

Coq & Bull

Volume 1 Issue 2

Summer 2009



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Cover photo: Erin Whitson
Erin Whitson Photography
St. Louis, Missouri
www.erinwhitson.com
erin@erinwhitson.com

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User Beware

Dave Klix
Lebanon, Tennessee
www.myspace.com/daveklix

Words flow through the pen to the paper, like water raging down a river to the sea.
Thoughts in my head aching, like a caged animal yearning to be free.
Sentences become verses, bringing it all to life.
Sugarcoating sweetness in a heart, or piercing like a knife.

The slash of a pen can dishonor a name.
Can build someone up, or put them to shame.
So powerful, it can incite madness with a few swift strokes on a line.
It can melt or break a heart, whether it be yours or mine.

The pen in the wrong hands can maim like a gun.
Can set emotions on ice, or make them hotter than sun.
The pen can put people in love, or make two countries hate.
Can bring riches beyond dreams, or decide your fate.

User beware, the pen can be a weapon so strong.
Can start wars in far places, or tame the heart with a song.
It's the pen in my hand that form words made from ink.
The pen is the tool that hears what I think.

Bliss

Mary E. Mann
San Diego, California

maryemann@gmail.com

Henry Lister, who goes by Hank, works at the front desk of Wine-Dark Sea, a publication geared toward overly literary wine snobs. Wine-Dark Sea puts out an issue on the fourth Thursday of every month. On the second Tuesday of the month, a day like any other, Henry Lister had much on his mind and little on his plate. The desk was quiet, the day winding down. It was a little after three o'clock in the afternoon. Henry Lister, known as Hank, sat next to the silent phone, staring at his computer background, a simulated rolling green field. The computer calls this image "Bliss."

The phone rang, pulling Hank out of "Bliss." He answered the phone automatically:

"Thank you for calling Wine-Dark Sea, this is Henry."

"Hi, Henry, how's it going?" said a jovial, comfortably well-moneyed voice. This wasn't anyone Henry knew. The familiarity grated on him.

"Well, thank you. What can I do for you?"

"Henry, I'm just wondering whether the Simian Estate Cab is going to be critiqued in this issue. If not, I have good money that says it ought to be. Is George in?"

George Montgomery Jr. is the editor of Wine-Dark Sea, an extremely satisfied and moody older man. Wine snobs ogle at his knowledgeable feet. Wine-makers fly him to their estates, humbly offering up their best.

"Please hold while I check Mr. Montgomery's availability. What's your name?" Henry said stiffly. He pressed the hold button and set the phone down. He rolled his eyes at it, then picked it back up and pressed another button. The phone rang once, and a woman answered.

"George Montgomery Jr.'s office, this is Lina speaking," she said.

"Lina, it's Henry, a Frank Devro is on line three for George."

"Thanks, Henry," and Lina clicked off.

Hank felt alone, now that he had been and was no longer on the phone. He looked out into the office waiting area, a few empty chairs on either side of an end table, on which lay a copy of the latest issue of Wine-Dark Sea.

Hank sighed and turned back to his computer. He clicked the mouse a few times on nothing. "Bliss" taunted him with its placid rolling green hills. He bent down and

reached for the shelf underneath the desk where he keeps his personal things – a box of crackers, a pack of cigarettes, a box of tissues, a packet of trail mix, a cell phone, and a stack of magazines. On top was an issue of the New Yorker. He pulled it out and began to leaf through, stopping on an article about Norway.

“The four main banks of Norway,” begins the article, “have declared bankruptcy.”

Hank looked up. He thought about the recent layoffs at Wine-Dark Sea. He thought about the relative unimportance of such a bourgeois magazine in an era of economic turmoil. He thought about trying and failing to find a new job, and dying hungry, penniless, homeless, and unknown. He thought that maybe it was time to get back together with his girlfriend...

Or maybe it was time to read something else. He turned the pages, trying and failing to ignore the pictures of pale Norwegians in thick jackets, picketing in front of government building, or waiting in lines outside the supermarkets, their pockets stuffed with bills and coins. Hank isn't even sure what the currency is in Norway. At least, he reasoned, he lives in California. He might become homeless, but he won't freeze. His life would just be so tragically like “Grapes of Wrath,” the definite economic hardship book.

The next article he flipped to was about an artist, Hugh de Konecny. Apparently, at least according to the author, de Konecny was one of the most brilliant and promising artists that ever lived. That is, until he killed himself. The meaningless of existence finally got to him. He hung himself from the sawed-off rope of a child's swing in the backyard of his home, leaving a masterpiece three-quarters finished in the tool shed for his wife to find.

Hank felt ever so slightly panicked. He closed the magazine and took a few deep breaths. He looked around the office. Behind the glass doors to his left, he could see Lina crossing the hallway. Her gaze was on the paper in her hand. She crossed into the opposite office without glancing through the doors to Hank. In a few moments, he heard a tinkle of laughter coming from the office.

Hank sat like a drowning man at his clean and well-managed desk in the empty front office of Wine-Dark Sea. He felt sweat rise at his temples. He thought about going home. But really he couldn't go. The thought of possibly losing his job created an icy panic that gripped his heart like a vise. That would be the final confirmation, assuring the world that Henry Lister, who went by Hank, was clearly a loser.

“Hank? Oh, he couldn't even keep a receptionist job. He lives under a bridge now,” he imagined his ex-girlfriend telling her friends.

Hank wiped his face with one of the tissues on his shelf. He glanced at the shelf, and pulled out the packet of cigarettes, Parliament Lights. What they used to call P-Funks in college. He swallowed down how that memory felt and tucked the P-Funks in

his back pocket. He pulled a piece of paper out of the printer tray and bent over it, printing neatly, "Back in five minutes, please wait."

He hung the sign on the front of his desk with two pieces of scotch tape. He glanced through the glass double doors, saw no one, and so he walked quickly out the office doors, into the hall, and shortly into an elevator. The slow descent was almost unbearable. He fiddled with his lighter. He hummed an off-key rendition of "When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore," to normalize himself.

In a few minutes he was out on the street, strolling around the building and lighting a cigarette. He sat on a curved planter wall, leaning his head back so that the sun warmed his face. He inhaled deeply from his P-Funk. The smoke filled him. He exhaled a cloud of smoke, settling deep into the ritual. The smallness of it was comforting.

It didn't used to matter so much, this need for meaning. He didn't used to feel this way about life. A year ago, he would have skipped over both articles in The New Yorker out of boredom most likely, and would have spent his last hours of work surreptitiously checking his Facebook account. He would have sent a flirty message to a girl of his choice. When work let out, he would have left quickly, with a rakish grin to the slightly older but sexy Lina. He would have gone to the gym with his roommate, marveling at his well-formed body, then would have showered at home, usually with a cold beer in the shower caddy. These were the small pleasures of life that Hank particularly enjoyed. He would have gone to a bar and flirted, taking home a girl he'd been working on. He would have gone to bed satisfied.

And now he was not satisfied. And something in him was drawn to those articles, and really any messages of heartbreak, pain and emptiness. It was like they sought him out, all the sad and empty things. Even as he was drawn to them, he resented them, and tried to put them away, bury them behind cigarettes and routine.

He finished the cigarette and stubbed it out on the side of the planter wall. He still felt a downbeat in his head, and so pulled out another P-Funk. He lit it and sucked on it with sincerity. He closed his eyes and blew the smoke out as slowly as he could.

"Well, there's the bright boy himself. Taking a break?" He knew who stood in front of him before he opened his eyes. It was George Montgomery Jr.

"Mr. Montgomery, sir, I was just on my way back upstairs. I hope I didn't inconvenience you," inwardly he cringed at his own acquiescence. He made to put out his second cigarette on the planter wall and hop down, but George Montgomery Jr. waved him down to his seat.

"Don't rush now, there's nothing for you to do up there anyway, not right now. Enjoy your break, Henry."

Hank smiled weakly, resisting the urge to tell him for the first time that he preferred to be called Hank. He didn't have the energy for that kind of conversation. Anyway, the economy was too bad to be correcting his boss.

George Montgomery Jr. gave Hank a cordial nod, then turned and strode off in the direction of the parking garage. Hank watched him, his stylish (and completely unnecessary) trench coat billowing slightly around his well-cut suit. He envied him his unworried self-confidence. George Montgomery Jr. had his life all figured out. Hank didn't know shit. He puffed out an undistinguished puff of smoke. He couldn't even blow smoke rings, and he'd been smoking for six years now.

For some reason that fact disgusted him, and he put out his cigarette anyway, despite George Montgomery Jr.'s order to enjoy his break. Hank didn't enjoy much, lately, anyway. He picked up his first cigarette, which he had laid neatly crumpled next to him on the wall, and took both cigarettes to the garbage can. Then he walked back into the building, breathing out a trapped breath, and rode the elevator impatiently to his office. What was he impatient for?

He burst back into the office, and it was like he had never left. His sign still hung there, by two pieces of scotch tape. No one sat in the seats, or paged through the one issue of Wine-Dark Sea. He sat down in his chair behind the desk and swiveled around. He pulled the sign up and over the desk, tearing it off and leaving little pieces of scotch tape clinging to the desk surface. He reached below his desk and checked his cell phone. He'd been gone from his desk for fourteen minutes. No one had called.

How odd it seemed that he could leave his job and come back to everything the same. How long could he have been gone before anyone noticed? George Montgomery Jr. was gone for the day. Lina would be busy with the day's end paperwork for a while. None of the journalists were there but Sandy, a photographer, using Photoshop quietly in her office.

Hank stopped swiveling and sat straight up. It didn't matter so much anyway, it's not like he had anywhere better to go. He clicked the computer mouse and found himself once again staring at "Bliss." It looked like an idealized version of Missouri, where Hank had grown up and his parents still lived. This field was probably subject to tornados. If it was a real sunny green field in Missouri, it would probably now be a Walmart or part of an industrialized farm, corn spreading as far as the eye could see. Hank tried to imagine people on the field, friends of his, but the only image that he could grasp onto was that of his recent ex-girlfriend. He didn't want her in the field. Maybe that's why the computer programmers chose the title "Bliss", because there were no other people. "Bliss" looked boring.

Hank checked the time on the computer - the numbers read 4:36. He would officially be off the clock in twenty-four minutes. He would just have to kill time until then. He remembered one of his English professors in college, Prof. Hoffman, reading to them from Thoreau, "As though you could kill time without injuring eternity." Hank instantly felt guilty, but really didn't have anything else to do. He fiddled with the computer mouse, looked around, and clicked on the Internet icon. Facebook - the ultimate maimer of eternity.

He didn't really have anything to do on Facebook, and didn't have any girls to flirt with. Against all will and reason, he found himself typing in his ex-girlfriend's name, then clicking on her picture. Her profile popped up on screen. He analyzed her picture - it was new since the last time he'd looked at it. She looked good. She was laughing in the picture, with a friend next to her. They were dressed like eighties icons, probably for some theme party. She had teased her hair out, wore a headband, and had on a big t-shirt with the neck cut out, so the shirt slipped down and exposed one naked shoulder. She looked cool, Hank thought, but then she had always been cool.

He scrolled through the posts on her wall, messages from friends mostly, until he found a message from a guy that he didn't know. The message was brief but flirtatious.

"Coming to Mahoney's on Friday? I still owe you a drink from the pool game the other night. You're a shark :)"

Hank ground his teeth and stared at the message for a few moments, gouging at the wound of jealousy in his heart. God, he was torturing himself, but he couldn't not look. He tried to click on the guy's picture to see his profile, maybe salt the wound just a little more, but he was on a closed network that Hank couldn't access.

Fine, that was fine. Hank clicked on his own profile. In his picture he looked happy, grinning in the warm lights of a bar, dark wood in the background. His ex-girlfriend had been in the picture, but he'd cropped her out when they split up. He looked good, anyway. Reading the posts on his wall just made him feel sad and slightly sick, like he'd just eaten a bag of Cheetos or read a People magazine cover-to-cover. He looked at the time. It was a quarter to five. Completely independent of his own wishes, he clicked on her profile again. Her. He tore at his own heart just a little more, looking at her pictures.

Lina appeared behind the glass door. Hank logged out of Facebook and closed the Internet icon, resuming his docile gazing at "Bliss" just as she approached the desk.

"Henry, any messages?" she asked, resting a piece of paper on the desk.

"No, none," he answered, sitting up straight and meeting her eyes. Lina was what Hank's friends would call a cougar, a woman about ten years older than Hank with a great figure and a beautiful face. "Sexy, and experienced," Hank's roommate had said knowingly when Hank had described her. Once, Hank might have flirted with her. Now, he just tried not to piss her off.

"Ok, that's fine. Listen, I know you're off in five minutes, but I wondered if you would mind filling out this employee survey before you leave. It's a new thing George is doing. Just drop it in my box before you leave," she left the paper on the desk and turned and went back through the glass doors. Hank couldn't even snicker at the "drop it in my box" line. He really was losing it. He looked down at the paper and read:

"How valuable do you think your work is to Wine-Dark Sea? Please Explain."
Shit. He really was going to lose his job.

Less than five minutes later, he dropped the survey in the box on Lina's immaculate desk. She looked up from the papers on her desk. Her glasses were low on her nose, and a halo of frizz was slowly escaping from her chignon. She smiled kindly but not overly encouragingly.

"Thank you Henry. Have a good weekend."

"You too Lina," he stood there awkwardly for a moment, not knowing what to do with his hands for some reason. He turned abruptly and walked out the door. What was that about? Was it possible to become awkward with age? He had never been an awkward person before. Back at his desk he gathered his things. He put his iPod headphones in and turned on Bon Iver, then floated out the door and down the elevator, comfortably ensconced in a protective cocoon of melancholy music. The world was farther away now.

On his walk home, drawn in by the music, he began to think about things, all sorts of thoughts flitting back and forth through his head. He began to think about Her.

She was the first girl, woman really, who he'd felt so strongly about. He met her the summer after college, at a bar in Sacramento. They dated for a year. She was beautiful and cool, everything he wanted and felt like he could be. She made him feel cooler. And sometimes, she made him feel less cool. Like he was just riding on her magic train for a while, only a passenger on the wild ride to success. He elected to get off.

