink. Vaporous as a match head's sulfur explosion. A puddle of once ice.

Then there is the most sincere nothing.

And you forget.

Believe it or not, you forget sound. Music. You forget rhythm and the involuntary tensing and relaxing of muscles snared in its siren call. You forget thunder in spite of its lightening. You fantasize romantically about heartbeat thumping. Baby coos. Stage-close woofer tweeter amp cable bass pain. Earplugs ear stuck, traveling canal deeper. Muffled numb noise. Mute burglar entry. You forget the voice of your wife.

You don't remember it all. Like traveling.

Like the parts of each day that buoy you to the moments best kept in shoe boxes under beds. Life in mute. The warning tic of clocks as vacant as the tocs. Underwater mumble sun notes dotting visual purple. Jazz beats in clubs bring down the house, silence standing among the rubble. My wife hiding her smile behind a wine glass; she doesn't want me to see her enjoying the music. I draw her hand and the glass down from her mouth and wipe the red corners of her lips. I mouth the word smile. Or I say it. Either way, to me, I mouth it. She placates with a daunting gesture of pursed lips fishhook drawn lengthwise and cornered up. I know the timing of the snare by the blinking of her eyes and the bass by the vibrations in my chest through the floor. If I watch the successive pauses of her blue eyes and place my feet squarely down, I can almost know the beat. Guitar fingers waterfall scales. Off-time eye rhyme. The held pained face of a bent note reached higher and bunched with the other soundless strings. The big bass man standing in back apart from the rest plucking his flatwound double thick rhythm notes. Backbone of God.

My wife scribbles a letter on a napkin in blue ballpoint pen and pushes it over to me.

A.

It's the key of the song.

Instant visuals play against my closed eyelids. Scales. Sevenths. A. That bastard emerald note. Rock blues prodigal fuck-up note. Green because I have to ascribe it a color. A jungle green A. Grey green. Covering the room in glued wallpaper.

Arranged in front of me are napkins with other letters. Other songs.

I have the set list in its keys and modulations. Tonics.

Harmonies.

Alphabets from A to G.

Colors.

She smiles at me and there is nothing delinquent about it. There is no pity. It's all blue eyes and her veined and trembling throat and her blue ballpoint pen. Traveling. Notes over the air. Carried in planes autopilot to landing strips not lighted. You're not supposed to remember it all, but you try nonetheless. You make scrapbooks and tell stories. You videotape still life like tourists so afraid of new surroundings that they aim to capture it. Steel bars and video screens of forcefield protection. Chewed fingernails.

The next napkin says curtain call.

I hold up the candle from the middle of the table and shout encore at the top of my lungs.

Napkin: encore in B minor.

The serration of the strings cuts deep into my fingerprint spoiled finger tips and I hold them like holding a lover over a cliff's edge. Tightly. They dance tigh trope style from the head to the body, explorative. Callous flame retardant. I strum the strings with my right hand, watching intently as they vibrate wide in what looks to be triple, quadruple, million duplications that slowly wind down to one. I play harshly and loudly, often raking my knuckles across the strings and

drawing blood. The body against my body humming, deafening. Echoing around the acoustic cave. I hold it tightly, the wood creaks. She sits in a corner and watches. Listens. Rocking backwards with sleepy intent, I bridge notes, hammer-on pull-off neglect pull-out euphoric perfection. I control the influx and outgo. I am a baggage handler throwing the luggage with reckless passion into the underbelly of the fuselage. I take photograph after photograph of leaning towers and Big Bens. I wear headphones except for on landing and take-off. Chew gum to release the pressure in my ears. Open the spiral vent. Press on the light. Every string in one strike. Six precious tendrils catching their neighbor's resonance and flipping their passports at stonefaced custom guards machine gun toled palm muted strum down down up up down up finger lain pluck release harmonics fifth seventh twelfth fret. In tune open chord. Capo key change octave strings wrapped in coiled string. Metal fiber. Heavy metal folk rock jazz classical hip fucking hop. Big bop. Big band. Blue grass emo acoustic hippy hipster beatnik trance dance. Tuning knob turning. Animal momentum. Jesus Christ nailed forgiveness.

Empty ear.

Returning home, eighteen hour flight, to the everyday real world real life, missing the Positano Coast. Missing the Floating Market. Missing the Liberty Bell, St. Louis Arch, Grand Canyon Moscow crayon Kremlin. Appalachian Trail Stonehenge Outback Taj Mahal Alamo.

I've worked up a sweat and she nods affirmatively. Takes the guitar from my hand and opens the windows. It's winter, and she's prepared her missiles.

I sleep through the night.

I watch foreign films with subtitles and read lips in different languages.

I can cut off any driver without being honked at.

I never know when the ding suggests we've reached a safe altitude and it is safe to walk around the cabin.

The world is a silent place.

Here, alone with my wife sleeping, watching her chest rise, hold, then release air through her throat, catching the strings of her larynx, I would give anything to watch the undulation forever.

I'd give my sight to hear her sing again.

The Man Who Would not be King

By Denise M. Bouchard

I heard myself screaming, "Daddy, don't leave me! Don't leave me here alone with them!" It was of no use. My father was dying and my words held no alchemical power. The only power they had was to lift my stepmother and stepsisters eyes to glare at me with their enormous hatred and I realized what I had just said. For all the things they had said about me and to me with no just cause, they now had an excuse to talk, and talk they did...

"Imagine her saying a thing like that to her dying father!"

"Imagine her behaving as though we'd mistreat her or lean on her when he is gone!"

We lived in a French country chateau not that far from the palace in Paris.

The year was 1544 and I was alone...

It was actually worse than being alone as my stepmother and stepsister had come to depend on me for everything as I knew they would. They would often receive guests and except to criticize everything I did for them, I was not included in their conversations but I was expected to wait on them.

My birthname was Isabella yet soon, amidst the other degradations following my father's death, I was christened 'Cinderella' for my ability to keep the fireplaces lit which oft left me with smears of soot upon my skin from the cinders.

After the funeral, my stepsister Monique glided toward me, blocking the

way to my chambers and said, “Pray tell, Cinderella, why are you so bereft? He was so much closer to my mother and I. You know, mon cher, he often spoke ill of you behind your back.”

Even the flippant social climbers who flocked to my stepmother’s bosom for alliances and gossip thought my stepsister had been untoward in that remark.

The servants stood by me but to no avail- our camaraderie would not ease our sufferings.

My father had once told me that I was to inherit the chateau, but he had no will to bequeath his holdings and estate in writing.

Lady Antoinetta, of the Italian Northern Provence, was a very influential woman who made certain to get her way. Though she was not well-read and possessed no riding nor domestic skills, it always amazed me to see the hoards of friends who called on her daily, to pay homage, to get into her good graces as there were few to be had. They would leave tokens for her, presents from all corners of Europe to delight her fancy. What art Lady Antionetta did possess, was an endless capacity for gossip. ‘Did you know...’ was her favorite segue and no one, not commoner nor aristocrat wanted to be in the end of that sentence. It is a wonder then, that my father remarried when he had been so happy with my mother. Yet he seemed to not only love his second wife but to also live in fear of displeasing her. She could stare down the devil with her prominent features, high black pompadour, and small, calculating eyes. Even so, she had a beauty born of artifice and her daughter’s face actually held a natural kind of fairness, though they’d never admit the same of me.

I never told Monique that of course my father had spoken in disdain of her and with frustration, especially concerning the matter of her jealousy toward me. He also complained often of his new wife but what good would it have served to fan the flames by returning their ill will. They weren’t as strong as I was. I also couldn’t afford the risk of being locked away in my chamber, subject to their whims.

The drudgery kept me in on the better side of their temperaments, giving me leave to work in the apothecary where I’d once worked alongside my

father. I could not simply stop being a healer and the tinctures, herbaceous smells, and powders called to me. The apothecary shared a large space with the tavern, separated only by a partial wall, and I sometimes worked there as well. The tavern owner was the brother of my departed birth mother and his wife ran the dress-making and mercantile; all once owned by my father. My uncle Robert and his wife, Eleanor, were my god-parents and they kept me smiling with their great humor.

My uncle often called me into the tavern when it became busy and I would then serve and talk astrology with the patrons who loved hearing of fortunes or warnings written in the sky as an entertainment to go with their ale. I had once carefully done the workings of my own birth stars and they spoke of a high place in society. Thus I knew there was no real truth to it, still, some swore by these idealized falsehoods.

Robert was a gentle man, but on one particular day, he was anxiously beckoning me to abandon my duties in the apothecary at once to come assist him in the tavern. A gathering of royals, which was rare to see amidst the common parts of the kingdom, were being a bit rowdy. One of them seized me about the waist and cried, "Kiss me, fair wench! The war is over!" Forcibly pulling me onto his lap, he caused a stir which drew the attention of my uncle who then ran out from behind the serving bar.

Suddenly, the Prince, whom I did not recognize at first and was shocked to see standing in front of me, said, "This is no common wench, Charles. Unhand this maid and let her go about her work." He then took my hand and kissed it. "Forgive my unfortunate friend, young maiden." His friend, Charles, feeling embarrassed and emboldened by spirits retorted, "Oh, come now, Phillip, me thinks we all deserve a kiss from this fair lady."

"I said NO!" the Prince bellowed, slamming his goblet down upon the wooden table which shook with his force. A stern glare was cast upon the reddened face of his companion. As Charles looked away with a dour, "Your Highness," Phillip turned toward my uncle and I.

"Forgive my men. They are in a celebratory mood today for we have won at Ceresole." At that, a boisterous cheer rose up from around the table. I noticed that the Prince's hand shook slightly as he held his goblet aloft. I also noticed through the dim light and din that he did not take his eyes

from me. Still, as the merriment escalated, he became weary and rose to sit in on one of the oak benches alone. He put down the pewter goblet and placed his head in hands as though he sought to shut out sights our eyes were not privy to. His men began to call for his return to their lively table.

I touched the sleeve of my uncle. "Uncle, it would seem that the Prince is in need of quiet and soothing remedy. Could you not ask him if he would like his men to leave him?"

Carefully, so as not to anger the Prince, my uncle approached with his head bowed. "Your Majesty... My niece is skilled in herbal remedies. Would it be your pleasure to be tended in privacy?"

The Prince replied that indeed he was requiring solitary comfort. He then commanded the men to return to the palace and told them that he would join them later at court to sup and celebrate.

Thankfully, at the desire of the Prince, they filed out when they did, for the Prince's hands began to shake perceptibly. I shuttered the windows and placed the wooden plaque upon the door that indicated that we were closed for the remainder of the day. I even sent my uncle into the apothecary to mix a compound for anxiety. I sat across from the Prince thinking it all so surreal, but my instincts as a healer took over.

Placing my hands around his, I held them firm for a moment before mixing the compound into the ale. Knowing that his Majesty was in good care, my uncle retreated up the steps of the interior with discretion. Once alone, I asked the Prince where he went if just in thought, to relax and renew himself.

And in that moment in time, my life shifted.

"I have a rustic country retreat that is my own. It's a large manor house with sheep, horses, cows... My balcony overlooks waterfalls and streams as well as a lake inhabited by ducks, geese and swans, depending on the favorability of the season."

I watched his eyes as he talked excitedly about his home away from the castle. He was passionate about his private estate and he became ever more

relaxed as he spoke of it.

“It’s a lot of work, to be sure, but I love it.” His smile gave newfound light to the room.

“I would’ve thought that you preferred the luxury of the castle and having everything done for you...”

“The ‘spoiled royal’?” he interjected.

“Well... no... it’s just that I’ve had to take care of people and things so long that I suppose it’s a fantasy of mine to be taken care of.”

“It’s not all that wonderful. I have no privacy at the castle. My days are filled with ‘musts’ and ‘shoulds’... constant duties. It is drafty, crowded, far too large, and this last war against the Spanish Imperial army was horrific...” His eyes darkened.

I put my hand over his and he comes back to the present moment.

“My father is more like what you envision. He is full of ideas and dreams for an even more formal castle with elegant grounds and knights with blue corded ribbons and medals of silver. But I am content to go to my hunting retreat with my hunting dogs and cook and such...”

“I’m sorry, I thought you said ‘cook’...”

“Yes, I did. When I was younger I would find adventure in the kitchens where I watched the cooks. My manor house has a massive stone hearth in the kitchen with a stone warmer. I make pies time to time... Did I tell you that there is an apple orchard on the grounds?”

“It all sounds so lovely, Your Highness.”

“Would you like to see it?”

“I’d be honored.”

“Then I shall take you there in gratitude for your kindness. Meet me by the

forest path at the city's end, morning of the morrow at ten."

I was shocked, though in propriety, tried to act as though this sort of thing happened to me everyday. Even though I had all but locked this man up with me in the tavern, I was amazed that anything more would come of the encounter.

"You're so lovely," he said quietly. His hand touched my cheek and he left.

I knew that I would need an excuse to be away for the whole day. I had my uncle send word that there was someone in town who was ill and needed my care, thus I would be staying with my uncle and aunt which was partially true, for I did venture over to the store of my aunt and told her everything.

I left from her house the next morning, looking like a future baroness. I feared that he would not be there waiting. But there he was.

We rode for a time into Normandy and if I'd thought his descriptions of the retreat were awe-inspiring, they didn't begin to compare with the true beauty spread out before us. The grounds were gorgeous and lush. He took me by the paddocks, the barns and the stables where I viewed his majestic horses. I fell in love with the stone walls. There were apple blossoms everywhere. The manor itself had a rugged beauty. Around the back we rode and finally tied up our horses.

He took my hand which surprised me and we walked down to the lake where he had set up a table with chargers, pewter goblets and in the middle sat a vase of apple blossoms. It was still young in the day when we arrived. The birds were singing and although it was only April, the house with its thick walls made it feel like late spring inside. Doors were thrown open and the golden light was spectacular. I was able to truly experience what it was must've been like to live there. By being free to closely examine the paintings on the walls and touch the tiles on the mantle of the fireplace, I was able to get inside his life, his travels. I could understand why he always returned for there was such a sense of peace in the manor. He took me outside to see his kitchen garden which, he pointed out, was so different than the palace gardens. Here he had vegetables, potted herbs still sleeping, but I was able to imagine the profusion of the summer harvest.

He called it an ugly garden, the apotheosis of the palace's neatly tended rows of flowers and vegetables. I knew he didn't believe it to be ugly at all and I told him that I found his land and gardens here to be beautiful. He smiled at that. The Prince didn't seem like royalty that day. Simply a man. A handsome and charming man indeed.

During lunch he spoke to me of the different tiers of royalty. He went into the need to sometimes marry with a warring country. I wasn't yet ready to tell him everything. As far as he knew, I still had a title. He had made me roasted pheasant with turnips with a tasty pottage to begin with. I told him that it was delectable. He took great pride in this. He spoke more of the lack of freedom he felt at court.

"I do not think I would like to be at court either."

"What would you do with your life, milady?"

"I would like something akin to what you've shown me here today."

He was silent. I confessed that the day had been one of the loveliest in all my life. He goes on to tell me that in his fantasies, he has a wife like me and a life of normalcy.

"What would our make-believe names be, do you think?"

"I've always liked the name 'De Mornai'."

He laughed. "Walk with me, Madame De Mornai and tell me why else you would detest living at court..."

I found that he was amused by the idea of the free life neither of us could enjoy.

"Well... I would want my children around. I would want them to grow by their mother's hands rather than those of a governess... I love my freedom... I'd want my husband to love only me. I want to continue my studies and to serve the people of the kingdom as a healer. I want my husband to love me whether or not God sees fit to give us a son and whether or not I feel well on any given day, month or year."

A smirk arose on his lips. "You say you love freedom but you wish for the traps of caretaking, working and fidelity."

"Those are not traps to me, Your Highness."

"You are so beautiful... your golden wavy hair and eyes for which I cannot name the color yet as they are ever-changing..."

He had a quilted blanket in one arm, a cask of wine in the other. I noted that he had not addressed my retort, but rather had commented on my outer beauty.

He sat down and I followed suit, taking care to do so neatly with the folds of my gown.

"Shall we romp, milady?"

"You mean to race our horses, Your Majesty?"

"No... I mean this." His palms on my shoulders pressed me backward toward the ground and he moved to cover my body with his.

"Stop this!" I cried, shame and disgust over the advance making my voice tremble. "I did not come here for such a purpose!"

"Do you push away all men? Or just myself?"

"I push away all men like yourself. I am not to be used for your amusement."

"I should like to have taken you naked with me under the waterfall."

"Your Highness! Are you not able to listen or do you choose not to?! I imagine you are quite used to this and that you take all of your women here."

"On the contrary, milady, I have never taken another woman here nor have I ever had another woman deny me..."

“It is time then that you did. Your manners are crude.”

“Do you find me repugnant, madam?”

“I am waiting for the right one. The one who will share my bed not for a night but for a lifetime.”

Laughing heartily, he replied, “Do you mean you are saving yourself?”

“I do not see the humor in that. I feel that I am worthy of being treated like a lady.”

“Well I shall kiss you then... and I will not allow any further arguments.”

He did as he said by capturing my mouth before another protest was spoken. I allowed him this. It stirred within me feelings that had been foreign till then. Still, I allowed him to go no further and he did not attempt such.

“I must go,” I said quietly as I rose flustered and confused.

“You cannot. You haven’t told me enough about yourself yet.”

I looked to the sky watching the approaching horizon... time was drawing thin.

“I know that you want a life of love and passion and time with your future children, but who are you, exactly?” His entreaty was not demanding, though my feet were rooted to the ground as though he had planted me there amongst the blossoms deep in the earth.

“I love to study the healing arts and the formations of the stars as they give meaning to our lives.”

“Do you know then of Copernicus?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I can’t imagine studying the stars without his intriguing perceptions. You have studied him?”

The Prince smiled with a clever gleam in his eyes. “I knew him, milady. In his life his works were of great interest to my father who gave him leave to stay at the palace. Often I found myself under his personal tutelage. It was a great loss when he died last year.”

“Indeed... I am glad to learn of this mutual interest, Your Majesty, and I must thank you for all your hospitality. I really must be getting home now, however...”

He rose and we walked toward where the horses had been tied.

“I am sorry for my earlier behavior. The man who marries you will be a lucky man, to be certain... You are like the rarest of gems... and it is those that are most rare that are most valuable... Shall we not ride back together?”

“I don’t think an escort shall be necessary. I know the way.”

“You will be back then, milady?”

“Your Highness, I am not interested in being one of the many gems in your collection. I prefer to stand alone, even if that means turning cold eyes toward your flattery.”

“Yes, milady,” he replied with rising temper, “...you will stand alone.”

He did not see the tears that fell onto my horse’s mane as I left him. Though I did see him assault the table by gathering up the remnants of the meal, the candlesticks, crockery and drinking goblets into the linen cloth and throw the lot of it into the lake. As I rode away, I felt an ache which strangely was not only felt in my heart, but also in my body. This new ache was both empowering and relentless. I did not answer to my stepmother when I arrived home. I did not set the table. I’d become someone else, and found myself staring idly or singing while attending to chores. What I’d underestimated was Lady Antoinetta’s ability to sniff out change.

With her eyes narrowed, I heard her ask Monique, “What is going on with that wayward child? Cinderella has quite suddenly developed a personality

and it does not do!”

Anxious for answers, she summoned a friend of hers to come call on her the following day.

“Lavinia! How good to see you, mon cher! Please sit...”

Antoinetta called for my stepsister in a shrill yell that resounded through the chateau. “MONIQUE!”

“Cinderella, you are excused... and no I don’t want you to tend to the cinders...”

“Good heavens, child! You hover like an insect! Go outdoors and tend to the garden.”

Sensing something was amiss, I committed the lamentable sin of eavesdropping.

“Speak up, Lavinia! What have you heard?!”

“There is talk of the King soon throwing a ball for the Prince to choose his bride. Of course she must be of noble birth and come from a family in highest social standing. I’ve heard talk that because of the war, he will not choose a Spanish bride. I think an Italian bride would make a fine alliance... though he may prefer a French wife. There is talk of him fancying a French girl in the city... You know, your stepdaughter is quite comely... you don’t think he would...”

“NONSENSE!” Antoinetta barked. “My daughter, Monique, would make for a perfect wife for the Prince. She’s cultured. Why I even gave her a French name at birth. And it’s about time that everyone knows that Cinderella has lost all social standing... a dowerless girl without title. I will hold a feast in Monique’s honor as France’s most influential reigning socialite.”

“CINDERELLA! Where is that foolish child?!” she bellowed.

“Here is a list of chores for you to do within the next few weeks. This

chateau must sparkle! I want the stone floors scrubbed, the wooden floors polished, polish all the fine silverware, beat the carpets and tapestries, mend what is frayed, give cook the order of all the cuisine that will be served, order the finest goblets and chargers, and take these two dress patterns to the dressmaker's."

"But... Stepmother, this is going to be costly..."

"AND?!" intoned Antoinetta as she stared me down.

"I will begin to make preparations straight away..."

"Good. Make haste, girl."

The night of the feast arrived and though I had doubted all my stepmother's spending so lavishly, I reluctantly had to admit that the chateau looked almost reminiscent of its former glory. It was good to see life breathed into the old place once more. There was a lute player, a poet, a singer and someone to play the mandolin.

I felt hopeful in the enlivened atmosphere and had been called by my true name, "Isabella" all evening. I thought that the night might even be a herald of better things to come... yet each time a young man from social circle approached me to ask for a dance, I was summoned away. Antoinetta would then whisper some drop of poison in the young suitor's ear.

Monique, however, who had always garnered little attention at such festivities in part due to her disagreeable manner, danced the entire evening.

Finally, I asked to be excused. I had heard many a rumor and insult on that long and insufferable evening. Everyone was behaving so foolishly, speaking constantly of how they would marry Phillip.

On my way to bed, I was cornered by Monique's cousin Eduardo.

"Isabella, pray tell, you are not going up to bed already are you?"

"Yes, my lord, I'm afraid so. It has been a long day, though I'm certain that

my stepmother and stepsister would want for you to delight in the remainder of the evening.”

“Oh, come now, Isabella, it is a cold bed without company...” He then administered his best smile.

“You are wasting your time, sir. I can manage without escort and companion.”

“How dare you turn me away, Isabella- you who have become a nobody... you’ll die my cousin’s and my aunt’s maid, so you’d better get used to a cold bed. You’ll never get a better offer than mine if I know my cousin and aunt. Don’t worry, though. You’ll always have the purpose of fetching their chamber pots.” His sinister laughter rang through the stairwell.

It was not a shock to me when we received invitations to the ball and my stepmother informed me that I was not to attend as punishment for my behavior of late. I retired to my room without a word. I wanted to break things. Only one thought lifted me from my ruminations- I now understood that I wanted to see the Prince again. My world had been turned upside down and awakened simply by a kiss. What it was that I wanted and needed in my life, I knew not, but it would not be my stepsister who took it in my place.

I went to my god-mother, Eleanor, and poured out the contents of my ailing heart.

“Is there no end to the ways in which they try to hurt you? Stop fretting, mon cher. We must get to work. It is time to make Monique cry. You shall be stunning.”

On the evening of the ball, my uncle asked Antoinetta if I could stay late in the apothecary. So consumed was she with the affairs of her daughter that she absent-mindedly acquiesced. Eleanor asked Robert to drive me in their humble carriage. She used a bit of lip and cheek balm upon my face and fashioned my hair into an intricate upsweep, threaded through with some glass beads. On my feet were slippers of velvet. Finally, as my uncle helped me into the carriage, he put an ermine wrap about my shoulders. I looked every bit the noble woman. I added the final touch of a seldom used smile.

As we neared the Fontainebleau, I could glimpse the lakefront lit with torches. This was the King's favorite estate. White swan boats glided upon the lake and it began to snow. It was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen. I entered the grand ballroom under a false name and all heads turned to stare. It was a name that only Phillip knew. To everyone else, I was a stranger.

"Baroness De Mournai," was announced.

"I am sorry, mademoiselle, that name does not appear here on our list."

There were smirks and brows were raised.

"I know of her," said the Prince. "Let her through at once!!"

Rows of eyes narrowed but I was allowed to pass on the strength of his word.

Again and again, he asked me to dance with him. Finally, he took me by the hand to a side hall, away from the crowd. He seemed somehow different that night- not as young, nor gentle nor light of spirit. There was anger and gruffness beneath the handsome exterior. His eyes gazed upon me differently and spoke of betrayal.

"We are getting looks, Your Highness..."

"Let them look then. We'll provide them something to talk of in the morning." He leaned in, took my face in his hands and kissed me tenderly as he'd done the first time. And then again with such fierce passion, I felt dizzy as though I was falling. But his arms held me fast as did the wall he was pushing me up against.

"I must go," I said.

"You cannot go so soon. I will not let you."

I turned to the windows. "I love the swan boats," I remarked, as a diversion. "Look... it's snowing lightly. An early November snow. It's so

beautiful... Surely one of the most beautiful sights I've ever looked upon."

"Yes," he replied, but he wasn't looking at the boats. "Shall we go out in one? I'll need to have them brought in soon, but tonight we can float in the snow... I'll keep you warm."

"What of your guests, Your Highness? This is your night. This is wrong."

"That is why it feels so right, milady."

We descended hidden side stairs lit by torches. Quietly, we slipped into one of the boats, away from prying eyes. He covered us with a woolen blanket from the stable. He had held my hand as we raced toward the lake and we were giggling like children. I hoped that he would see our commonalities. In a sense, we had both had our childhoods cut short and we both needed to play as we once might have. Ensnared in the boat, I lay back on his chest with his arms around me. I thought to myself that if I were queen, I would take one of the boats inside the castle and make it a crib for my babe.

He began to kiss me fiercely, pulling on my gown, almost tearing at it. I had never been touched so and couldn't help but feel upset after all it had taken to simply get me there to see him one last time.

"You whoreson!" I yelled. "I came here tonight in this ridiculous finery to treasure what could be our last moments together because I thought you were a gentleman!"

Bitterly, he tossed his head back and laughed. "Oh! Don't try to impress me with your heavenly virtue, madam. You would not delight so in my company were I not made of gold! There is no virgin maid alive who would refuse the bed of a future king."

"I may be of current humble circumstance but I am not of a simple mind. Do not think me so shallow as the courtiers who would feign worship for Your Highness' graces. My father's death may have taken my title but you will not take my body or soul."

I managed to stand and though the boat tilted, I kept it steady. It wasn't until we neared the lake shore that I swung around by the swan's neck,

using it to propel me to land, that the boat tipped over with the astonished Prince still inside.

Finally he called out to his groomsmen and hell's fury broke loose. I ran and was caught. I heard him yell, "Let her go!" with such fierceness and the finality of his words stung a little, but then he added, "...it is true what they say of her. She wears noblemen's hearts around her neck!"

I had heard that the Prince had found someone. We had had nothing more than a trifle together. He obviously had far more delights with other women and easily tired of them. How could I have thought that a stolen kiss would have won his heart? He had also been beastly in his behavior. His poor future queen would be mercilessly cheated upon. So why did I feel so bereft as though I was taken ill? At first I thought that it was just a passing sadness. I missed my father. I wanted to run to him and cry into his shirt endlessly. There would no masculine arms to hold me... no deep voice to reassure.

My god-parents knew of my anguish. They had heard my sobs and it broke their hearts. Oddly I felt empty all the way to my womb. As always the apothecarist needed my help, depended on it. Thus, I had to be strong. The ill would not suspend their ailments, time would not draw to a still... I knew grief and the way that no one and nothing outside of it would stop while it raged. With puffy eyes and a swollen pink and white splotchy appearance, I tried to put on a smile and smoothed out my apron. There was a carriage outside out the shop which garnered much curiosity from the people who were filling the street. I tried in vain to find my shoes. I needed to stop taking them off for my own comforts yet amongst my tinctures and herbal palms, it seemed the most natural of habits.

Outside, I heard, "Out of my way! Let us through!" from gruff groomsmen. I saw that it was the King's carriage; the crest was evident on its door. What was not evident was why it would be there outside the shop. There were servants for such errands as well as the court's own dubious healer. I stood in the frame of the doorway. The groomsmen looked at me. "Mademoiselle Isabella of Chateau Dereon?"

Taken aback, I stammered, "Yes, monsieur?"

“The King commands your presence at court.”