She cried and begged him not to go. He felt great. He said he needed his freedom. He was too young to settle down with just one woman. She nodded, tears running down her cheeks. She said she understood. How did she understand? Hank himself had no idea what he was talking about.

So she disappeared from his life, essentially. She moved back to Boston, where she'd gone to school. She moved in with her best friend. She left only two days after they split. She had never really liked Sacramento anyway. She would be ok.

Hank was left with the crumbling gaping hole of what he had done. The bubble of being on top, of knowing that someone was crying to be with him, that only lasted a few days, a week tops. Then she was gone, and the drama was over. All that was left was the refuse of his former life, an existence now an abandoned house, wallpaper falling in strips from the wall, mouse shit piling in the corners, big anarchist A's scrawled on the wall in spray paint.

The worst part for Hank was that it was all his own doing, and he didn't even know why. Was there any real reason to send packing the only woman who had ever loved him (besides his mother, who showed her love with guilt and strict discipline – that sort of love did not appeal to Hank)? He had no idea what had driven him to it. But it was all his doing, and he was now left with the icily paralyzing fact that maybe he couldn't love, maybe his wiring made him incapable of ever really loving somebody. He very well could have just tossed away his one chance at happiness with someone,

but he couldn't bring himself to commit the act of bringing her back to him. He couldn't call her and proclaim his love, or get on a plane and fly to beg her forgiveness. He just stayed in Sacramento, shuttling from work to home and back in a daze. He comforted himself by thinking that at least he had a job. This was not absolutely comforting, considering the survey he had just filled out with wild abandon, but he had a hard time getting worked up about it.

Bon Iver sympathized with him, singing slowly and tragically in minor chords all the way back to his building. He let himself in and up the staircase to his apartment, which he shared with an old college friend. He slumped in and dropped himself into an easy chair. The late afternoon sun shone through the window, mocking him. He really wished it would rain, for once. The sun made everything look dustier, highlighting the cheap furniture and the peeling posters on the walls.

Hank fell asleep in the easy chair, an unsatisfying shallow sleep in the sun. He woke to darkness creeping in boldly through the slanting blinds. The blinds lifted and shifted. A body slid through and landed hard on the ground.

Hank just stared at it, blinking incomprehensibly. He felt heavy and sluggish. He finally managed to croak out a "hey?"

The form rising from the floor jumped and turned. The light next to him was turned on.

"Jesus Hank, what the fuck are you doing? You scared the shit out of me!" the figure was, he realized, his roommate Berg (Michael Berg, really, but known as Berg to everyone in his life since childhood. Even his mother would slip sometimes and absently refer to him as Berg, as though he were a teammate of hers instead of her youngest son).

"Oh man," Hank ran a slow hand through his hair. It needed to be cut, probably, "I took a nap. Why are you coming through the window?"

Berg dusted off his sleeves, not looking at Hank. He rubbed his hair, removing some debris from the carpet - fuzz, mostly.

"I forgot my keys this morning. I figured you would be home, since you weren't at the gym. But you didn't answer when I knocked, so I used the fire escape. You were assed out, man!" Berg tousled Hank's hair with an absent-minded hand as he passed by, "Hey man, did you eat yet?"

"No," said Hank, who felt immobile, "not yet. I just woke up."

"Yeah," Berg said, pulling a box of pasta from the cupboard, "I know. Don't forget I just jacked my way in here. By the way, we need to start locking the windows. That was like, way too easy."

"Are you making macaroni?" Hank called from his chair, hearing the rattle of dry pasta in cardboard.

"I am making *penne*," Berg read from the box, "would you like some *penne*?"

"Yeah macaroni sounds great," Hank said, reaching for the television remote on the table and turning on the TV. Basketball blossomed on the screen. He relaxed into the comfortable buzz and color.

"Hey man, are you going out tonight?" came Berg's voice from the kitchen.

"Enh, I don't know. I don't really feel up to it," Hank called back.

Berg, having put water on to boil and retrieved a half-empty jar of vodka sauce from the refrigerator to heat up, walked back into the living room and collapsed himself onto the couch, kicking his legs up energetically onto the arm.

"Do you have to be somewhere early tomorrow?" Berg asked, staring at the television.

"No," answered Hank immediately, looking ahead mentally at the long blank weekend. The effort of creating fun for himself seemed monumental, and he was not up to the task.

"And you're not sick, right? And you didn't get fired right, so you have money?" Berg craned his neck around to look at Hank, "So why not go out? Listen man, it totally sucks that you split up with your girlfriend, but you did it to yourself. Snap out of it, you're getting really hard to live with."

"Really, I'm hard to live with?" Hank was genuinely concerned. His friendship with Berg was one of the few positive things in his life. At least if he died, Berg would come to his funeral. That was some comfort.

"Shit man, I had to climb through the window today, because you were so, like, depressed and zonked out you couldn't hear me banging on the door and ringing the bell. Hank, you gotta get out of this funk, whatever it is. The economy is shit, and you have a steady job, with benefits. You're healthy, you're young. Save this shit for when you're locked up in a nursing home. Now is the time to be livin'," Berg jumped up from the couch and loped into the kitchen to pour the pasta in the boiling water.

"Hey Berg," called Hank from his spot on the armchair, "bring me a beer?"

"See, that's what I'm talking about!" Berg said excitedly, walking back in with two popped beers, "Ladies and gentlemen, he's back!"

Hank took a long swallow, feeling the bubbles travel soothingly down his throat, creating a cold pathway down his torso. He closed his eyes. Yes, this was exactly what he needed. Alcohol, why hadn't he thought of that before?

Hank stood uncomfortably against the bar. He was drunk, and careened unstably as he swung himself up and onto a barstool. He took a long swallow of his beer, trying to look suave and worldly, possibly. He glanced over to the end of the bar, where a smoky brunette was talking animatedly with a friend.

He would walk over and say hello. They would have a witty, brilliant conversation together. She would look at him like she must know him from somewhere, with a twinkle in her eye. They would laugh together. Then she would

leave with him. They would walk through the street back to his house. He would show her a constellation that he knew, it didn't matter that he didn't really know any. He would kiss her on the sidewalk, both of them overwhelmed with feeling. They would go up to his house and make slow, passionate love. Then they would stay up all night in bed looking at each other's bodies and talking, realizing how much they had in common. This scenario included soundtrack.

From the end of the bar, he stared at her. He was with her already in a tangle of sheets and legs, crying beautifully and softly at the naked pain of life while they sated each other. He was a tragic figure, and she loved him.

He decided to try. After all, he used to be good at this sort of thing. He walked the length of the bar more or less steadily, and approached the smoky brunette with a smile and only very slightly trembling hands.

"Hi, I'm Hank," he began, smiling. He realized too late that he was defenseless. He was a naked man, all his skin turned inside out to reveal his vulnerable organs - liver, stomach, and pancreas.

"Laurie," her hand went out to shake his, without a romantic hesitation or eye search.

"Do you like to..." here he was lost. What did he like to do?

"I mean, do you like...this band?" he finished lamely, praying that somehow this was right. The band in question was a punk/ska combo on stage in the far corner of the bar. The lead singer wore skinny jeans, had long wild hair, and had been screaming nonsensically into the microphone for the better part of an hour now.

"I'm sorry, what?" she wasn't listening. Her friend next to her, a short thin woman with blonde hair, said something in her ear and the brunette laughed and half-turned from him, in conversation.

"Would you like to get out of here? Maybe go for a walk?" this was it. This was when she would recognize him. Now she would give him that look, like they must have known each other before.

Instead she looked at him, half-smiled, and said "no thanks". It was so anticlimactic, a slow release of all the air in the balloon of his hopes. She turned away. Everything that had just happened in his head flooded out. His heart broke. He knew, rationally, that this was ridiculous and it only made him feel ever so slightly more crazed. He knew what that look she had given him meant.

"Your loneliness would swallow me," her eyes said. He knew it without saying it out loud. He crept, or slunk, back to the other end of the bar. Berg was talking to a girl, probably the same old lines, but he was calm and suave and practiced, and she bought it all up. Someone would be getting laid tonight. Probably no crying involved. Hank wasn't interested. He put down his empty beer on the bar, swayed, and pulled his jacket off of the barstool. He was out the door and into the not-satisfactorily cool evening before Berg could notice that he was gone and try to bolster him up with more

bro talk. He let himself into the dark apartment. He didn't turn on the lights, but found and opened a bottle of red in the kitchen and sat in the armchair. He drank straight out of the bottle. It was soothing. He felt like he might be entering a depression. Well at least he was doing something. He put on the Bon Iver album that always made him feel terrifically full of dark nights and broken hearts and howling and sobs.

Few existences, he felt as he sunk into the chair, were more meaningless than his. He held a minimum of responsibility at a job that a well-trained parrot and monkey, their forces combined, could probably handle. He had no girlfriend, and no prospects. He didn't even get along with his family so well. That was it. Henry Lister, known as Hank, was a certifiable loser.

It felt good feeling sad, like pressing down hard on a wound. Like the children that say "Mommy it hurts when I do this," and then keep pinching their earlobes until they are told to stop. He lay down on the rug and thought of the girl at the bar. He closed his eyes and let the music wash over him. It was the thirty-second time that he had listened to this same album. It dug and wormed its way through his skull. He felt like an aching tragic figure. If only he were being filmed, this breakdown might matter. There were plenty of movie scenes that went this way.

Open Roads and Freebirds

J.J. Kinni

jkinnijr@pmafla.com

When I was ten I took off. The wind scooped me up and took me clear from the backwaters of Louisiana, and propelled me on a path rarely traveled. Just ten and I was already taking to my own way of living. Of course my more formative years were spent running from all sorts of establishment people. Truant officer's attempting to throw me behind a desk and have me learn my sums, Preachers, Priests, Rabbi's, Policemen, the Phillips family from South Kansas, a whole gang of social workers, and let us not forget all the rest of the saps stuck in a life they never imagined would be theirs. You can see it in their eyes. That tired, estranged to the world look in their pathetic, mechanical faces, going through the motions of life with little to show for it. Checking their monies in the bank weekly, regular check ups for the children, church on Sunday, and a shit boss that gives them no respect and even less pay. They cling to these ideas of a bright future, yet they refuse to leave from under the black cloud amassed above them. They tread through life, hoping for a gold mine to land in their lap, or some old aunt out west to die so they can collect their inheritance.

Mother was a Preachers daughter, Father was a drunken bayou resident. Mother would go to church for forgiveness everyday, Father would go to church to sleep off the night before. They loved each other. Mother wanted to name me Gabriel, Father wanted to name me Boy. They chose Madden, Madden Delacroix.

It wasn't enough for me, sitting, waiting to die. I was only ten and the world was far too big for me to sit, ponder my existence, and have no say on how my stars turned out. I didn't know what I wanted, who does at ten, but I knew I wanted out of were I was. So as I said earlier, and I shall say many times, that great wind that came blustering off the Gulf scooped me up and sent me on a path just for yours truly. It has been twenty years since I've seen home. That wind hasn't stopped blowing since.

I started out as most wander lings do, the stick and the sack all tied and over my shoulder. I was a real stinking bum back then, a gangly kid, fresh out the bayou marsh, and into a world of unknown adventure and sought after life. Not even shoes for the feet that I walked with. Father sold them for a fifth of bourbon; Mother told me Jesus wouldn't have complained. I told them, "Goodbye" and never saw them again.

A couple of years go by. I spend most of my time stealing from homes. You know, Apple Pies cooling on windowsills, stuff of that nature, nothing bad, just doing

my part to stay alive and be my own. I mean sure there were instances that I don't think were good, and I maybe shouldn't have done certain things at certain times, but since being on my own, the laws just didn't seem to have much control over my behavior. We all have good and bad in us. What happens if we completely bottle up that more dangerous side? I don't know, but I can tell you I don't want to find out. That's why when I have an issue, I act how I act. Whatever it takes to get that poison out. Some times I feel bad for the poor bastards who have to deal with me at times, but that passes like the days in the week.

By thirteen I managed to steal an old rusted out motorcycle just sitting inside some Good old Boy's garage. This old piece of World War II history, just sat there. It was May 13th, 1950 and it was three o'clock in the afternoon. It was old and beat up. The kickstand straining to hold up the steel bird that's perched against it. I saw some greasy Patriot riding on one a lot like it. He looked free, and happy. I couldn't tell by the beard that he brandished, but I could see that his eyes, when they stared at me, had content in them. Father once crashed into a motorcyclist, Mother prayed for the dead nobody in church on Sunday.

Now this old bike that sat waiting for me to take it up and start up its heart once more, may have been rusted and looking rather broken, but I knew it could still sing. I took to the road like I was born of steel and rubber, with gasoline coursing through my veins. Sure that Good Old Boy came running from his shanty when he heard me give life to the Freebird that he had sitting dormant under his watch. But sometimes that's how it goes. Sometimes a thirteen year old steals your motorcycle. I popped it into first and shot from that garage.

The Good Old Boy took a shot at me with his scattergun, but that bird was my guardian, I fed it more throttle, and it gave me wings. I didn't stop for three states. I weaved through Tennessee, winded around Kentucky, and a beeline across Illinois. I stopped in Chicago to siphon a few gallons off this hot shot gassing up his Cadillac. He was a real smooth cat, reminded me of Slick Eddie, a local hustler and bookmaker from New Orleans. He had the felt hat with the three-inch lapel, pinstriped from head to toe, and some serious shoes. I stole three gallons from him on the sly. Mother always put money in the collection plate, Father stole from the church.

It's been a long haul since that uncertain time. I've been through several different hogs. Like a special lady, they're all close to my heart. I've seen every state in the U.S. I've barreled through Canada, and stopped several times to fight Mounties. I've got dames from San Francisco to New York City. Been shot twice, once I ended up in the hospital, and spent five years in a work camp for sodomy of a police officer with his baton. Got out, got thrown back in for another eight months, for being seen with "undesirables." Those "undesirables" were a couple of Hog Heads I ran into on the way into Humble, Texas just outside of Houston, we painted up the town. Damned

beautiful too. The one guy was named Russell or something. Mothers first love was named Russell, Father shot him in a bar one night.