“The King?.. I... I need to prepare. I must dress.”

“NOW, mademoiselle!”

I was sure I was being taken by force to jail. There was a lie... There was Eduardo who I knew had been responsible for the crude behavior of the Prince... The King, I'd thought, would be so disgusted with me. I had the look of someone who'd been crying all day, my clothes were rags, and I was without shoes. I hoped the Prince would not be at home. Oh, the Prince! He couldn't see me this way. I wanted to jump from the carriage. I surmised that it didn't matter as he was likely busy making plans for his future bride. I lay my head against the softly padded curtained side of the carriage and let my hair fall over my face. My fate would soon be sealed.

I hardly looked out on the grounds as we arrived.

I was led down incense clouded halls and told to wait in a small chamber. I could hear many hushed voices in the next room. Horns blew and the King and Queen were announced from across the other side of the room which echoed the greatness of its size. A page came for me and through a hidden door in the chamber, I entered a square cubicle shrouded by curtains. I was instructed to sit upon a highly detailed golden chair cushioned in crimson velvet. Though I was hidden behind silk curtains, the room became brighter and brighter as the torches were lit. I saw that my bare feet were resting on a dais of gold inlay, the top of which was a mosaic of rose and golden colored compass. Finally, two maids came and each took a side of the curtains in front of me and knotted them on the golden poles. There were gasps of shock and recognition. The horns sounded once again and the Prince was announced. He looked so handsome and intent, I nearly forgot how ragged I was in my dress. Looking straight at me, his eyes never veered off once or appeared dismayed. He was donned in full regal attire. His eyes burned with passion.

He removed his crown and presented it in the four directions of the room. I saw the lords and ladies, my stepmother and stepsister, even the servants, and then my god-parents who seemed to wink at me and smile knowingly. And then he did the most amazing thing- he knelt before me, he was

actually upon his knee, holding his crown out, and loudly said: “By sword and scepter, by my life, I bid you with respect and love to be my wife. I choose to relinquish my crown to the next eldest son of my father.” His eyes were hopeful, not taking my acquiescence for granted.

I could hardly comprehend the magnitude of the situation or how my life would change. Some say that I took a step backwards before I moved toward him. Though history remains undisputed that I said ‘yes’ and touched his beautiful face.

“You shiver my love,” he whispered and cloaked me in his velvet robe. All at once it was the promise that he would shelter me; the roof of our home would protect me from the storms, his arms would keep my heart from loneliness and his devotion would shield us both from the outside world.

Our young daughter runs about the grounds of the country manor. She brings me some of the flowers that I am trying to coax to grow in the garden and I laugh with delight. My husband looks on bewitched and bemused. Some whisper that as the apothecarist’s daughter, I worked some magic to ensnare him. There are no medicines that I know of like that. I still continue with my studies, overlook things in the village and lend myself where I am needed. My in-laws, the King and Queen, fully accept me and are immensely kind to me. I do not know the future- only that I am so fulfilled as a woman and have all that I ever wanted.

It is 1547 and I am never alone.

A Soldier on the Field

by Linda Emma

Part III

In the beginning, Denny craved the details.

He wanted to know coordinates, to understand where he was in

relationship to other points on a map, parts of a globe. Maybe it was his innate sense of geography or the coursing farmer's blood that lent respect to the beauty and bounty of the land, his sense of coming from and returning to it.

In the beginning, he cared.

Now he didn't give a shit.

One patch of fucking tropical green looked the same as the next; one captured hill, no different than any other, this village, the same as the last.

Denny had all but stopped his effort to reach The World. There was now nothing outside Vietnam; his tunnel vision was absolute. Gone were the waterfalls and rainbows, the weird wildlife, the flowering flora. He stopped noting the flashes of strange birds, stopped hearing the shrieking calls of primates. What had once verged on the majestic to his consuming senses, now seemed repetitive and entrapping. It was all sweaty and smelly and raw. There were attacks and counterattacks, the ranks of Denny's unit thinning at an escalating pace. And with each mortar blast, every raided village, each trampled patch of red-clayed dirt, Denny's internal turmoil tore at the fabric of his character, shredding it threadbare. There was a metamorphosis from a sweet, country farmer, boy to man, student to soldier, naive and caring friend to cynical and hardened fighter. Denny felt as if his feet were forever slipping on the craggy hills of the Truong Son Range, being tangled in jungle brush, vine and rock. He could gain forward momentum only if he acquiesced to the pulling force of gravity. And forward was the only direction about which he cared. Forward was the pull of time, the tick of the clock, the scratch mark on a calendar. Each day's end was a day closer to the end of his tour.

He just wanted out -out of the darkness of the shrouding canopies, out of the dampness of dew and sweat that were inseparable from one another, away from the smells of mold and mildew and human excrement that assaulted and numbed the senses at the same time, out of this God-forsaken slice of dystopia.

If Eden had been this kind of tropical paradise, Eve bit the apple just to get the hell out.

“Hall,” a voice called.

Denny’s eyes were closed, but he wasn’t sleeping. Not really. It was that hazy place in-between, where the seductive pull of a dream still hangs on, if only by a whisper. In the fog of his mind, Denny’s eyes were squinting, caught between swaying stocks of golden wheat, the gentle whistle of a warm wind somewhere in the middle of a different world.

“Hall,” again, more insistent.

“You suck, Luster, ya know. You really suck,” Denny said.

“Suck this,” Luster said grabbing at his crotch even though Denny hadn’t yet opened his eyes.

He jumped down closer, to within feet of Denny, poked him.

“What?” Denny said, swatting the air.

“Take patrol with me.”

“Why? I thought Klein was on.”

“Yeah, he’s off now. C’mon, I can’t stand Klein, anyway.”

Denny opened his eyes.

“Captain said me?”

“Captain said not Klein. He pulled ‘im for a rat patrol. Gonna detonate the hole at the base of the hill.”

Rat patrol was Klein’s specialty. He was little, could fit in the tiny spaces of those tunnels. And his uncle or cousin or someone had sent him a Luger. If did need to shoot, the blast of the Luger wouldn’t deafen him. The idiots at head command were still sending in the peanut boys with M60s. What were they thinking? Yeah, Klein was equipped for it.

Luster, on the other hand, hated the tunnels. A maze of bug and rat-infested tributaries all leading to who-the-fuck-cares. On the approach to anything that even appeared to be a bunker system, Luster's pulse would start tapping out its own twisted revelry, his eyes wide, fingers twitching, his head somewhere else.

Denny wondered about that. Weird. Luster seemed so indestructible, fearless.

Six-six, 250 pounds, bolt-upright posture -intimidating. And he had this white-toothed grin, below jet black hair, a mop of it before basics, he'd said, and smoky gray eyes.

"Jeez," Denny said, protesting, but starting to move. "I was up 'til 0400. Couldn't you get someone else?"

"C'mon," Luster said, even though Denny had given up the fight, was grabbing his artillery, moving forward.

Technically, Denny outranked Luster, but there was no question among the grunts where the real authority lay. Luster had more time in than even the Captain and he'd been a Corporal.

Until something happened.

Denny wasn't sure which of the stories made sense, but they all ended with Luster going AWOL, being taken in by the MP's, bucked down to Private and sent back to the field.

In a hole, on a hill, it was still Luster to whom they all turned, though. In this unit alone, there were three guys who owed their life to Luster. In the Corps, many more.

Denny didn't know Luster well, but there was something both admirable and confusing about him. The darting eyes, the gaps in the whole of his story.

Told Denny he was from South Dakota. Denny liked that, too, since he'd

taken to calling him “Horse,” after South Dakotan native and Sioux leader, Crazy Horse.

Crazy Horse was a loyal and fierce warrior, and he’d led the Sioux against Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn. Then, contained but not subdued, he’d fought against his confinement on the White man’s reservation, ran away from its constraints.

Yeah, Luster from the Dakotas; that fit.

But then Denny heard him one day regaling some newbies with raunchy teenage exploits about his days on the beaches of Marina del Rey. Another time, it was stories of rural Maine.

Denny set off behind Luster.

One thing was certain. On any patrol, Luster would have his back. Denny trusted every Marine to honor the brotherhood, but with no one did he feel more secure about it.

Given the wrong circumstances, Horse would save his life -of that Denny was certain.

The hill had been strafed; a forward patrol had already gone through, radioed back an all clear call.

When Denny’s unit set forth at dawn, the attitude was caution, muddled by the monotony of two weeks stuck in a jumble of greens, one mass indistinguishable from the next, and seemingly abandoned of human life.

The labyrinth of hidden tunnels, beneath an inhospitable terrain to which the North Vietnamese seemed to be innately adapted, made the land as much an enemy as the Viet Cong. That was coupled with an enemy strategy that consisted of small attacking groups appearing from nowhere, and easily disappearing back into the shadowy darkness or hovering along the periphery to play carnival shot games with the Americans as their sitting ducks.

It was a textbook ambush and they walked into it as if it were their first day off transport, Cobra-dropped onto a plot of death-dark green earth.

And out of that earth, like an army of swarming fire ants, came a furious wave of black pajama-clad men and boys wielding Russian-made artillery and arms, roaring, screaming, firing guns, throwing grenades, plunging bayonets.

It was a burst of horrific activity, noise, blood, chaos.

And then -silence.

Denny was panting, his M60 readied, his helmet askew and impairing his vision, but he did nothing to right it. He pulled at his own senses, trying to assess -see who was where- but at the same time, fighting to stay completely still and quiet. His pant leg was soaked in blood, but he didn't feel anything, wasn't sure if it was his own blood or Klein's or Harper's.

Both dead, he knew, just pieces instead of people now.

Fffffffttt -sound, whipping through trees, brush, green and brown tangles.

Thwack.

Denny rolled, ducked.

Sniper fire.

For the next hour, he, and he wasn't sure who else, were held down, blind to their assailant, mired in the dirt, on their bellies, the smell of burst intestines mixing with gunpowder, rising in the hot, sticky air.

It was Horse who finally took out the sniper.

Still, they waited -in silence. Until, one of them, Peterson, rose. Slowly, tentatively, at first. And then, seeing his erect form, seeing that there was indeed only a single sniper, the other men got up as well. They stood and took the somber inventory: three of them gone; five more wounded.

These weren't the worst casualties Denny's unit had suffered, but for Denny it was another layer in the packed resolve against where he was and what he was doing. Like the pelitic muds that surrounded them, each day in The Nam was hardening the core of who Denny was.

When Denny stumbled upon Horse raping a village girl, it was the final affront to everything Denny had once believed. He wrought his fury on Horse in a flurry of fists, and even followed through enough to alert the commander, fill out forms, file a formal report. But it was an exercise in futility.

Privately, the Captain conceded that Horse wasn't right, damn good fighter and a soldier, sure, but something was wrong with that boy, the Captain had said.

"A shame too," Captain said. "I knew his Sergeant at basics; said he was the best god damn recruit he'd ever seen."

The Captain granted Denny an extra R&R.

But when Denny got back, Horse was still part of the unit.

Luster tried to approach Denny.

"It wasn't what you thought," he said.

Denny offered him only a shove as he moved past him, and an icy stare.

Luster wasn't Crazy Horse; he was just crazy, sick. How had Denny missed it? His life attitude had betrayed him. Seeing things in a positive light, up side, not down, wouldn't work here. None of his old ideals applied. If Denny was going to make it out alive, he'd have to learn a whole new set of rules and a way to square them with the person he was trying to hold on to.

As easily as Denny could avoid being in Horse's company on a personal level, in the field it was impossible. Although the Captain separated the

once amiable pair with more frequency, when he ordered a search and destroy mission on intelligence that a Viet Cong guerrilla group was in the area, Horse and Denny both were included in the ten man team.

Denny had a nagging sense of unease as he set forth on point through the low brush. He didn't try to push it away; he knew now to trust his new reality.

The village they came upon was a tiny encampment, a series of a dozen Vietnamese hootches, the rustic palm-thatched homes of the area, placed as a haphazard string in the middle of the Boonies. Even in the smallest and poorest towns of Denny's homeland, there was nothing quite like the Vietnamese sub-standard of living. But as if to further knock Denny away from building a new reality, the second hut he and Flaherty busted in on was a picture of contradictions. It was standard fare for the Vietnamese abode in the hilly region bordering Cambodia: small, mud-floored -cooking, living, sleeping space all minimally contained. But entering from the dust and dirt of the outside, Denny and Flaherty took in an impeccably neat space, richly colored fabrics adorning the small table, the sleeping areas. In a corner was a tiny bamboo-constructed shelf unit, a handful of books upon it. Author names, spoke out from books unknown to Denny. And standing quietly to its side, straight, with an unflinching gaze at Denny, was a woman, not much older than he. Denny knew there were others in the home with them, but for a moment, maybe two, all he saw was her.

Her straight, jet black hair fell on shoulders covered in a richly colored fabric of pinks and teals, yellows and blues. She had dark eyes, high cheekbones. She wasn't much taller than the village girls Denny had encountered since he'd come to Vietnam, but the couple of inches she had on them, combined with her shoulders-back posture made her appear much taller. Denny and Flaherty both had their M16s pointed and at the ready, but she just stood still, waiting.

Flaherty waited too, with his gun shakily trained on the old man and young boy in the room with them. He tried to play the tough guy, but was just a cherry. His eyes ping-ponged between his prisoners, waiting for a sudden move, a reason to shoot.

Just as Denny started to lower his gun to ratchet down the tension, Horse

burst into the home.

“C’mon, get ‘em out here,” he shouted. “Now!”

Horse looked to the man and the boy, motioned them out, with a violent wave of his gun.

“Out, out,” he said. “Didi Mau, didi mau!”

“Move ‘em,” he commanded of Flaherty.

He turned toward Denny, looked at the girl.

“Go on,” he said to Denny. “Hit the other huts.”

Denny ignored Horse. He let his gun go limp at his side, motioned with his hand to the woman, and stood between her and Horse as she left the hut.

By now most of the huts had been cleared, their peopled contents in a lopsided circle at the heart of the tiny village. They were children and women, a few old men. There was nothing sinister or menacing about them. One of the men kept up a chant of, “GI good, GI good,” fear in every utterance.

Denny looked into the man’s yellowed and watery eyes. He had a still abundant head of gray hair above his wrinkled brow. He was dressed in an ill-fitting black tunic and pants that made him look like a child in his father’s suit.

Denny was still taking in the fear in the faces before him, the trigger-tight tension of the soldiers at his shoulders, when he felt a change.

Did he hear it or see it? He wasn’t sure, but something was amiss.

He reacted before he knew he did.

He was down, rolling, firing, taking cover, taking note.

These were the bad guys and they’d already killed Flaherty, but also the old

man, a puzzled look in his still open, but dead eyes.

It was an explosion of deafening blasts and cries, plumes of smoke rising like a misty film, blurring the landscape, the targets, the innocents.

Were there two of them or twenty? Denny didn't know, but Horse had already charged one in a war movie scene of bravado, placing himself dead center into the sites of the soldier's AK-47, as if shielded by an impenetrable force field.

It looked like suicide.

But Horse jumped, ran, rolled, and was up again, unscathed, his assailant dead, peppered with holes.

It wasn't ten minutes.

The attack, its defense, their escape.

Now Denny and his fellow Marines turned to the capture of the accomplices. These villagers, innocent or not, were now the enemy.

The muffled thunder of their boots, the whish of brush giving way to fleeing bodies, cries, screams, incomprehensible pleas, shattered the air just as the artillery fire had. Denny stopped an old woman and a child, herded them to where Dobson was both nursing his wounded leg and holding arms against their new hostages.

Denny caught a peripheral shot of color bleed into the greens, escaping. So did Horse.

They both recognized the tropical flowers bobbing through the brush.

"I got it," Horse offered, at Denny's side.

"No," Denny said.

He pushed Horse aside.

“I’ve got it.”

Denny looked into eyes he didn’t recognize, a weird grin on Horse’s face. He thought to the Captain’s refrain, “there’s something wrong with him,” thought back to Dubeck and Cahill, to Billy. He’d heard Billy had killed himself -no one to protect him.

“Yeah, you go first,” Horse said.

Denny shook his head, pulled himself free of the twisted stare, felt repulsed. The look in Horse’s eyes shook him even more than the firefight had.

He ran off into the woods, pursuing the girl, and wondering what the fuck he was going to do with her when he found her.

It was easy, too. Too easy. He was too well-trained; she not trained at all, not used to the role of hunted, of being someone’s prey.

With Denny’s gun trained on her, she stumbled back against a towering Eucalyptus, stopped and took a breath.

Denny was under obligation to apprehend, to treat her as a North Vietnamese collaborator. He stared into her eyes, caught there again. She looked neither angry nor frightened. She would come easily, he knew. And he would have to protect her, keep Horse from her, and any others.

But how?

Denny let the tension from his trigger finger melt, brought his gun down.

She watched it fall, blinked. Denny heard a sigh escape her lips and watched as her posture relax.

He could let her go, allow her to disappear off into the woods, then find his way back to his unit. She might be the enemy the Captain would insist she was, a contemporary Mata Hari, a spy, a killer, or she could be what Denny suspected -a woman stuck in a war that she hadn’t asked for.

A rain of gunfire interrupted Denny's conversation with himself.

Denny grabbed the girl, pulled her down, behind the covering of a rock, his body further shielding her from the onslaught. But Denny couldn't be certain if they were the targets, couldn't know even if it was enemy or friendly fire.

He didn't fire back. Instead, he waited.

He was practically on top of her, her breath at the base of his neck.

The barrage stopped. He heard the sound of men pushing through brush, voices, not English.

She could shout to them, reveal their position, scream for help.

Denny looked at her, into her eyes.

She said nothing, just stayed pinned against him, her breathing in sync with his, quick, but measured.

He stared at her.

She was beautiful.

He could be dead at any moment, captured, tortured.

And all he could think was that she was beautiful.

The voices and the footsteps retreated, still in the area, but moving farther away from their spot in the brush.

Denny pulled off of her.

They waited quietly together. They were anything but safe.

They had to move, Denny thought, get somewhere.

Denny didn't know where he was going, but he knew what was happening

where he was not. The Marines would torch the village, take what was useful to the unit, destroy the rest. Dobson was probably already on the PRC-25, radioing the Captain, taking orders. Denny hoped the villagers would be spared, treated not as enemy collaborators but merely as the pawns Denny knew them to be.

But he doubted it.

She got to her feet.

Denny tried to stop her, pulled at her wrist, but she took his hand, whispered, “di di.”

He hesitated.

“Come,” she said.

He rose fully, letting let her pull him.

But then his interrupted instincts returned. He scanned his surroundings, assessed their vulnerability. Before he realized he had even touched her, he pulled at her blouse, then stopped, cut off by the look on her face, all the implications the gesture could hold.

“No, no,” he faltered, motioning with his hands, trying to make her understand.

He brought both hands up in a halting gesture.

“Wait.”

He lowered his gun, leaned it against his legs, while he took off his flak jacket, stripped the t-shirt beneath from his chest. He extended it to her, used sign language.

How did he tell her that this was protection, that this could save their lives?

She understood that he wanted her to wear it. Whether she knew why, that her tunic was a beacon against the greens, he didn’t know, but she had it on

and was again leading him in a matter of moments.
And he allowed her to.

Away from the direction he should be moving, against his training, against what he knew to be right, code and conduct. He merely submitted to her insistent tug on his arm.

She led them to a well-hidden bunker, part of the networking tunnels, but one that Denny's unit hadn't unearthed. It wasn't far from their camp. Not really, and yet no one had reported a tributary in this quadrant.

He must have hesitated because she took his hand again, tugged him forward.

"Come," she said, quietly.

Gunfire, distant but still too close for safety.

He followed and they left the muted sounds of explosions and turmoil behind them.

Hunkered in the depths of the bunker, its connection to a larger labyrinth thwarted by the tumbled in rock and gravel that Denny suspected was the handiwork of Klein or one of the tunnel rats from the army units he'd led through, they stayed hidden and safe. She knew the hole and its tiny store of food, candles. Denny didn't try to ask how or why.

He didn't care.

And when he finally succumbed to sleep, his gun limply in his hand, he gave in to the possibilities, as if he'd already jumped and there was no turning away from the bite of the water, the risk of its depths.

But she didn't try to leave him, or turn his weapon against him.

Instead, somewhere in the night, she pulled into the shelter of his steady breathing, the crook of his arm. He enfolded her there, brought her closer, kissed the top of her head.

And they slept, deeply, a sleep that had eluded Denny since his arrival in Vietnam.

*

Maria sat behind the cluttered desk of her mentor.

The training wheels were off now. It was time to give this a shot all on her own.

She looked out the classroom window. It was a gray morning, cloudy and threatening.

And she was early.

Her students would not arrive for another half hour. But she had been nervous, unable to sleep. Where better to spend the morning? She thought.

She reviewed the lesson plan before her for the fifth time, then stopped herself.

She knew this stuff. She even knew the children, having spent the last four weeks student teaching under the watchful eye of Mildred Schooner. A gruff, gray-haired disciplinarian, Maria had been sure she wouldn't warm up to the woman. Then, she'd watched as Schooner melted before her charges, answer every query with thought and enthusiasm. Soon, Maria found herself trying to emulate the woman. If she could become even half the teacher Mrs. Schooner was, she would be proud.

This was one of three third grade classes at Rutherford Taylor elementary. And if it was possible, Maria would be happy to stay.

She'd had other ideas. Grander. Loftier. Now, third-grade sounded just right.

Maria looked at the tarnished brass bracelet on her wrist. She'd have to take it off someday, she knew. Eddie hadn't asked her to. Wouldn't. But

still, soon she'd have to remove it from her wrist.

For her own reasons.

She looked at his name: PFC Dennis J. Hall USMC 6-3-69 An Loc, wondered.

His letters to her had at first changed their tone, then shortened, then trickled away.

She wasn't notified that Private First Class Denny Hall had been reported Missing In Action. Why would she have been? She'd never met Denny's father, his brothers, doubted they knew she existed.

But eventually, she'd found out.

An outside bell let out its peal.

Maria stood up, fighting the lingering nervousness.

Mrs. Schooner opened the classroom door and a line of smiling students began to find their seats.

end

Finding Faith

By Danielle Radin

Tatiana walked out of the synagogue with tears in her eyes. She always got teary eyed after the Mourner's Kaddish, but today she was especially emotional because she had had time to think. She knew that one day she would be the one in mourning; and she also knew that someday someone would be mourning for her. It was inevitable. She felt a strong connection to the people walking out of the synagogue with her. She was amongst them as a Jew, but it was not always like this. She squinted into the memory of

her unreligious past-squinted because it was so hard to see now-because it was so distant that it was like trying to read a book from the top of the Eiffel Tower .

She wished she was in Paris again. Paris was beautiful and the people there knew their place and knew what they wanted out of life. They were not like Western society; waiting aimlessly for an afterlife that might not even exist. It did not matter to her all that much what the hell Western society was waiting for. She knew what she wanted now. She felt like her life was a giant hourglass, with the grains of sand squeezing through the middle to the vast bottom faster and faster as she got older. Maybe when all the grains fell to the bottom that would be the end, or maybe a new hour glass would fill up and count time for her soul after it departed from her body. Either way, she did not want to sit around and wait to find out.

She put this logic towards most things. She never waited around for someone else to do the work for her. She'd learned early about disappointment when placing personal happiness in incapable hands or shallow hopes. She was an initiator- she made things happen. She knew that she would someday start a charity organization in some foreign Third World nation. She had ambitions and goals and she was not afraid to reach out and grab them.

On that cool autumn morning, she decided to go to her friend Michelle's house for a bit of contrast from the solemn synagogue. She had been best friends with Michelle through everything- her parent's divorce, her father issues, her unhealthy relationships. Michelle was free-spirited or what her parents termed 'a complete screw up'. She was vulgar, unorganized, unmotivated, and too laid back about the fact. She was basically the exact opposite of Tatiana, but she kind of liked that. Michelle was her escape from the real world. She made Tatiana look at things with a removed levity that she wouldn't have been able to muster on her own.

Tatiana needed an escape every now and then. She did things without having the slightest clue why she did them. Things that her therapist would explain simplistically, using sentences such as, "well this event resulted in you doing this," which would make Tatiana tilt her head slightly to the left and say, "...well that makes sense." She made conscious decisions more with her heart than with her mind and only when they were explained to

her with logic could she see if they were the right choices or not. She did know why she did some things, though. She knew that she liked dating older men because they were mature and they could act like a father figure to her. Well, a temporary father figure anyway, until she tired of their company and moved on.

Tatiana's relationship with her father was a complex one. She knew that he loved her, but he seemed to never have any time for her when she was growing up. Now he had a new wife that was not her biological mom, and a new daughter that was not her, but she did not mind all that much. She actually preferred her step-mom to her biological mother ninety percent of the time. Her step-mom understood her, and gave her substantial advice and abundant love. Her biological mother did not really have any emotion towards anything. Her father hated emotion because he was taught to do so while growing up. Looking back on it, Tatiana could see how that would probably not be a good formula for a marriage-two people who hated expressing emotion- and she could not blame the divorce on her parents fully when they were raised with those beliefs. She just wished that she knew the exact, precise reasons why her parents got the divorce. She wondered about it frequently, hoping to avoid treading the same steps herself, but was not so consumed about it now to try and wrench solid answers from either of her parents. After her parents went their separate ways when she was in fifth grade, she swore off love forever, saying that it did not exist and that the correct term for it was "companionship." Emotional expression was not a part of her familial inheritance.

Maybe that was why she liked George so much- because he was not afraid to wear his heart on his sleeve. He was older, but only by two years. He was twenty. She and George had been dating for a few months before he was shipped off to Cuba to be in the air force. They had continued to talk for the next year after that over the phone, and through letters.

In truth, George reminded her of her father in many ways. He was smart, down to Earth, and someone who she could respect. He was the emblem of the relationship she always wished she could have with her father. He called her and expressed how much he cared about her. He was perfect.

Tatiana was in love with George and she did not even believe in love. Despite herself, she was starting to change her views. She sometimes

scolded herself for feeling so strongly about a guy that was over two-thousand miles away. She often times felt guilty when she would start new relationships with other guys, even though she and George were not exclusive. Her therapist told her that this was a perfectly natural way to feel, but Tatiana wished that she could be guilt free when she was fulfilling her physical needs. She knew that she was taking a risk, falling so hard for George, but she also knew that with a great risk comes a great reward. She often times caught herself thinking about what she and George's house would look like after they got married, or thinking of names for their future children. She liked the names Jayden and Skylar for boys. Her favorite name for a girl was Danielle.

George told her that he was going to come back and visit her soon, and that made Tatiana both excited and terrified. For one, she did not know if she and George would have the same chemistry in person that they did over the phone. Also, she was afraid that she was going to screw things up. The other guys she had had relationships with in the past pounded into her head time and time again that she was not good enough.

Sometimes she actually started to believe them. Her old boyfriend, Jerry, was always manipulating her into thinking that she was wrong. He had a way with that. Now he was a typical, down and out loser who knocked up some girl up and didn't have enough money to pay for child support. Even though she always knew he was going nowhere in life, Tatiana believed him most of the time because she trusted him. She trusted people. She was always giving people the benefit of the doubt- even if it was at her own expense. She would rather see other people happy and herself miserable then the other way around.

Michelle often told her that she should be more selfish at times, but Tatiana did not think that that was a good trait to have.

Just as she was leaving Michelle's house after a quick lunch to discuss another of Michelle's latest breakup dramas, she received a call from her father. She was excited and picked it up on the first ring.

"Hey pumpkin," he said over the phone.

"Hi daddy! What's up?" she asked him trying to keep the excitement in her

voice to a minimum.

“Listen, remember how we said that we were going to have Shabbat together this Friday night?”

Tatiana’s heart skipped a beat from thrill. She was thrilled because her father had not forgotten their dinner date. They had not eaten a meal together for longer than she could remember. “Yes daddy, I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she said.

“Yeah, well listen, I promised my friend Mike, you remember Mike right? I think you met him a long time ago. Yeah, well anyway, I promised my friend Mike that I would eat dinner with him that night. I’m sorry pumpkin I completely forgot. We’ll have Shabbat dinner together really soon though, okay?” He gave a slight chuckle to lighten the mood.

She reached inside the pit of her stomach for all the strength that she could find. She needed it to hold back the tears. ‘Come on, don’t cry in front of your father,’ she said to herself. Hold it back. Hold it. Hold it.

“Oh it’s okay, Daddy, I already had plans for Friday anyway, I have to go now... I’m getting another call... Bye.” She hung up quickly and sunk her body to the ground, making a ball of herself on the pavement. She sobbed for a while, trying to remember who this Mike guy was and why he would want to steal her precious time with her father away from her. She could not ever remember meeting a Mike and this made her even sadder. She sat there for a long time, trying to control the shaking of her body, but it was a difficult task. She debated going back inside of Michelle’s house and telling her about it, but she remembered Michelle had had to leave early to go to a dance lesson.

She felt alone in the world. She had no one to talk to. Her phone was ringing again and she prayed it was her dad telling her that the whole thing was a sick joke and that they were still on for Friday. Yet it was even better than that- it was George. She took a few deep breaths and answered the phone.

“Hey! What’s up?” She asked cheerily.

“Hello beautiful, I could not stop thinking about you today. I had to give you a call.”

She felt the familiar fluttering of butterflies in her stomach. George made her forget about the hardships with her father. In a way, he was an escape too- an escape from the treatment that men geographically and emotionally close to her threw at her. She knew deep down that she did not deserve this kind of treatment, but had endured it for so long that she was used to it by now. But George was different. He appreciated her and respected her. He gave her the time of day. He valued her opinion and complemented her frequently. She loved talking to him and escaping with him.

“Aw, you’re sweet,” she said. “How’s the air force and when the heck are you gonna come visit me? I miss you.” She questioned herself immediately after she said that, she did not want to sound too clingy, but George seemed to appreciate it.

“I miss you too!” He exclaimed. “I promise you that I will come to see you by the end of this year, no exceptions!”

It was the end of November which meant that he was going to come soon. Immediately she began to fantasize about their futures together, but then remembered that he was still on the phone.

“Tatiana? Are you there? Hello?” She could hear him saying on the Cuban end of the line.

“Oh yeah sorry, bad service,” she said. “Well I look forward to seeing you, George. And I’m really glad you called, I’ve been having kind of a bad day.”

“Oh no,” he said, “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“It’s just stuff with my dad,” she said. She could not complain about her life when George was off fighting for his country. He had been trying to save enough money to buy a plane ticket home to see her for practically a year now, and still did not have enough. Tatiana knew that his poverty made him more down to Earth and appreciative of the small things in life and she liked that. Sometimes she felt guilty for the privileged life she lived while others struggled. If she had the opportunity to switch places with a child

from an impoverished nation, she would do it in a heart-beat with no regrets. But living the life she was given, she helped the world in her own way. She volunteered her time whenever she could and helped people who could not help themselves. She knew that she would be doing this for the rest of her life and it was one of her deepest passions.

“Okay well I just wanted to say hello, I have to go do more training now but I will see you soon darling, goodbye,” he said with some sadness in his voice.

“Goodbye George, it was nice talking to you,” she responded. It really was. The rest of what she wanted to say, that flood of special words for him, got stuck like a cork in the bottle of her throat.

Michelle was coming back from her dance lessons when she saw Tatiana still sitting on the pavement.

“Hey girlie, getting your tan on?” Michelle jokingly asked.

“Haha yeah, I wish,” Tatiana said, “My dad just canceled our dinner plans for Friday night.”

Michelle looked like she was going to cry Tatiana's tears for her. She crouched low and said, “Here why don't you come inside? We can talk about it.”

“It's okay, I should get going,” Tatiana answered, dismissing it. She did not want to burden Michelle with her problems.

“No, really- you're the only person I care about in the world, please come inside?”

Tatiana surrendered, getting up off of the pavement and went inside where she sat with Michelle for a long time. They laughed about stupid inside jokes that they had and she felt her burdens lightening. After talking to Michelle and George, she knew that it was okay if her father had canceled their dinner plans. It was okay because it was his loss and not hers. She knew that one day he would realize that they could have spent more time together while she was growing up. She appreciated her and her father's

relationship because it made her stronger.

She thought back to the Mourner's Kaddish and realized that life was too short to dwell on sadness. She cracked a joke to Michelle and they laughed for a long time. As she was wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She looked at the beautiful young woman that she had become and she had hope for her future. She knew that everything was going to be alright, and that she would continue to develop and grow into the kind of individual that she knew she could become. Through those who cared for her, she would find her faith. It was faith in the present, faith in the future and faith that whatever bliss awaited in life or death, it could be found through love.

A Small Lifetime

By Pat Greene

It was a struggle for her, getting around to the back of the house this morning to gather up the few kippins for starting the fire with. Usually she would have them brought in from the night before and she would leave them in a tidy bundle, set in to the right of the cuben hole next to the fireplace and Peter's chair.

The milk in the bottle was two days sour, so there was no use in her making a cup of tea. She could never drink black tea anyway. She could do without the one spoon of sugar but never the drop of milk. She left the front door slightly open so that she would hear young Matt Shinnors feet on the road and Matt would bring her back a pint of milk from the street.

As she passed Casey's chair, one of her dizzy spells came upon her and she had to stop and lean heavily on the small table that held her little porcelain nick-knacks under the picture window. Poor ol' Casey would be dead a

fortnight on her tomorrow. The tears came again. She was lost without poor Casey. He was with her for so long and they were such good friends. His scent, still remained in the house and it traveled to her now, off his chair and she would give the world to look down and find him there at her feet with his deep brown eyes and wagging tail... Just like he always was.

As a slight cool breeze escaped the outdoors and came in through the unguarded space of the doorframe, she suddenly became alarmed with the thought that whatever was left of Casey in the house might be getting away from her. This caused her to throw a frightened look back to the rear window to make certain it hadn't been left ajar. It was then that she realized that she had not opened that nor any window since the day before Casey had died. She gave a lean on the door which closed with the weight of her sadness.

Kate always loved having her windows thrown open and especially during those early spring days when the clean crisp air, with the welcome promise of summer, carries down off Crom-hill, and blows in around the house and rids it of the wretched winter dampness. Usually by the time the month of May comes around, every room in her house is alive with the full anticipation of Summer.

The hob needed tending and she went to it. As she knelt there sweeping the stray ashes through the hearth with the gray goose quill, another flood of emotions swept over her and this time her tears fell down into the fire where they sizzled and instantly evaporated in the hot turf embers.

Kate was married to Peter O' Riordan in October of nineteen twenty three. Peter was twenty four at the time and Kate was twenty two. Ireland was still in the throws of delight with its new freedom and it was a freedom that gave everyone a great amount of hope to look forward to. Kate was overjoyed when Peter had come to the house one night in early August and asked her

father for Kate's hand in marriage. Not once during the courtship or for the time leading up to the wedding, had Kate ever doubted that Peter was the right man for her. Kate had known Peter all her life and she was in love with him long before Peter had ever plucked up the courage to come calling on her.

Like Kate, Peter was an only child and when they were married, Kate went to live with Peter and his mother. In the late winter of nineteen twenty, Peter's father, Tom, had been taken from the house one night by the black and tans; shortly after daybreak the next morning, Peter found his father's lifeless body, face down in the cold dark waters of Barna river. That absence was never filled- the quiet lingered in the walls. Thus, when Peter brought Kate home to live with him, she was a welcome breath of fresh air into the house and even the house itself seemed to come back to life with her there. It didn't take Kate very long at all to settle in, or to feel like she was in her own home.

The knock came to the door, bringing her back to the present.

"Kate, are you there?"

Her heart bounced for joy in her chest. She loved his tiny little voice and he was such a lovely little fella. Every time she saw him, she wanted to hug him but she never did. Nothing ever more than just the ruffle of her hands through his beautiful head of straight black hair.

"I'm here Matt, give me a minute." She wiped her eyes with the navy blue bib, with the embossed imprints of wild daisies carpeting lush green pastures under the spreading limbs of giant hill-top chestnuts.

She went to get the door for Matt.

He smiled to her and she could always feel sure that he was sincerely happy to see her. He made his way past her and to sit under the chimney on the long wooden bench that Peter had made for her the summer before he passed away. She had always found Matt to be a very affectionate child and with the gentlest of mannerisms.

She had sweets somewhere in the house for him but where had she put them?

It was Matt's father Frank, that had buried poor Casey for her. He dug a hole down at the end of the plot and placed Casey in a four stone -flour bag. He was very careful when placing Casey in the shallow grave and Matt had cried the entire time for the loss of his good friend. Kate had always felt, that if she was taken before Casey, at least she would have the comfort of knowing that Matt would take care of Casey for her.

Matt came the day after they had buried Casey and he had a make-shift cross with him. Two flat panels about a foot each in length and carved from the white ash, bound together with a fistful of long switch grass and 'Casey' etched into one of the smooth shaved panels. The day after that, Matt came with primroses that he had picked from Judy Hennessy's ditch. He placed the primroses neatly around the cross, which he had driven down at the head of the grave, and knelt in prayer to ask God to be good to Casey. That was the last time that Matt had mentioned Casey's name to her. Kate had always known that children were the best at forgetting. Matt would probably forget her too when she was gone but maybe he wouldn't. At least she hoped not.

"Matt, will you run into the street and get a few things for me?"

She handed him a five pound note and the shopping list that she had made

out for herself, two days before.

Matt took the shopping bag from the hook at the back of the bedroom door and when he had reached the front gate, Kate called after him and told him not to forget to get the quarter pound of clove rocks for himself.

If Casey was here now, she thought, he would be off down the road with Matt, and she'd be out there at the gate watching after them, laughing every time Casey would jump up and try to trip Matt as they ran. She would watch them until they disappeared beyond Tom Donovan's bend and from there the road steadily rises before them and they would pass Ballinlough graveyard, where everyone belonging to Kate was buried and then it was a good half mile on foot into the village of Ballyvistee.

Kate and Peter were blessed with the birth of a baby girl, three weeks before the Christmas of nineteen twenty five. They named her 'Agnes', after Peter's mother. Beautiful little Agnes was their completion to an already happy home and she was showered with love, morning, noon and night. Agnes was born with a heart murmur condition and Kate and Peter were always careful to prevent her from ever getting overly excited even though there was the acceptance, by both of them that Agnes would never grow up to have a normal life. Neither of them had ever given a moment's thought to the fact that Agnes might well be taken from them.

One night in early September of nineteen twenty seven, Kate tucked Agnes into her bed and if she had known that night was going to be the last time that she was ever to hear her little girl say goodnight to her, she would never have left her all alone there in that room by herself. She would have laid there next to her precious little Agnes and she would have wrapped her up in her arms and cradled her with every ounce of love in her body... and when the attack took hold of Agnes maybe she could have done something to prevent it from getting worse and maybe their little darling's life could have been saved.

But Agnes was all alone when cruel death came creeping through her room. Like a thief in the middle of the night, it hovered over her as she slept and carried their little bundle of joy out into the cold and never-ending darkness. Carried her away... not even allowing the time for one small goodbye.

Peter and Kate could not have asked for better friends or neighbors after Agnes was taken from them. Every night for weeks and months afterward, someone would come and sit in with them and try to take their minds off their terrible loss. Kate was better at pretending than Peter and she was far too polite to tell these good people that she would prefer to be left alone. Being alone was far more comforting for her. She didn't have to pretend when she was alone and the pain was much easier to deal with. She hated having to make-believe to anyone that she would ever really get over losing her little darling angel.

Peter was never the same again and slowly he began to shut Kate out until eventually they became like two strangers sitting across the fire from one another. Both of them, with their eyes fixed back in time, searching the ashes for reasons why they were deserving of something so tragic to happen to them.

It was a beautiful August night in nineteen thirty one and Kate had gone outside to stand in the road in front of the house and listen to the night settle in around her. She had always found a particular kind of happiness in hearing how the birds and the animals went about going to their beds. There was a time when Peter would come out there and stand with her but after Agnes passed away, that was something else that Peter stopped doing. For a long time too, Kate had not gone out there. Life and everything to do with living and especially, the business of happy living, had lost all it's meaning to her and she went about her days shutting herself off from everything and anything to do with her own survival.

It was a thrush that came to her one morning while she was hanging out the washing. The thrush perched herself on the line right next to her showing no fear of Kate at all. This bird sat there staring at her and Kate finally began to grasp that this was very unusual behavior. She could see her own reflection in the bird's big brown eyes and the notion came to her that this was Agnes. The bird broke into song and Kate stood there holding on to the line, her tears streaming down her cheeks... accepting for the first time that she was not the cause of Agnes' dying.

As Kate was crossing the yard to go back inside, a strange eerie feeling took hold of her and for a moment, it stopped her in her tracks. She began to sense that something was wrong inside the house. She hurried her steps and when she got to the front door which she had left open behind her, she could see into the house and back to the fireplace. Peter was there, sitting with his head off to one side of the armchair.

She paused at the door before crossing the floor to him and when she reached out a hand to touch him, he didn't respond. She didn't have to touch him again to know that Peter was gone from her.

After examining Peter, doctor O' Brien told her that Peter had died from a weak heart but Kate was certain that her gentle, kind and loving thirty two year old husband had more than likely died from a broken heart.

Peter's mother, Agnes came down with pneumonia in the late Autumn of nineteen thirty eight, from which she never fully recovered and she died with Kate by her side three days into the new year. Kate's own mother and father died a year apart from one another. Her father first, in nineteen forty two and her mother, the following year, just two days shy of her sixty fifth birthday. From there on, Kate had been left alone to bear the weight of life on her own two shoulders and sometimes when she looked back over her thirty years of being alone, it seemed like a small lifetime to her.

She had left the door open behind Matt when he left and some more of Casey was getting out of the house. She stepped outside into the yard where the last of the lingering fog was beginning to give way to the mid morning sun. She crossed over the cobblestones and stood at the gate and searched for Matt coming back up the road. He was there and again, she felt it a pity that poor ol' Casey wasn't with him. She went out into the road and when Matt saw her there, he quickened his step. If she'd closed her eyes just then, just for one small moment, it might well have been Agnes there in the road. When he got closer, Kate could see the clove rocks bulging out of the side of his jaw. She laughed heartily. He had a beautiful glowing innocence with the way he was smiling to her. She couldn't help but dote on him and he might as well have been her own. She surely loved him that way.

"Was I long Kate?"

"Not at all Matt, you made great time" "S'or I don't know what I'd do only for you."

He passed in the yard before her and into the house, leaving the message bag down on the floor next to Peter's chair. By the time that Kate herself made it to the door, he was there with his hand out, offering her a clove rock.

She took one from the paper wrapping and made sure to shut the door behind her.

The following story is a work of fiction. Some of the events described here are very loosely based on a case surrounding curious incidents that took place in 2004. This is an entirely fictional interpretation of those events and is meant to be interpreted as a work of fiction.

Thief of Shadows

By Nicole M. Bouchard

*“Open the door, my princess dear,
Open the door to thy true love here!
And mind the words that thou and I said
By the fountain cool, in the greenwood shade”- The Frog Prince by the
Brothers Grimm*

One man can be many different things to many different people. To the media, he was a bolded headline; to the general public, he was a punch-line; to those who'd known him before, he was a former promising glory who'd lost his way; yet to his victims, he was a thief of shadows... stealing personal intimacies that should only be given, never taken.

Nine years ago...

The pressure of the sun on his back felt good as he crouched down low to the freshly mowed grass with one hand on the idol he was raised to worship above all others. Drawing energy up from the ground, through the football like a conduit into his hand and upper arm, he felt the soothing steadiness of having purpose. In the deep South, this game was gospel. Flocks of the faithful gathered in tight bunches along the rows of bleachers in the stadiums where they prayed for the play.

Chip Cauldway wasn't an exceptional anything, but on the field he worked harder and longer to carve out an identity for himself. There was no denying his persistence and strength which manifested itself in how he pulled for his teammates. Dependable as rain and humidity, he was a necessary part of the atmosphere of Mica, Georgia's high school football team. It was his junior year and all his aspirations for the future weighed on admittance to New Orleans College. His academic grades made the cut, but weren't nearly high enough to earn a free ride. He was holding back on his application, certain that his greater triumphs awaited in his senior year. Then, then, he would apply for Early Decision and once accepted, would kill himself for the Lions, New Orleans College's prestigious college football team which in his view, seemed like the world stage.

He often came down to the field before the game to psyche himself up. All the janitors and maintenance staff who polished the silver bleachers till they outshone the sun and rode tractors to keep the grass low or re-paint the white lines knew him. He was always the first to arrive and the last to leave. The scent of promise coming off the verdant grass was thick, intoxicating him into a dreamy state of awareness.

Only the light kiss upon the back of his neck shook him out of it. Maryanne Whitman stared down at him with her trademark smile that edged up on the left side of her mouth. Her nose gave a mischievous twitch when he glanced up at her through the blur of morning light. She was one of many in terms of character and appearance. Cobalt blue eyes with a crop of teased, voluminous blonde hair and the slightly overdone orangey tone on her flawless skin showing through her clothes which left little to the imagination. Maryanne had the sort of fair skin that burned easily, so she and her friends had viciously explored the frontier of self-tanners and bronzing lotions with mid-range spf's. Her trim figure and bubbly personality captured Chip's attention on the first day of school in their freshman year. One cheerleader to every football hero; it was an equation that made sense for them, their parents and most probably their future offspring.

"Good game today, baby..." It was something she always said before a big game but he never tired of hearing it. She drew out the word "ba-by" with the sexy drawl of Elizabeth Taylor's character in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Her coconut and lime perfume extended a twisting vapor that tickled him under the chin like a finger. He leaned into it as though being led out onto a window ledge; it was just out of reach and he'd willingly fall to his death going after it. His eyes followed the sway of her skirt long after she'd walked away. It was clear that today had to be a win. Somehow her ardor always cooled when the team lost a game.

It was electric out on the field in the second half of the game. Time was slipping down the sides of their faces in the humid aftermath of a storm that had swept in earlier around noon. Chip tugged at the collar of his jersey. It felt like he was being held down and suffocated. He had a burning bitter taste in his mouth like lightening striking dry brush. His teammates felt the heaviness under the purple afternoon clouds. At that moment they all would have sacrificed six months of beer for a single drop

of rain.

Water would've steamed upon contact with their skin. It was a home game and the cheerleaders brought the heat up about ten degrees when they did their routine to the throbbing tempo of Snap's "Rhythm is a Dancer".

The visiting team on defense were fast on their heels and the clock seemed to be speeding up rather than slowing down. One more play...

Chip wasn't the first choice for things like this but the star kicker was in the hospital with a broken knee. The coach had made it clear. It was a tight formation on the line of scrimmage. The holder was Ky Smithons- long snapper. Chip was placekicker for the attempted field goal to gain the last three points that would end the war. It was only a few seconds but it felt like the world was at a standstill.

With a semi-circle maneuver to come around to it like an eagle swooping down on its prey, he executed the classic soccer-style kick that he'd practiced for two years.

As much as he tried to remember that moment in its exact, pain-staking detail in future years, it was simply blank. The roar of the crowd came next. Screams for the home team showered down in streams. The game was over. A seventy-yard field goal. His teammates dog-piled him. He caught a glimpse of Maryanne, mid-air, with her hands clasped together. They'd won.

The Georgia High School Sports Association had a soft spot for Chip Cauldway- hero of the hour who'd won them one of the most significant games of the year.

The streamers, the cheers, the confetti, comped meals, parties, and the object of Maryanne's newly discovered erotic wickedness, Chip felt the roar of the crowd roosting in the pit of stomach. Good fortune kissed his cheek once more on the mild winter day of his senior year when his college acceptance letter arrived.

2002 (Nine years later)

The novelist Anne Rice had once referred to Louisiana as the one place in the US that possessed the exotic, mystical qualities of the Caribbean. That was the reason Jasmine had chosen to rent the house there with her cousins who would also be Freshman entering Lafayette College that semester. They were a little more on the wild side and loved a chance to go partying with upperclassmen. Shyly, Jasmine would decline and confront the ever-growing pile of homework from her heavy course load.

Too exhausted to fold the laundry as she often was, she went to her room and slowly undressed for bed. Though she loved the climate, her heart was heavy from being homesick. Closing her eyes, she could imagine New York with its endless lights and vibrant energy. The leaves she knew would be turning their fiery reds and golds. It was October. She hadn't been gone long enough to miss the chill, but autumn in Central Park called to her.

Once she'd slipped on an over-sized Yankee's tee-shirt, she crawled under the sheets. Her silhouette gleamed in moonlight. Even with window open, it was quiet. This was a new luxury which she'd never experienced growing up. She'd have to merge the best of both places to settle in properly. Outside of her cousins, she hadn't had the opportunity to meet many people. There was the guy in the café who noticed her lack of accent and had asked if she was from up north. He was a scruffy older guy, but he seemed to sense her loneliness so he bought her a cup hot chocolate and had them put a bit of nutmeg on the whipped cream so she could think of fall. He asked her polite questions about back home. She knew he was just indulging her, but it had been nice to reminisce nonetheless.

Her advisers had been understanding about the switch too, which she appreciated. It was an adjustment... it was all an adjustment.

Lulled to sleep by the warmth of the air and visions of home, she was deeply unaware of the sound at the window.

A figure crept past her bed as she slept. They folded the laundry that they knew would be there. They ate leftover pizza which they found in the fridge. Then carefully, quietly, they came back into the bedroom and watched her sleep. Without disturbing the sheet drawn over her, he laid down with her back to his chest. Deeply inhaling her scent, his head rested upon the edge of her pillow. He whispered softly, *"Open the door, my*

*princess dear,
Open the door to thy true love here!
And mind the words that thou and I said
By the fountain cool, in the greenwood shade..."*

*

Trade winds came in through the slats in the faded green shutters to lightly flutter the edges of the faded newspaper clippings on the chipped walls of his living room. A dim light over the kitchen table gave the only hint that someone still inhabited the space. The humble apartment on the outskirts of Lafayette seemed alone in a realm apart from the rest of the complex. Instead of neat and tidy window boxes to match the other units, dark, unseemly vines crept down the walls as if to swallow the occupant whole. The interior had transformed over the years into the sort of heavily breathing, cool-blooded creature that would dwell at the bottom of the bayous. Neighboring residents familiar with the principles of Voodoo hung charms on the outside of their doors to frighten away whatever dark spirits glided along the halls, having slithered out when the door to apartment 13 was opened- which it rarely ever was. The landlord knew when the rent was late, but rather than heading up to demand it, he would wait a week or so and inevitably an envelope would be slid under his door with the crumpled funds inside. That's how he could tell that the renter was still alive. Once, when the rent was a week and a half late, he bothered himself enough to worry that the young man had died. Mrs. Alvaraz who lived across from 13, saw the landlord ascend the stairs and move to knock on the door.

"Someone came at midnight last night to deliver something. This morning, whatever it was was gone. So don't bother, Larry. I keep a watch on things."

Larry was relieved that he hadn't had to knock. It was a veritable certainty that if something was amiss, Mrs. Alvaraz would know about it. An attractive Jamaican woman in her seventies with gray braids neatly gathered into a bun secured by a silk scarf, she was the matriarch of the complex and kept a protective watch on everyone. Her grandchildren marveled at her uncanny ability to search out their secrets with just one side glance. It wasn't an ability she possessed with strangers, but she could feel things that made her a discerning judge of character. There was a

darkness to the man across the way but it wasn't absolute, either. She stayed alone in the hall after Larry had returned to the office and stared at the door to 13. The phone rang in her apartment- she didn't need caller ID to know it was her daughter. Reluctantly, she stepped back inside her world and tried to forget about what distress was behind that closed door.

In the wake of light over the kitchen table, the man hadn't stirred over the conversation outside his thin walls. The sizable bag of marijuana that had been delivered the night before was already significantly depleted. Bottles littered the floor. The sink and the fridge seemed to be in a high-stakes race to seem which could form more exquisite strains of mold more quickly. The sink was in the lead with the unfair advantage of dirtied dishwater.

If the lightbulb overhead could've turned itself out for shame, it would have. It didn't care for its role in highlighting every mistake and manifestation of sorrow it witnessed. Flickering against its glassy restraints like a lightning bug trapped in a child's airless jar, a hell with good intentions, the light flashed out a code of distress. The glimmers were reflected in the glossy pages on which his face lay glued and still. Frozen faces gazed out from the stylized borders. They were smiling. Always. No matter what.

In the automatic flash, a time capsule was made. A perfect snapshot. Evidence of a perfect world that never changed while these people still had reason to smile. And they were still all together. Class of '94' in fading, embossed silver lettering next to the purple emblem of Mica High; Mica, Georgia was just under his palm.

*

She still loved him. Whenever Trent came by with some random excuse as to why he had to see her, she let him in. Neither of them knew how to say 'no' or 'goodbye'; not to one another. Theirs was a tumultuous on and off relationship with all the curative and destructive attributes of fire. His dark eyes burned whenever he set them upon her. He was supposed to have started dating again, but when her jealousy and judgment made her ignore him, he'd suddenly be available again.

It wasn't entirely unreasonable for her to have called him. Her roommate,

Elizabeth, would be out of town for two nights and there wasn't anyone else who could stay with her. She couldn't travel to stay with anyone because of the art gallery opening. Five girls within ten miles of her had reported an intruder coming into their bedrooms at night when they were alone. He listened closely to her concerns. He wanted to climb out of his skin every time they spoke; it was a raging hypocrisy for him to pretend to be a distant friend to the woman he'd loved since she'd slapped him four years before on a blind date.

"Yeah, I'll come by. I don't want you alone..." he hesitated, "...do you want me to stay?"

She knew what he meant by that. He was asking if he could stay the night and that always led to more than they'd bargained for. If there was a brick wall between them in bed, she'd claw her way through if he didn't get to her first. The whole idea of him staying over had a blinking neon caution sign above it.

"On the couch. In the other room. Down the hall." She wanted to be rational but knew what bitter heartache she'd feel, knowing he was close, but far away. Feeling torn apart, she'd cry herself to sleep and summon the strength to say "Thank you" and "Bye" on the morning of the third day.

After a long pause where she sat with her head in her hands, he finally answered, "Fine. Whatever you want."

They both remained on the phone saying nothing and everything in their silence. She hung up first.

*

When he crawled back into consciousness, he saw that he'd passed out on the yearbook. Maryanne's eyes twinkled with ambition as she clutched onto the arm of a younger version of who he used to be.

"F*&^in' bitch!" he yelled as he threw the book into the wall.

He regretted the sudden guttural burst of sound and clutched his head.

It was all a second ago... forever ago. The curse...

A green pallor had settled onto his skin. No one in that book would recognize him now.

When a breeze disturbed one of the newspaper clippings on the wall, he jumped up with surprising agility to press it hard back into place with the cheap tape holding it up.

If just one piece of what he'd built up fell apart, so would he. He'd disintegrate like the paper itself, just dusty grains of the past.

There was a bookshelf in the apartment with no books in it. A few dead plants and cobwebs had laid claim to the uppermost shelves. On the last shelf, there were some torn pieces of paper paper-clipped together. Next to them was the old five-subject he'd used in his last year at school. Five years old with a missing cover and limp pages sagging together, the wire spiral that had started to unwind at the top, leaving a sharp edge that often caught on the skin of his fingers. This was where he kept the whole mess of it. One shelf. No other evidence of what he'd become- this way he didn't have to face up to it when he didn't want to. Shaky penmanship and smeared ink recorded, within the blue lines of each page, all the information gathered about each one of the women. Their schedules, addresses, who they lived with, personalities, jobs, and any personal facts he could come across.

Jasmine Cardoza- 19yrs. old/ Occupation- Student/ Lives with Maria and Lacy Cardoza/ Origin- NYC/ few friends, single, homesick, many calls home, in by 7pm on weeknights, frequents Midstreet Café on Tuesdays, never orders coffee...

Lindsey Holden- 23yrs. old/ Occupation- Secretary/ Lives alone/ Origin-local/ part-time caretaker of elderly parent, single, dating-site profile specifies a love of antiques, drops by Yearly's on Saturdays, arrives home from work around 10 pm...

Rachel Whittmore- 24yrs. old/ Occupation- Gallery curator/Lives with Elizabeth Jenkins/Origin- Tennessee/ single for six months, tickets arrived for Elizabeth Jenkins, departing Thursday (File Incomplete)

The pages paper-clipped together were torn from a library book he'd stolen the previous year. The book was *The Collected Tales: Brothers Grimm*. The excerpt was the story of "The Frog Prince."