The other "undesirable" I can't remember his name. Let's just call him Smith. Well, Russell, Smith, and I met up on our way into the Texas town. They had been coming from Missouri, where they were wanted for sleeping with the Governor's daughter. Governor's daughters always have a reputation for slumming. It was the smell of gasoline and white lightning that attracted this particular Philly to these two Rough Riders. At least that's what they told me.

We hit the city like a carnival troop just reaching a new destination. People stared and looked crossed as we cruised their streets. Primal in our appearance they didn't know what to make of us. Big Stetson's and cowboy ties. One look made the toughest Humble Cowboy quake in his rattle skins. We were a different breed. We didn't sit pat in a shit town, running the race that takes you nowhere. We didn't turn our heads and shake in fear at the idea of Bikers in our town. We were the ones who made their lives shake. Shake at the bedrock and reverberate through the minds of their children. They were honestly in awe of us. They hid behind disgust and shock, but we resembled to the people of Humble and all over this godforsaken country, an old way, a way that is true, a way that doesn't live by laws made by people no better than ourselves. Mother used to pray for peace, Father used to drink to war.

War came to Humble some would say. They would say that we brought havoc to a quiet and just town, that we did all sorts of disorderly things. But that is what we are, disorderly. We aren't the single file type. We weren't cut from that cloth. We're cut from the dead leather of fallen outcasts and vagabonds everywhere. We are the rapscallion's of this country living a step ahead of the law, and generations behind the laws they put upon us.

Howie's is where it started. Just three ruffians looking for a couple of cold ones and some good laughs. We were unwelcome the minute we stepped inside. Texans of all shapes and sizes greeted us with silence and general dislike. They didn't know us, they had never spoken to us, and up until that point we had done nothing wrong. But they hated us nonetheless. So we gave them reason to hate, reason to envy, and reason to love us.

During a rack of billiards whispers and devilish hisses were constant. The people of these little towns hate outsiders, especially if you ride a bike. They think we're Jesse James coming to rob their bank.

So to combat the looks and whispers we slammed back the beers, faster and faster, Russell turned out was a proficient pool sharp. He could handle a pool cue like it was a blonde. Smith watched on as Russell gave me a lesson in billiards.

"Can I get you guys another round?" the waitress in a Shirley Ann nametag asked.

“Yea, I’m gonna need something to put these flames out. Turns out Russell here can do a little hustling,” I replied.

The bags that the waitress brandished under her eyes showed a hard life. She went to the bar for another round, and Smith added a round of bourbon as well. The night got damp, outside and in. We were on our fourth game when I noticed drunken men with glass for eyes bend and twist their way over to us. Dutch courage made them all He-men. They thought they found themselves a nice little work out. What they found were a couple men with pool cue’s, who were used to wielding them. Fat slovenly hicks, Tobacco spit oozing from their drunken holes in their pathetic heads. Thinking the dozen drinks they begged off the bar gave them strength. Cattle rustlers thinking they found a couple of loose calf’s to brand. Russell saw them. Smith was already out with his knife. We caught them fast and they went down easy. Smith knifed one who turned out to be the cousin of the Sheriff’s. Smith is dead now. Russell cracked a few yokels with his pool cue, so hard they lost teeth and courage all in one swish. Me, I threw a few swings and knocked out a few. Nothing special, Smith and Russell did most of the heavy lifting. We ran for the bikes, the law was on its way.

We headed downtown. Looked for a nice quiet place to relax and lay low. A whorehouse is what we found. Asian prostitutes fresh from Japan or wherever. Step on your back for a buck, suck you dry for a few more. We got a few more drinks at the Asian parlor. I picked a real cutie, she went by Luki, for my massage. She had small feet, and big tits. Enough for any man I always say. She walked on me all night. I paid her extra to talk. She spoke English very well. She told me of her home in Japan. She called me her Samurai. I called her a beautiful idiot. Told her I was no Samurai, just a loner who had an affinity for the women of her trade. She was looking for a ride out of town, and away from her Madame. I left her an extra five for what she did with her tongue.

Russell and Smith were outside waiting. They had been thrown out for disorderly conduct. Even in bordellos there are rules. We passed some grass that Smith had on him. Got nice and toasty while we devised were to go next. Mother drank the blood of Christ, Father shot heroine twice.

Titty Bar, three in the a.m. Circling the stage, Russell has got some bird in the back. Smith is in the corner like Smith always is, watching. Old Mad Dog Coos Hound is chomping at the bits. Miss Asia gave me a taste of the night that made me want more. Dollars and deadbeats, it was a sea of degenerate mugs. All in roller chairs, and Washington peaking out of there pockets saying hello. Leaving them empty and at attention.

Tassels on nipples, girls with Leopard print, truckers breaking from all niters, divorcee’s missing the comfort of their former lovers, alcoholics, addicts, deviants...all normal people. The joint showed how close we really are to one another. We differ

only in what we portray to the public outside the doors of *Briar Patch Titty Bar*. Some have children, some are loners, and others just need a good stiff drink and a stiff something or other as well.

Those beautiful dancers applied their hustle gently with their hips. God love them for what they give you. Russell walked out of the back. Lipstick on his collar and zipping up his britches as he joined back into the party at the stage, Mystique had just come on. Long legged beauty, with control over her every move. She knew exactly what she was doing. Those around the stage, who witnessed the affair, had pleasant dreams ahead of them that evening. This dark Tex-Mex beauty stepped on my heart as she danced around her home, with her ten-inch Go Go's leaving imprints in my soul. She smells of heavy perfume and a hard night's work. Mother didn't believe in fornication, Father fucked whores.

If you didn't see it coming you should have. I know Smith saw it. Smith saw everything. Damned Russell seemed to have gotten his hands on some white powder. Went at it, and forgot to pay. Now we had some big burly cowboys itching to give us a trouncing. But like I said, Smith saw it. Well, a brew-ha began and we once again found ourselves running (well at this point stumbling would be more appropriate) out to our bikes. Bouncers, strippers, boozers, and cooks all chased us out. There must have been fifty people in that establishment, and all fifty were looking for a fight. We got out okay, and we were down the road before they had a chance at us. Like I said, always a step ahead.

Red lights flash outside a gas station on the outskirts of Humble. Russell, Smith and I were inside. The three of us (well me and Russell, Smith just watched) laughed and knew what this meant. Sheriff John Q. Law stood with his hometown boys and their deer rifles, ready to unload on the three devils they made us for. Smith lit a joint and walked outside, the bell rung on the door as he opened it. Russell and I followed behind the bell rung twice more. Mother prayed for sinners, Father played the horses.

"You boys have run your course. Now either you get inside the squad car—" hometown boys with hometown hearts cocked their guns in unison, "Or we dance right here. You boys are going to learn some manners if it kills you."

Smith continued puffing his joint. Russell looked ready for death. I enjoyed the breeze from that nighttime blow. No one moved. Smith spit.

The Sheriff fired, he killed Smith. "That was my nephew you stabbed boy," the Sheriff spat back.

Russell didn't move. He didn't blink. He died with Smith. His path ended there. That part of him was gone. A true rebel for the cause had died by the law, and now Russell had to mourn part of himself, while the Sheriff got a trophy for his wall. They threw the both of us in their squad car, and left Smith to bleed out at the station. Mother helped at the church, Father went to Angola Prison.

Now I'm supposed to tell you about my time in Prison and how I handled it like I handle life. But I hated it. It's a bad place and bad places bring bad people and bad people bring out the worst in me. It's my Mother taking over when I'm in those places. She always had a devil of a temper. She used to beat me with a Bible if I didn't clean the kitchen after the Preacher ate over. My Father was off being a good old Dad. He punished a bottle if it got close by. He always drank when the Preacher came home. My Mother took guidance and my Father found his own. Sam Driskle, the Preacher to my Father's perfect religion. He called it perfect, because Sam only sold one-hundred proof. "Blessed be his name," Father would say. He was a crazy old cook who didn't have much to him. But my Mother loved him all the same. They would smile, hold hands, and go to dinner at Driskle's every Wednesday. Mother would drive, Father was her co-pilot. Father would drink his dinner; Mother had a burger and beer. There were no set rules to that home. I was stuck there with false sunlight. I told you I wouldn't tell you about prison.

I got out and sort of kept low for a few years. I traveled and kept on the move, but in the summer of '65 I found this real farmer's daughter of a redhead out in Wyoming. She was a spitfire, and she loved the Duster. That's one of my other ladies. She kept me smooth and straight for a good while. Matilda (this redhead) she got real generous when she saw my lady. We played in her Daddy's barn all afternoon. She served me lemonade, while I ate apples in the shade. Matilda was barely seventeen, but she sure did love me. Kept my belly full all summer, while I hid out on her father's land. I took her for rides when she was done with her chores. Sometimes she would ditch her chores and we would take off to this river that I called my Matilda, because like this fiery redhead, it too was full of life and had all sorts of time ahead of it. Mother gave herself only for procreation, Father was lonely with his bottle.

Matilda would usually pack a nice lunch, sandwiches, fruit, pie, and a jug of her Daddy's Moonshine. Did I mention she drank? We would trade shots between loving, eating, and swimming. We'd be loaded on the ride back and she loved to put her hands over my eyes. She was my muse and my poison. And I could have loved her.

But Poppa found out and chased me off his land. Once again the wind blew and sent me on my way. I kept Matilda's panties. And a few dollars she stole from her Poppa. The law chased me, but I made it safe out of that prairie. Took the road out West to San Francisco. Heard of the Warlocks and how they were welcoming all. Haight Ashbury called me, because they said it was free, a little utopia devouring a whole city.

Cruising over the rolling streets of the Bay City was constant anticipation for what was ahead. With every block the storefronts began to change. Pet shops became Pot villas. Jeans ballooned at the bottom. The straight-laced Spades loosened their ties

as they crossed into the colorful. Entire groups of women became sexual panthers after passing the expanding barrier. Everyone and everything changed. A growing revolution that was destined to shake the earth, making waves, leaving destruction and love in their wake, and be a mix that I needed.

This sweet old Duster roared between my legs at the ladies in skirts I passed by, giving them a jolt that stayed with them and may never have left. They see me and they know what I've come for. They sympathized with me, they had seen so many like me, pilgrims on a last ditch effort for peace of mind, and a holy land that could thrive. We all were real optimistic. God bless us.

This old Joe that I bunked with for a time during my eight months spent as a guest of the state, told me of a friend he had out in San Francisco, and how that's where he planned to go if he ever got out. He was doing fifteen years for manslaughter. He would miss Haight-Ashbury. So he told me that he would drop a line to his friend that lives out there. All I knew was the guy's name and a place where I might have had a chance at finding him. Rex Gillespie, turned out to be the guy's name, and I was told to look for Dr. Lazarus Lucidities Looking Glass. There I would find a blind man who knew everyone in the Haight Ashbury district, from there I knew no more.

To get to Dr. Lazarus's I had to cruise through a good portion of Haight. There were people younger than me, and some my own age. They all had starry eyes. Glimmers of hope and serenity they all seemed to be. Dancing down the streets paved in colorful flowers thrown in the air by buxom and beautifully complacent women. Free of the walls that blocked them in everywhere else. It was a living parade that was full of life, and inevitable death. It was too good for anyone to enjoy forever. I loved my new home.

The good Doctor's shop was on Saryan Street just before I came to Golden Gate Park. It was a sight to behold. A band playing for what seemed forever on his rooftop, people hanging out front of this peculiar shop, droves of them, all outer worldly and entirely vulnerable. They were in happy land, and the Doctor seemed to be a mayor of sorts. Women dressed as cherubs dropped flower petals from the roof falling splendidly on top of locals and outsiders alike. Everyone felt the love.

Mixed in were tweekers, benders, puffs, and scallywags. Many of the dropped out teens missed these types. I knew them too well. They blended in well, and put on a good mask, but I could see their villainy. They were like me.

I parked the Duster in front of the storefront, and headed into the bizarre world that Dr. Lazarus ruled. A very pretty young flower girl stuck a Sunflower in my nappy hair and gave me a passionate kiss to welcome me to this enchanting place. She did the same to every person (man or woman) that entered. It was free love.

Inside there were all types of books, records, a large collection of ukulele's, spun glass pipes to smoke the Doctors magic, Hemp clothing on display, young adults dancing in the aisles of merchandise, and who must have been Dr. Lazarus himself.

Around him on the floor sat close to a dozen young people listening to him and the music he strummed from his ukulele. In the corner behind the good Doctor sat an old twisted Hippie, too old for what he was, and his eyes were clouded.

"Please come and sit with us, take up Nana and feel her aura, she is waiting for you traveler," the good Doctor said as I passed by his circle.

Nana was lying back in the circle looking up at me, giving herself to me on the good Doctor's floor. She moved and arched beneath me. She purred as only the most seductive temptress could.

"You are among others. Be as we are and you shall be at peace. Drink in that feeling that pulls you. It is glorious light and freedom. There is so much beauty in you and this world. You are the world. Be apart of this universe for a time."

I sat for a time. Nana caressed me, and scaled my road worn body with her delicate touch. The good Doctor gave me some of his good medicine. The crazy Shaman had me drink from the cup that was passed in the circle, followed by some very intoxicating smoke. The music in my head took over from my mind. The good Doctor played his ukulele while synthesizer sounds came over me from the speakers projecting music from heaven. I was at peace, Nana in my arms, the room pulsed, and the good Doctor kept strumming.

"Don't fear the purple people. They are pacifists and delicate like love bugs on evening dew. Caught in the same web that we all try to see our way through. Open your heart to them, and let them fill your mind. They need nothing, and you need nothing. You need only to be and be you shall. Love."

Hours passed and the world kept turning. I made love to Nana in a back bungalow of the good Doctor's. She washed me and then we made love again. She was the sexual panther that other sexual panthers wanted to be. She was free and full of life and ready to accept what passion I had. She fell asleep fully, curled up like a newborn. She even purred when she dreamt. Mother loved the Holy Spirit, Father was second to him.

The thought of Rex was deep into some space in my mind. The medicine had put him off. He was no longer what mattered. Just being here, that is all that mattered. I awoke to a round mother moon shining in from between the hanging drapes. Nana kissed and rubbed my scars, battle wounds from different days than today was.