It was all so clear when he put the pieces together. His senior year had ended well enough. He was going to the college he wanted. The fuss made over his junior year had died down through his lackluster plays afterward. Still, he felt himself riding high on the fumes of that success. Now that he'd become a student, he was ready to attend tryouts for the college team. There wasn't a single doubt in his mind that his greater glories would come on that field. Everything in between the winning game of the season in '93 and that moment walking toward the tryouts was simply a time of saving up the best of him.

In the way that small children often do, he had built up the idea of an absolute with no doubts, no back-ups, no rationality; he would be a star player for The Lions. It began and ended with that. There was no other play in mind. He'd be a famous football hero and marry Maryanne so that he'd spawn little football heroes in his image.

The stretched-thin legend he'd woven about himself broke into shards that fell with each heavy step as he staggered from the field. His body moved but his mind stayed with fractured focus... One part of him zoomed into the expression on the coach's face as he shook his head and moved his pen across the clipboard, slicing Chip's name in two. Another skipped like a cd, repeating the same loud verse over and over again, unable to get past what he'd believed since he was a boy. A third part of him refused to believe what had just transpired. It was this third part of his mind that would see to his undoing. Yet unable to shield himself, the blow pierced his armor as a blade through tissue paper.

No one saw the deep thunderous clouds converging overhead as each ray of light was consumed. To the rest of them, it was still a sunny September day. No else could see the earth breaking apart. They couldn't feel the black vapors rising from the flames that sprung up to replace each blade of grass. They couldn't hear the warning cry tear their ears to shreds.

Trembling in the dorm room with a cold that drew the marrow from his bones, he reached for the phone. Was he dead? Was it real? The pervasive

cold threaded itself into his veins. It was too late.

The transformation had begun.

Maryanne's voice sounded so removed as he tried to choke out the words to tell her he was drowning.

"Look, hun... I've been meanin' to talk to you... so whatever's goin on- just save it... Ya know Lonnie? Yeah... well... I've been seein' im'... all summer, actually. I didn't mean to hurt ya baby, but I mean, Lonnie went and got a job right outta high school at some firm in Atlanta... Anyway, I'm marryin' im'... Aw, come on, Chip... Did you really think you'd be some kina' all-star..?" She laughed with a deep, gritty inflection that came out when she was disgusted. It shattered the Liz Taylor femininity. "Look- I can't waste my time while you're wastin' yers in school... You were only ever half good at most things, great at nothin'... I need to take my chances... So what?... You're not gonna say shit?" She'd kept such a tight leash around his collar that she half-expected him to comfort her out of the small guilt she felt. Pissed at his silence and the lack of tears, she willed herself to deliver the final punch that would leave him on the ropes. "By the way, ba-by, he's a much better f&*^ than you..."

Whether or not she said anything else, he'd never know. His hand placed the phone back on the receiver. For the next few weeks he wandered around in a stupor that allowed him to do the normal things as if nothing was amiss. The B's and C's slipped into D's. By the following year, he was careening through the thorny branches of F's until he finally stopped attending school. They would have failed him out regardless.

His family still sent him money for school. He hadn't spoken to them for three months. Taking a semester's worth of tuition, he got a small apartment in Lafayette. Working odd jobs here and there he was scraping by even when tuition checks cut out after his parents received a letter from the college. Hyped up on drugs and whatever dangers he could discover in dark alleys once the sun went down, it was a kind of living while dead. No feelings, no problem. His world was becoming darker and smaller. As he crept in company of shadows, hardly revealing himself, it seemed that he too was becoming darker and smaller.

He'd lose every card game he played, get the worst shifts at his jobs, and a strange plague of flies had invited themselves into his apartment. They flew out of the closet, clung to the walls in numbers, and as many as he killed, they'd return with even more reinforcements. They were small with blackish-green luminescent bodies. He'd never seen that kind before.

When he signed on for gator-trapping, his co-workers found it strange that he did his work fearlessly, with little experience. When a trap was being wrestled off of a large alligator that had the misfortune of coming into part of it, Chip was called down. The gator had snapped at all the others. It had heartless, ancient eyes. It stopped its thrashing to stare at Chip once he arrived there. He stared back. Once freed, the gator slipped silently back into the water, away from him. It could've been construed as a good thing, but no one saw it that way. Exceedingly superstitious, they saw that even monsters evaded his company. The forty-year old who shared the shift with him ceased their conversations even though he talked too much and they were largely one-sided anyway. He handed Chip a beer before walking away. "You're f*&%in' cursed, man..."

Had Chip the inclination to answer him, he would have said matter-of-factly, "I know."

Yet hearing the word out loud tugged on the tails of his inner demons.

It soon became an obsession. He thought back to the place where he had first learned about curses and spells and their reversals. At the library late at night, he'd confine himself to a study room surrounded by tomes on the subject. These weren't books on witchcraft or Voodoo or new age Wiccan remedies. He needed to follow an outline, a formula that matched his situation. His resources could be found in the children's section. Folktales, fairy tales, fables... Grimm, Anderson... Until something finally resonated. He smuggled the book out under his sweat-shirt. Deciding he needed only one section, he tore it out and threw the book in a dumpster.

Those pages carefully clipped together were the answer. His ultimate play book.

He'd been cursed by an evil witch. That was why he'd never made the team. Every misfortune stemmed from Maryanne's cruel infidelity. She'd

taken him from his princely status and shrunk him down to a slimy frog who dwelt in the bottom of the well. He would find a worthy maiden, do a good deed for her, just as the frog had retrieved the golden ball, and then he would enforce the bargain the frog had made in order to free himself:

“If you will love me, and let me live with you and eat off your golden plate, and sleep upon your bed...”

He read every version of the story and reconciled himself to a plan. He would study single young women, learn their heart’s desire, do a kind deed toward that end, and go to where she lived. He’d eat from her plate, and then lay down beside her to sleep upon her pillow. It would work with one of them. They’d see him as a prince and the curse would be broken.

*

It was raining when he arrived. He had picked up a pizza. Hesitating before knocking on the door, he wondered what to say. The door swung open. He looked up in surprise.

“Rachel...”

“Hey, Trent...”

He looked from the peach sundress up to her face. Her straight chestnut hair had a slight wave to it. Those eyes had a light in them that he could never explain. His chest tightened as he moved past her into the apartment with the thought of how he’d often smothered that light when he’d made her cry.

“I didn’t expect dinner... That’s great. I set up a pillow and everything over there for you. I... really appreciate this.”

Unable to summon up the right words, he smiled at her and set the pizza down, along with a liter of soda. There were stools by the counter. He grabbed two plastic cups from the cabinet.

“Soda?”

“Sure”. She had turned to get plates and napkins.

Knowing it wouldn't be an easy night, he poured soda for both of them, but slipped a healthy amount of rum in his.

He was looking over at the television as she arranged the cups and plates for them.

He sat down next to her when she was ready. They both reached for a slice of pizza and laughed nervously when their hands touched.

After they'd each had a bite, he made small talk about his job. "What do you think? I really want your opinion."

Glad that he asked, she put down the pizza and faced him. "I think it's good for you. I'd rather see you doing something you're passionate about rather than just working for your uncle. You don't want his paperwork life. This is good."

He nodded. "I'm really psyched about it... I know it's new but it feels..."

She reached for her drink while listening to what he was saying. His body language was tense but there was a gentleness in his face. She blinked hard not to notice and took a deep swig of the soda so that the cup nearly covered her view of him.

Trent broke off his speech when she suddenly lurched forward and spit the drink back into the cup. By the wideness of her eyes and the way she wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, he already knew what had happened and what would happen.

The cups had accidentally been switched.

Gasping for breath and tearing at the eyes, she swore as she struggled off the stool and went over to the sink to pour out the cup's contents.

If he stayed still enough and bore the onslaught, would it undo the damage?

"I can't believe you! You swore you'd stopped drinking! If you thought I wouldn't smell it off of you, you must think I'm pretty damn stupid... God, I

can't believe you would do this to me... You never tell the truth! You never change!"

It was the bad history of his drinking and what it had done to them that made the incident as awful as it was. He wanted to rewind the moment, get back to where she was proud of him, get back to when he'd poured the drinks in the first place.

"Rachel, Rachel... I didn't... I don't drink like that anymore. For some reason, I don't know why, I thought tonight would be a little awkward, ok?! Guess I was right! Maybe I could handle you with a few drinks in me!"

In his temper, he always said the very things he didn't want to say. It was never what he meant. He couldn't get the right words out to her. Rarely ever could.

"OH- so *I* drive you to this? It's my fault?.. Take some responsibility! Maybe if you weren't so drunk that night maybe you wouldn't have gone after that stupid slut!"

"I did not go after her! That was forever ago! I didn't want her so get over it!"

He wished there were subtitles to his sentences so she could see the words translate into what was really meant. Whatever semblance of peace there was was over. She was silent. That, above any of her screaming, crying or arguing was the worst. Following her stare, he saw the door. How minutes had it been? If he could time all their good moments and put them together, it would be enough for him to live only those moments in a lifetime.

If he stayed another second, he knew he'd do something else that would make it even worse.

She didn't allow herself to cry until the door was shut.

*

When he drove past, he saw two shadows near the window. She was

supposed to have been alone. He'd have to come back the next night. He didn't mind the wait. She was the prettiest in his opinion. When he met her at the gallery, she seemed to have such a passion for the artwork. The gallery was doing well, but he knew that she wanted to make a sale where someone genuinely understood the importance of the work- she was tired of being used as a decorating consultant to the bourgeois. She wanted someone to see and feel through a painting. And he knew which painting meant the most to her. He didn't mind the extra research for her. Art books fell in a domino pattern across his couch. He'd studied the terms. He knew what to say. He knew how to retrieve the golden ball. Chip bought the painting from her the day before. Already he'd sold it at a profit. That part she'd never know. He'd done her a kindness, now it was up to her to break the curse...

*

The next morning didn't wipe away the anguish from the night before as she'd hoped it would. Trent wouldn't come back. Did she have to get so upset with him? Why did he have to say those things? Being thrown in front of a moving vehicle would've hurt less. Yet rumination wouldn't do. There was an opening that she had to do that afternoon and the morning was to be taken up by doing errands for it. Wine, cheese, shrimp... hopefully the woman driving down to help wouldn't insist on making a dish again. The previous time had resulted in a red velvet cake in the shape of a bear with melted M&M eyes because the artist's last name was "Bear".

She couldn't grieve everything out now; it was a saving grace that she wasn't given the time to do so.

Rachel showered and slipped on a sapphire blue silk dress.

There wouldn't be enough time to change.

*

He couldn't wait any longer. She had to understand. She owed him this now.

*

It was only nine o'clock when she turned her key in the lock but she was exhausted. Her eyes were starting to burn from the running eyeliner and her hair was spiraling out the upsweep she'd done that morning. Leaning her head and body against the door, it gave way. She threw her keys on the counter, dropped her shoes from her other hand and walked toward the living room even though she hadn't switched the light on yet. Only the kitchen light was left on. She wanted to crawl towards the couch and go straight to sleep. With her hands rubbing her eyes, she couldn't see him standing there.

An ambulance was going by. She didn't hear her name whispered softly.

With a yawn, she collided with his chest.

She screamed and kned him in the groin. He struggled not to fall and gripped her shoulders.

Even after he yelled her name, she kept kicking and screaming.

He finally managed to restrain her and she squinted into his face.

"Trent?"

"Rachel... I said your name... I said 'it's me'... who the hell were you expecting?.."

"Well, I... Wait a minute- you're the one hiding in my apartment! I could've had a heart attack!"

"I wasn't hiding, Rachel. I thought you were looking straight at me. I came back tonight cause I knew you wanted me to stay and I wanted to apologize for the other night... I guess I did my job protecting you because I'm the only wounded..."

They both laughed as they stumbled toward the couch. Only then was she conscious that her makeup and hair were a mess. She tried to get up but he gently held her down.

"I know you're exhausted and want to go get ready for bed. You don't have to entertain me. I'm just here. Get some sleep and we'll head out for doughnuts tomorrow morning. I'm sorry, Rache, I'm so sorry about everything the other night... I didn't mean that. I just... I'm really different and I didn't want you to think..."

"I know."

"Get some sleep." He watched her go down the hall as she felt her way along the wall to her bedroom.

She washed her face and brushed her hair, but she was too tired to take off the dress. Rachel could hear the game on TV in the living room, turned down low. Tugging the covers up over her, she felt safe. He'd come back for her.

*

It was well past midnight when she awoke to careful steps on the hardwood floors. Feeling weight come down on the bed behind her, she kept her eyes closed so that she'd neither be agreeing or disagreeing on Trent's presence.

*

Trent was asleep on the couch with the TV still on low. It was a fitful sleep that had him tossing and turning. A slight noise rendered him half-awake. Thinking that the TV might've been bothering Rachel he felt around the floor for it in the dark. His hand seized it and pressed the power button.

*

She couldn't help but smile when the warm breath crept upon her pillow.

*

He had already eaten off her golden plate at the gallery opening which he'd attended. He saw that she was still wearing the blue silk dress...

*

Hesitant to speak and shatter the moment, she felt him put his arm around her so that his palm rested on her torso. He was leaning forward to whisper in her ear. She wanted, needed his words- those that Trent always struggled to speak. Then the voice came with the words:

*“Open the door, my princess dear,
Open the door to thy true love here!
And mind the words that thou and I said
By the fountain cool, in the greenwood shade...”*

*

Trent sat up on the couch. He'd heard a few steps but maybe she'd gone back to bed.

*

A horrible sickness came over her when she recognized the voice. She wanted to scream but frozen with fear like in a nightmare, the sound barely came out... Trent was all the way down the hall with the TV on...

Feeling her form go rigid, the intruder quickly covered her mouth. Instinctively, she swung out her arm to knock the lamp off the nightstand.

*

Wondering if it was appropriate, Trent was already on his way to her room to look in on her when the crash happened. He ran forward and didn't bother checking the lock on the door- at a run, he kicked it open. The shock of what was happening had rendered the intruder slow and stunned. None of the others had been like this...

Chip was seized by the throat and thrown into the wall. Barely able to breathe, Rachel jumped up out of bed and ran into the hall to call 911. Trent punched him hard enough to render him unconscious.

*

Comparing evidence, witnesses and obtaining a testimony, Chip Cauldwell was convicted on all six counts. Letters from his former high school teachers, his coach and his family poured in to convince the judge to be merciful. Chip's lawyer attributed the odd behaviors to the pot and drinking that ensued during Chip's depression after not making the college team.

Much to the surprise of the media and the general public, he was released with three years probation. It was heavily considered that he'd once been known for a great football play and had been an all-around fair-tempered individual.

Perhaps, just perhaps, he thought, in her own way, the last girl had broken the spell. He was finally remembered.

Just the same, his landlord finally had good reason to post an eviction notice on his door and he did so with relief. Mrs. Alvaraz had a warm heart, but she refused when the lawyer asked her to write a letter on his behalf. She told the gentleman that he needed tough love and real help instead of a slap on the wrist.

The newspapers created names for him; Chip Cuddles-well, Psycho Spooner, Mr. Wacky Wonderful, Freaky Frisker... and the public responded with jokes from men and women saying that although he was a little sick, their spouses didn't spoon or cuddle or do laundry... some men wanted the deal he had- free food, free cuddles, disappearing in the morning...

Everyone thought of it differently.

Yet the victims didn't see the lighter side of it. Though they were physically unharmed, their safe, personal space had been violated. An intimacy had been stolen and no good deed could justify it.

Rachel met with the other victims. Few took it seriously so they formed their own small support group and dealt with their fears of intrusion, being alone, being watched, being deceived...

*

It was clear to Trent that night that he should've been with her, beside her. They found their way back to one another and made sure it was for the right reasons. By and large, Rachel, and all of the other women, healed from the incident and got their courage back. The only tell-tale sign was that Rachel forbid Trent from sleeping behind her; he said he didn't mind because he preferred looking at her as she slept.

MENUDO

by Mark Barkawitz

I woke late Sunday morning to Joy's wet tongue licking my cheek. "Will you get out of my face..." I rolled over to get away from her. I'd fallen asleep on the couch. Passed-out would probably be a better way to put it, because I still had on my clothes from last night. My mouth tasted like glue. But Joy—a big golden retriever with the broad head of a Saint Bernard—wanted out. She jumped on my shoulder and wasn't going to quit bugging me until I got up. So I got up. A warhead detonated in my skull and the fallout spread over my body. Atom, my older dog, was asleep in the corner. I roused him and let them both out the back door. They were good dogs and usually stuck around the yard, so I didn't have to worry about them.

I needed some aspirin. The aspirin bottle was on the stove next to the instant coffee. There was only one aspirin left. I grabbed my coffee cup from the sink and filled it with water. There were still coffee stains on the bottom of the cup, but I didn't figure they'd kill me. I shot down the aspirin with one gulp and turned on the burner under the tea kettle. Then I put a spoonful of instant Yuban into the cup and waited. The kettle didn't whistle and I got tired of waiting, so I grabbed it anyway. Nothing. I'd forgotten to put water in it. To hell with it.

I went back to the living room, sat on the couch, and massaged my temples. A crumpled beer can lay on the carpet and an empty half-pint of Jose Cuervo stood alone on the coffee table. The ashtray was spilled on the floor. The TV Guide lay spread-eagled in front of the TV, but I couldn't remember how anything got there. Where Ginny's picture had hung—on the wall above the TV—only a nail was left sticking out of the cracked plaster. Hadn't she been here last night? Yep, we'd had a fight. A good one. There was no sign of her

picture anywhere. My head felt like the Red Sea splitting open. I needed more aspirin. And some coffee. I knew my neighbor, Anna, would have some, so I figured I'd try to make it over to her place.

Anna was a really nice girl. Just twenty-one. A little young for a slightly older dog like me, who was approaching thirty but presently feeling like sixty. She had moved here a couple months ago. I was sitting on my porch, relaxing with my dogs, when a moving van drove by. It pulled into a driveway just down the block and a big Latino man, who'd been driving, got out and began opening the back doors of the van. I couldn't see Anna, because she'd gotten out on the other side. Then I recognized the man. It was Al Sanchez. I'd worked construction with him a few years back. He'd been my foreman. When the construction company we worked for ran short of work and I got laid-off with the rest of the guys who were short on seniority, he used to invite me over to his house for dinner. His wife, Alice, sure was a good cook. That's when I first met Anna. She was just seventeen then.

The dogs and I went over to say 'hi'. They remembered me right off. I helped Al move the heavy stuff, like the couch and Anna's bed. He told me he was glad to find out that I lived almost next door, because he and his wife were worried about their daughter's moving out. She was the baby of the family, their only girl, and the last child to leave home. I promised I'd keep an eye on her and I think that made him feel better.

It was sunny outside, which made me squint. I didn't see Joy and Atom, but figured they were probably out back somewhere. They liked to lie together in the tall grass under the sun, like a retired couple on a Florida beach. At first, the walking seemed to help, but after a few steps it made my head pound even worse. Good thing Anna lived so close. I couldn't have made it much farther. I knocked at her back door.

"Who is it?"

"Me."

She unlocked her door and opened it. Smiling, wearing shorts and an old T-shirt, her long hair was tied back. "Hi. Oh, you look terrible."

"I feel terrible. Do you have any aspirin?"

“Sure. Come on in, pal.”

“Thanks.” I followed her into the kitchen and leaned against the counter while she went to get the aspirin. When she returned, she poured me a glass of water. I shot down the aspirin and killed off the water.

“How was your night?” she asked.

“Good question.”

“Well?”

“I had another fight with Ginny,” I said. “Then I went to some bar. The Raven and the Rose, I think. It’s a little fuzzy after that, but I must’ve had a good time. ‘Cause I sure feel like hell this morning.”

She shook her head. “I wish you wouldn’t do that kind of thing. You know I worry about you.”

“I know. I worry about me, too.” Then my head began to pound again. I closed my eyes and rubbed them. “Do you have a spare cup of coffee for a friendly lush?”

“Come sit in the living room.” She led me by the hand to the big recliner in the front room. “Sit back,” she said. “I’ll put some menudo on the stove for you instead.”

“‘Menudo’? What’s that?”

“It’s Mexican soup made from tripe. A great cure for hang-overs according to Father. Mom makes it for him. I think I have a little in the fridge.”

“Tripe? That’s cow stomach, isn’t it?”

“Um hm.”

“I think I’d rather have coffee.”

"I'll strain it for you. The broth is really all you'll need." She went to work in the kitchen. "You have to stop doing this to yourself." She took something out of the refrigerator.

"I know. I will. How was your night? Did you see Billy?" Billy was her boyfriend.

"I saw him." She put the pot of menudo on the stove and wiped her hands on the dish towel. Then she came over and sat on the arm of the recliner. "Relax," she said, and began rubbing my temples. I could smell the spices from the soup on her hands. "I was ready at eight. He finally showed up at eleven. Said he'd forgotten. Then all he wanted to do was jump in bed with me. I got mad. I probably shouldn't have, because then he got mad. We argued for awhile. He finally left about one."

I didn't say anything. I opened one eye. She was looking at me.

"No, I didn't go to bed with him."

For some reason, that made me feel better.

"The soup should be ready." She got up and strained the menudo into a large coffee cup, then brought it in to me. I sipped it slowly because it was hot and very spicy.

"Do you think you'll make up?" she asked me. She leaned over the back of the chair and started rubbing my neck and shoulders.

"Nope. Not this time."

"That's too bad. You made a nice couple."

"That's what I thought." She didn't say anything, so I added. "To hell with her."

"Be nice."

"To hell with 'nice,' too." She stopped rubbing me. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm still sore."

“You’ll get over her. Things work out for the best.”

I had to laugh. Things hadn’t always worked out for the best with me and women. “How’s your dad?”

“He’s fine. He wants to know when you’re going fishing with him?”

“Oh, I forgot all about that.” He’d invited me the last time I’d seen him. That was just after Anna had moved in. He’d come by to see how she was doing. I got the impression he and his wife weren’t particularly fond of Billy. “I’ll call your dad tomorrow.”

She smiled. “By the way, did you ever get around to cleaning that house of yours?”

“Not yet. Vacuum’s still broken.”

“I’ll bring mine over later.”

“Forget it. I appreciate the offer, but it wouldn’t be right.”

“But I hate to see you live like that?”

“It’s not so bad.”

“It’s a mess.”

“So it’s a mess. I’ll clean it up this afternoon.”

“You’d better or I’m coming over with my vacuum.”

“No, thanks anyway. I’ll clean it.” I finished off the menudo and we talked a little longer. Then she had to get ready for church. I got up to leave and she walked me to the back door. She kissed me goodbye on the cheek.

“I’ll see you later,” she said. “Hope you’re feeling better.”

“I am. Thanks.” When I got home, my dogs were on the porch. We went inside and I turned on the TV. There was a football game on. Rams were playing the

Saints. It was a close game. But I couldn't get interested. Anna was right; my house was a mess. So I grabbed a waste basket and started picking up. It was soon full. I put the empty Jose Cuervo bottle on top and went outside to empty it. Atom and Joy followed me around back. I took the top off the nearest barrel. At the bottom lay Ginny's picture—face up, staring right back at me. It sort of startled me, I guess. Anyway, I just stared down at it for awhile. It was a good picture of her, taken last Christmas with my decorated tree in the background. She was holding up the gold necklace I'd given her and smiling, but now her rosy cheeks looked like a chipmunk's. I dumped the trash in on top. The glass broke in the frame when the tequila bottle hit it. The empty beer cans and cigar butts helped to cover it up. I put the top back on the barrel and started back up the driveway, lamenting that I hadn't separated the trash. Oh, well. Atom and Joy walked in front, wagging their tails as if nothing in the world were wrong. Dogs were great that way. Then they spotted Delilah, one of the neighbor's cats, and took off after her.

At dusk, I sat on the porch, sipping a Coors. Atom slept at my feet. Joy sat on the lawn, scratching herself. Ronnie rode by on his bicycle. He was around my age but mentally deficient and physically deformed. He lived with his mother in an old, two-story house at the end of the block. They rented out rooms. He rode a girl's bike because it was easier for him to get on and off. There was a basket attached to the handlebars, but it was usually empty. To even himself out, on one foot Ronnie wore a special shoe with a built-up sole, which dragged when he walked. His hair was a dark crew-cut that didn't hide the long, surgical scar behind his ear. His eyes stared off in different directions.

"Hi!" he yelled to me.

"Hi, Ronnie. How's it going?"

He stopped his bicycle in front of the porch and leaned on his good leg. The dogs didn't seem to notice. "Oh, fine. Keepin' busy at work. Makin' lotsa' spoons." Like a tape, it never varied.

"That's good, Ronnie." No one knew exactly where Ronnie worked or what he did with his spoons, but he made lots of them somewhere.

"Well, gotta go now." He started to pedal away. "Don't forget my name's Ronnie."

“Yeah, Ronnie. I won’t forget.” I chugged down the rest of my beer and got up to go inside, when Anna walked up.

“So how’s the clean-up going?” She smiled. She wore little make-up—needed none—and her long hair hung loosely over lightly-tanned shoulders bared in a summer top.

“It’s a work-in-progress.” I crushed the beer can under my sneaker.

She nodded. “Have you had dinner yet?”

“Food? That sounds like a good idea.”

“I’m making stew.” She smiled again.

“Sounds irresistible.” And I smiled again, too.

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"Abstract 253" by Jim Fuess; www.jimfuessart.com

Welcome to our Fiction section!

Featured Stories:

"Tremble, Her Throat"- by Jeff Mark

"The Man Who Would not be King"- by Denise Bouchard

"A Soldier on the Field, Part III"- by Linda Emma

"Finding Faith"- by Danielle Radin

"A Small Lifetime"- by Pat Greene

"Thief of Shadows"- by Nicole M. Bouchard

"Menudo"- by Mark Barkawitz

Tremble, Her Throat

By Jeff Mark

Listening to music is like traveling.

You're not supposed to remember it all, just some parts, perhaps the parts best kept in picture frames or in the youthful font of journals. Notes bound out like bubbles floating on their own accord, peacock motley colored with the dimension of shape. They are experienced for halved seconds and they go, not to be remembered. Like traveling. Like the moments spent outside of home, the sounds stick only so long, the moving dancing bodies, flyers waiting to board, a long row of rhythm down the arm of the temporary loading ramp. Chaotic balance. Smooth as warm ice. Congealing like glue. Independent as a castaway. The forms of people dancing, unable to control the involuntary movement of their bodies; dancing and breathing. Throats hum dominants. Octaves. Tonic harmonies. Heel-stuck shoes bounce the toes in bass drum rhythm and the fingers pluck out spinal cord basslines on worn jeans, bent and straightened at the knees to the beat. Breaths of air in a foreign land. In-flight dinners. Satiated and cloistered but miles above the Earth and traveling at great rates of speed. Other customs. Other cultures. Augmented chords. Dissonant chords. Held bar chord sevenths. Bend then pluck and lower blues slow moan draw the mouth into a snarl then a smile. Fucking without a condom. Slow motion up tempo. Swing rudiments perididdle flam triplet two-tom high-hat closure ride ride ride. Tapped keys like rocking seats in a movie theatre, trays in their upright positions. Prepare to land. Cacophony crescendo. Pentatonic slower than moments bow the head chin to chest or bow it back eyes to the stars. Breathe deep and know the breathing. Feel it push back, the violent vibrations from half stacks mic-to-PA linked floor monitors fedoras blown back bald heads revolving around the playful gauntlet of resonate tonal beasts floating. Pinch harmonics squeal. Brass quivers spittle and exhale. Lifting.

Angels a thousand fold grabbing the stitching of your shirt. Lifting.

Moments away from home.

Moments outside of life.

Only to return when the saxophonist loses his breath.

Because you're not supposed to remember it all.

Trying to explain sound to a deaf man is a challenge more futile than asking a child to articulate its choices. The thought of something making sound and it translating to a sense is completely lost on them, but they believe. They believe people who hear when they talk of sound, the way believers know Heaven exists despite the constant feeling that someone's playing a trick on them. God and music, both so intangible to those without the sense or senses to understand or believe.