"The Warlocks are having a show tonight," Kiss, "They are going to blow the minds of the dropped out masses," Lick, "Let me take you," Kiss.

The house of the Warlocks was the cornerstone of this world. It was the White House, the Vatican, and Alcatraz living together in chaotic harmony. Nana and I walked with some of her friends. The good Doctor never left his Looking Glass.

Thousands flocked to the home of the Warlocks. The show went on in their basement, but speakers were run throughout. On the porch, in the living room, up the

stairs, they found every crevice of the grounds. The good Doctor's medicine was in the punch. Cups for everyone and people shared everything. They were communal in their survival. Mother was greedy with her lover, Father never caught the Holy Spirit.

The sounds from underground grew as Nana, I, and the rest of the good Doctors congregation arrived at the riotous occasion. Women under the night's moon glimmered with sweet attitude, young men and full grown howled at the sight. It was sure to be a feast unlike I've experienced in some time. Partygoers swung from the trees with acid pops in their hands. Tugging at the night like petulant children hoping for some extra candy. The Doctor always gave treats to the kids.

The basement spanned an eternity it seemed. The cosmos erupted on the walls and on the people floating in space around me. Nana was off twisted into a mix of love and magic. While a light show propelled the universe with a band that came from a different place. They lived here in this house, yet they controlled the universe. They were the Gods these young people looked to for guidance. I liked the singer's chops. He reminded me of Smith. Mother sang in the choir, Father was a blues man.

More of the good Doctors brew, a potion for the ages. We all were being bent by the music the Warlocks gave us. Some Merry Pranksters were shifting about among the crowd. Handing out candy and spliffs to us. It was Halloween every night in the Bay City. A troop of green people flashing in the space lights dancing to this new sound could be found. This underground venue shook and rattled as these Gods of the future battled with what we are used to, and attempted to breakthrough to the wind swept youth. The medicine kicked in.

Heaven was around me. Dark yet perfect heaven. I was in a sea of others. We were fluid. We splish-splashed every which way. These perfect ladies mixed with the awestruck men. We were all in love.

I saw my Mother. She was burning a bible with a smile. My Father sung into the microphone. He cried words that rocked the bedrock of our minds. I haven't cried since I left home. His words cradled me in his arms. Mother is beside, Father showed me to the masses.

Lost now on the country miles in his Cadillac.

I can tell by the way you smile he's rolling back.

The world swayed. We felt passion. You could never get from any Presley. We were apart of something new. There was peace.

Come wash the nighttime clean,

Come grow this scorched ground green,

I was born again in the arms of a band that opened me up. We all were open vessels dangling in a threshold suspended over a new day. The times were changing. The medicine was working.

*Blow the horn, tap the tambourine
Close the gap of the dark years in between
You and me,
Cassidy...*

-Bob Weir (The Warlocks aka Grateful Dead)

I smiled. Euphoria grabbed me and so did Nana. We danced with open arms to the world. I had found a home. Everything was together and separated all at once. People melded together and spread apart. There were close times and there were alone times. But together we were, like the grass under a naked redhead and the brotherhood of a couple of outlaws. Nana and I merged with others. We moved to the music, letting the words burn us. We were perfect the way we were. Neal would be proud.

Exhibit

Tony McMillen
Tucson, Arizona

mcfoodstamp@yahoo.com

I can't stop looking at my reflection. At my reflection in the glass door. The glass door leading into the photography exhibit. That's always been one of my problems. The staring at my myself thing, at my reflection. I don't even have beauty as an excuse. Staring back from the glass door is an average looking nobody. He's twenty four years old and slightly pudgy, with straw colored hair and thick black rimmed glasses. He's got a backpack hanging off one shoulder. His face is wholly unremarkable. Yet he completely fascinates me.

I go inside the exhibit and an attractive dark haired woman who works there looks up momentarily from her laptop, appraising me quickly, then decides her laptop is worth revisiting. She doesn't know what she's missing. If she had been closer to me when she looked, if we had been having a conversation or about to kiss; I know exactly what would have happened: I would have stared deeply into her eyes, searching there intensely. She would have thought my eye contact meant I was really into her, really falling for her. But in truth I would have been looking into her eyes with all that focus for another reason, I would have looked till I found that miniature reflection of myself staring back. I wouldn't have been looking for anything more.

The first picture is a photo of some old man who looks like my father staring past the lens and directly at the viewer. At you, at me. There's this weird expression on his face, I can't place it but it gives me the creeps. He looks so much like my dad, only a little older, that a little shiver runs through my skin. I move on to some other pictures. Nothing special. Some typically androgynous sixteen year old boys dressed up like gladiators or something in what's supposed to be a really sleazy decadent old mansion. I'm not impressed. There's some black and white photography, skyscrapers being tore down, then erected. It's nice enough. Anything in black and white looks twenty times better than color. I pass some Asian looking guy in three piece power broker drag. He coughs then wipes his hands on his pants as he walks past me. Leaving me apparently alone in the exhibit. There's another picture of the creepy old man who could be my dad, this time he looks a little younger. He just stares out toward the viewer. I

don't get it. What's the point of the old man pics? As far as subject goes the guy was nothing special. Just some eighty, or maybe seventy year old in this picture, old white guy staring at you. The guy who took this pic must know the owner of the gallery or something. Some light hits the corner of my eye as I walk past the crummy old man picture. My eye instinctually peers over examining the reflective surface the light bounced off, scanning for my image to be shining back. It's rewarded with my fascinating, familiar, generic face. Somebody should put my picture in a place like this.

There's some run of the mill third world hell swollen stomach ghost children picture to make sure you remember how good you have it here. In America, in a photography exhibit looking at these kids who might as well live on Mars because that's how far I feel from them right now. I look at their eyes and can't see myself reflected back. Therefore I walk on, turning a corner.

It opens up to a long, narrow hall. There's photos all along the walls so I know I'm somewhere I'm supposed to be. But it's strange. This long skinny hall being used for the exhibit. It's claustrophobic and poorly lit. They could have picked a better place. The first picture I see in the hall is that old man again! But this time he is definitely younger looking than the previous pictures. It hits me that I know this man. It also occurs to me that he doesn't look so much like my father as he looks like my Uncle Marty. They have the same hair. My Dad is bald as a bird's knee. Walking down the hall every photograph I see is of the old man, turning younger.

I'm starting to get it now. The concept. The point. Pretty soon the guy in the photograph is looking like he's in his fifties or forties. It's actually pretty amazing. They have to be self portraits I think. No way is a subject going to be that reliable, not for forty plus years! The photos themselves might be crap but I have to admire the commitment. Even as I'm appreciating the guy's persistence to his vision I'm also thinking what a narcissist. Not that I'm one to talk. At least I haven't taken photos of my aging process and flooded an entire exhibit with them. I may be in love with how I look but I don't pretend to think anybody else cares. I wouldn't subject anybody else to that.

I'm Halfway down the hall and the guy in the photos is getting even younger. I'm wondering what will be at the end. If maybe this was all done by the parents of the guy in the photos. If this was their big idea. Maybe the last photo is the guy being squirted out of his mother's womb. That'd be a good payoff. I look at a picture of the guy who's maybe thirty five now and I swear to god I know this guy. He still has that weird look on his face but he doesn't look like my Uncle Marty so much anymore. More like some other relative from my mother's side. I get a little further and I see a photo of him and recognize the guy finally. Me. The guy in the photos is me. Me in ten years with twenty

five extra pounds. Me in the future. This is impossible. This is not real. I look around to see if anybody else is nearby to see this. There's no one. I look at the picture a little closer. My stomach shrinks to the size of an apricot and I shake my head. This is impossible! The man in the photo just stares back at me. The strange expression on his/my face. There's no mistaking it. It's me. I try to rationalize it. It has to be done with a computer. The age progression stuff they do for missing persons, something like that. Somebody who knows me must be putting me on. But no one knows I came here. I've only been to this place twice before. Once last year and once earlier this spring. I am hardly a regular. I go to the next picture, me maybe three years younger than the last picture. There is no doubt that it's me and it doesn't look doctored up. It looks real. I feel sick all of a sudden. Like my insides are made of paper. Then I look down at the end of the hall and resting against the wall, against the dead end there's something large enough to be another picture only it's covered by a black tarp.

The last picture. I start running toward it. Briefly my peripheral catches glimpses of my more and more familiar face staring out from both sides of the hall. Each face has that same strange expression. What is it? What was that goddamn look?! I get to the object in the tarp and I'm afraid to take it off. Flanking it are photos of me maybe only a year or so in the future. For half a second I think I'm just having a dream, a stupid weird dream. But I know I'm not. I should find somebody else, just to confirm that I'm not crazy. It's a prank. It's some elaborate weird prank. Has to be. But what is that look all the men in the picture had? The old man, the old me what is that look on my/his face? Fear. No worse. What is worse than fear? I catch my hand tremor as it goes for the black tarp. I pull it off and see:

There's me in the hall, surrounded by photos of myself. In the photo I'm staring at the viewer, at myself staring at myself. There's that look on my face. Worse than fear. That's when I notice something obscuring the left corner of the picture. Something dark and thin. Maybe it's whoever's holding the camera's hand getting in the way of the picture. Whoever or whatever's holding the camera. Maybe the photo was taken, or will be taken in a hurry, frantically. I look at my eyes in the photograph. I can almost see something in them. I feel something is behind me now. Something I won't be able to face. I can't turn around. So I don't, I wait for it to come to me. To do whatever it's planning. I stare at the photograph, at my eyes. Something is behind me, right behind me and at this moment I notice there's something behind me in the photograph too. I catch my own reflection in the picture of my eyes. That look, that look is now on my face. I don't need to see my reflection to know that. But I can't stop looking.

In Time

Stephanie Caprini
Clarendon Hills, Illinois

I sat wondering if I could move
Not physically but of Mind
Of Space and of Emotion
And maybe even of Time

I knew not what I wanted
Only that I wanted to go
To escape - a run of color
Too fast for you to hold

Sometimes I feel so far away
Other times so stuck right here
Yet in my mind I can imagine
The life I wish were near

Do you see me as I see myself?
Are we two not but one?
Because at times I feel so stuck
- it seems -
My life has not yet begun

But one day I'll be able to move
Both physically and of Mind
And you'll see me as I see myself
I'll accomplish it all, in time.

angel feathers...

Jennifer Law
Harker Heights, Texas

HouseMusicDivah@aol.com

I sit silently
suffocating beneath my tears
my eyes are burning like the sun
my thoughts are torturous devices implanted with thoughts of you
how you and I could never become
anything more
tears fall like rain, streaking the windows of my face
every vein pumps your name through my system like a drug
and I cannot get enough
but the more I think of losing you
the more I feel so empty
my life would be like a fairy tale story
with no prince
no happily ever after
no songbirds singing
no smiles and carefree dancing
my feathers are falling to the ground like snow
i'm losing my wings
i'm losing this battle within
my prayers are silenced by my disbelief
that another could come and go as they please
it's like being an anorexic dog with no teeth
in a room filled with steaks
there is no sympathy
throughout my chest-heaving sobs
just soft, godly eyes looking down upon my breaking heart
how could one life be so pathetically unfulfilled?
like the precious, I just need you
that one ring to conquer them all
so naked I have become as I live through each day
barely breathing
trying to hold onto what's left of my optimism

holding the remnants of what's left of my soul
padded in the feathers i've lost
time will only tell
when you will be next...
my love for you is a Starbucks
I'll take a number
and stand in line
with the others who are displayed in a light
that basks them in a glow
so far from own
they flick their hair, they smile and flirt
they capture your attentions like butterflies caught in a net
they will take you home
they will rip off your wings
they will call you theirs
and you will smile as you crawl through your life
on young limbs like branches on trees
until they break you of your spirit
and I will watch this all go down
with number in hand
at the back of the line
still waiting to be called by you
still holding onto what I know is true
my love has no boundaries with you
yet everything with you is a "no" and a wall
around every corner, every time I smile at the thought of
progress
I am shut out and shut down at the door of your heart
oh won't you notice me the way you notice them?
the way you smile and shyly spill how much they admire you
how modestly you lay this evil dagger of evidence before me
and like the fakest Barbie, I smile in empathy
like I'm so happy for you
while pieces of my heart shatter and break before my very eyes
I keep waiting as the sun's light dims outside
soon you'll be closing up shop
and I will be sitting in the dark still holding the number
waiting to be called...

Surrender

Rachel Miller

miller.rach@hotmail.com

You always walked in front of me,
Those few feet back you could not see
That in your haste and hurried tread
I heard more the things you never said.
The distant space the silent tone
Though I walked with you, I walked alone.

The words you spoke I once believed
How openly I was deceived.
Those words now have no validity,
Trust, confidence nor solidity.
Those eyes so warm, that gentle face
Your arms were only an empty embrace.

The counterfeit emotions precisely reveal
That everything was only artificially real.

Is it an act that you pretend so well?
Because truth confused makes it hard to tell.
Did you utter those words so that you could use me?
Or out of boredom to merely amuse me?
Or are you a man that's just stubborn or scared?
You tell me, I'm now visually impaired.
Don't find offense in my accusation,
It was created by your fickle formulation
As a confused byproduct of cold conversation.

You barred your heart, but I hung on
To a mistaken lead on which I was drawn.
I saw something different, something good
So time and patience I withstood,
To pursue intuition I thought so strong
To finally arrive and see I was wrong.

A chivalrous man would've opened the door,
But the door of your heart was all I asked for.
Communication was between *my own* heart and head
Not between *your* heart and *mine* instead.
You've mastered successfully by what you've parried
How to divorce people...without being married.
Your mode of speaking was to ignore,
So I won't talk, anymore.

I won't pry open your eyes to see
The rare gem you disvalued because it came free.
The things we find easily without arduous toil
Are the jewels overlooked we kick under the soil.
Perhaps that's why you were unsure
For true love comes by fighting for.
In winning my heart you were never engaged,
But only stood as a soldier – poised and staged.

The fight is over. I'm tired and sore,
I will no longer your love fend for.
I cannot battle something obscure,
For you hold your *own* self as prisoner of war.
Your love was dressed in confederate armor
And the ally I fought for was really my harmer.
Masked as my comrade, you were my contender.
Goodbye sweet love, my little pretender.
Well done, you've won.
I surrender.

Spring

Kareem Ali
Portland, Oregon

Kareem5@gmail.com

Out here the winter gone the earth has lost
Her candied grasses blown from gold to cream
Her snow white garments stripped of ice and frost
Until each lake becomes a crystal stream

The sun arrives to thaw the hardened earth
Awakening birds sleeping with a glee
And tender trees giving a tender birth
To drowsy plants and humble bumble-bee

The daisies bloom yet always seem to bring
To hills and fields that sparkle through the day
The buds and chestnuts of a youthful spring
Welcoming the gold daffodils of May

The Roads are Longer in Europe

Kelly Garthwaite
Arlington, Virginia

kgarthwaite@gmail.com

The station smelled like urine and day-old coffee. The bathrooms could have used a good spray down and a new supply of dry toilet paper, so it didn't make sense to me why it was required for the passengers to pay a whole Euro, which was about a buck fifty in American dollars at the time, simply to use this glorified, indoor Porta John. The ladies worked together to keep each other's pockets full by propping open the door to their newly vacant stalls, allowing each of us to cheat the unseen toilet police. Though there was a slight language barrier between their perfect and my broken Spanish, we understood each other. This was truly an ideal example of how the world can come together for a good cause.

Mom and I had been traveling throughout Spain and were en route to Lisbon, Portugal that day. Since we couldn't fit either of our giant suitcases into the less than adequately sized lockers, we were destined to remain in the Seville bus station for the next four hours. We had purchased our tickets the day before, since there was only one bus per day from Seville to Lisbon, and I'd heard a rumor that the bus usually fills up quickly. Needless to say, we were not exactly elated to spend four hours sitting before the seven-hour-long bus ride that awaited us, but I've always been pretty talented when it comes to entertaining myself.

I began reading, my feet propped up on my newly purchased Swiss Army suitcase. I couldn't really concentrate on Jack Kerouac's words in front of me; I had a lot of other crap on my mind, though regardless of how much I actually took away from the book at that moment, *On The Road* seemed quite fitting for the whole scenario, and I'm sure that Jack would have understood my not being able to concentrate, since he too allowed his mind to wonder. I thought about how I'd been a terrible bitch more often than not for the last 10 days. I felt bad, so sometimes my conscience would set in, allowing my disposition to float back and forth between just short of sweet and then back to horrible. I was in the middle of experiencing an exciting, yet probably rather unhealthy relationship; of course at the time I didn't realize that it was unhealthy, since I thought that I was *really* in love for real this time, an ailment that I'd already experienced on way too many occasions. And, once we returned to the States, I had five days before I was moving away from home completely on my own for the first time to be closer to the man at the root of the confusing relationship. I'd also been in strange Spanish cities for the last week and a half and spoke very slow intermediate-level

Spanish, but felt inadequate at times and was hard on myself when I felt lost in translation. I usually eased my frustration with an afternoon drink or four, and my Spanish suddenly became incredible. But now, we were leaving Spain, the place where I'd practiced my intoxicated Spanish.

I was bored, a perfect time to eat; mom and I went to the bus station café, which I would not have recommended to anyone who is less than bored, though it's miraculous how well a personal mini bottle of Cabernet really does make even the most terrible over-steamed vegetables, from-the-box rice, and dried-out baked chicken taste acceptable. Not to mention that the service was awful. I felt like I was burdening the staff with every request. They seemed pissed at me; well, at everyone. They hated their lives, and it showed in their expressions – the disapproving raised eyebrows, the obvious and abrupt lash bats, and the rolling around of the tongue on the side of the mouth. Maybe my vision was still blurred from the previous afternoon's stint of one or four servings of booze, but to this day I believe that I saw one of them hunched over, looking like a mad scientist at work, and putting a booger in someone else's plate of rice and then trying to disguise it with some extra salt and pepper. That person really must have taken too long to order.

Somehow we'd managed to survive the four-hour-long wait. I'd been people watching most of the time and gotten lost in my own thoughts. At the time, I was going through an incredibly judgmental phase, taking pride in making fun of passers-by. It was probably due to the lack of love that I had for myself. I was unsure of what was to come, and though I was excited about the unknown, I was still pretty freaked out; I'd gotten to know the me who was from my home town surrounded by a stagnant, yet comfortable, atmosphere, not the me who was about to live in the big city that I'd soon call my new abode. It was time to get on the bus.

By the time we made it down the ramp to bus terminal 8, there was already a unique-looking gaggle of people waiting. The fellow who I assumed to be the driver began loading luggage into the storage compartments and yelling what sounded like Spanish profanity at some of the ticket-holders. I would later come to find out that the bus driver was Portuguese – from that point on, I was convinced that all Portuguese men had fiery tempers. After he finished loading everyone's baggage, we were allowed to proceed onto the bus.

Mom and I picked two seats pretty near the front – though, they wore tolerable smiles, the crowd occupying the back of the bus looked dirty from years of hard labor and maybe a little rough around the edges, so we wanted to keep our distance. We sat in the terminal on an idle bus for a good 10 to 15 minutes waiting for any spare passengers. The ride began anything but quietly. Many of the men were already acquainted, so they began to chat, and from the way the driver reacted to their conversations, it seemed that he knew all of them too. He was like a strict middle school bus driver, expecting all of the children, though these were grown men, to sit down quietly with their hands folded across their laps. I could see his rear-view mirror and his eyes when he would pull them from the road every so often to check on the sixth

grade men sitting to the back. His dark eyes, full of contempt, were directed towards the army of disrupters.

I have a small bladder. Almost like clockwork, I have to pee about 15-30 minutes after drinking a 16 ounce bottle of water; and then sometimes again pretty soon afterwards. I made sure to check on whether or not there was a toilet on the bus; there was. Today, it was broken. When I have to pee, nothing else in the world matters. Bombs could go off, and I'd be oblivious while searching for a place to relieve myself. So, I was slightly concerned about how often we'd be able to stop. The bus driver explained to me in broken, yet understandable, English that we would stop often for breaks, which is exactly why the ride would take seven hours.

We made our first stop. Apparently, the bus driver was quite a good friend to some, as this would be the first of two stops we made to wait for his comrade who never showed up. We were parked in a ditch on the side of the road, the bus almost sideways it seemed, in the middle of nowhere, Spain; I believe the name of the town would have translated to that in English. There was a suitable-looking gas station just up the hill, so I asked our driver, who I'll call "Luis", since he is a major factor in this whole ordeal, if I had time to take a break.

Still thinking that the driver was Spanish, I began.

"Yo necesito ... Yo necesito usar ..."

Luis stopped me mid sentence.

"Whaat do youu need?"

I hadn't had enough booze that day. Apparently, my Spanish was not awesome enough for him to lower himself to speaking on an elementary level, though I found that a lot of Spaniards and Portuguese people rather enjoy practicing their English.

"I need to use the bathroom," I said slowly.

"Youu go. Aye wait forr youu."

I believed him, but not a lot, so I walked briskly up the hill and into the gas station.

"El bano, por favor?"

Pointing in the direction of the toilet, the attendant handed me the restroom key, which was attached to a massive wooden spoon, making it completely impossible for anyone to misplace it, or worse, run for the Portuguese border with it without being spotted by the police and then tattooed as the massive spoon thief for life. As I walked around the corner, I saw that the bus was still there. I squatted hurriedly, returned the key and its attachment to its rightful owner, and hopped onto the bus where my sometimes contagiously sweet mom was waiting with a relieved look on her face. I took my seat.

Luis started up the bus again. We rode for what seemed like hours before the next stop without more than quiet chatter arising from the backend of the bus. I'm not going to lie; I tried very hard to eavesdrop on the conversations that were taking place back there. I'm sure they were juicy. If these men were anything like American construction workers, then I'm positive there had to have been some talk about the "fine piece of ass" that walked by on the work site the other morning. I wanted to hear

about it, since I was having so much trouble controlling my moods with mom and didn't really feel like talking too much.

Mom was sleeping; well, at least she had her eyes closed. I looked over at her. I knew that I'd made her feel bad on numerous occasions during this trip. What the hell was I thinking? She was my mother. She gave birth to me, and I was a cheeky little punk. I guess the complicated relationship that I mentioned before had already started to do a number on me. Mr. Complicated was shallow, so I'd become shallow. I used to be sinking in twelve feet of water, but now I was only wading up to my ankles. I was too concerned with appearances; for instance, I made sure that both of us left our white sneakers behind, since I heard that wearing them in a country as liberal and sheik Spain is in the same category as sporting a Bush/Cheney '04 tee shirt. You might as well defecate in the streets; you'd be showing the same amount of class, and you'd probably get about the same amount of stares.

I pulled out Jack again, but did not read his words successfully for long. I felt motion sick. I decided to look out the window. It was not spotless, but I was still able to see clear across to some body of water out the left side. We had crossed the country line into Portugal. The whole back of the bus started chanting "Por-tu-gal" repetitively and clapping along with their own beat. They were drunk and satisfied, happy to be returning home after what seemed like an extended stay in their neighboring country. I noticed Luis getting agitated, and I think that the vein on the side of his neck began to protrude. He began battling with a temperamental personal fan that was clipped to something on his dashboard. Sweat was dripping down his face, so he pulled out a rag, dabbing his teary pores while holding on to the oversized steering wheel with one hand. We swerved a tad, but he always managed to steady us. I never quite feared for my life.

We took an exit off the highway. He drove us through a very barren town. It was flat and dusty and there were a few car dealerships around, but nothing exciting was happening. We pulled into a small bus station. Luis arose from his throne, faced towards the back of the bus, and shouted something in Portuguese, which sounded like "five minutes" in Spanish.

"Wee will haave fiivve minn-itts heere," Luis translated confidently. He stepped outside to have a smoke.

I stayed on the bus. My bladder was still empty after the first leg; and, it's amazing how the fear of being stranded in rural Portugal can help you abstain from needing to use the restroom, or even taking a break, letting the bus out of your site for more than even a second.

We had not been there five minutes when Luis decided that it was time to leave. He hadn't finished his whole cigarette when he rushed back onto the bus, plopped himself down in his chair, turned the key, and reversed. The dirty men in the rear began raising hell in Portuguese. Just then, three of the dirty men ran out from behind one of the station terminal hallways towards the bus. They were waving their arms about and yelling. It was a wild, arm flailing jamboree. And they had brought beer to the party, one in each hand. I suppose that they were working on their intoxicated Spanish as

well. It was obvious that Luis was trying to make an example of them. He allowed the stragglers to rejoin the group; as they stepped up onto the bus, double-fisted with ale, they no longer wore the tolerable smiles we witnessed before the journey even began. They were pissed, and they cursed Luis; he cursed back, and then the back of the bus engaged in a rebuttal, defending their dirty comrades, but within a few minutes, everything was back to normal, or at least the way it had been before.

The back of the bus army was jovial again. They imbibed. They sang songs together. Their cheeks became rosier. The front of the bus had stayed tame throughout. We had already been traveling for a few hours. Mom pulled out some granola that had made the transcontinental flight and now a cross country bus ride with us. Of course being the kind woman and wonderful mother that she was (and still is), she offered me some before partaking in grabbing some for herself. I declined the offer, and returned to looking out the window.

The sun was muscling its way lower into the western sky, so the bus's shadow was racing along beside us. The terrain consisted of rolling hills, a dry ground, and many vertically challenged trees. It was February, so I imagine that it would have appeared much more lush during the spring and summer months. The sky was bright blue, which contrasted the dusty, light clay-colored earth in a very appealing manner. I was beginning to bond with Portugal. It was lovely, and its people seemed full of character thus far.

I suppose that my ears were open enough to hear some recognizable conversation. Two people, who looked about college-age, were occupying the seats just in front of us. I couldn't believe that I hadn't really noticed beforehand, since we'd already been on the bus for almost four hours. I am a very sociable person, though it may not seem like it from the way that I've portrayed myself on this trip, so I leaned over their seats and interrupted them.

"Where are you guys from?"

"We're from Seattle, and you?"

The girl, who seemed like she was a little too confident for her own good, almost arrogant, was the talker. Her boyfriend, who seemed a much better person than she, was an attentive listener and remained calmer. I figured that this union probably worked for them.

"We're from Virginia, two hours southwest of D.C. Where have you traveled?"

The arrogant girl piped up, not even giving her calm boyfriend a chance to say a word. I saw annoyance written all over his face, so I figured that they'd been traveling together for quite some time.

"We've been traveling for about two months already now. We started in Argentina and then jetted over here to Europe. We've already been to about seven countries, and after Lisbon, we're off to Amsterdam, or maybe Frankfurt. We haven't really decided yet ("We" obviously meant "I"). My dad gave us money for all the plane tickets as my college graduation present, so we're just seeing how long we can sustain ourselves on the money that we have with us. It's been a really great time. We've been in and out of hostels. Everyone we've met has been really cool. Oh, except for this one

time when someone stole some of our stuff. Yea, that wasn't cool. Oh, and we celebrated our anniversary - we've been together for two years now - by going out to this kind of nice dinner, and the hostel let us have our own room for a night. It was really nice. So yea, we've had a really good time."

She didn't ask about our travels, so since I figured she just forgot or her mother never taught her any manners, I went ahead and volunteered our travel information.

"That sounds like a really great time. Well, we were in Spain for 10 days - we flew into Madrid, and then went to Toledo for a day trip. We flew from Madrid to Barcelona. I loved Barcelona. You should totally try to get there before you head home. Then from Barcelona, we flew to Seville, took an overnight trip to Granada, then went back to Seville, and now here we are."

"That's cool," she stated, very obviously uninterested.

I decided to forgive her for being a typical college student with daddy's money. She felt like she already knew everything and already understood the ways of the world. I figured I'd just let the world take care of shaping her up. It wasn't my duty.

"So where did you guys go to school?"

"The University of Washington."

"What did you major in?"

I wasn't sure exactly why I was continuing this one-sided conversation, but I guess I was well-aware of the three hours left on the bus; so it was either this or trying to have a broken conversation with the infantry in the back of the bus.

"International Affairs and he got his degree in Business."