But there is a beautiful ignorance for those born without the sense, or any sense for that matter. After someone fails at trying to describe sound, the deaf man returns to his non-allegoric cave, content knowing that there are figures dancing outside, but that the shackles keep him adoring the shadows. For him, nothing is lost. He can't lose something that was never given to him.

To him, life is completely fair.

But to lose your hearing.

Slowly, from birth, to feel things get quieter. To ask *what?* The knowledge of the impending stripping of sound. To wake one day to nothing, and think you are dead.

To eventually wish you were.

I watch the throat of my wife as she practices her scales, the veins in her neck grow and pulse with her most strenuous notes. The skin taut around her neck, her chin lifted, her mouth open. During breaths, everything softens, then constricts again with the sounding of the freshest note, her chest pounding air through her voice in gunshot waves that I think rattle the walls. The smooth skin of her throat shakes. In the winter we'll open all the windows and let in the cold so I can watch her breaths, like a steam engine treble and bass (FACE every good boy does fine) notes ride the puffed clouds and long streams of sustained tones missile in the apartment like a tea kettle boiled.

Sometimes she lets me place my hand on her throat while she sings, to feel her larynx as she works a hurried part of something that reminds me of something familiar but the memory is gone. Leaves. Like a dream. She'll allow my fingers pressing against her neck, though I'm sure it hurts her tone. She squeezes her eyes and I hold more tightly. She humors me. She loves me. The pace quickens, she modulates. I squeeze harder. There's a frill, a tremolo, a tremble, and I hold on to my dear for dear life. I feel the tongue deep in her throat move around the sound like masticated food and her eyes are closed but they are rolled up in her head. My palm shakes from the veins pumping more and more blood up through her neck from her heart to her head, my knuckles are white steering wheel oncoming crash tight. I'm so close. Something in my ear, the anvil, the hammer, moves, some waves send down some nerve to some part of my brain. Don't stop. Not yet. I can feel it. Right there. My palm is my ear. She runs through the bars sweaty and tired in a marathon and I am so close. So close.

And I feel her hands on mine and I open my eyes and she has her eyes open looking up at me. They are blue. A little like her face. She smiles. She's stopped singing.

I let go.

When she is cast in a show I attend the first performance and sit in the front row, a dozen or so blue hyacinth stalks across my lap so that, unintentionally, everyone knows that someone I know is up there on stage, singing. As she bows, I clap loudest not because I am the most proud, but because I'm not so sure I'm making noise, so I overcompensate.

Cupped hands colliding. An anarchy of rapid poppings, war time rifles of admiration. The British try to clap in unison, to find a rhythm, a timed beat of appreciation. Bravo. It's noise. Sound. Music to fill the space with sound when the singer stops.

My whole world is this clapping.

My music is the sore hands of applause.

Slowly, all sound follows the Doppler Effect, even into oblivion. There is the

rush of cars, the lowering of the landing gear, lush and lulling like an impending ocean wave strike; it rises to apex and passes with a slap rolled-with punch and distances itself in deeper tones until it is gone. By increments as menial as seconds, sound spirals counter-clockwise down an open sink. Vaporous as a match head's sulfur explosion. A puddle of once ice.

Then there is the most sincere nothing.

And you forget.

Believe it or not, you forget sound. Music. You forget rhythm and the involuntary tensing and relaxing of muscles snared in its siren call. You forget thunder in spite of its lightening. You fantasize romantically about heartbeat thumping. Baby coos. Stage-close woofer tweeter amp cable bass pain. Earplugs ear stuck, traveling canal deeper. Muffled numb noise. Mute burglar entry. You forget the voice of your wife.

You don't remember it all. Like traveling.

Like the parts of each day that buoy you to the moments best kept in shoe boxes under beds. Life in mute. The warning tic of clocks as vacant as the tocs. Underwater mumble sun notes dotting visual purple. Jazz beats in clubs bring down the house, silence standing among the rubble. My wife hiding her smile behind a wine glass; she doesn't want me to see her enjoying the music. I draw her hand and the glass down from her mouth and wipe the red corners of her lips. I mouth the word smile. Or I say it. Either way, to me, I mouth it. She placates with a daunting gesture of pursed lips fishhook drawn lengthwise and cornered up. I know the timing of the snare by the blinking of her eyes and the bass by the vibrations in my chest through the floor. If I watch the successive pauses of her blue eyes and place my feet squarely down, I can almost know the beat. Guitar fingers waterfall scales. Off-time eye rhyme. The held pained face of a bent note reached higher and bunched with the other soundless strings. The big bass man standing in back apart from the rest plucking his flatwound double thick rhythm notes. Backbone of God.

My wife scribbles a letter on a napkin in blue ballpoint pen and pushes it over to me.

A.

It's the key of the song.

Instant visuals play against my closed eyelids. Scales. Sevenths. A. That bastard emerald note. Rock blues prodigal fuck-up note. Green because I have to ascribe it a color. A jungle green A. Grey green. Covering the room in glued wallpaper.

Arranged in front of me are napkins with other letters. Other songs.

I have the set list in its keys and modulations. Tonics.

Harmonies.

Alphabets from A to G.

Colors.

She smiles at me and there is nothing delinquent about it. There is no pity. It's all blue eyes and her veined and trembling throat and her blue ballpoint pen. Traveling. Notes over the air. Carried in planes autopilot to landing strips not lighted. You're not supposed to remember it all, but you try nonetheless. You make scrapbooks and tell stories. You videotape still life like tourists so afraid of new surroundings that they aim to capture it. Steel bars and video screens of forcefield protection. Chewed fingernails.

The next napkin says curtain call.

I hold up the candle from the middle of the table and shout encore at the top of my lungs.

Napkin: encore in B minor.

The serration of the strings cuts deep into my fingerprint spoiled finger tips and I hold them like holding a lover over a cliff's edge. Tightly. They dance tightrope style from the head to the body, explorative. Callous flame retardant. I strum the strings with my right hand, watching intently as they vibrate wide in what looks to be triple, quadruple, million duplications that slowly wind down to one. I play harshly and loudly, often raking my knuckles across the strings and

drawing blood. The body against my body humming, deafening. Echoing around the acoustic cave. I hold it tightly, the wood creaks. She sits in a corner and watches. Listens. Rocking backwards with sleepy intent, I bridge notes, hammer-on pull-off neglect pull-out euphoric perfection. I control the influx and outgo. I am a baggage handler throwing the luggage with reckless passion into the underbelly of the fuselage. I take photograph after photograph of leaning towers and Big Bens. I wear headphones except for on landing and take-off. Chew gum to release the pressure in my ears. Open the spiral vent. Press on the light. Every string in one strike. Six precious tendrils catching their neighbor's resonance and flipping their passports at stonefaced custom guards machine gun toled palm muted strum down down up up down up finger lain pluck release harmonics fifth seventh twelfth fret. In tune open chord. Capo key change octave strings wrapped in coiled string. Metal fiber. Heavy metal folk rock jazz classical hip fucking hop. Big bop. Big band. Blue grass emo acoustic hippy hipster beatnik trance dance. Tuning knob turning. Animal momentum. Jesus Christ nailed forgiveness.

Empty ear.

Returning home, eighteen hour flight, to the everyday real world real life, missing the Positano Coast. Missing the Floating Market. Missing the Liberty Bell, St. Louis Arch, Grand Canyon Moscow crayon Kremlin. Appalachian Trail Stonehenge Outback Taj Mahal Alamo.

I've worked up a sweat and she nods affirmatively. Takes the guitar from my hand and opens the windows. It's winter, and she's prepared her missiles.

I sleep through the night.

I watch foreign films with subtitles and read lips in different languages.

I can cut off any driver without being honked at.

I never know when the ding suggests we've reached a safe altitude and it is safe to walk around the cabin.

The world is a silent place.

Here, alone with my wife sleeping, watching her chest rise, hold, then release air through her throat, catching the strings of her larynx, I would give anything to watch the undulation forever.

I'd give my sight to hear her sing again.

The Man Who Would not be King

By Denise M. Bouchard

I heard myself screaming, "Daddy, don't leave me! Don't leave me here alone with them!" It was of no use. My father was dying and my words held no alchemical power. The only power they had was to lift my stepmother and stepsisters eyes to glare at me with their enormous hatred and I realized what I had just said. For all the things they had said about me and to me with no just cause, they now had an excuse to talk, and talk they did...

"Imagine her saying a thing like that to her dying father!"

"Imagine her behaving as though we'd mistreat her or lean on her when he is gone!"

We lived in a French country chateau not that far from the palace in Paris.

The year was 1544 and I was alone...

It was actually worse than being alone as my stepmother and stepsister had come to depend on me for everything as I knew they would. They would often receive guests and except to criticize everything I did for them, I was not included in their conversations but I was expected to wait on them.

My birthname was Isabella yet soon, amidst the other degradations following my father's death, I was christened 'Cinderella' for my ability to keep the fireplaces lit which oft left me with smears of soot upon my skin from the cinders.

After the funeral, my stepsister Monique glided toward me, blocking the

way to my chambers and said, “Pray tell, Cinderella, why are you so bereft? He was so much closer to my mother and I. You know, mon cher, he often spoke ill of you behind your back.”

Even the flippant social climbers who flocked to my stepmother’s bosom for alliances and gossip thought my stepsister had been untoward in that remark.

The servants stood by me but to no avail- our camaraderie would not ease our sufferings.

My father had once told me that I was to inherit the chateau, but he had no will to bequeath his holdings and estate in writing.

Lady Antoinetta, of the Italian Northern Provence, was a very influential woman who made certain to get her way. Though she was not well-read and possessed no riding nor domestic skills, it always amazed me to see the hoards of friends who called on her daily, to pay homage, to get into her good graces as there were few to be had. They would leave tokens for her, presents from all corners of Europe to delight her fancy. What art Lady Antionetta did possess, was an endless capacity for gossip. ‘Did you know...’ was her favorite segue and no one, not commoner nor aristocrat wanted to be in the end of that sentence. It is a wonder then, that my father remarried when he had been so happy with my mother. Yet he seemed to not only love his second wife but to also live in fear of displeasing her. She could stare down the devil with her prominent features, high black pompadour, and small, calculating eyes. Even so, she had a beauty born of artifice and her daughter’s face actually held a natural kind of fairness, though they’d never admit the same of me.

I never told Monique that of course my father had spoken in disdain of her and with frustration, especially concerning the matter of her jealousy toward me. He also complained often of his new wife but what good would it have served to fan the flames by returning their ill will. They weren’t as strong as I was. I also couldn’t afford the risk of being locked away in my chamber, subject to their whims.

The drudgery kept me in on the better side of their temperaments, giving me leave to work in the apothecary where I’d once worked alongside my

father. I could not simply stop being a healer and the tinctures, herbaceous smells, and powders called to me. The apothecary shared a large space with the tavern, separated only by a partial wall, and I sometimes worked there as well. The tavern owner was the brother of my departed birth mother and his wife ran the dress-making and mercantile; all once owned by my father. My uncle Robert and his wife, Eleanor, were my god-parents and they kept me smiling with their great humor.

My uncle often called me into the tavern when it became busy and I would then serve and talk astrology with the patrons who loved hearing of fortunes or warnings written in the sky as an entertainment to go with their ale. I had once carefully done the workings of my own birth stars and they spoke of a high place in society. Thus I knew there was no real truth to it, still, some swore by these idealized falsehoods.

Robert was a gentle man, but on one particular day, he was anxiously beckoning me to abandon my duties in the apothecary at once to come assist him in the tavern. A gathering of royals, which was rare to see amidst the common parts of the kingdom, were being a bit rowdy. One of them seized me about the waist and cried, "Kiss me, fair wench! The war is over!" Forcibly pulling me onto his lap, he caused a stir which drew the attention of my uncle who then ran out from behind the serving bar.

Suddenly, the Prince, whom I did not recognize at first and was shocked to see standing in front of me, said, "This is no common wench, Charles. Unhand this maid and let her go about her work." He then took my hand and kissed it. "Forgive my unfortunate friend, young maiden." His friend, Charles, feeling embarrassed and emboldened by spirits retorted, "Oh, come now, Phillip, me thinks we all deserve a kiss from this fair lady."

"I said NO!" the Prince bellowed, slamming his goblet down upon the wooden table which shook with his force. A stern glare was cast upon the reddened face of his companion. As Charles looked away with a dour, "Your Highness," Phillip turned toward my uncle and I.

"Forgive my men. They are in a celebratory mood today for we have won at Ceresole." At that, a boisterous cheer rose up from around the table. I noticed that the Prince's hand shook slightly as he held his goblet aloft. I also noticed through the dim light and din that he did not take his eyes

from me. Still, as the merriment escalated, he became weary and rose to sit in on one of the oak benches alone. He put down the pewter goblet and placed his head in hands as though he sought to shut out sights our eyes were not privy to. His men began to call for his return to their lively table.

I touched the sleeve of my uncle. "Uncle, it would seem that the Prince is in need of quiet and soothing remedy. Could you not ask him if he would like his men to leave him?"

Carefully, so as not to anger the Prince, my uncle approached with his head bowed. "Your Majesty... My niece is skilled in herbal remedies. Would it be your pleasure to be tended in privacy?"

The Prince replied that indeed he was requiring solitary comfort. He then commanded the men to return to the palace and told them that he would join them later at court to sup and celebrate.

Thankfully, at the desire of the Prince, they filed out when they did, for the Prince's hands began to shake perceptibly. I shuttered the windows and placed the wooden plaque upon the door that indicated that we were closed for the remainder of the day. I even sent my uncle into the apothecary to mix a compound for anxiety. I sat across from the Prince thinking it all so surreal, but my instincts as a healer took over.

Placing my hands around his, I held them firm for a moment before mixing the compound into the ale. Knowing that his Majesty was in good care, my uncle retreated up the steps of the interior with discretion. Once alone, I asked the Prince where he went if just in thought, to relax and renew himself.

And in that moment in time, my life shifted.

"I have a rustic country retreat that is my own. It's a large manor house with sheep, horses, cows... My balcony overlooks waterfalls and streams as well as a lake inhabited by ducks, geese and swans, depending on the favorability of the season."

I watched his eyes as he talked excitedly about his home away from the castle. He was passionate about his private estate and he became ever more

relaxed as he spoke of it.

“It’s a lot of work, to be sure, but I love it.” His smile gave newfound light to the room.

“I would’ve thought that you preferred the luxury of the castle and having everything done for you...”

“The ‘spoiled royal’?” he interjected.

“Well... no... it’s just that I’ve had to take care of people and things so long that I suppose it’s a fantasy of mine to be taken care of.”

“It’s not all that wonderful. I have no privacy at the castle. My days are filled with ‘musts’ and ‘shoulds’... constant duties. It is drafty, crowded, far too large, and this last war against the Spanish Imperial army was horrific...” His eyes darkened.

I put my hand over his and he comes back to the present moment.

“My father is more like what you envision. He is full of ideas and dreams for an even more formal castle with elegant grounds and knights with blue corded ribbons and medals of silver. But I am content to go to my hunting retreat with my hunting dogs and cook and such...”

“I’m sorry, I thought you said ‘cook’...”

“Yes, I did. When I was younger I would find adventure in the kitchens where I watched the cooks. My manor house has a massive stone hearth in the kitchen with a stone warmer. I make pies time to time... Did I tell you that there is an apple orchard on the grounds?”

“It all sounds so lovely, Your Highness.”

“Would you like to see it?”

“I’d be honored.”

“Then I shall take you there in gratitude for your kindness. Meet me by the

forest path at the city's end, morning of the morrow at ten."

I was shocked, though in propriety, tried to act as though this sort of thing happened to me everyday. Even though I had all but locked this man up with me in the tavern, I was amazed that anything more would come of the encounter.

"You're so lovely," he said quietly. His hand touched my cheek and he left.

I knew that I would need an excuse to be away for the whole day. I had my uncle send word that there was someone in town who was ill and needed my care, thus I would be staying with my uncle and aunt which was partially true, for I did venture over to the store of my aunt and told her everything.

I left from her house the next morning, looking like a future baroness. I feared that he would not be there waiting. But there he was.

We rode for a time into Normandy and if I'd thought his descriptions of the retreat were awe-inspiring, they didn't begin to compare with the true beauty spread out before us. The grounds were gorgeous and lush. He took me by the paddocks, the barns and the stables where I viewed his majestic horses. I fell in love with the stone walls. There were apple blossoms everywhere. The manor itself had a rugged beauty. Around the back we rode and finally tied up our horses.

He took my hand which surprised me and we walked down to the lake where he had set up a table with chargers, pewter goblets and in the middle sat a vase of apple blossoms. It was still young in the day when we arrived. The birds were singing and although it was only April, the house with its thick walls made it feel like late spring inside. Doors were thrown open and the golden light was spectacular. I was able to truly experience what it was must've been like to live there. By being free to closely examine the paintings on the walls and touch the tiles on the mantle of the fireplace, I was able to get inside his life, his travels. I could understand why he always returned for there was such a sense of peace in the manor. He took me outside to see his kitchen garden which, he pointed out, was so different than the palace gardens. Here he had vegetables, potted herbs still sleeping, but I was able to imagine the profusion of the summer harvest.

He called it an ugly garden, the apotheosis of the palace's neatly tended rows of flowers and vegetables. I knew he didn't believe it to be ugly at all and I told him that I found his land and gardens here to be beautiful. He smiled at that. The Prince didn't seem like royalty that day. Simply a man. A handsome and charming man indeed.

During lunch he spoke to me of the different tiers of royalty. He went into the need to sometimes marry with a warring country. I wasn't yet ready to tell him everything. As far as he knew, I still had a title. He had made me roasted pheasant with turnips with a tasty pottage to begin with. I told him that it was delectable. He took great pride in this. He spoke more of the lack of freedom he felt at court.

"I do not think I would like to be at court either."

"What would you do with your life, milady?"

"I would like something akin to what you've shown me here today."

He was silent. I confessed that the day had been one of the loveliest in all my life. He goes on to tell me that in his fantasies, he has a wife like me and a life of normalcy.

"What would our make-believe names be, do you think?"

"I've always liked the name 'De Mornai'."

He laughed. "Walk with me, Madame De Mornai and tell me why else you would detest living at court..."

I found that he was amused by the idea of the free life neither of us could enjoy.

"Well... I would want my children around. I would want them to grow by their mother's hands rather than those of a governess... I love my freedom... I'd want my husband to love only me. I want to continue my studies and to serve the people of the kingdom as a healer. I want my husband to love me whether or not God sees fit to give us a son and whether or not I feel well on any given day, month or year."

A smirk arose on his lips. "You say you love freedom but you wish for the traps of caretaking, working and fidelity."

"Those are not traps to me, Your Highness."

"You are so beautiful... your golden wavy hair and eyes for which I cannot name the color yet as they are ever-changing..."

He had a quilted blanket in one arm, a cask of wine in the other. I noted that he had not addressed my retort, but rather had commented on my outer beauty.

He sat down and I followed suit, taking care to do so neatly with the folds of my gown.

"Shall we romp, milady?"

"You mean to race our horses, Your Majesty?"

"No... I mean this." His palms on my shoulders pressed me backward toward the ground and he moved to cover my body with his.

"Stop this!" I cried, shame and disgust over the advance making my voice tremble. "I did not come here for such a purpose!"

"Do you push away all men? Or just myself?"

"I push away all men like yourself. I am not to be used for your amusement."

"I should like to have taken you naked with me under the waterfall."

"Your Highness! Are you not able to listen or do you choose not to?! I imagine you are quite used to this and that you take all of your women here."

"On the contrary, milady, I have never taken another woman here nor have I ever had another woman deny me..."

“It is time then that you did. Your manners are crude.”

“Do you find me repugnant, madam?”

“I am waiting for the right one. The one who will share my bed not for a night but for a lifetime.”

Laughing heartily, he replied, “Do you mean you are saving yourself?”

“I do not see the humor in that. I feel that I am worthy of being treated like a lady.”

“Well I shall kiss you then... and I will not allow any further arguments.”

He did as he said by capturing my mouth before another protest was spoken. I allowed him this. It stirred within me feelings that had been foreign till then. Still, I allowed him to go no further and he did not attempt such.

“I must go,” I said quietly as I rose flustered and confused.

“You cannot. You haven’t told me enough about yourself yet.”

I looked to the sky watching the approaching horizon... time was drawing thin.

“I know that you want a life of love and passion and time with your future children, but who are you, exactly?” His entreaty was not demanding, though my feet were rooted to the ground as though he had planted me there amongst the blossoms deep in the earth.

“I love to study the healing arts and the formations of the stars as they give meaning to our lives.”

“Do you know then of Copernicus?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I can’t imagine studying the stars without his intriguing perceptions. You have studied him?”

The Prince smiled with a clever gleam in his eyes. “I knew him, milady. In his life his works were of great interest to my father who gave him leave to stay at the palace. Often I found myself under his personal tutelage. It was a great loss when he died last year.”

“Indeed... I am glad to learn of this mutual interest, Your Majesty, and I must thank you for all your hospitality. I really must be getting home now, however...”

He rose and we walked toward where the horses had been tied.

“I am sorry for my earlier behavior. The man who marries you will be a lucky man, to be certain... You are like the rarest of gems... and it is those that are most rare that are most valuable... Shall we not ride back together?”

“I don’t think an escort shall be necessary. I know the way.”

“You will be back then, milady?”

“Your Highness, I am not interested in being one of the many gems in your collection. I prefer to stand alone, even if that means turning cold eyes toward your flattery.”

“Yes, milady,” he replied with rising temper, “...you will stand alone.”

He did not see the tears that fell onto my horse’s mane as I left him. Though I did see him assault the table by gathering up the remnants of the meal, the candlesticks, crockery and drinking goblets into the linen cloth and throw the lot of it into the lake. As I rode away, I felt an ache which strangely was not only felt in my heart, but also in my body. This new ache was both empowering and relentless. I did not answer to my stepmother when I arrived home. I did not set the table. I’d become someone else, and found myself staring idly or singing while attending to chores. What I’d underestimated was Lady Antoinetta’s ability to sniff out change.

With her eyes narrowed, I heard her ask Monique, “What is going on with that wayward child? Cinderella has quite suddenly developed a personality

and it does not do!”

Anxious for answers, she summoned a friend of hers to come call on her the following day.

“Lavinia! How good to see you, mon cher! Please sit...”

Antoinetta called for my stepsister in a shrill yell that resounded through the chateau. “MONIQUE!”

“Cinderella, you are excused... and no I don’t want you to tend to the cinders...”

“Good heavens, child! You hover like an insect! Go outdoors and tend to the garden.”

Sensing something was amiss, I committed the lamentable sin of eavesdropping.

“Speak up, Lavinia! What have you heard?!”

“There is talk of the King soon throwing a ball for the Prince to choose his bride. Of course she must be of noble birth and come from a family in highest social standing. I’ve heard talk that because of the war, he will not choose a Spanish bride. I think an Italian bride would make a fine alliance... though he may prefer a French wife. There is talk of him fancying a French girl in the city... You know, your stepdaughter is quite comely... you don’t think he would...”

“NONSENSE!” Antoinetta barked. “My daughter, Monique, would make for a perfect wife for the Prince. She’s cultured. Why I even gave her a French name at birth. And it’s about time that everyone knows that Cinderella has lost all social standing... a dowerless girl without title. I will hold a feast in Monique’s honor as France’s most influential reigning socialite.”

“CINDERELLA! Where is that foolish child?!” she bellowed.

“Here is a list of chores for you to do within the next few weeks. This

chateau must sparkle! I want the stone floors scrubbed, the wooden floors polished, polish all the fine silverware, beat the carpets and tapestries, mend what is frayed, give cook the order of all the cuisine that will be served, order the finest goblets and chargers, and take these two dress patterns to the dressmaker's."

"But... Stepmother, this is going to be costly..."

"AND?!" intoned Antoinetta as she stared me down.

"I will begin to make preparations straight away..."

"Good. Make haste, girl."

The night of the feast arrived and though I had doubted all my stepmother's spending so lavishly, I reluctantly had to admit that the chateau looked almost reminiscent of its former glory. It was good to see life breathed into the old place once more. There was a lute player, a poet, a singer and someone to play the mandolin.

I felt hopeful in the enlivened atmosphere and had been called by my true name, "Isabella" all evening. I thought that the night might even be a herald of better things to come... yet each time a young man from social circle approached me to ask for a dance, I was summoned away. Antoinetta would then whisper some drop of poison in the young suitor's ear.

Monique, however, who had always garnered little attention at such festivities in part due to her disagreeable manner, danced the entire evening.

Finally, I asked to be excused. I had heard many a rumor and insult on that long and insufferable evening. Everyone was behaving so foolishly, speaking constantly of how they would marry Phillip.

On my way to bed, I was cornered by Monique's cousin Eduardo.

"Isabella, pray tell, you are not going up to bed already are you?"

"Yes, my lord, I'm afraid so. It has been a long day, though I'm certain that

my stepmother and stepsister would want for you to delight in the remainder of the evening.”

“Oh, come now, Isabella, it is a cold bed without company...” He then administered his best smile.

“You are wasting your time, sir. I can manage without escort and companion.”

“How dare you turn me away, Isabella- you who have become a nobody... you’ll die my cousin’s and my aunt’s maid, so you’d better get used to a cold bed. You’ll never get a better offer than mine if I know my cousin and aunt. Don’t worry, though. You’ll always have the purpose of fetching their chamber pots.” His sinister laughter rang through the stairwell.

It was not a shock to me when we received invitations to the ball and my stepmother informed me that I was not to attend as punishment for my behavior of late. I retired to my room without a word. I wanted to break things. Only one thought lifted me from my ruminations- I now understood that I wanted to see the Prince again. My world had been turned upside down and awakened simply by a kiss. What it was that I wanted and needed in my life, I knew not, but it would not be my stepsister who took it in my place.

I went to my god-mother, Eleanor, and poured out the contents of my ailing heart.

“Is there no end to the ways in which they try to hurt you? Stop fretting, mon cher. We must get to work. It is time to make Monique cry. You shall be stunning.”

On the evening of the ball, my uncle asked Antoinetta if I could stay late in the apothecary. So consumed was she with the affairs of her daughter that she absent-mindedly acquiesced. Eleanor asked Robert to drive me in their humble carriage. She used a bit of lip and cheek balm upon my face and fashioned my hair into an intricate upsweep, threaded through with some glass beads. On my feet were slippers of velvet. Finally, as my uncle helped me into the carriage, he put an ermine wrap about my shoulders. I looked every bit the noble woman. I added the final touch of a seldom used smile.

As we neared the Fontainebleau, I could glimpse the lakefront lit with torches. This was the King's favorite estate. White swan boats glided upon the lake and it began to snow. It was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen. I entered the grand ballroom under a false name and all heads turned to stare. It was a name that only Phillip knew. To everyone else, I was a stranger.

"Baroness De Mournai," was announced.

"I am sorry, mademoiselle, that name does not appear here on our list."

There were smirks and brows were raised.

"I know of her," said the Prince. "Let her through at once!!"

Rows of eyes narrowed but I was allowed to pass on the strength of his word.

Again and again, he asked me to dance with him. Finally, he took me by the hand to a side hall, away from the crowd. He seemed somehow different that night- not as young, nor gentle nor light of spirit. There was anger and gruffness beneath the handsome exterior. His eyes gazed upon me differently and spoke of betrayal.

"We are getting looks, Your Highness..."

"Let them look then. We'll provide them something to talk of in the morning." He leaned in, took my face in his hands and kissed me tenderly as he'd done the first time. And then again with such fierce passion, I felt dizzy as though I was falling. But his arms held me fast as did the wall he was pushing me up against.

"I must go," I said.

"You cannot go so soon. I will not let you."

I turned to the windows. "I love the swan boats," I remarked, as a diversion. "Look... it's snowing lightly. An early November snow. It's so

beautiful... Surely one of the most beautiful sights I've ever looked upon."

"Yes," he replied, but he wasn't looking at the boats. "Shall we go out in one? I'll need to have them brought in soon, but tonight we can float in the snow... I'll keep you warm."

"What of your guests, Your Highness? This is your night. This is wrong."

"That is why it feels so right, milady."

We descended hidden side stairs lit by torches. Quietly, we slipped into one of the boats, away from prying eyes. He covered us with a woolen blanket from the stable. He had held my hand as we raced toward the lake and we were giggling like children. I hoped that he would see our commonalities. In a sense, we had both had our childhoods cut short and we both needed to play as we once might have. Ensnared in the boat, I lay back on his chest with his arms around me. I thought to myself that if I were queen, I would take one of the boats inside the castle and make it a crib for my babe.