Well, now I understood why she seemed so conceited. Now, I want to emphasize this is not true about everyone who majors in International Affairs, but the majority of the ones who I've met happen to have very similar demeanors. Because they know a little bit about a piece of the world, they feel like they are incredibly cultured, allowing them to feel as though they are above everyone else.

"Nice," I said, wearing a half smile and nodding.

Our conversation faded. She turned around in her seat and started reading. Luis slowed the bus again. We were in another dusty little roadside town. He pulled up to a café. All that mattered to me was whether or not it had a functioning toilet. Luis arose from his throne again. He spoke in Portuguese first, and the men in the back of the bus jumped up, excitedly. They were rejoicing. I had pretty much already deciphered what he'd said. It sounded like he'd just told us that we were going to have a long break, and I'm sure the dirty men were excited because they were running low on booze fuel.

"Wee haave thir-tee minn-itts heere."

The rest of us hopped off the bus and walked into the newly crowded café. This looked like the type of joint that only had customers, other than obnoxious family members who consistently overstay their welcome and help themselves to food in the kitchen without asking, whenever the bus to and from Lisbon would pass through. There were flies everywhere and the floors were dirty. I guessed that the owner slipped the restaurant inspector a 20 spot to keep himself from being shut down. I elected just getting a bottle of water.

To ensure not getting left behind, I kept Luis in my sight at all times. He sat down to order a bite and a coffee. I guess he'd worked up an appetite while he was sweating out all of that temper. He ate quickly and kept to himself. He was actually quite polite. I could see in his gestures that he was gentle with women, but obviously not quite so tender when it came to men. He flashed a kind smile and a nod of respect at the lady behind the counter when she refilled his mug. He thumbed his wedding ring and looked off into the distance while he ate. I wondered what his marriage was like.

Luis gathered up our pack of riders, or he at least gave fair warning that we'd be leaving soon, if we were interested in hitching a ride. Everyone loaded up, and not one person was left behind.

Before long, evening fell. The front of the bus became illuminated with the individual seat lights; the back of the bus was unlit, since every single one of the dirty men had passed out. The road was dark, but we continued along into the night. I thought about my life to come, eventually let go of thinking too far into the future, and got really excited about the idea of sleeping in a nice, warm bed.

Lisbon glowed in the distance. I walked up to the front of the bus to talk to Luis, since mom and I were en route to Sintra, a small town about 20 miles west of the city; we needed to figure out how to get to the metro rail that would take us there. Swaying back and forth a bit, I grabbed the edge of the aisle seats to steady myself as I walked to the front.

I spoke slowly.

"Hi. Once we get to Lisbon, we are traveling to Sintra and need to make it to the metro rail. Can you tell us where to get off?"

"Wee will mayke two sttopos en Lisboa. Youu need to gett off at thee second wwon. Thee rrrain esstation is thare. Aye showw youu whare," he said kindly.

"Thank you," I said, smiling genuinely.

We pulled into a bus station where all the dirty men got off. While he was getting off the bus to help the departing passengers, Luis looked at me and shook his head while mouthing, "Not thiss wwon." The bus was completely unloaded after about five minutes, and then we were off through the outskirts of Lisbon.

I dazed off, staring into the night sky, as we wheeled through unfamiliar territory. There were only a few stars out that night, yet the ones that were awake glowed very brightly. Only moving my eyes, I looked to the rear-view mirror and caught a glimpse of Luis's face. He looked strained from driving, but relieved that he had finally made it home, or at least where he would stay for the night.

We lurched into our final stop; the bus sighed. We all disembarked. Luis opened the storage compartments, and we all helped to unload. Once mom and I found our luggage, Luis directed us to where we would find the metro rail. I thanked him again for being so helpful, and then we walked the 50 yards to the rail station.

It had taken us seven hours to get there, but I felt like we were worlds away. We left Spain behind in search of a new adventure and found it in the most unexpected place; but now, we were on our way to Sintra.

The Shebeen

Michael J. Atwood
North Attleborough, Massachusetts

mja2atwood@mac.com
www.mjatwood.com

Mick, the bartender, was literally run off his feet. He ignored the aching legs that seemed to be betraying him and leaned his dishwasher-cracked hands against the hard oak bar – struggling to read the lips of another fervent patron over the noise of Irish folk music emanating throughout the pub. On the small cramped stage in front of the bar was a four-piece session band, led by a stout, red-faced singer lamenting about The Troubles in Ireland. For some reason, tonight, in the darkness of this Santa Monica shebeen, Mick felt no empathy or allegiance to any cause. His mind was elsewhere.

It was the annual Ancient Hibernians dinner – the third year of this clandestine affair, kept secret due to Prohibition. Still, every Irishman from Los Angeles to Pasadena knew about it and was sure to stroll through the back banquet room of McLean’s Hotel and collect a plate of corned beef and cabbage to eat with their pint of dark stout. It occurred to Mick that it was quite odd to be celebrating St. Patrick’s Day in California. However, business was good and a card game was forming in the back room amidst a cloud of cigar smoke. The local police force had been well compensated, as were the staff at McLean’s. Mick was a loyal servant to his boss, Jimmy, the head of the McLean gang that had come west from Boston. He looked beneath the bar and observed the bucket full of cash next to a revolver that he wondered if he would ever have to use.

Mick translated the patron’s order, *Pionta Guinness, le do thoil*. As if driven by a motor, he reached down, grabbed yet another pint glass, then shifted the tap downward pouring the beer. He set the pint glass down and let the creamy foam settle, then wiped his hands with the bar towel, tossing it into a sink filled with gray water. He felt like a priest in offering sacred drink to his sinful customers – to listen to their confessions behind his wooden facade. They were here for a charitable cause – to give money back to the Irish – and to support a movement that was about to infiltrate Los Angeles politics and society. Mick felt it ironic that the rent went back to a Jew landlord who sat waiting in the desert.

The patron eagerly picked up his pint, offered a “cheers” in Gaelic and Mick returned the man an almost religious nod then accepted the currency from the damp oak bar. He watched the man disappear into the crowd as if being swallowed by the

ocean eleven streets away. Mick stared into crowd enveloped in cigarette smoke and felt the bodhran beat against his chest.

There was a feeling within him lately – a strange anxiousness – one that he was not unfamiliar with; it was a deep, derided desire to escape. He thought it odd that as a devout Catholic, a religion filled with mystery – that he couldn't figure this one out. He also felt that he was such a fraud. He was Irish – his parents had emigrated from County Wexford to Boston almost thirty years prior. However, this façade here at McLean's Hotel, his accent, and the rest of it was as phony as any movie sets ten miles down the road in Hollywood.

Mick adjusted his suspenders underneath his Kelly green vest and felt that reoccurring twinge in his stomach. It was the same sensation he felt waking up on Christmas Day in Santa Monica the first year he'd moved here from Boston. He recalled listening to his son laugh on his wife's lap as they'd ripped open their presents while Bessie Smith sang the blues on their oversized Philco radio box. He'd smiled as he watched from the windowsill of their cramped flat. Seventy degrees and sunny on Christmas Day, Mick thought – what would his mother think?

* * *

The Mass they'd attended at St. Monica's was offered by a Jesuit who had lived in Mexico and spoke of the poverty he'd seen on his mission. He'd even ended the Mass shifting from Latin to Spanish, alluding to those who had emigrated here and now lived in the Chavez Ravine slums.

Mick looked down upon Wilshire Boulevard, watching motorcars pass and the palm trees sway in the wind as he smoked his twelve-cent Camels. A palm leaf fell to the sidewalk and blew onto the street. He watched as a Ford drove over it.

The boulevard had changed so much in their three years here – it was busy now and the trolley to Hollywood rattled past as it did until early evening; there were more and more new-comers every day. The population of Santa Monica had grown by 10,000 people according to a story in the previous week's *Times*, since they'd moved here in 1925. He looked across at a real estate office and a bank on the corner of 11th Street. There had been an orange grove there before tractors had cleared the property. The owner, a wealthy Jew named Lankstein, had bought it from a farmer and pasted his name on the front almost as a sign of defiance to the anti-Semitic sentiments in the neighborhood. Mick didn't mind the Jew's ambition or the fact that he tried to compete with his shy business – it was the fact that he'd used his money and leverage to take down the citrus orchard. Mick had enjoyed looking out at them in the morning while he drank his coffee.

He'd let the sash fall back, darkening the room, and turned back and studied his growing family in front of the Christmas tree. It just didn't make sense to live like this; there was a second baby on the way.

His wife, Shannon, held up the cocktail dress he'd bought her with his bar earnings.

“Oh Mick—it’s beautiful,” she had said sucking in her pregnant stomach and modeling the dress to her otherwise slim frame. “Do I look like Rita Hayworth?”

“Absolutely,” he had said, moving to their wet bar, pouring a second martini and sipping it. He made another for his wife and handed it to her with a kiss on the lips. She was quite beautiful still, he thought. Shannon had red hair, a thin frame, and beautiful emerald green eyes. She had grown up around the corner from him in Dorchester and was his friend Mangan’s older sister. He’d loved her practically his whole life since he had watched her from behind the sash of his parent’s second floor window as a boy.

“Cigarette?” he asked her.

She nodded and he slipped one between her lips then lit it from his matchbook advertising the new hotel, Casa Del Mar, down south of the pier near Main Street.

He stood and took a sip of his own drink and winced. He hated gin but it was Christmas—and it was in vogue. He’d have a few stouts later, down at the pub, but for now, he would try to accommodate his wife’s taste.

Shannon had taken to the fact that there was money to spend. In Boston, they had lived on the second floor of his parents’ row house on Sullivan Street. He had randomly met with Jimmy on a Sunday night after Mass at a shebeen in the back of Dugan’s house on Savin Hill. He had been back in the neighborhood recruiting bar workers and an accord was reached—Jimmy wanted to surround himself with Irishmen from the neighborhood. Loyalty would keep him safe in Los Angeles. With the offer was a train ticket for the two of them. It was worth the small investment for Jimmy since McLean’s had been robbed blind by local workers the first few months in business. When that happened, there was blood and blood was expensive for a new operation in a new town.

A Louis Armstrong number came on and Mick set the drink down and tickled his son, Liam, to the floor that was covered in red and green wrapping paper. Times were good. He had money. And if he moved up in the order with the McLean gang, he’d have a bungalow down closer to the shore by next Christmas. There were opportunities within the organization if you were full-bred Irish. His parents were back in Dorchester probably freezing. Mick’s father occasionally sent letters saying he could move back and he’d get Mick on with the union as a pipe fitter.

Mick had other plans.

* * *

The three months since Christmas had gone by in a snap of a finger. The winter had been beautiful—seventy degrees every day and his wife had pushed the pram around with the kids while he’d slept a few hours after his shift. His son was five now and his daughter three.

He turned toward the entrance the shebeen, noticing his friend, Gabriel Bradley, talking to Jimmy and he hoped he wasn’t getting involved—his nature was too good for this lifestyle. Gabriel was a writer and a Catholic schoolteacher—one of his closest

friends in Los Angeles. He too had grown up in the neighborhood back in Dorchester but attended the Latin School instead of the Jesuit school that Mick and Jimmy had gone to. Just two weeks ago, Gabriel received a Western Union telegram that his brother, Patrick, had been found dead in Quincy Bay. The funeral had long been since held and Mick had consoled him. Gabriel was now looking for a new purpose.

He'd invited Gabriel to dinner at his apartment after Mass the previous Sunday and Shannon had cooked a nice meal for them. Then, after the baby was asleep, they had walked to Third Street to the cinema to watch a flicker called *The Racket* and talked about movie ideas that would make them rich. His friend was a great storyteller and orator – Mick wondered if he would make a move in local politics one day.

They were all in their own way trying to preserve something that their parents would be proud of. But there was also money to be made and as he accepted the patrons green backs, Mick cleared the rest of the scattered bills off the counter and threw dollars and a few coins into his bucket, then turned and discreetly poured himself a shot of warm whiskey. They had Jameson but he wished for a Bushmills, the top-shelf stuff Jimmy kept in the back.

Mick looked at the clock; it was nearly eight. Jimmy had many balls in the air including some real estate prospecting in The Palisades, a rural section of forgotten land where Will Rogers had built a mansion with polo fields near. With the explosion of the population over the last few years, 1928 had been a fine year. He looked down to a copy of *Saturday Evening Post* and studied the picture of the new Ford sedan he was going to buy this week from a dealer in Culver City – \$800 seemed like a lot but there had been some deliveries he had made for Jimmy. In California, it was important to have a good motorcar, one that allowed you to take the windshield down and soak up the sun. He thought about driving up the coast with his family toward Malibu in his new car, perhaps after work with Gabriel, cruising down Sunset toward Hollywood and Vine. He'd come here with hope that he could eventually work in the pictures. Instead, he focused on his family. He would keep this job and see what panned out.

Jimmy came over and studied him at the bar with a grimace.

"Put it away," he said firmly, nodding to the magazine. "And no drinkin' off the till. You're acting like a member of the Gustin Gang, for Christ's sake. We don't steal."

"Sorry," said Mick.

"We've got costumers; there's plenty to be made tonight. And keep up the accent," he said with a smirk. "Folks out here fancy it. They're not coming here for the service – they want liquor, entertainment, and women."

"Yes," Mick replied.

They'd known each other back in Boston. Both of them had gone to the Jesuit secondary school downtown before the priests had bought land in Newton and turned it into a college. Jimmy had been a good athlete and had gotten offer to go play baseball in college. But he had followed Joe Kennedy's lead on a tip he'd received – Mick wondered if he was funded by the entrepreneur who was in the B-pictures and was having an affair with Gloria Swanson. He didn't have enough family money to get into the B-pictures but on a whim the former Jewish proprietor had offered him the

hotel for a song. They'd worked out an arrangement and the old man had left L.A. for Palm Springs for convalescence after wrestling with cancer. A sharp dressed little man showed up each week to pick up the envelope from him; Mick wondered if he was carrying a gun beneath his silk outfit – his dark eyes and tight, brown skin staring at him with tremendous leverage. He pondered what would happen if that envelope was light one week, if he'd request Jimmy's flesh in return for his default.

"How's the new baby?" asked Jimmy with a smile.

"She's grand," said Mick nervously.

"And the wife?"

"Well, she's just grand."

Jim nodded and Mick looked at Gabriel, who was talking with some other men.

"Listen, I've got something for you," he began nodding to a pint glass.

Mick nodded and poured him a Guinness and quickly set it on the bar.

"What's on your mind?" asked Mick, his heart skipping a beat.

"I've made an investment. I've put money into a movie." He sipped his stout.

"Really," replied Mick.

"Yeah, a western. It's something that Joe is involved in. He asked me to come on board and I couldn't resist. I mean, that's why we really came out here, right? Hollywood. If I wanted to run a shebeen, I could've just as well done that in Boston."

Mick looked at him incredulously. This seemed like that opportunity that he had been waiting for. He smiled. "Well, that's grand. What can I do to help?"

"I want you to be my man on the set, make sure things run smooth, if you know what I mean."

"Out where exactly?"

"Santa Clarita, about forty miles east."

Mick nodded and felt the twinge in his stomach again. He imagined living in the desert, far away from this seaside city he had become quite attached to. What would Shannon say? But this was his opportunity to move up.

"I have a feeling that this Jazz Age stuff is fading," said Jimmy. "People are getting into country music – more like our sound, you know? When I was back in Chicago, I heard this guy Gene Autry on the radio. It's a good sound."

Mick looked at his boss as he spoke in a most obsessed manner. What would Shannon say? He kept thinking. She was a bit of a pessimist, especially if the money wasn't flowing in as he'd promised. He wondered what the catch was. He and Jimmy had grown up in the same neighborhood. It made him feel that there was a bond of sorts between them.

"Of course," continued Jimmy. "There'd also be a house there for you."

Mick's heart skipped a beat. A house? That was an idea that had evacuated his mind as soon as they arrived in California. It would be at least a year, maybe more before they had enough for anything.

"I'll have to run it by the wife," said Mick. "See how she feels about it."

Jimmy smiled and finished his stout. He wiped his mouth, stood and looked at Gabriel, who was walking toward them. Jimmy looked deep into Mick's green eyes, reached out and took his face into his hands, pulling it close.

"Sometimes," he whispered. "You have to be a man and decide when there's a good opportunity put forth for your family. Back in Boston, you'd be union for life apprenticing with your Da at some water works. I'm only offering once."

He gave him a kiss on the cheek then turned to the crowd and shouted, *Lá Fhéile Pádraig!* to the joy of the crowd who cheered rambunctiously. The pianist struck up "Sweet Adeline" and the men sang a few verses for a moment before Jimmy quieted them down. He took Gabriel by the neck and turned him toward Mick, who came around the other side of the bar. Jimmy threw his arm around him as well. It was as if they were back in Dorchester again, making teams for stickball.

"Lads – let me introduce the newest candidate for city selectmen – Gabriel Bradley!" he exclaimed.

Gabriel smiled at Mick. It was too late; he was part of this now. In the dark shebeen, the music began again. And Mick already knew what he would tell Shannon.

* * *

On Sunday afternoon, after Mass, Gabriel packed the new Ford with a picnic basket, blankets, folding chairs and towels. His hair was slicked back and parted in the middle and his dark sunglasses hung off the tip of his nose. He wore Bermuda shorts and a collared short-sleeve shirt with sandals. He felt like a tourist but didn't care. He would tell Shannon about the plan today, about how he'd been chosen. It could be worse: Jimmy could be using him for muscle or asking him to take care of collecting from the gamblers who played cards in the shebeen on Saturday nights. These were the men who sometimes ended up in the Los Angeles aqueduct floating face down with their throats slashed. He called out to Shannon, who was getting the kids together, saying that he was ready.

Mick steered the Ford steadily down Ocean Boulevard as they headed south toward Manhattan Beach. One of the other barmen had a driveway at his flat near the beach and they could park there with the kids. It was a beautiful day and Mick glanced at his wife holding Sinead, the infant, while Liam sat in the back staring out at the surfers riding waves. He would wait until they were on the beach to tell her. It was hard to get angry on the beach; it was a place of solace, especially for a pale Dorchester girl who only knew Revere and Nantasket from her youth.

They arrived and got settled on the shore close to the water. The baby played with a sand pail and Liam ran back and forth between their umbrella and chairs and the water. Mick watched his son and wondered if his pale skin would burn today underneath the mid-day sun. He felt his feet in the sand.

He studied his son's physique; he was going to be an athletic kid and the idea of moving away from Santa Monica disappointed him. What kind of schools would they

have in Santa Clarita? Mick had hoped to send him to the Catholic school with the nuns behind St. Monica's.

He had heard that Will Rogers was shooting movies out there and that was about it – there were farms and agricultural workers – something that was now changing in Los Angeles. Goldwyn Pictures had shot many of their early silent flickers between there and Hollywood. Gene Autry, the singer Jimmy had mentioned, was also coming out from Chicago according to an article he had read in the *Times*. Mick had heard that the days of title cards were fading; there were rumors of “talkies” – flickers with sound. It was exciting.

Shannon looked at him and smiled. He lit a Camel and tried to smile back but she knew him too well.

“What’s on your mind, darling?” she asked.

“What?” asked Mick.

“You look troubled.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“You wear concern on you face like a little boy.” Her lips curled up in the same way they had years ago when he had timidly asked if he could kiss her goodnight at the end of their first date to an ice cream parlor in Dorchester.

It occurred to Mick that his wife had lost her Boston accent in the three years they’d been in California.

“So what do you want me to tell you?” he asked.

“Tell me that you have some good news,” she said.

“I think I do, but I’m not sure. I mean I don’t know what you’ll. Well, you see –”

“I’m pregnant,” said Shannon firmly.

Mick looked at her, shocked, then stood and stared out at the Pacific.

“Pregnant?” he repeated. All he could think of was home – Boston – moving the family back away from all this – abandoning paradise.

“Mick,” Shannon finally said. “Aren’t you happy?”

Mick looked down at his wife. She looked disappointed. He immediately dropped his knees to the sand, wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head, then her lips – long.

“Yes, yes,” he reassured her. We’ll name him Patrick, after Gabriel’s brother. If a girl, Patricia.

“So, you’re happy?”

He kissed her forehead. “Yes, of course. It’s wonderful.”

“I’m glad. So, what was it that was on your mind?”

Mick held his balance then looked at her and smiled weakly. He reached for his cigarettes and put one between his lips. “Nothing,” he said. “I just wanted to ask you if you wanted to look at that little bungalow you had your eye on off of San Vicente?”

“Can we afford it?”

“Not today,” he said, blowing smoke into the warm air as he waved out the match flame. “But maybe tomorrow.”

Shannon smiled, leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. She rose and ran toward Liam, who was floating dangerously deeper in the ocean pulled by the undertow. Mick threw down his cigarette in the sand and picked up his daughter who smiled at him then looked out and pointed.

"Water, Daddy!" she said.

He would tell Shannon later, maybe after her second Martini. He would tell her that there was no other option.

* * *

Mick stood at the bar. It was Holy Thursday and the crowd would be arriving after Mass for a few drinks before the Catholic sacrifices of Good Friday. He turned and stared into the Jameson mirror behind the bar, studying his wrinkling forehead where forty days ago he wore blackened ashes in the form of a cross. So much had happened since then, most notably that Gabriel had won the early April election.

He'd put Shannon and the kids on a train to Santa Clarita the day before at Union Station. Jimmy had made all the arrangements and the house would be waiting for them. Mick was to join them in two days.

Gabriel walked in and called out to Mick. He approached the bar and Mick began to pour him a stout.

"None for me, I'm a councilman now," said Gabriel. "Don't want that in the papers. Government official drinking during Prohibition."

Mick stopped the tap and pushed back up. He dumped the stout down the drain.

"You're a changed man already, Mr. Bradley," joked Mick.

Gabriel looked at Mick seriously and leaned forward on the bar.

"Mick – we need to talk."

Mick nodded and looked around to see if they had privacy.

"It's Jimmy," began Gabriel. "He's been a little aggressive. It's awkward."

He looked at his old friend. There was fear on his face, real fear.

"Jimmy asked me to do something, you know, something..." Then he stopped and stared at Mick.

Mick nodded. "Well, just don't do it."

"We can't talk about this here," Gabriel whispered. "We'll have to do it outside the shebeen – later. Where shall we meet?"

The door opened and a crowd of men marched in from Mass at St. Monica's.

"We can meet at the pier, around midnight," said Mick.

"But it's got to be tonight," his friend insisted

Mick watched as Gabriel put on his straw hat then moved through the crowd of men coming for their final drinks before the abstemiousness of Good Friday. He stepped back and looked down again at the revolver then thought of Shannon, Liam, and Sinead out in Santa Clarita.

* * *

Mick finished his shift and took the trolley eleven streets west to the Santa Monica Pier, nervously considering what his friend was going to tell him. He walked the length of the pier past the Ferris wheel, thinking that he was certain he had seen the pier in a flicker he took Shannon to when he was courting her back in Dorchester, her father demanding she was home by eight o'clock sharp and finally approving of Mick after keeping his agreement to the curfew five times. When they first arrived in Santa Monica he and Shannon had seen a beach beauty contest at the bottom of the pier on one of their Saturday walks, but Mick didn't think any of those girls were as pretty as his wife.

Mick reached the end of the pier and spotted Gabriel sitting on a bench lighting a cigarette, heard the crash of the Pacific rolling in from Santa Monica Bay under them, snapping against the wooden support beams.

Gabriel nodded to him and Mick sat on the bench at the end of the pier, lighting a Camel and looking over at the tired face of his friend. He usually liked to stand at the end of the pier, elbows on the edge of the wood railing. But he was happy to sit after being on his feet all night at the shebeen.

"Heard from Shannon yet?" Gabriel asked.

Mick reached into his jacket and took out a Western Union telegram.

"They're fine. Settling in. The house is a bit smaller than she'd hoped for but it's a house. I'll be heading out in the morning on the eight o'clock train from Union Station."

Gabriel nodded and put out his cigarette.

"Jimmy – he has to go, Mick," said Gabriel.

Mick paused but remained calm. "What has he gotten you into?" asked Mick.

"Oil. He wants me to lobby for a site in Beverly Hills. There's a well, underneath a residential neighborhood. But there are kids all around – and he still wants to dig. It'll require bribes to council members and possibly a little muscle – all that leads back to me." He sighed. "I told him no, that I wouldn't use my influence. He told me that he has some things on me – bad things, Mick. Things that could get me tossed off this pier."

Mick nodded and lit another Camel. He wanted to walk – walk away from this all. He wanted to be with his family, hold his son on his lap, and not worry. He reached into his pocket and Gabriel watched nervously. He removed his wallet, fingered into it and handed him an old photograph – the only photograph he actually had. Gabriel studied it and laughed.

"Hell, this is from ten years ago, Gabriel beamed. "Your wedding day. Look how thin we were."

Mick looked at the three of them – Jimmy, Gabriel, and himself with Shannon who was dressed in her ivory lace-wedding gown that she now kept safely in a department store box in the closet. Gabriel handed him back the photograph and Mick slid it into his wallet.

“We pledged something that day,” said Mick. “You were both in my wedding, you were my best man, Gabriel.”

Gabriel nodded and leaned to the side.

Mick stood.

“I’ll take care of everything,” said Mick. “You won’t have to worry about anything.”

Gabriel nodded and looked down.

“Can you do it tonight, Mick?”

“yeah – tonight everything will be settled.”

Silence.

Gabriel stood then hugged his childhood friend. “Thank you, Mick,” he Gabriel.

He began to walk away and Mick reached into his jacket again, revealing a revolver from the shebeen. Mick muttered a prayer in Gaelic then pulled the trigger twice. The force pushed Gabriel back against the wooden railing at the end of the pier. A third shot and Gabriel’s body barreled over the railing and fell into the gushing water under the pier.

Gabriel tossed the revolver over the railing. He did not wait to hear it collide with the water below as he ran back down the pier to the car that was promised to be waiting for him – nothing but his family on his mind. And that he had taken advantage of an opportunity.

The Fearless Dandelion

Diliana Ovtcharova
Albuquerque, New Mexico

diliana87@live.com

There was a time when Dandelions were not considered weeds, but just another flower full of hope when it buds out of the Earth and bursting with beauty upon first bloom. Back then, the Dandelions wilted away like the tulips and roses they shared the land with. They did not transform into the cloud-like puff-balls little boys and girls nowadays love to blow into the air. So for many centuries, the Dandelions were incapable of turning into a weightless puff.

The flowers' world was always ruled by the Sun: the great judge above who told them when to bloom, when to tuck their pedals in, and when to say their goodbyes before wilting away. If the flowers ever disobeyed the Sun, they would wilt within 24 hours of the offense. Of course, no one had actually seen a friend or sister be put down to wilt early, but they knew it had happened.

"My cousin's sister's best friend's mom told the Sun she didn't feel like tucking in her pedals one night. The air was warm and the Apple Trees were having a salsa performance. She wanted to see it; so she stayed up all night, dancing and swaying in the night's Breeze. The next morning, her stem was cracked and all of her pedals were found thrown about in the garden. She was a pearl white Hyacinth, and everybody knows a Hyacinth is the Sun's favorite flower. That poor beautiful flower! I don't think I could go on blooming if any of my loved ones were punished by the Sun."

Similar stories kept the air tense amongst the flowers. The relations and flowers were always different, but the punishment always similar. And so the flowers lived, in fear of the Sun, yet they always admired and respected him for he was the one who gave them life. Until one day, a Dandelion was born with no fear. She never cried as a baby and always struggled to fall asleep when the Sun left. The flowers in the garden did not understand her lack of fear and were told by the Sun that if she could not be startled, she would grow up to be a foolish and hideous flower.

The daisies in the garden jumped out from behind trees, yelled "Boo" every chance they could, told her stories of the disobedient flowers, even tried to convince her the Sun would send the Wind to ravage her at night if she did not get frightened. The Dandelion was a hopeless case and the rest of the flowers only grew more fearful of the Sun who was furious at their apparent failure.

"If I can't scare her into obedience, I fear the rest of the flowers will not obey me. Moon, please help me." The Sun was beginning to sound desperate.