He began to kiss me fiercely, pulling on my gown, almost tearing at it. I had never been touched so and couldn't help but feel upset after all it had taken to simply get me there to see him one last time.

"You whoreson!" I yelled. "I came here tonight in this ridiculous finery to treasure what could be our last moments together because I thought you were a gentleman!"

Bitterly, he tossed his head back and laughed. "Oh! Don't try to impress me with your heavenly virtue, madam. You would not delight so in my company were I not made of gold! There is no virgin maid alive who would refuse the bed of a future king."

"I may be of current humble circumstance but I am not of a simple mind. Do not think me so shallow as the courtiers who would feign worship for Your Highness' graces. My father's death may have taken my title but you will not take my body or soul."

I managed to stand and though the boat tilted, I kept it steady. It wasn't until we neared the lake shore that I swung around by the swan's neck,

using it to propel me to land, that the boat tipped over with the astonished Prince still inside.

Finally he called out to his groomsmen and hell's fury broke loose. I ran and was caught. I heard him yell, "Let her go!" with such fierceness and the finality of his words stung a little, but then he added, "...it is true what they say of her. She wears noblemen's hearts around her neck!"

I had heard that the Prince had found someone. We had had nothing more than a trifle together. He obviously had far more delights with other women and easily tired of them. How could I have thought that a stolen kiss would have won his heart? He had also been beastly in his behavior. His poor future queen would be mercilessly cheated upon. So why did I feel so bereft as though I was taken ill? At first I thought that it was just a passing sadness. I missed my father. I wanted to run to him and cry into his shirt endlessly. There would no masculine arms to hold me... no deep voice to reassure.

My god-parents knew of my anguish. They had heard my sobs and it broke their hearts. Oddly I felt empty all the way to my womb. As always the apothecarist needed my help, depended on it. Thus, I had to be strong. The ill would not suspend their ailments, time would not draw to a still... I knew grief and the way that no one and nothing outside of it would stop while it raged. With puffy eyes and a swollen pink and white splotchy appearance, I tried to put on a smile and smoothed out my apron. There was a carriage outside out the shop which garnered much curiosity from the people who were filling the street. I tried in vain to find my shoes. I needed to stop taking them off for my own comforts yet amongst my tinctures and herbal palms, it seemed the most natural of habits.

Outside, I heard, "Out of my way! Let us through!" from gruff groomsmen. I saw that it was the King's carriage; the crest was evident on its door. What was not evident was why it would be there outside the shop. There were servants for such errands as well as the court's own dubious healer. I stood in the frame of the doorway. The groomsmen looked at me. "Mademoiselle Isabella of Chateau Dereon?"

Taken aback, I stammered, "Yes, monsieur?"

“The King commands your presence at court.”

“The King?.. I... I need to prepare. I must dress.”

“NOW, mademoiselle!”

I was sure I was being taken by force to jail. There was a lie... There was Eduardo who I knew had been responsible for the crude behavior of the Prince... The King, I'd thought, would be so disgusted with me. I had the look of someone who'd been crying all day, my clothes were rags, and I was without shoes. I hoped the Prince would not be at home. Oh, the Prince! He couldn't see me this way. I wanted to jump from the carriage. I surmised that it didn't matter as he was likely busy making plans for his future bride. I lay my head against the softly padded curtained side of the carriage and let my hair fall over my face. My fate would soon be sealed.

I hardly looked out on the grounds as we arrived.

I was led down incense clouded halls and told to wait in a small chamber. I could hear many hushed voices in the next room. Horns blew and the King and Queen were announced from across the other side of the room which echoed the greatness of its size. A page came for me and through a hidden door in the chamber, I entered a square cubicle shrouded by curtains. I was instructed to sit upon a highly detailed golden chair cushioned in crimson velvet. Though I was hidden behind silk curtains, the room became brighter and brighter as the torches were lit. I saw that my bare feet were resting on a dais of gold inlay, the top of which was a mosaic of rose and golden colored compass. Finally, two maids came and each took a side of the curtains in front of me and knotted them on the golden poles. There were gasps of shock and recognition. The horns sounded once again and the Prince was announced. He looked so handsome and intent, I nearly forgot how ragged I was in my dress. Looking straight at me, his eyes never veered off once or appeared dismayed. He was donned in full regal attire. His eyes burned with passion.

He removed his crown and presented it in the four directions of the room. I saw the lords and ladies, my stepmother and stepsister, even the servants, and then my god-parents who seemed to wink at me and smile knowingly. And then he did the most amazing thing- he knelt before me, he was

actually upon his knee, holding his crown out, and loudly said: “By sword and scepter, by my life, I bid you with respect and love to be my wife. I choose to relinquish my crown to the next eldest son of my father.” His eyes were hopeful, not taking my acquiescence for granted.

I could hardly comprehend the magnitude of the situation or how my life would change. Some say that I took a step backwards before I moved toward him. Though history remains undisputed that I said ‘yes’ and touched his beautiful face.

“You shiver my love,” he whispered and cloaked me in his velvet robe. All at once it was the promise that he would shelter me; the roof of our home would protect me from the storms, his arms would keep my heart from loneliness and his devotion would shield us both from the outside world.

Our young daughter runs about the grounds of the country manor. She brings me some of the flowers that I am trying to coax to grow in the garden and I laugh with delight. My husband looks on bewitched and bemused. Some whisper that as the apothecarist’s daughter, I worked some magic to ensnare him. There are no medicines that I know of like that. I still continue with my studies, overlook things in the village and lend myself where I am needed. My in-laws, the King and Queen, fully accept me and are immensely kind to me. I do not know the future- only that I am so fulfilled as a woman and have all that I ever wanted.

It is 1547 and I am never alone.

A Soldier on the Field

by Linda Emma

Part III

In the beginning, Denny craved the details.

He wanted to know coordinates, to understand where he was in

relationship to other points on a map, parts of a globe. Maybe it was his innate sense of geography or the coursing farmer's blood that lent respect to the beauty and bounty of the land, his sense of coming from and returning to it.

In the beginning, he cared.

Now he didn't give a shit.

One patch of fucking tropical green looked the same as the next; one captured hill, no different than any other, this village, the same as the last.

Denny had all but stopped his effort to reach The World. There was now nothing outside Vietnam; his tunnel vision was absolute. Gone were the waterfalls and rainbows, the weird wildlife, the flowering flora. He stopped noting the flashes of strange birds, stopped hearing the shrieking calls of primates. What had once verged on the majestic to his consuming senses, now seemed repetitive and entrapping. It was all sweaty and smelly and raw. There were attacks and counterattacks, the ranks of Denny's unit thinning at an escalating pace. And with each mortar blast, every raided village, each trampled patch of red-clayed dirt, Denny's internal turmoil tore at the fabric of his character, shredding it threadbare. There was a metamorphosis from a sweet, country farmer, boy to man, student to soldier, naive and caring friend to cynical and hardened fighter. Denny felt as if his feet were forever slipping on the craggy hills of the Truong Son Range, being tangled in jungle brush, vine and rock. He could gain forward momentum only if he acquiesced to the pulling force of gravity. And forward was the only direction about which he cared. Forward was the pull of time, the tick of the clock, the scratch mark on a calendar. Each day's end was a day closer to the end of his tour.

He just wanted out -out of the darkness of the shrouding canopies, out of the dampness of dew and sweat that were inseparable from one another, away from the smells of mold and mildew and human excrement that assaulted and numbed the senses at the same time, out of this God-forsaken slice of dystopia.

If Eden had been this kind of tropical paradise, Eve bit the apple just to get the hell out.

“Hall,” a voice called.

Denny’s eyes were closed, but he wasn’t sleeping. Not really. It was that hazy place in-between, where the seductive pull of a dream still hangs on, if only by a whisper. In the fog of his mind, Denny’s eyes were squinting, caught between swaying stocks of golden wheat, the gentle whistle of a warm wind somewhere in the middle of a different world.

“Hall,” again, more insistent.

“You suck, Luster, ya know. You really suck,” Denny said.

“Suck this,” Luster said grabbing at his crotch even though Denny hadn’t yet opened his eyes.

He jumped down closer, to within feet of Denny, poked him.

“What?” Denny said, swatting the air.

“Take patrol with me.”

“Why? I thought Klein was on.”

“Yeah, he’s off now. C’mon, I can’t stand Klein, anyway.”

Denny opened his eyes.

“Captain said me?”

“Captain said not Klein. He pulled ‘im for a rat patrol. Gonna detonate the hole at the base of the hill.”

Rat patrol was Klein’s specialty. He was little, could fit in the tiny spaces of those tunnels. And his uncle or cousin or someone had sent him a Luger. If did need to shoot, the blast of the Luger wouldn’t deafen him. The idiots at head command were still sending in the peanut boys with M60s. What were they thinking? Yeah, Klein was equipped for it.

Luster, on the other hand, hated the tunnels. A maze of bug and rat-infested tributaries all leading to who-the-fuck-cares. On the approach to anything that even appeared to be a bunker system, Luster's pulse would start tapping out its own twisted revelry, his eyes wide, fingers twitching, his head somewhere else.

Denny wondered about that. Weird. Luster seemed so indestructible, fearless.

Six-six, 250 pounds, bolt-upright posture -intimidating. And he had this white-toothed grin, below jet black hair, a mop of it before basics, he'd said, and smoky gray eyes.

"Jeez," Denny said, protesting, but starting to move. "I was up 'til 0400. Couldn't you get someone else?"

"C'mon," Luster said, even though Denny had given up the fight, was grabbing his artillery, moving forward.

Technically, Denny outranked Luster, but there was no question among the grunts where the real authority lay. Luster had more time in than even the Captain and he'd been a Corporal.

Until something happened.

Denny wasn't sure which of the stories made sense, but they all ended with Luster going AWOL, being taken in by the MP's, bucked down to Private and sent back to the field.

In a hole, on a hill, it was still Luster to whom they all turned, though. In this unit alone, there were three guys who owed their life to Luster. In the Corps, many more.

Denny didn't know Luster well, but there was something both admirable and confusing about him. The darting eyes, the gaps in the whole of his story.

Told Denny he was from South Dakota. Denny liked that, too, since he'd

taken to calling him “Horse,” after South Dakotan native and Sioux leader, Crazy Horse.

Crazy Horse was a loyal and fierce warrior, and he’d led the Sioux against Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn. Then, contained but not subdued, he’d fought against his confinement on the White man’s reservation, ran away from its constraints.

Yeah, Luster from the Dakotas; that fit.

But then Denny heard him one day regaling some newbies with raunchy teenage exploits about his days on the beaches of Marina del Rey. Another time, it was stories of rural Maine.

Denny set off behind Luster.

One thing was certain. On any patrol, Luster would have his back. Denny trusted every Marine to honor the brotherhood, but with no one did he feel more secure about it.

Given the wrong circumstances, Horse would save his life -of that Denny was certain.

The hill had been strafed; a forward patrol had already gone through, radioed back an all clear call.

When Denny’s unit set forth at dawn, the attitude was caution, muddled by the monotony of two weeks stuck in a jumble of greens, one mass indistinguishable from the next, and seemingly abandoned of human life.

The labyrinth of hidden tunnels, beneath an inhospitable terrain to which the North Vietnamese seemed to be innately adapted, made the land as much an enemy as the Viet Cong. That was coupled with an enemy strategy that consisted of small attacking groups appearing from nowhere, and easily disappearing back into the shadowy darkness or hovering along the periphery to play carnival shot games with the Americans as their sitting ducks.

It was a textbook ambush and they walked into it as if it were their first day off transport, Cobra-dropped onto a plot of death-dark green earth.

And out of that earth, like an army of swarming fire ants, came a furious wave of black pajama-clad men and boys wielding Russian-made artillery and arms, roaring, screaming, firing guns, throwing grenades, plunging bayonets.

It was a burst of horrific activity, noise, blood, chaos.

And then -silence.

Denny was panting, his M60 readied, his helmet askew and impairing his vision, but he did nothing to right it. He pulled at his own senses, trying to assess -see who was where- but at the same time, fighting to stay completely still and quiet. His pant leg was soaked in blood, but he didn't feel anything, wasn't sure if it was his own blood or Klein's or Harper's.

Both dead, he knew, just pieces instead of people now.

Fffffffttt -sound, whipping through trees, brush, green and brown tangles.

Thwack.

Denny rolled, ducked.

Sniper fire.

For the next hour, he, and he wasn't sure who else, were held down, blind to their assailant, mired in the dirt, on their bellies, the smell of burst intestines mixing with gunpowder, rising in the hot, sticky air.

It was Horse who finally took out the sniper.

Still, they waited -in silence. Until, one of them, Peterson, rose. Slowly, tentatively, at first. And then, seeing his erect form, seeing that there was indeed only a single sniper, the other men got up as well. They stood and took the somber inventory: three of them gone; five more wounded.

These weren't the worst casualties Denny's unit had suffered, but for Denny it was another layer in the packed resolve against where he was and what he was doing. Like the pelitic muds that surrounded them, each day in The Nam was hardening the core of who Denny was.

When Denny stumbled upon Horse raping a village girl, it was the final affront to everything Denny had once believed. He wrought his fury on Horse in a flurry of fists, and even followed through enough to alert the commander, fill out forms, file a formal report. But it was an exercise in futility.

Privately, the Captain conceded that Horse wasn't right, damn good fighter and a soldier, sure, but something was wrong with that boy, the Captain had said.

"A shame too," Captain said. "I knew his Sergeant at basics; said he was the best god damn recruit he'd ever seen."

The Captain granted Denny an extra R&R.

But when Denny got back, Horse was still part of the unit.

Luster tried to approach Denny.

"It wasn't what you thought," he said.

Denny offered him only a shove as he moved past him, and an icy stare.

Luster wasn't Crazy Horse; he was just crazy, sick. How had Denny missed it? His life attitude had betrayed him. Seeing things in a positive light, up side, not down, wouldn't work here. None of his old ideals applied. If Denny was going to make it out alive, he'd have to learn a whole new set of rules and a way to square them with the person he was trying to hold on to.

As easily as Denny could avoid being in Horse's company on a personal level, in the field it was impossible. Although the Captain separated the

once amiable pair with more frequency, when he ordered a search and destroy mission on intelligence that a Viet Cong guerrilla group was in the area, Horse and Denny both were included in the ten man team.

Denny had a nagging sense of unease as he set forth on point through the low brush. He didn't try to push it away; he knew now to trust his new reality.

The village they came upon was a tiny encampment, a series of a dozen Vietnamese hootches, the rustic palm-thatched homes of the area, placed as a haphazard string in the middle of the Boonies. Even in the smallest and poorest towns of Denny's homeland, there was nothing quite like the Vietnamese sub-standard of living. But as if to further knock Denny away from building a new reality, the second hut he and Flaherty busted in on was a picture of contradictions. It was standard fare for the Vietnamese abode in the hilly region bordering Cambodia: small, mud-floored -cooking, living, sleeping space all minimally contained. But entering from the dust and dirt of the outside, Denny and Flaherty took in an impeccably neat space, richly colored fabrics adorning the small table, the sleeping areas. In a corner was a tiny bamboo-constructed shelf unit, a handful of books upon it. Author names, spoke out from books unknown to Denny. And standing quietly to its side, straight, with an unflinching gaze at Denny, was a woman, not much older than he. Denny knew there were others in the home with them, but for a moment, maybe two, all he saw was her.

Her straight, jet black hair fell on shoulders covered in a richly colored fabric of pinks and teals, yellows and blues. She had dark eyes, high cheekbones. She wasn't much taller than the village girls Denny had encountered since he'd come to Vietnam, but the couple of inches she had on them, combined with her shoulders-back posture made her appear much taller. Denny and Flaherty both had their M16s pointed and at the ready, but she just stood still, waiting.

Flaherty waited too, with his gun shakily trained on the old man and young boy in the room with them. He tried to play the tough guy, but was just a cherry. His eyes ping-ponged between his prisoners, waiting for a sudden move, a reason to shoot.

Just as Denny started to lower his gun to ratchet down the tension, Horse

burst into the home.

“C’mon, get ‘em out here,” he shouted. “Now!”

Horse looked to the man and the boy, motioned them out, with a violent wave of his gun.

“Out, out,” he said. “Didi Mau, didi mau!”

“Move ‘em,” he commanded of Flaherty.

He turned toward Denny, looked at the girl.

“Go on,” he said to Denny. “Hit the other huts.”

Denny ignored Horse. He let his gun go limp at his side, motioned with his hand to the woman, and stood between her and Horse as she left the hut.

By now most of the huts had been cleared, their peopled contents in a lopsided circle at the heart of the tiny village. They were children and women, a few old men. There was nothing sinister or menacing about them. One of the men kept up a chant of, “GI good, GI good,” fear in every utterance.

Denny looked into the man’s yellowed and watery eyes. He had a still abundant head of gray hair above his wrinkled brow. He was dressed in an ill-fitting black tunic and pants that made him look like a child in his father’s suit.

Denny was still taking in the fear in the faces before him, the trigger-tight tension of the soldiers at his shoulders, when he felt a change.

Did he hear it or see it? He wasn’t sure, but something was amiss.

He reacted before he knew he did.

He was down, rolling, firing, taking cover, taking note.

These were the bad guys and they’d already killed Flaherty, but also the old

man, a puzzled look in his still open, but dead eyes.

It was an explosion of deafening blasts and cries, plumes of smoke rising like a misty film, blurring the landscape, the targets, the innocents.

Were there two of them or twenty? Denny didn't know, but Horse had already charged one in a war movie scene of bravado, placing himself dead center into the sites of the soldier's AK-47, as if shielded by an impenetrable force field.

It looked like suicide.

But Horse jumped, ran, rolled, and was up again, unscathed, his assailant dead, peppered with holes.

It wasn't ten minutes.

The attack, its defense, their escape.

Now Denny and his fellow Marines turned to the capture of the accomplices. These villagers, innocent or not, were now the enemy.

The muffled thunder of their boots, the whish of brush giving way to fleeing bodies, cries, screams, incomprehensible pleas, shattered the air just as the artillery fire had. Denny stopped an old woman and a child, herded them to where Dobson was both nursing his wounded leg and holding arms against their new hostages.

Denny caught a peripheral shot of color bleed into the greens, escaping. So did Horse.

They both recognized the tropical flowers bobbing through the brush.

"I got it," Horse offered, at Denny's side.

"No," Denny said.

He pushed Horse aside.

“I’ve got it.”

Denny looked into eyes he didn’t recognize, a weird grin on Horse’s face. He thought to the Captain’s refrain, “there’s something wrong with him,” thought back to Dubeck and Cahill, to Billy. He’d heard Billy had killed himself -no one to protect him.

“Yeah, you go first,” Horse said.

Denny shook his head, pulled himself free of the twisted stare, felt repulsed. The look in Horse’s eyes shook him even more than the firefight had.

He ran off into the woods, pursuing the girl, and wondering what the fuck he was going to do with her when he found her.

It was easy, too. Too easy. He was too well-trained; she not trained at all, not used to the role of hunted, of being someone’s prey.

With Denny’s gun trained on her, she stumbled back against a towering Eucalyptus, stopped and took a breath.

Denny was under obligation to apprehend, to treat her as a North Vietnamese collaborator. He stared into her eyes, caught there again. She looked neither angry nor frightened. She would come easily, he knew. And he would have to protect her, keep Horse from her, and any others.

But how?

Denny let the tension from his trigger finger melt, brought his gun down.

She watched it fall, blinked. Denny heard a sigh escape her lips and watched as her posture relax.

He could let her go, allow her to disappear off into the woods, then find his way back to his unit. She might be the enemy the Captain would insist she was, a contemporary Mata Hari, a spy, a killer, or she could be what Denny suspected -a woman stuck in a war that she hadn’t asked for.

A rain of gunfire interrupted Denny's conversation with himself.

Denny grabbed the girl, pulled her down, behind the covering of a rock, his body further shielding her from the onslaught. But Denny couldn't be certain if they were the targets, couldn't know even if it was enemy or friendly fire.

He didn't fire back. Instead, he waited.

He was practically on top of her, her breath at the base of his neck.

The barrage stopped. He heard the sound of men pushing through brush, voices, not English.

She could shout to them, reveal their position, scream for help.

Denny looked at her, into her eyes.

She said nothing, just stayed pinned against him, her breathing in sync with his, quick, but measured.

He stared at her.

She was beautiful.

He could be dead at any moment, captured, tortured.

And all he could think was that she was beautiful.

The voices and the footsteps retreated, still in the area, but moving farther away from their spot in the brush.

Denny pulled off of her.

They waited quietly together. They were anything but safe.

They had to move, Denny thought, get somewhere.

Denny didn't know where he was going, but he knew what was happening

where he was not. The Marines would torch the village, take what was useful to the unit, destroy the rest. Dobson was probably already on the PRC-25, radioing the Captain, taking orders. Denny hoped the villagers would be spared, treated not as enemy collaborators but merely as the pawns Denny knew them to be.

But he doubted it.

She got to her feet.

Denny tried to stop her, pulled at her wrist, but she took his hand, whispered, “di di.”

He hesitated.

“Come,” she said.

He rose fully, letting let her pull him.

But then his interrupted instincts returned. He scanned his surroundings, assessed their vulnerability. Before he realized he had even touched her, he pulled at her blouse, then stopped, cut off by the look on her face, all the implications the gesture could hold.

“No, no,” he faltered, motioning with his hands, trying to make her understand.

He brought both hands up in a halting gesture.

“Wait.”

He lowered his gun, leaned it against his legs, while he took off his flak jacket, stripped the t-shirt beneath from his chest. He extended it to her, used sign language.

How did he tell her that this was protection, that this could save their lives?

She understood that he wanted her to wear it. Whether she knew why, that her tunic was a beacon against the greens, he didn’t know, but she had it on

and was again leading him in a matter of moments.
And he allowed her to.

Away from the direction he should be moving, against his training, against what he knew to be right, code and conduct. He merely submitted to her insistent tug on his arm.

She led them to a well-hidden bunker, part of the networking tunnels, but one that Denny's unit hadn't unearthed. It wasn't far from their camp. Not really, and yet no one had reported a tributary in this quadrant.

He must have hesitated because she took his hand again, tugged him forward.

"Come," she said, quietly.

Gunfire, distant but still too close for safety.

He followed and they left the muted sounds of explosions and turmoil behind them.

Hunkered in the depths of the bunker, its connection to a larger labyrinth thwarted by the tumbled in rock and gravel that Denny suspected was the handiwork of Klein or one of the tunnel rats from the army units he'd led through, they stayed hidden and safe. She knew the hole and its tiny store of food, candles. Denny didn't try to ask how or why.

He didn't care.

And when he finally succumbed to sleep, his gun limply in his hand, he gave in to the possibilities, as if he'd already jumped and there was no turning away from the bite of the water, the risk of its depths.

But she didn't try to leave him, or turn his weapon against him.

Instead, somewhere in the night, she pulled into the shelter of his steady breathing, the crook of his arm. He enfolded her there, brought her closer, kissed the top of her head.

And they slept, deeply, a sleep that had eluded Denny since his arrival in Vietnam.

*

Maria sat behind the cluttered desk of her mentor.

The training wheels were off now. It was time to give this a shot all on her own.

She looked out the classroom window. It was a gray morning, cloudy and threatening.

And she was early.

Her students would not arrive for another half hour. But she had been nervous, unable to sleep. Where better to spend the morning? She thought.

She reviewed the lesson plan before her for the fifth time, then stopped herself.

She knew this stuff. She even knew the children, having spent the last four weeks student teaching under the watchful eye of Mildred Schooner. A gruff, gray-haired disciplinarian, Maria had been sure she wouldn't warm up to the woman. Then, she'd watched as Schooner melted before her charges, answer every query with thought and enthusiasm. Soon, Maria found herself trying to emulate the woman. If she could become even half the teacher Mrs. Schooner was, she would be proud.

This was one of three third grade classes at Rutherford Taylor elementary. And if it was possible, Maria would be happy to stay.

She'd had other ideas. Grander. Loftier. Now, third-grade sounded just right.

Maria looked at the tarnished brass bracelet on her wrist. She'd have to take it off someday, she knew. Eddie hadn't asked her to. Wouldn't. But

still, soon she'd have to remove it from her wrist.

For her own reasons.

She looked at his name: PFC Dennis J. Hall USMC 6-3-69 An Loc, wondered.

His letters to her had at first changed their tone, then shortened, then trickled away.

She wasn't notified that Private First Class Denny Hall had been reported Missing In Action. Why would she have been? She'd never met Denny's father, his brothers, doubted they knew she existed.

But eventually, she'd found out.

An outside bell let out its peal.

Maria stood up, fighting the lingering nervousness.

Mrs. Schooner opened the classroom door and a line of smiling students began to find their seats.

end

Finding Faith

By Danielle Radin

Tatiana walked out of the synagogue with tears in her eyes. She always got teary eyed after the Mourner's Kaddish, but today she was especially emotional because she had had time to think. She knew that one day she would be the one in mourning; and she also knew that someday someone would be mourning for her. It was inevitable. She felt a strong connection to the people walking out of the synagogue with her. She was amongst them as a Jew, but it was not always like this. She squinted into the memory of

her unreligious past-squinted because it was so hard to see now-because it was so distant that it was like trying to read a book from the top of the Eiffel Tower .

She wished she was in Paris again. Paris was beautiful and the people there knew their place and knew what they wanted out of life. They were not like Western society; waiting aimlessly for an afterlife that might not even exist. It did not matter to her all that much what the hell Western society was waiting for. She knew what she wanted now. She felt like her life was a giant hourglass, with the grains of sand squeezing through the middle to the vast bottom faster and faster as she got older. Maybe when all the grains fell to the bottom that would be the end, or maybe a new hour glass would fill up and count time for her soul after it departed from her body. Either way, she did not want to sit around and wait to find out.

She put this logic towards most things. She never waited around for someone else to do the work for her. She'd learned early about disappointment when placing personal happiness in incapable hands or shallow hopes. She was an initiator- she made things happen. She knew that she would someday start a charity organization in some foreign Third World nation. She had ambitions and goals and she was not afraid to reach out and grab them.

On that cool autumn morning, she decided to go to her friend Michelle's house for a bit of contrast from the solemn synagogue. She had been best friends with Michelle through everything- her parent's divorce, her father issues, her unhealthy relationships. Michelle was free-spirited or what her parents termed 'a complete screw up'. She was vulgar, unorganized, unmotivated, and too laid back about the fact. She was basically the exact opposite of Tatiana, but she kind of liked that. Michelle was her escape from the real world. She made Tatiana look at things with a removed levity that she wouldn't have been able to muster on her own.

Tatiana needed an escape every now and then. She did things without having the slightest clue why she did them. Things that her therapist would explain simplistically, using sentences such as, "well this event resulted in you doing this," which would make Tatiana tilt her head slightly to the left and say, "...well that makes sense." She made conscious decisions more with her heart than with her mind and only when they were explained to

her with logic could she see if they were the right choices or not. She did know why she did some things, though. She knew that she liked dating older men because they were mature and they could act like a father figure to her. Well, a temporary father figure anyway, until she tired of their company and moved on.

Tatiana's relationship with her father was a complex one. She knew that he loved her, but he seemed to never have any time for her when she was growing up. Now he had a new wife that was not her biological mom, and a new daughter that was not her, but she did not mind all that much. She actually preferred her step-mom to her biological mother ninety percent of the time. Her step-mom understood her, and gave her substantial advice and abundant love. Her biological mother did not really have any emotion towards anything. Her father hated emotion because he was taught to do so while growing up. Looking back on it, Tatiana could see how that would probably not be a good formula for a marriage-two people who hated expressing emotion- and she could not blame the divorce on her parents fully when they were raised with those beliefs. She just wished that she knew the exact, precise reasons why her parents got the divorce. She wondered about it frequently, hoping to avoid treading the same steps herself, but was not so consumed about it now to try and wrench solid answers from either of her parents. After her parents went their separate ways when she was in fifth grade, she swore off love forever, saying that it did not exist and that the correct term for it was "companionship." Emotional expression was not a part of her familial inheritance.

Maybe that was why she liked George so much- because he was not afraid to wear his heart on his sleeve. He was older, but only by two years. He was twenty. She and George had been dating for a few months before he was shipped off to Cuba to be in the air force. They had continued to talk for the next year after that over the phone, and through letters.

In truth, George reminded her of her father in many ways. He was smart, down to Earth, and someone who she could respect. He was the emblem of the relationship she always wished she could have with her father. He called her and expressed how much he cared about her. He was perfect.

Tatiana was in love with George and she did not even believe in love. Despite herself, she was starting to change her views. She sometimes

scolded herself for feeling so strongly about a guy that was over two-thousand miles away. She often times felt guilty when she would start new relationships with other guys, even though she and George were not exclusive. Her therapist told her that this was a perfectly natural way to feel, but Tatiana wished that she could be guilt free when she was fulfilling her physical needs. She knew that she was taking a risk, falling so hard for George, but she also knew that with a great risk comes a great reward. She often times caught herself thinking about what she and George's house would look like after they got married, or thinking of names for their future children. She liked the names Jayden and Skylar for boys. Her favorite name for a girl was Danielle.

George told her that he was going to come back and visit her soon, and that made Tatiana both excited and terrified. For one, she did not know if she and George would have the same chemistry in person that they did over the phone. Also, she was afraid that she was going to screw things up. The other guys she had had relationships with in the past pounded into her head time and time again that she was not good enough.

Sometimes she actually started to believe them. Her old boyfriend, Jerry, was always manipulating her into thinking that she was wrong. He had a way with that. Now he was a typical, down and out loser who knocked up some girl up and didn't have enough money to pay for child support. Even though she always knew he was going nowhere in life, Tatiana believed him most of the time because she trusted him. She trusted people. She was always giving people the benefit of the doubt- even if it was at her own expense. She would rather see other people happy and herself miserable then the other way around.

Michelle often told her that she should be more selfish at times, but Tatiana did not think that that was a good trait to have.

Just as she was leaving Michelle's house after a quick lunch to discuss another of Michelle's latest breakup dramas, she received a call from her father. She was excited and picked it up on the first ring.

"Hey pumpkin," he said over the phone.

"Hi daddy! What's up?" she asked him trying to keep the excitement in her

voice to a minimum.

“Listen, remember how we said that we were going to have Shabbat together this Friday night?”

Tatiana’s heart skipped a beat from thrill. She was thrilled because her father had not forgotten their dinner date. They had not eaten a meal together for longer than she could remember. “Yes daddy, I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she said.

“Yeah, well listen, I promised my friend Mike, you remember Mike right? I think you met him a long time ago. Yeah, well anyway, I promised my friend Mike that I would eat dinner with him that night. I’m sorry pumpkin I completely forgot. We’ll have Shabbat dinner together really soon though, okay?” He gave a slight chuckle to lighten the mood.

She reached inside the pit of her stomach for all the strength that she could find. She needed it to hold back the tears. ‘Come on, don’t cry in front of your father,’ she said to herself. Hold it back. Hold it. Hold it.

“Oh it’s okay, Daddy, I already had plans for Friday anyway, I have to go now... I’m getting another call... Bye.” She hung up quickly and sunk her body to the ground, making a ball of herself on the pavement. She sobbed for a while, trying to remember who this Mike guy was and why he would want to steal her precious time with her father away from her. She could not ever remember meeting a Mike and this made her even sadder. She sat there for a long time, trying to control the shaking of her body, but it was a difficult task. She debated going back inside of Michelle’s house and telling her about it, but she remembered Michelle had had to leave early to go to a dance lesson.

She felt alone in the world. She had no one to talk to. Her phone was ringing again and she prayed it was her dad telling her that the whole thing was a sick joke and that they were still on for Friday. Yet it was even better than that- it was George. She took a few deep breaths and answered the phone.

“Hey! What’s up?” She asked cheerily.

“Hello beautiful, I could not stop thinking about you today. I had to give you a call.”

She felt the familiar fluttering of butterflies in her stomach. George made her forget about the hardships with her father. In a way, he was an escape too- an escape from the treatment that men geographically and emotionally close to her threw at her. She knew deep down that she did not deserve this kind of treatment, but had endured it for so long that she was used to it by now. But George was different. He appreciated her and respected her. He gave her the time of day. He valued her opinion and complemented her frequently. She loved talking to him and escaping with him.

“Aw, you’re sweet,” she said. “How’s the air force and when the heck are you gonna come visit me? I miss you.” She questioned herself immediately after she said that, she did not want to sound too clingy, but George seemed to appreciate it.

“I miss you too!” He exclaimed. “I promise you that I will come to see you by the end of this year, no exceptions!”

It was the end of November which meant that he was going to come soon. Immediately she began to fantasize about their futures together, but then remembered that he was still on the phone.

“Tatiana? Are you there? Hello?” She could hear him saying on the Cuban end of the line.

“Oh yeah sorry, bad service,” she said. “Well I look forward to seeing you, George. And I’m really glad you called, I’ve been having kind of a bad day.”

“Oh no,” he said, “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“It’s just stuff with my dad,” she said. She could not complain about her life when George was off fighting for his country. He had been trying to save enough money to buy a plane ticket home to see her for practically a year now, and still did not have enough. Tatiana knew that his poverty made him more down to Earth and appreciative of the small things in life and she liked that. Sometimes she felt guilty for the privileged life she lived while others struggled. If she had the opportunity to switch places with a child

from an impoverished nation, she would do it in a heart-beat with no regrets. But living the life she was given, she helped the world in her own way. She volunteered her time whenever she could and helped people who could not help themselves. She knew that she would be doing this for the rest of her life and it was one of her deepest passions.

“Okay well I just wanted to say hello, I have to go do more training now but I will see you soon darling, goodbye,” he said with some sadness in his voice.

“Goodbye George, it was nice talking to you,” she responded. It really was. The rest of what she wanted to say, that flood of special words for him, got stuck like a cork in the bottle of her throat.

Michelle was coming back from her dance lessons when she saw Tatiana still sitting on the pavement.

“Hey girlie, getting your tan on?” Michelle jokingly asked.

“Haha yeah, I wish,” Tatiana said, “My dad just canceled our dinner plans for Friday night.”

Michelle looked like she was going to cry Tatiana's tears for her. She crouched low and said, “Here why don't you come inside? We can talk about it.”

“It's okay, I should get going,” Tatiana answered, dismissing it. She did not want to burden Michelle with her problems.

“No, really- you're the only person I care about in the world, please come inside?”

Tatiana surrendered, getting up off of the pavement and went inside where she sat with Michelle for a long time. They laughed about stupid inside jokes that they had and she felt her burdens lightening. After talking to Michelle and George, she knew that it was okay if her father had canceled their dinner plans. It was okay because it was his loss and not hers. She knew that one day he would realize that they could have spent more time together while she was growing up. She appreciated her and her father's

relationship because it made her stronger.

She thought back to the Mourner's Kaddish and realized that life was too short to dwell on sadness. She cracked a joke to Michelle and they laughed for a long time. As she was wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She looked at the beautiful young woman that she had become and she had hope for her future. She knew that everything was going to be alright, and that she would continue to develop and grow into the kind of individual that she knew she could become. Through those who cared for her, she would find her faith. It was faith in the present, faith in the future and faith that whatever bliss awaited in life or death, it could be found through love.

A Small Lifetime

By Pat Greene

It was a struggle for her, getting around to the back of the house this morning to gather up the few kippins for starting the fire with. Usually she would have them brought in from the night before and she would leave them in a tidy bundle, set in to the right of the cuben hole next to the fireplace and Peter's chair.

The milk in the bottle was two days sour, so there was no use in her making a cup of tea. She could never drink black tea anyway. She could do without the one spoon of sugar but never the drop of milk. She left the front door slightly open so that she would hear young Matt Shinnors feet on the road and Matt would bring her back a pint of milk from the street.

As she passed Casey's chair, one of her dizzy spells came upon her and she had to stop and lean heavily on the small table that held her little porcelain nick-knacks under the picture window. Poor ol' Casey would be dead a

fortnight on her tomorrow. The tears came again. She was lost without poor Casey. He was with her for so long and they were such good friends. His scent, still remained in the house and it traveled to her now, off his chair and she would give the world to look down and find him there at her feet with his deep brown eyes and wagging tail... Just like he always was.

As a slight cool breeze escaped the outdoors and came in through the unguarded space of the doorframe, she suddenly became alarmed with the thought that whatever was left of Casey in the house might be getting away from her. This caused her to throw a frightened look back to the rear window to make certain it hadn't been left ajar. It was then that she realized that she had not opened that nor any window since the day before Casey had died. She gave a lean on the door which closed with the weight of her sadness.

Kate always loved having her windows thrown open and especially during those early spring days when the clean crisp air, with the welcome promise of summer, carries down off Crom-hill, and blows in around the house and rids it of the wretched winter dampness. Usually by the time the month of May comes around, every room in her house is alive with the full anticipation of Summer.

The hob needed tending and she went to it. As she knelt there sweeping the stray ashes through the hearth with the gray goose quill, another flood of emotions swept over her and this time her tears fell down into the fire where they sizzled and instantly evaporated in the hot turf embers.

Kate was married to Peter O' Riordan in October of nineteen twenty three. Peter was twenty four at the time and Kate was twenty two. Ireland was still in the throws of delight with its new freedom and it was a freedom that gave everyone a great amount of hope to look forward to. Kate was overjoyed when Peter had come to the house one night in early August and asked her

father for Kate's hand in marriage. Not once during the courtship or for the time leading up to the wedding, had Kate ever doubted that Peter was the right man for her. Kate had known Peter all her life and she was in love with him long before Peter had ever plucked up the courage to come calling on her.

Like Kate, Peter was an only child and when they were married, Kate went to live with Peter and his mother. In the late winter of nineteen twenty, Peter's father, Tom, had been taken from the house one night by the black and tans; shortly after daybreak the next morning, Peter found his father's lifeless body, face down in the cold dark waters of Barna river. That absence was never filled- the quiet lingered in the walls. Thus, when Peter brought Kate home to live with him, she was a welcome breath of fresh air into the house and even the house itself seemed to come back to life with her there. It didn't take Kate very long at all to settle in, or to feel like she was in her own home.

The knock came to the door, bringing her back to the present.

"Kate, are you there?"

Her heart bounced for joy in her chest. She loved his tiny little voice and he was such a lovely little fella. Every time she saw him, she wanted to hug him but she never did. Nothing ever more than just the ruffle of her hands through his beautiful head of straight black hair.

"I'm here Matt, give me a minute." She wiped her eyes with the navy blue bib, with the embossed imprints of wild daisies carpeting lush green pastures under the spreading limbs of giant hill-top chestnuts.

She went to get the door for Matt.

He smiled to her and she could always feel sure that he was sincerely happy to see her. He made his way past her and to sit under the chimney on the long wooden bench that Peter had made for her the summer before he passed away. She had always found Matt to be a very affectionate child and with the gentlest of mannerisms.

She had sweets somewhere in the house for him but where had she put them?

It was Matt's father Frank, that had buried poor Casey for her. He dug a hole down at the end of the plot and placed Casey in a four stone -flour bag. He was very careful when placing Casey in the shallow grave and Matt had cried the entire time for the loss of his good friend. Kate had always felt, that if she was taken before Casey, at least she would have the comfort of knowing that Matt would take care of Casey for her.

Matt came the day after they had buried Casey and he had a make-shift cross with him. Two flat panels about a foot each in length and carved from the white ash, bound together with a fistful of long switch grass and 'Casey' etched into one of the smooth shaved panels. The day after that, Matt came with primroses that he had picked from Judy Hennessy's ditch. He placed the primroses neatly around the cross, which he had driven down at the head of the grave, and knelt in prayer to ask God to be good to Casey. That was the last time that Matt had mentioned Casey's name to her. Kate had always known that children were the best at forgetting. Matt would probably forget her too when she was gone but maybe he wouldn't. At least she hoped not.

"Matt, will you run into the street and get a few things for me?"

She handed him a five pound note and the shopping list that she had made

out for herself, two days before.

Matt took the shopping bag from the hook at the back of the bedroom door and when he had reached the front gate, Kate called after him and told him not to forget to get the quarter pound of clove rocks for himself.

If Casey was here now, she thought, he would be off down the road with Matt, and she'd be out there at the gate watching after them, laughing every time Casey would jump up and try to trip Matt as they ran. She would watch them until they disappeared beyond Tom Donovan's bend and from there the road steadily rises before them and they would pass Ballinlough graveyard, where everyone belonging to Kate was buried and then it was a good half mile on foot into the village of Ballyvistee.

Kate and Peter were blessed with the birth of a baby girl, three weeks before the Christmas of nineteen twenty five. They named her 'Agnes', after Peter's mother. Beautiful little Agnes was their completion to an already happy home and she was showered with love, morning, noon and night. Agnes was born with a heart murmur condition and Kate and Peter were always careful to prevent her from ever getting overly excited even though there was the acceptance, by both of them that Agnes would never grow up to have a normal life. Neither of them had ever given a moment's thought to the fact that Agnes might well be taken from them.

One night in early September of nineteen twenty seven, Kate tucked Agnes into her bed and if she had known that night was going to be the last time that she was ever to hear her little girl say goodnight to her, she would never have left her all alone there in that room by herself. She would have laid there next to her precious little Agnes and she would have wrapped her up in her arms and cradled her with every ounce of love in her body... and when the attack took hold of Agnes maybe she could have done something to prevent it from getting worse and maybe their little darling's life could have been saved.

But Agnes was all alone when cruel death came creeping through her room. Like a thief in the middle of the night, it hovered over her as she slept and carried their little bundle of joy out into the cold and never-ending darkness. Carried her away... not even allowing the time for one small goodbye.

Peter and Kate could not have asked for better friends or neighbors after Agnes was taken from them. Every night for weeks and months afterward, someone would come and sit in with them and try to take their minds off their terrible loss. Kate was better at pretending than Peter and she was far too polite to tell these good people that she would prefer to be left alone. Being alone was far more comforting for her. She didn't have to pretend when she was alone and the pain was much easier to deal with. She hated having to make-believe to anyone that she would ever really get over losing her little darling angel.

Peter was never the same again and slowly he began to shut Kate out until eventually they became like two strangers sitting across the fire from one another. Both of them, with their eyes fixed back in time, searching the ashes for reasons why they were deserving of something so tragic to happen to them.

It was a beautiful August night in nineteen thirty one and Kate had gone outside to stand in the road in front of the house and listen to the night settle in around her. She had always found a particular kind of happiness in hearing how the birds and the animals went about going to their beds. There was a time when Peter would come out there and stand with her but after Agnes passed away, that was something else that Peter stopped doing. For a long time too, Kate had not gone out there. Life and everything to do with living and especially, the business of happy living, had lost all it's meaning to her and she went about her days shutting herself off from everything and anything to do with her own survival.

It was a thrush that came to her one morning while she was hanging out the washing. The thrush perched herself on the line right next to her showing no fear of Kate at all. This bird sat there staring at her and Kate finally began to grasp that this was very unusual behavior. She could see her own reflection in the bird's big brown eyes and the notion came to her that this was Agnes. The bird broke into song and Kate stood there holding on to the line, her tears streaming down her cheeks... accepting for the first time that she was not the cause of Agnes' dying.

As Kate was crossing the yard to go back inside, a strange eerie feeling took hold of her and for a moment, it stopped her in her tracks. She began to sense that something was wrong inside the house. She hurried her steps and when she got to the front door which she had left open behind her, she could see into the house and back to the fireplace. Peter was there, sitting with his head off to one side of the armchair.

She paused at the door before crossing the floor to him and when she reached out a hand to touch him, he didn't respond. She didn't have to touch him again to know that Peter was gone from her.

After examining Peter, doctor O' Brien told her that Peter had died from a weak heart but Kate was certain that her gentle, kind and loving thirty two year old husband had more than likely died from a broken heart.

Peter's mother, Agnes came down with pneumonia in the late Autumn of nineteen thirty eight, from which she never fully recovered and she died with Kate by her side three days into the new year. Kate's own mother and father died a year apart from one another. Her father first, in nineteen forty two and her mother, the following year, just two days shy of her sixty fifth birthday. From there on, Kate had been left alone to bear the weight of life on her own two shoulders and sometimes when she looked back over her thirty years of being alone, it seemed like a small lifetime to her.

She had left the door open behind Matt when he left and some more of Casey was getting out of the house. She stepped outside into the yard where the last of the lingering fog was beginning to give way to the mid morning sun. She crossed over the cobblestones and stood at the gate and searched for Matt coming back up the road. He was there and again, she felt it a pity that poor ol' Casey wasn't with him. She went out into the road and when Matt saw her there, he quickened his step. If she'd closed her eyes just then, just for one small moment, it might well have been Agnes there in the road. When he got closer, Kate could see the clove rocks bulging out of the side of his jaw. She laughed heartily. He had a beautiful glowing innocence with the way he was smiling to her. She couldn't help but dote on him and he might as well have been her own. She surely loved him that way.

"Was I long Kate?"

"Not at all Matt, you made great time" "S'or I don't know what I'd do only for you."

He passed in the yard before her and into the house, leaving the message bag down on the floor next to Peter's chair. By the time that Kate herself made it to the door, he was there with his hand out, offering her a clove rock.

She took one from the paper wrapping and made sure to shut the door behind her.

The following story is a work of fiction. Some of the events described here are very loosely based on a case surrounding curious incidents that took place in 2004. This is an entirely fictional interpretation of those events and is meant to be interpreted as a work of fiction.

Thief of Shadows

By Nicole M. Bouchard

*“Open the door, my princess dear,
Open the door to thy true love here!
And mind the words that thou and I said
By the fountain cool, in the greenwood shade”- The Frog Prince by the
Brothers Grimm*

One man can be many different things to many different people. To the media, he was a bolded headline; to the general public, he was a punch-line; to those who'd known him before, he was a former promising glory who'd lost his way; yet to his victims, he was a thief of shadows... stealing personal intimacies that should only be given, never taken.

Nine years ago...

The pressure of the sun on his back felt good as he crouched down low to the freshly mowed grass with one hand on the idol he was raised to worship above all others. Drawing energy up from the ground, through the football like a conduit into his hand and upper arm, he felt the soothing steadiness of having purpose. In the deep South, this game was gospel. Flocks of the faithful gathered in tight bunches along the rows of bleachers in the stadiums where they prayed for the play.

Chip Cauldway wasn't an exceptional anything, but on the field he worked harder and longer to carve out an identity for himself. There was no denying his persistence and strength which manifested itself in how he pulled for his teammates. Dependable as rain and humidity, he was a necessary part of the atmosphere of Mica, Georgia's high school football team. It was his junior year and all his aspirations for the future weighed on admittance to New Orleans College. His academic grades made the cut, but weren't nearly high enough to earn a free ride. He was holding back on his application, certain that his greater triumphs awaited in his senior year. Then, then, he would apply for Early Decision and once accepted, would kill himself for the Lions, New Orleans College's prestigious college football team which in his view, seemed like the world stage.

He often came down to the field before the game to psyche himself up. All the janitors and maintenance staff who polished the silver bleachers till they outshone the sun and rode tractors to keep the grass low or re-paint the white lines knew him. He was always the first to arrive and the last to leave. The scent of promise coming off the verdant grass was thick, intoxicating him into a dreamy state of awareness.

Only the light kiss upon the back of his neck shook him out of it. Maryanne Whitman stared down at him with her trademark smile that edged up on the left side of her mouth. Her nose gave a mischievous twitch when he glanced up at her through the blur of morning light. She was one of many in terms of character and appearance. Cobalt blue eyes with a crop of teased, voluminous blonde hair and the slightly overdone orangey tone on her flawless skin showing through her clothes which left little to the imagination. Maryanne had the sort of fair skin that burned easily, so she and her friends had viciously explored the frontier of self-tanners and bronzing lotions with mid-range spf's. Her trim figure and bubbly personality captured Chip's attention on the first day of school in their freshman year. One cheerleader to every football hero; it was an equation that made sense for them, their parents and most probably their future offspring.

"Good game today, baby..." It was something she always said before a big game but he never tired of hearing it. She drew out the word "ba-by" with the sexy drawl of Elizabeth Taylor's character in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Her coconut and lime perfume extended a twisting vapor that tickled him under the chin like a finger. He leaned into it as though being led out onto a window ledge; it was just out of reach and he'd willingly fall to his death going after it. His eyes followed the sway of her skirt long after she'd walked away. It was clear that today had to be a win. Somehow her ardor always cooled when the team lost a game.

It was electric out on the field in the second half of the game. Time was slipping down the sides of their faces in the humid aftermath of a storm that had swept in earlier around noon. Chip tugged at the collar of his jersey. It felt like he was being held down and suffocated. He had a burning bitter taste in his mouth like lightning striking dry brush. His teammates felt the heaviness under the purple afternoon clouds. At that moment they all would have sacrificed six months of beer for a single drop

of rain.

Water would've steamed upon contact with their skin. It was a home game and the cheerleaders brought the heat up about ten degrees when they did their routine to the throbbing tempo of Snap's "Rhythm is a Dancer".

The visiting team on defense were fast on their heels and the clock seemed to be speeding up rather than slowing down. One more play...

Chip wasn't the first choice for things like this but the star kicker was in the hospital with a broken knee. The coach had made it clear. It was a tight formation on the line of scrimmage. The holder was Ky Smithons- long snapper. Chip was placekicker for the attempted field goal to gain the last three points that would end the war. It was only a few seconds but it felt like the world was at a standstill.

With a semi-circle maneuver to come around to it like an eagle swooping down on its prey, he executed the classic soccer-style kick that he'd practiced for two years.

As much as he tried to remember that moment in its exact, pain-staking detail in future years, it was simply blank. The roar of the crowd came next. Screams for the home team showered down in streams. The game was over. A seventy-yard field goal. His teammates dog-piled him. He caught a glimpse of Maryanne, mid-air, with her hands clasped together. They'd won.

The Georgia High School Sports Association had a soft spot for Chip Cauldway- hero of the hour who'd won them one of the most significant games of the year.

The streamers, the cheers, the confetti, comped meals, parties, and the object of Maryanne's newly discovered erotic wickedness, Chip felt the roar of the crowd roosting in the pit of stomach. Good fortune kissed his cheek once more on the mild winter day of his senior year when his college acceptance letter arrived.

2002 (Nine years later)

The novelist Anne Rice had once referred to Louisiana as the one place in the US that possessed the exotic, mystical qualities of the Caribbean. That was the reason Jasmine had chosen to rent the house there with her cousins who would also be Freshman entering Lafayette College that semester. They were a little more on the wild side and loved a chance to go partying with upperclassmen. Shyly, Jasmine would decline and confront the ever-growing pile of homework from her heavy course load.

Too exhausted to fold the laundry as she often was, she went to her room and slowly undressed for bed. Though she loved the climate, her heart was heavy from being homesick. Closing her eyes, she could imagine New York with its endless lights and vibrant energy. The leaves she knew would be turning their fiery reds and golds. It was October. She hadn't been gone long enough to miss the chill, but autumn in Central Park called to her.

Once she'd slipped on an over-sized Yankee's tee-shirt, she crawled under the sheets. Her silhouette gleamed in moonlight. Even with window open, it was quiet. This was a new luxury which she'd never experienced growing up. She'd have to merge the best of both places to settle in properly. Outside of her cousins, she hadn't had the opportunity to meet many people. There was the guy in the café who noticed her lack of accent and had asked if she was from up north. He was a scruffy older guy, but he seemed to sense her loneliness so he bought her a cup hot chocolate and had them put a bit of nutmeg on the whipped cream so she could think of fall. He asked her polite questions about back home. She knew he was just indulging her, but it had been nice to reminisce nonetheless.

Her advisers had been understanding about the switch too, which she appreciated. It was an adjustment... it was all an adjustment.

Lulled to sleep by the warmth of the air and visions of home, she was deeply unaware of the sound at the window.

A figure crept past her bed as she slept. They folded the laundry that they knew would be there. They ate leftover pizza which they found in the fridge. Then carefully, quietly, they came back into the bedroom and watched her sleep. Without disturbing the sheet drawn over her, he laid down with her back to his chest. Deeply inhaling her scent, his head rested upon the edge of her pillow. He whispered softly, *"Open the door, my*

*princess dear,
Open the door to thy true love here!
And mind the words that thou and I said
By the fountain cool, in the greenwood shade..."*

*

Trade winds came in through the slats in the faded green shutters to lightly flutter the edges of the faded newspaper clippings on the chipped walls of his living room. A dim light over the kitchen table gave the only hint that someone still inhabited the space. The humble apartment on the outskirts of Lafayette seemed alone in a realm apart from the rest of the complex. Instead of neat and tidy window boxes to match the other units, dark, unseemly vines crept down the walls as if to swallow the occupant whole. The interior had transformed over the years into the sort of heavily breathing, cool-blooded creature that would dwell at the bottom of the bayous. Neighboring residents familiar with the principles of Voodoo hung charms on the outside of their doors to frighten away whatever dark spirits glided along the halls, having slithered out when the door to apartment 13 was opened- which it rarely ever was. The landlord knew when the rent was late, but rather than heading up to demand it, he would wait a week or so and inevitably an envelope would be slid under his door with the crumpled funds inside. That's how he could tell that the renter was still alive. Once, when the rent was a week and a half late, he bothered himself enough to worry that the young man had died. Mrs. Alvaraz who lived across from 13, saw the landlord ascend the stairs and move to knock on the door.

"Someone came at midnight last night to deliver something. This morning, whatever it was was gone. So don't bother, Larry. I keep a watch on things."

Larry was relieved that he hadn't had to knock. It was a veritable certainty that if something was amiss, Mrs. Alvaraz would know about it. An attractive Jamaican woman in her seventies with gray braids neatly gathered into a bun secured by a silk scarf, she was the matriarch of the complex and kept a protective watch on everyone. Her grandchildren marveled at her uncanny ability to search out their secrets with just one side glance. It wasn't an ability she possessed with strangers, but she could feel things that made her a discerning judge of character. There was a

darkness to the man across the way but it wasn't absolute, either. She stayed alone in the hall after Larry had returned to the office and stared at the door to 13. The phone rang in her apartment- she didn't need caller ID to know it was her daughter. Reluctantly, she stepped back inside her world and tried to forget about what distress was behind that closed door.

In the wake of light over the kitchen table, the man hadn't stirred over the conversation outside his thin walls. The sizable bag of marijuana that had been delivered the night before was already significantly depleted. Bottles littered the floor. The sink and the fridge seemed to be in a high-stakes race to seem which could form more exquisite strains of mold more quickly. The sink was in the lead with the unfair advantage of dirtied dishwater.

If the lightbulb overhead could've turned itself out for shame, it would have. It didn't care for its role in highlighting every mistake and manifestation of sorrow it witnessed. Flickering against its glassy restraints like a lightning bug trapped in a child's airless jar, a hell with good intentions, the light flashed out a code of distress. The glimmers were reflected in the glossy pages on which his face lay glued and still. Frozen faces gazed out from the stylized borders. They were smiling. Always. No matter what.

In the automatic flash, a time capsule was made. A perfect snapshot. Evidence of a perfect world that never changed while these people still had reason to smile. And they were still all together. Class of '94' in fading, embossed silver lettering next to the purple emblem of Mica High; Mica, Georgia was just under his palm.

*

She still loved him. Whenever Trent came by with some random excuse as to why he had to see her, she let him in. Neither of them knew how to say 'no' or 'goodbye'; not to one another. Theirs was a tumultuous on and off relationship with all the curative and destructive attributes of fire. His dark eyes burned whenever he set them upon her. He was supposed to have started dating again, but when her jealousy and judgment made her ignore him, he'd suddenly be available again.

It wasn't entirely unreasonable for her to have called him. Her roommate,

Elizabeth, would be out of town for two nights and there wasn't anyone else who could stay with her. She couldn't travel to stay with anyone because of the art gallery opening. Five girls within ten miles of her had reported an intruder coming into their bedrooms at night when they were alone. He listened closely to her concerns. He wanted to climb out of his skin every time they spoke; it was a raging hypocrisy for him to pretend to be a distant friend to the woman he'd loved since she'd slapped him four years before on a blind date.

"Yeah, I'll come by. I don't want you alone..." he hesitated, "...do you want me to stay?"

She knew what he meant by that. He was asking if he could stay the night and that always led to more than they'd bargained for. If there was a brick wall between them in bed, she'd claw her way through if he didn't get to her first. The whole idea of him staying over had a blinking neon caution sign above it.

"On the couch. In the other room. Down the hall." She wanted to be rational but knew what bitter heartache she'd feel, knowing he was close, but far away. Feeling torn apart, she'd cry herself to sleep and summon the strength to say "Thank you" and "Bye" on the morning of the third day.

After a long pause where she sat with her head in her hands, he finally answered, "Fine. Whatever you want."

They both remained on the phone saying nothing and everything in their silence. She hung up first.

*

When he crawled back into consciousness, he saw that he'd passed out on the yearbook. Maryanne's eyes twinkled with ambition as she clutched onto the arm of a younger version of who he used to be.

"F*&^in' bitch!" he yelled as he threw the book into the wall.

He regretted the sudden guttural burst of sound and clutched his head.

It was all a second ago... forever ago. The curse...

A green pallor had settled onto his skin. No one in that book would recognize him now.

When a breeze disturbed one of the newspaper clippings on the wall, he jumped up with surprising agility to press it hard back into place with the cheap tape holding it up.

If just one piece of what he'd built up fell apart, so would he. He'd disintegrate like the paper itself, just dusty grains of the past.

There was a bookshelf in the apartment with no books in it. A few dead plants and cobwebs had laid claim to the uppermost shelves. On the last shelf, there were some torn pieces of paper paper-clipped together. Next to them was the old five-subject he'd used in his last year at school. Five years old with a missing cover and limp pages sagging together, the wire spiral that had started to unwind at the top, leaving a sharp edge that often caught on the skin of his fingers. This was where he kept the whole mess of it. One shelf. No other evidence of what he'd become- this way he didn't have to face up to it when he didn't want to. Shaky penmanship and smeared ink recorded, within the blue lines of each page, all the information gathered about each one of the women. Their schedules, addresses, who they lived with, personalities, jobs, and any personal facts he could come across.

Jasmine Cardoza- 19yrs. old/ Occupation- Student/ Lives with Maria and Lacy Cardoza/ Origin- NYC/ few friends, single, homesick, many calls home, in by 7pm on weeknights, frequents Midstreet Café on Tuesdays, never orders coffee...

Lindsey Holden- 23yrs. old/ Occupation- Secretary/ Lives alone/ Origin-local/ part-time caretaker of elderly parent, single, dating-site profile specifies a love of antiques, drops by Yearly's on Saturdays, arrives home from work around 10 pm...

Rachel Whittmore- 24yrs. old/ Occupation- Gallery curator/Lives with Elizabeth Jenkins/Origin- Tennessee/ single for six months, tickets arrived for Elizabeth Jenkins, departing Thursday (File Incomplete)

The pages paper-clipped together were torn from a library book he'd stolen the previous year. The book was *The Collected Tales: Brothers Grimm*. The excerpt was the story of "The Frog Prince."

It was all so clear when he put the pieces together. His senior year had ended well enough. He was going to the college he wanted. The fuss made over his junior year had died down through his lackluster plays afterward. Still, he felt himself riding high on the fumes of that success. Now that he'd become a student, he was ready to attend tryouts for the college team. There wasn't a single doubt in his mind that his greater glories would come on that field. Everything in between the winning game of the season in '93 and that moment walking toward the tryouts was simply a time of saving up the best of him.

In the way that small children often do, he had built up the idea of an absolute with no doubts, no back-ups, no rationality; he would be a star player for The Lions. It began and ended with that. There was no other play in mind. He'd be a famous football hero and marry Maryanne so that he'd spawn little football heroes in his image.

The stretched-thin legend he'd woven about himself broke into shards that fell with each heavy step as he staggered from the field. His body moved but his mind stayed with fractured focus... One part of him zoomed into the expression on the coach's face as he shook his head and moved his pen across the clipboard, slicing Chip's name in two. Another skipped like a cd, repeating the same loud verse over and over again, unable to get past what he'd believed since he was a boy. A third part of him refused to believe what had just transpired. It was this third part of his mind that would see to his undoing. Yet unable to shield himself, the blow pierced his armor as a blade through tissue paper.

No one saw the deep thunderous clouds converging overhead as each ray of light was consumed. To the rest of them, it was still a sunny September day. No else could see the earth breaking apart. They couldn't feel the black vapors rising from the flames that sprung up to replace each blade of grass. They couldn't hear the warning cry tear their ears to shreds.

Trembling in the dorm room with a cold that drew the marrow from his bones, he reached for the phone. Was he dead? Was it real? The pervasive

cold threaded itself into his veins. It was too late.

The transformation had begun.

Maryanne's voice sounded so removed as he tried to choke out the words to tell her he was drowning.

"Look, hun... I've been meanin' to talk to you... so whatever's goin on- just save it... Ya know Lonnie? Yeah... well... I've been seein' im'... all summer, actually. I didn't mean to hurt ya baby, but I mean, Lonnie went and got a job right outta high school at some firm in Atlanta... Anyway, I'm marryin' im'... Aw, come on, Chip... Did you really think you'd be some kina' all-star..?" She laughed with a deep, gritty inflection that came out when she was disgusted. It shattered the Liz Taylor femininity. "Look- I can't waste my time while you're wastin' yers in school... You were only ever half good at most things, great at nothin'... I need to take my chances... So what?... You're not gonna say shit?" She'd kept such a tight leash around his collar that she half-expected him to comfort her out of the small guilt she felt. Pissed at his silence and the lack of tears, she willed herself to deliver the final punch that would leave him on the ropes. "By the way, ba-by, he's a much better f&*^ than you..."

Whether or not she said anything else, he'd never know. His hand placed the phone back on the receiver. For the next few weeks he wandered around in a stupor that allowed him to do the normal things as if nothing was amiss. The B's and C's slipped into D's. By the following year, he was careening through the thorny branches of F's until he finally stopped attending school. They would have failed him out regardless.

His family still sent him money for school. He hadn't spoken to them for three months. Taking a semester's worth of tuition, he got a small apartment in Lafayette. Working odd jobs here and there he was scraping by even when tuition checks cut out after his parents received a letter from the college. Hyped up on drugs and whatever dangers he could discover in dark alleys once the sun went down, it was a kind of living while dead. No feelings, no problem. His world was becoming darker and smaller. As he crept in company of shadows, hardly revealing himself, it seemed that he too was becoming darker and smaller.

He'd lose every card game he played, get the worst shifts at his jobs, and a strange plague of flies had invited themselves into his apartment. They flew out of the closet, clung to the walls in numbers, and as many as he killed, they'd return with even more reinforcements. They were small with blackish-green luminescent bodies. He'd never seen that kind before.

When he signed on for gator-trapping, his co-workers found it strange that he did his work fearlessly, with little experience. When a trap was being wrestled off of a large alligator that had the misfortune of coming into part of it, Chip was called down. The gator had snapped at all the others. It had heartless, ancient eyes. It stopped its thrashing to stare at Chip once he arrived there. He stared back. Once freed, the gator slipped silently back into the water, away from him. It could've been construed as a good thing, but no one saw it that way. Exceedingly superstitious, they saw that even monsters evaded his company. The forty-year old who shared the shift with him ceased their conversations even though he talked too much and they were largely one-sided anyway. He handed Chip a beer before walking away. "You're f*&%in' cursed, man..."

Had Chip the inclination to answer him, he would have said matter-of-factly, "I know."

Yet hearing the word out loud tugged on the tails of his inner demons.

It soon became an obsession. He thought back to the place where he had first learned about curses and spells and their reversals. At the library late at night, he'd confine himself to a study room surrounded by tomes on the subject. These weren't books on witchcraft or Voodoo or new age Wiccan remedies. He needed to follow an outline, a formula that matched his situation. His resources could be found in the children's section. Folktales, fairy tales, fables... Grimm, Anderson... Until something finally resonated. He smuggled the book out under his sweat-shirt. Deciding he needed only one section, he tore it out and threw the book in a dumpster.

Those pages carefully clipped together were the answer. His ultimate play book.

He'd been cursed by an evil witch. That was why he'd never made the team. Every misfortune stemmed from Maryanne's cruel infidelity. She'd

taken him from his princely status and shrunk him down to a slimy frog who dwelt in the bottom of the well. He would find a worthy maiden, do a good deed for her, just as the frog had retrieved the golden ball, and then he would enforce the bargain the frog had made in order to free himself:

“If you will love me, and let me live with you and eat off your golden plate, and sleep upon your bed...”

He read every version of the story and reconciled himself to a plan. He would study single young women, learn their heart’s desire, do a kind deed toward that end, and go to where she lived. He’d eat from her plate, and then lay down beside her to sleep upon her pillow. It would work with one of them. They’d see him as a prince and the curse would be broken.

*

It was raining when he arrived. He had picked up a pizza. Hesitating before knocking on the door, he wondered what to say. The door swung open. He looked up in surprise.

“Rachel...”

“Hey, Trent...”

He looked from the peach sundress up to her face. Her straight chestnut hair had a slight wave to it. Those eyes had a light in them that he could never explain. His chest tightened as he moved past her into the apartment with the thought of how he’d often smothered that light when he’d made her cry.

“I didn’t expect dinner... That’s great. I set up a pillow and everything over there for you. I... really appreciate this.”

Unable to summon up the right words, he smiled at her and set the pizza down, along with a liter of soda. There were stools by the counter. He grabbed two plastic cups from the cabinet.

“Soda?”

“Sure”. She had turned to get plates and napkins.

Knowing it wouldn't be an easy night, he poured soda for both of them, but slipped a healthy amount of rum in his.

He was looking over at the television as she arranged the cups and plates for them.

He sat down next to her when she was ready. They both reached for a slice of pizza and laughed nervously when their hands touched.

After they'd each had a bite, he made small talk about his job. "What do you think? I really want your opinion."

Glad that he asked, she put down the pizza and faced him. "I think it's good for you. I'd rather see you doing something you're passionate about rather than just working for your uncle. You don't want his paperwork life. This is good."

He nodded. "I'm really psyched about it... I know it's new but it feels..."

She reached for her drink while listening to what he was saying. His body language was tense but there was a gentleness in his face. She blinked hard not to notice and took a deep swig of the soda so that the cup nearly covered her view of him.

Trent broke off his speech when she suddenly lurched forward and spit the drink back into the cup. By the wideness of her eyes and the way she wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, he already knew what had happened and what would happen.

The cups had accidentally been switched.

Gasping for breath and tearing at the eyes, she swore as she struggled off the stool and went over to the sink to pour out the cup's contents.

If he stayed still enough and bore the onslaught, would it undo the damage?

"I can't believe you! You swore you'd stopped drinking! If you thought I wouldn't smell it off of you, you must think I'm pretty damn stupid... God, I

can't believe you would do this to me... You never tell the truth! You never change!"

It was the bad history of his drinking and what it had done to them that made the incident as awful as it was. He wanted to rewind the moment, get back to where she was proud of him, get back to when he'd poured the drinks in the first place.

"Rachel, Rachel... I didn't... I don't drink like that anymore. For some reason, I don't know why, I thought tonight would be a little awkward, ok?! Guess I was right! Maybe I could handle you with a few drinks in me!"

In his temper, he always said the very things he didn't want to say. It was never what he meant. He couldn't get the right words out to her. Rarely ever could.

"OH- so *I* drive you to this? It's my fault?.. Take some responsibility! Maybe if you weren't so drunk that night maybe you wouldn't have gone after that stupid slut!"

"I did not go after her! That was forever ago! I didn't want her so get over it!"

He wished there were subtitles to his sentences so she could see the words translate into what was really meant. Whatever semblance of peace there was was over. She was silent. That, above any of her screaming, crying or arguing was the worst. Following her stare, he saw the door. How minutes had it been? If he could time all their good moments and put them together, it would be enough for him to live only those moments in a lifetime.

If he stayed another second, he knew he'd do something else that would make it even worse.

She didn't allow herself to cry until the door was shut.

*

When he drove past, he saw two shadows near the window. She was

supposed to have been alone. He'd have to come back the next night. He didn't mind the wait. She was the prettiest in his opinion. When he met her at the gallery, she seemed to have such a passion for the artwork. The gallery was doing well, but he knew that she wanted to make a sale where someone genuinely understood the importance of the work- she was tired of being used as a decorating consultant to the bourgeois. She wanted someone to see and feel through a painting. And he knew which painting meant the most to her. He didn't mind the extra research for her. Art books fell in a domino pattern across his couch. He'd studied the terms. He knew what to say. He knew how to retrieve the golden ball. Chip bought the painting from her the day before. Already he'd sold it at a profit. That part she'd never know. He'd done her a kindness, now it was up to her to break the curse...

*

The next morning didn't wipe away the anguish from the night before as she'd hoped it would. Trent wouldn't come back. Did she have to get so upset with him? Why did he have to say those things? Being thrown in front of a moving vehicle would've hurt less. Yet rumination wouldn't do. There was an opening that she had to do that afternoon and the morning was to be taken up by doing errands for it. Wine, cheese, shrimp... hopefully the woman driving down to help wouldn't insist on making a dish again. The previous time had resulted in a red velvet cake in the shape of a bear with melted M&M eyes because the artist's last name was "Bear".

She couldn't grieve everything out now; it was a saving grace that she wasn't given the time to do so.

Rachel showered and slipped on a sapphire blue silk dress.

There wouldn't be enough time to change.

*

He couldn't wait any longer. She had to understand. She owed him this now.

*

It was only nine o'clock when she turned her key in the lock but she was exhausted. Her eyes were starting to burn from the running eyeliner and her hair was spiraling out the upsweep she'd done that morning. Leaning her head and body against the door, it gave way. She threw her keys on the counter, dropped her shoes from her other hand and walked toward the living room even though she hadn't switched the light on yet. Only the kitchen light was left on. She wanted to crawl towards the couch and go straight to sleep. With her hands rubbing her eyes, she couldn't see him standing there.

An ambulance was going by. She didn't hear her name whispered softly.

With a yawn, she collided with his chest.

She screamed and kneed him in the groin. He struggled not to fall and gripped her shoulders.

Even after he yelled her name, she kept kicking and screaming.

He finally managed to restrain her and she squinted into his face.

"Trent?"

"Rachel... I said your name... I said 'it's me'... who the hell were you expecting?.."

"Well, I... Wait a minute- you're the one hiding in my apartment! I could've had a heart attack!"

"I wasn't hiding, Rachel. I thought you were looking straight at me. I came back tonight cause I knew you wanted me to stay and I wanted to apologize for the other night... I guess I did my job protecting you because I'm the only wounded..."

They both laughed as they stumbled toward the couch. Only then was she conscious that her makeup and hair were a mess. She tried to get up but he gently held her down.

“I know you’re exhausted and want to go get ready for bed. You don’t have to entertain me. I’m just here. Get some sleep and we’ll head out for doughnuts tomorrow morning. I’m sorry, Rache, I’m so sorry about everything the other night... I didn’t mean that. I just... I’m really different and I didn’t want you to think...”

“I know.”

“Get some sleep.” He watched her go down the hall as she felt her way along the wall to her bedroom.

She washed her face and brushed her hair, but she was too tired to take off the dress. Rachel could hear the game on TV in the living room, turned down low. Tugging the covers up over her, she felt safe. He’d come back for her.

*

It was well past midnight when she awoke to careful steps on the hardwood floors. Feeling weight come down on the bed behind her, she kept her eyes closed so that she’d neither be agreeing or disagreeing on Trent’s presence.

*

Trent was asleep on the couch with the TV still on low. It was a fitful sleep that had him tossing and turning. A slight noise rendered him half-awake. Thinking that the TV might’ve been bothering Rachel he felt around the floor for it in the dark. His hand seized it and pressed the power button.

*

She couldn’t help but smile when the warm breath crept upon her pillow.

*

He had already eaten off her golden plate at the gallery opening which he’d attended. He saw that she was still wearing the blue silk dress...

*

Hesitant to speak and shatter the moment, she felt him put his arm around her so that his palm rested on her torso. He was leaning forward to whisper in her ear. She wanted, needed his words- those that Trent always struggled to speak. Then the voice came with the words:

*“Open the door, my princess dear,
Open the door to thy true love here!
And mind the words that thou and I said
By the fountain cool, in the greenwood shade...”*

*

Trent sat up on the couch. He'd heard a few steps but maybe she'd gone back to bed.

*

A horrible sickness came over her when she recognized the voice. She wanted to scream but frozen with fear like in a nightmare, the sound barely came out... Trent was all the way down the hall with the TV on...

Feeling her form go rigid, the intruder quickly covered her mouth. Instinctively, she swung out her arm to knock the lamp off the nightstand.

*

Wondering if it was appropriate, Trent was already on his way to her room to look in on her when the crash happened. He ran forward and didn't bother checking the lock on the door- at a run, he kicked it open. The shock of what was happening had rendered the intruder slow and stunned. None of the others had been like this...

Chip was seized by the throat and thrown into the wall. Barely able to breathe, Rachel jumped up out of bed and ran into the hall to call 911. Trent punched him hard enough to render him unconscious.

*

Comparing evidence, witnesses and obtaining a testimony, Chip Cauldwell was convicted on all six counts. Letters from his former high school teachers, his coach and his family poured in to convince the judge to be merciful. Chip's lawyer attributed the odd behaviors to the pot and drinking that ensued during Chip's depression after not making the college team.

Much to the surprise of the media and the general public, he was released with three years probation. It was heavily considered that he'd once been known for a great football play and had been an all-around fair-tempered individual.

Perhaps, just perhaps, he thought, in her own way, the last girl had broken the spell. He was finally remembered.

Just the same, his landlord finally had good reason to post an eviction notice on his door and he did so with relief. Mrs. Alvaraz had a warm heart, but she refused when the lawyer asked her to write a letter on his behalf. She told the gentleman that he needed tough love and real help instead of a slap on the wrist.

The newspapers created names for him; Chip Cuddles-well, Psycho Spooner, Mr. Wacky Wonderful, Freaky Frisker... and the public responded with jokes from men and women saying that although he was a little sick, their spouses didn't spoon or cuddle or do laundry... some men wanted the deal he had- free food, free cuddles, disappearing in the morning...

Everyone thought of it differently.

Yet the victims didn't see the lighter side of it. Though they were physically unharmed, their safe, personal space had been violated. An intimacy had been stolen and no good deed could justify it.

Rachel met with the other victims. Few took it seriously so they formed their own small support group and dealt with their fears of intrusion, being alone, being watched, being deceived...

*

It was clear to Trent that night that he should've been with her, beside her. They found their way back to one another and made sure it was for the right reasons. By and large, Rachel, and all of the other women, healed from the incident and got their courage back. The only tell-tale sign was that Rachel forbid Trent from sleeping behind her; he said he didn't mind because he preferred looking at her as she slept.

MENUDO

by Mark Barkawitz

I woke late Sunday morning to Joy's wet tongue licking my cheek. "Will you get out of my face..." I rolled over to get away from her. I'd fallen asleep on the couch. Passed-out would probably be a better way to put it, because I still had on my clothes from last night. My mouth tasted like glue. But Joy—a big golden retriever with the broad head of a Saint Bernard—wanted out. She jumped on my shoulder and wasn't going to quit bugging me until I got up. So I got up. A warhead detonated in my skull and the fallout spread over my body. Atom, my older dog, was asleep in the corner. I roused him and let them both out the back door. They were good dogs and usually stuck around the yard, so I didn't have to worry about them.

I needed some aspirin. The aspirin bottle was on the stove next to the instant coffee. There was only one aspirin left. I grabbed my coffee cup from the sink and filled it with water. There were still coffee stains on the bottom of the cup, but I didn't figure they'd kill me. I shot down the aspirin with one gulp and turned on the burner under the tea kettle. Then I put a spoonful of instant Yuban into the cup and waited. The kettle didn't whistle and I got tired of waiting, so I grabbed it anyway. Nothing. I'd forgotten to put water in it. To hell with it.

I went back to the living room, sat on the couch, and massaged my temples. A crumpled beer can lay on the carpet and an empty half-pint of Jose Cuervo stood alone on the coffee table. The ashtray was spilled on the floor. The TV Guide lay spread-eagled in front of the TV, but I couldn't remember how anything got there. Where Ginny's picture had hung—on the wall above the TV—only a nail was left sticking out of the cracked plaster. Hadn't she been here last night? Yep, we'd had a fight. A good one. There was no sign of her

picture anywhere. My head felt like the Red Sea splitting open. I needed more aspirin. And some coffee. I knew my neighbor, Anna, would have some, so I figured I'd try to make it over to her place.

Anna was a really nice girl. Just twenty-one. A little young for a slightly older dog like me, who was approaching thirty but presently feeling like sixty. She had moved here a couple months ago. I was sitting on my porch, relaxing with my dogs, when a moving van drove by. It pulled into a driveway just down the block and a big Latino man, who'd been driving, got out and began opening the back doors of the van. I couldn't see Anna, because she'd gotten out on the other side. Then I recognized the man. It was Al Sanchez. I'd worked construction with him a few years back. He'd been my foreman. When the construction company we worked for ran short of work and I got laid-off with the rest of the guys who were short on seniority, he used to invite me over to his house for dinner. His wife, Alice, sure was a good cook. That's when I first met Anna. She was just seventeen then.

The dogs and I went over to say 'hi'. They remembered me right off. I helped Al move the heavy stuff, like the couch and Anna's bed. He told me he was glad to find out that I lived almost next door, because he and his wife were worried about their daughter's moving out. She was the baby of the family, their only girl, and the last child to leave home. I promised I'd keep an eye on her and I think that made him feel better.

It was sunny outside, which made me squint. I didn't see Joy and Atom, but figured they were probably out back somewhere. They liked to lie together in the tall grass under the sun, like a retired couple on a Florida beach. At first, the walking seemed to help, but after a few steps it made my head pound even worse. Good thing Anna lived so close. I couldn't have made it much farther. I knocked at her back door.

"Who is it?"

"Me."

She unlocked her door and opened it. Smiling, wearing shorts and an old T-shirt, her long hair was tied back. "Hi. Oh, you look terrible."

"I feel terrible. Do you have any aspirin?"

“Sure. Come on in, pal.”

“Thanks.” I followed her into the kitchen and leaned against the counter while she went to get the aspirin. When she returned, she poured me a glass of water. I shot down the aspirin and killed off the water.

“How was your night?” she asked.

“Good question.”

“Well?”

“I had another fight with Ginny,” I said. “Then I went to some bar. The Raven and the Rose, I think. It’s a little fuzzy after that, but I must’ve had a good time. ‘Cause I sure feel like hell this morning.”

She shook her head. “I wish you wouldn’t do that kind of thing. You know I worry about you.”

“I know. I worry about me, too.” Then my head began to pound again. I closed my eyes and rubbed them. “Do you have a spare cup of coffee for a friendly lush?”

“Come sit in the living room.” She led me by the hand to the big recliner in the front room. “Sit back,” she said. “I’ll put some menudo on the stove for you instead.”

“‘Menudo’? What’s that?”

“It’s Mexican soup made from tripe. A great cure for hang-overs according to Father. Mom makes it for him. I think I have a little in the fridge.”

“Tripe? That’s cow stomach, isn’t it?”

“Um hm.”

“I think I’d rather have coffee.”

"I'll strain it for you. The broth is really all you'll need." She went to work in the kitchen. "You have to stop doing this to yourself." She took something out of the refrigerator.

"I know. I will. How was your night? Did you see Billy?" Billy was her boyfriend.

"I saw him." She put the pot of menudo on the stove and wiped her hands on the dish towel. Then she came over and sat on the arm of the recliner. "Relax," she said, and began rubbing my temples. I could smell the spices from the soup on her hands. "I was ready at eight. He finally showed up at eleven. Said he'd forgotten. Then all he wanted to do was jump in bed with me. I got mad. I probably shouldn't have, because then he got mad. We argued for awhile. He finally left about one."

I didn't say anything. I opened one eye. She was looking at me.

"No, I didn't go to bed with him."

For some reason, that made me feel better.

"The soup should be ready." She got up and strained the menudo into a large coffee cup, then brought it in to me. I sipped it slowly because it was hot and very spicy.

"Do you think you'll make up?" she asked me. She leaned over the back of the chair and started rubbing my neck and shoulders.

"Nope. Not this time."

"That's too bad. You made a nice couple."

"That's what I thought." She didn't say anything, so I added. "To hell with her."

"Be nice."

"To hell with 'nice,' too." She stopped rubbing me. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm still sore."

“You’ll get over her. Things work out for the best.”

I had to laugh. Things hadn’t always worked out for the best with me and women. “How’s your dad?”

“He’s fine. He wants to know when you’re going fishing with him?”

“Oh, I forgot all about that.” He’d invited me the last time I’d seen him. That was just after Anna had moved in. He’d come by to see how she was doing. I got the impression he and his wife weren’t particularly fond of Billy. “I’ll call your dad tomorrow.”

She smiled. “By the way, did you ever get around to cleaning that house of yours?”

“Not yet. Vacuum’s still broken.”

“I’ll bring mine over later.”

“Forget it. I appreciate the offer, but it wouldn’t be right.”

“But I hate to see you live like that?”

“It’s not so bad.”

“It’s a mess.”

“So it’s a mess. I’ll clean it up this afternoon.”

“You’d better or I’m coming over with my vacuum.”

“No, thanks anyway. I’ll clean it.” I finished off the menudo and we talked a little longer. Then she had to get ready for church. I got up to leave and she walked me to the back door. She kissed me goodbye on the cheek.

“I’ll see you later,” she said. “Hope you’re feeling better.”

“I am. Thanks.” When I got home, my dogs were on the porch. We went inside and I turned on the TV. There was a football game on. Rams were playing the

Saints. It was a close game. But I couldn't get interested. Anna was right; my house was a mess. So I grabbed a waste basket and started picking up. It was soon full. I put the empty Jose Cuervo bottle on top and went outside to empty it. Atom and Joy followed me around back. I took the top off the nearest barrel. At the bottom lay Ginny's picture—face up, staring right back at me. It sort of startled me, I guess. Anyway, I just stared down at it for awhile. It was a good picture of her, taken last Christmas with my decorated tree in the background. She was holding up the gold necklace I'd given her and smiling, but now her rosy cheeks looked like a chipmunk's. I dumped the trash in on top. The glass broke in the frame when the tequila bottle hit it. The empty beer cans and cigar butts helped to cover it up. I put the top back on the barrel and started back up the driveway, lamenting that I hadn't separated the trash. Oh, well. Atom and Joy walked in front, wagging their tails as if nothing in the world were wrong. Dogs were great that way. Then they spotted Delilah, one of the neighbor's cats, and took off after her.

At dusk, I sat on the porch, sipping a Coors. Atom slept at my feet. Joy sat on the lawn, scratching herself. Ronnie rode by on his bicycle. He was around my age but mentally deficient and physically deformed. He lived with his mother in an old, two-story house at the end of the block. They rented out rooms. He rode a girl's bike because it was easier for him to get on and off. There was a basket attached to the handlebars, but it was usually empty. To even himself out, on one foot Ronnie wore a special shoe with a built-up sole, which dragged when he walked. His hair was a dark crew-cut that didn't hide the long, surgical scar behind his ear. His eyes stared off in different directions.

"Hi!" he yelled to me.

"Hi, Ronnie. How's it going?"

He stopped his bicycle in front of the porch and leaned on his good leg. The dogs didn't seem to notice. "Oh, fine. Keepin' busy at work. Makin' lotsa' spoons." Like a tape, it never varied.

"That's good, Ronnie." No one knew exactly where Ronnie worked or what he did with his spoons, but he made lots of them somewhere.

"Well, gotta go now." He started to pedal away. "Don't forget my name's Ronnie."

“Yeah, Ronnie. I won’t forget.” I chugged down the rest of my beer and got up to go inside, when Anna walked up.

“So how’s the clean-up going?” She smiled. She wore little make-up—needed none—and her long hair hung loosely over lightly-tanned shoulders bared in a summer top.

“It’s a work-in-progress.” I crushed the beer can under my sneaker.

She nodded. “Have you had dinner yet?”

“Food? That sounds like a good idea.”

“I’m making stew.” She smiled again.

“Sounds irresistible.” And I smiled again, too.

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