"It's just one flower, Sun. One tiny flower among thousands, millions of more beautiful and more frightened flowers! If, by some miracle, this Dandelion convinces the rest of the flowers that fear is a hindering emotion, I have devised a plan."

And so the Moon and the Sun traded ideas back and forth, hoping no drastic measures would have to be taken and the the Dandelion would soon lose her stubborn bravery. As Autumn approached, the flowers were preparing for wilting and reminisced about the day they first bloomed. The Dandelion however, had no plans to wilt. Why would she wilt simply because the Sun claimed she had to? She ignored his daily threats and stubbornly displayed her bright yellow pedals. She wanted to not only never wilt, but to travel to other gardens too. She hungered to fly above the trees and reach the other side of the world, greet the Orchids she had heard about and speak with the Bamboo plants (she thought they would have a more interesting take on life than the Weeping Willows she was surrounded by).

The next day, the Dandelion awoke with a new outfit. She was no longer a brilliant yellow, but instead she was covered by white fluff, resembling the Clouds above: they were the ones who had told her tales of the Orchids and Bamboos. Clouds always had the best stories. Ecstatic at her individual weightless pedals, the Dandelion begged the Clouds to find the Breeze and have him fly past her, lifting her off the grass as high as he could, and take her to the other side of the world. As the other flowers awoke, they were terrified to see what had happened to the Dandelion. She should have been the first one to wilt according to the Sun.

"What's happened to the Dandelion, Sun...Why has she not wilted peacefully...Is she dead...Will she live forever?" Questions were now flying fast towards the Sun, luckily he was quick on his rays and fake answers poured out of him.

"The Dandelion refused to wilt. She did not respect my authority and thus she shall suffer. I have turned her into a skeleton of what she once was," the Sun was just as shocked as the flowers but he could not let them know that, "and I have ordered the Wind to blow past her today, destroying whatever flower soul is left inside of her! Because of her, because of her refusal to accept fear as a natural gear in life, she will be solely responsible for giving other Dandelions the unfortunately hideous title of Weeds!"

Heavy gasps leaped out of all the flowers' stems. A weed was disgusting, ugly, and disposable.

"Do you see now?" continued the Sun, "This is what happens when a flower does as it pleases. Wind!" The Sun motioned for the Wind to take the Dandelion away. This was the best news the Dandelion could hear. The Wind was so much more powerful than her tardy friend, the Breeze. He could lift each of her pale pedals to the Clouds where they could keep her company until the Breeze met her for their trip.

"This is most glorious news!" thought the Dandelion, "These silly flowers can shake in fear, but I will fly. I will see what the clouds witness every day!"

The Wind immediately responded to the Sun and violently swept the Dandelion's pedals away. In front of the tulips and roses now stood a naked stem of the once jovial Dandelion. The Wind did not realize that the Clouds were awaiting the

Dandelion and he left her pedals to be devoured by them. The Clouds did not devour their adventurous friend, instead they cradled her in their arms until it was safe for the Breeze to take her pedals around the world.

As the Dandelion's pedals traveled the world, they each decided to plant themselves in different locations. Some pedals felt a close connection with the songs of India, some were intrigued by the Tuscan hills, others preferred the beaches of Jamaica, and so they began their fearless families across the world.

If ever you see a white puffy Dandelion, and the Breeze and Wind are not around, kneel down to it, tell it of a beautiful place to visit and blow a puff of air so it can begin its journey.

The Province

Jessica A. Kent
Cohoes, New York

jessica.a.kent@gmail.com

There were no wars at this time. No concern except fires upon the horizon and dispatched messages of militants at the border, though messengers were unreliable, and paper was tossed to the wind. Most days the denizens of this scorched town kept themselves drunk upon native wine, a sweet substitute for existence. The young missionary drank Coca-Cola in the province town's café, but sipped as if it were merlot, holding the bottle pinched like a glass's stem. But the woman knew better than to guess his airs. There was no class behind him. In the rugged equatorial heat she confronted him quickly, fingers surrounding the cane backing of the empty chair across from him. "Who do you think you are?"

"Who do you think I am?" He didn't startle, or fight. His light eyebrows raised a bit. His Adam's apple pulsed as he swallowed. That was all. Her callous expectations had caused men pause in the past, and it worked again. A pleasure in her challenges, she enjoyed the game, knowing winning moves, gaining, receiving. His too clean clothes were beginning to wilt. He was new, but not that new. And he felt faintly familiar. His kind, at least. Idealistic, dreamer, unshattered.

"Who do I think you are? I think you're some rich brat kid out to change cultures he has no place in." She arched an eyebrow, and there were no more games. There was only familiarity, and a haunting pedigree of distaste. A droplet of sweat from the bottle of soda met his finger and spread over the skin. His arms were long and tanned, the collar of his polo shirt opened at the throat. He looked like a sophomore on holiday. A brat kid. A young man eager for his name to be imprinted upon a scroll of history, and many young men had walked away from these places wounded, even wounded at her own hands. It was only her pastime in a world of nothingness. Take whatever you can as amusement.

His lips came together, his eyes narrowing. "I've seen you. In this town. They talk about you—"

"Yes. And they say wild, wonderful things."

"All true?"

She played a smile for him, understanding the intricacies of her beauty, seeing his eyes. There were other men here in this place, tin roof and dark

interior, but an opened porch allowed the sounds of the marketplace to penetrate, and the dull light from seasons of overcast. She shook her dark hair back as she sat. He leaned forward, still clutching the soda, as if they were about to seek depth. But she did not move towards him. Reclined, as if there would be other options.

They were the only white skinned people around. She was comfortable in that knowledge; he, as yet, was not. They spoke English to one another, though in different accents.

"You were in the market with the others." Her dark eyes returned from surveying the street. "You carried a Bible."

"And what books do you carry?"

"There's no need anymore. I've read too many words, written too many more."

"You're here on vacation then?" They both knew she was not.

She crossed her legs and hung an arm upon the back of the chair, eyes finding the messy street again. "A ten year vacation."

"Why here?"

Vague familiarity. Like a confession without a partition. Had she been this truthful before? "Because it's not there."

"Did I get your name?"

"I never got yours."

He simply smiled. "If I am who you think I am, my name won't matter. Just another face."

"You will die for this."

His smile did not abate. "I plan to."

They would not come to an agreement, so they parted ways. For he couldn't help his faith, and she couldn't help her logic, and she lifted from the table in a frustration she found hard to mask, hand to forehead exiting the close-quartered café into the mud streets of humidity. A foolish boy willing to die for nothing. He moved to the edge of the porch watching her step away, and the motorbikes parted for her, and the ladies of the town turned their eyes, and the men of the town turned their gaze. The rains were a distant mist blurring clear views, vapor from heaven.

That had been enough for the first afternoon. He wouldn't be at the table every day, she knew, and once a week might be expected, but perhaps not. But she found him again. He was easy to find.

There wasn't much to the town, just a few squares built up around pitted pieces of land where natives sold what they could coax from the ground. Everyone was poor, and the rains sometimes were ceaseless. Decades old cars shared roadways with livestock, and foliage hung lifeless. She kept a room and was only alone when she chose to be, moving to the rusted iron balcony overhanging the street, but whose vista was mostly milky sky. Moving back inside. Moving to the café. Too caught up in life, or not caught up enough.

Consumed with another lover. Remembering.

She watched him, his blond head ducking about in the crowds. He loved children, and held them, lifted them when he could, carried them in the crook of his arm or upon his back. They chased him when he ran. They tried to tag his swift, lean body, curved and borne away. They all knew him, the missionary, they called him the missionary, though there were many others like him from the compound a half mile from the town. He was not the newest, or the longest there, nor the youngest of the set. But only he was granted the title. He darted about upon the dirt field and fell laughing when they captured him.

There were too many hardcovers upon her shelves, pages swelling from the humidity, and she chose one. Words. Her collection contained manuscripts of her own. Her collection did not contain a Bible.

In the night, in the rains, he appeared, soaked clothing and swift gate, beneath shimmering lamplight and through hollow streets. He returned again to the view below the balcony, moving beside the doctor, who mounted a motorbike. The missionary climbed behind, the sound of a revving engine drowned by downpour thunder. She turned back inside.

Rains gave way to nothingness, brown and heat, and she was drinking again. The café didn't serve much, but what they did sufficed, and she joined him at his table with a tumbler of amber liquid. He pinched his bottle of soda like a wine glass, and smiled, as if pleased to see this old friend. She knew it wasn't the delight other men took in seeing her.

"How are you?" He seemed sincere.

"You're a fool, for what you do." She sipped, and stared. "You will never find what you're looking for."

"Will you? Have you, I should ask?"

"There's nothing to find."

"Love? Trust? Faith?"

"There is nothing." She sipped again, under his stare. "I left my country because there is nothing, and came here because there is nothing."

The missionary pursed his lips again, and his hair had grown longer. He resembled the earth now, his eyes unafraid as before, more so. "I don't believe you."

But this was not confession, and she would never tell him about loss and empty rooms. Passions will carry one far but they cannot sustain, and death is finite and rancid. Nothing more to say, to speak, no more words to write, and nothing but heat and days until the end. And he so vibrant, longing for death. It is pain and betrayal. She could not say these things, but felt that one day she would. That something would be pierced in his presence, pulled back, something made bare before the young man. Until then she would drink, and toy with his cool company. "Who was the doctor for?"

"A child." His eyes suddenly turned away from hers. "We prayed. But he died."

“And your delicate faith shatters.”

“No.” She watched his eyes, his still hands.

“I’m intimate with loss.”

“I figured you were. Why else would you be here?”

She more than once stood from his table because he cut too close. This boy, this naive boy from nowhere, this child. He would not drink. He would not follow her to private corners. He would not relent. Still he darted about in the square, his laughter light. The men of the town turned their eyes to him, and the ladies of the town turned their gaze. She turned her gaze, to him.

There were no wars, but talk of militants returned. The soft knock on her door woke her, heavy head rising from the pillow, and she clothed herself before opening to the young missionary. He kept his eyes from her, from her hand clutching sheer fabric at her chest, skin revealed. “I’m not here for you,” he whispered. There was desire, a subtle pull, but she felt uncomfortable under his gaze, and regretted the position she placed him in. He was young enough to be her son. He wanted to invite her to the compound, to a party of sorts for the others heading back to their home countries. A flash of breathlessness and she wondered about his plans. “No. I’m staying. I’m here for eternity.”

She refused his invitation, and sat at the table in the café staring at an empty chair. Night came and the men of the town grew drunk and improper, and she walked streets of poverty. There was nothing ever to be afraid of, and the border threats seemed far away and inaccessible, murder, burning, rape. Nothing the mind can hold on to for very long.

She thought to the years and to the graves and the endless rains and grief buried, and as he had a family at the compound, she once had a family, too. They celebrated life together like he celebrated life, but they did not honor goodbye like he honored goodbye.

Was there nothing to ever not be afraid of? She felt safe in his presence.

There were wars now. Invasions, targets. Strategic, but the town had never been strategic. Men still got drunk as before, even though smoke on the outskirts edged its way to the sky. He spoke to her of other things, his hands illustrating and a differing light in his eyes. And he did follow her to her room, but only to listen to things she would not say publicly. They did not know one another at all, weren’t even certain of origin. But he listened when she spoke, and she was safe. Elements calmed, armies were broken. Things were suddenly smooth.

When he was not in town the men of the café told stories about him and mocked him and she sat at the table drinking, thinking too much, and what had he asked her? Have I found what I am looking for? What is it that I seek? When she saw his blond head moving about the people of the marketplace, she smiled. She found him again in the afternoon with his Bible in hand, and, shielding her eyes from the sun, told him playfully he was a fool for what he did. He grinned. Children gathered around him, waiting.

He darted away. They chased him until he crashed to the ground, his laughter all around.

She was never told about his death, and only sensed it, hearing bits of gossip from the men in the café, the men in the streets. No one knew any more information. Stuff of legends, anyway. She went to the compound barely breathing, a weight inside, and no one knew her. But knew her from stories. He had been beaten, his throat cut, body mutilated.

They had already wept. They had already forgiven. His remains were already on the way home.

She returned to her room and could barely stand, but this loss was different than before. He had not been lost. He had stayed, like he promised, until the end. She had not succeeded in turning his eyes, and could be comforted in that alone.

Blood and Rocks

B.W. Long
Charlotte, North Carolina

bradwlong21@yahoo.com

Susan Jentry threw her tool belt over her shoulder as she stepped hard onto the gravel with steel toed boots. She slammed the door of her '82 Ford pick-up, and headed toward the salt mine that from a distance seemed quiet as smoke billowed gently out of the stacks of the processing plant adjacent to the mine. The sun was just passing over the crest of the horizon, pushing half a mile wide hole in the ground into prominence, and the early morning air was tainted with the taste of salt. Her throat burned from the salt by the end of the day, but after working there over the years her senses had become callused. She had been in the plant for three years total but during the winters she was typically laid off for three or four months as production slowed. Everything about the job was typical and routine. The rocks crunched under Susan's feet as her long legs and confident stride carried her down the auxiliary road toward the front of the plant.

The roar of activity from the mine grew louder as Susan reached the front doors of the plant. Susan's supervisor was at the door waiting for her. He was a stout man with horn rimmed glasses whose clip on tie only fooled those who hadn't met him before. Susan knew that when he waited at the door there was something important to be done. He approached as she continued to walk down the laminate floor that was slick from the water lubricate used on the blades that cut the salt rocks down to size. His feet shuffled carefully behind Susan as he glanced over his clipboard.

"Hey Malcolm, must be a busy morning," Susan said, a hinting irritation in her voice.

"Once you clock in and get ready, I need you to head over to the mine. One of the cutters lost its pneumatics late last night." Malcolm's voice was loud with a light rasp from the harsh, salt-infused air. Susan shuddered when he told her of her first job. The plant was safe. Women had worked comfortably in the plant for years, and Susan had managed to rise to a fairly important position. She was hired in as head of maintenance, and while at first there was a slight uproar, she had become a regular presence and no one batted an eye. However, the mine was different. They were a different breed. Generation after generation had been at the mine. Most men of the surrounding town could trace back their heritage to the mine. Male after male, great grandfathers to great grandsons had worked every day. They liked only their own kind.

They worked alone for long hours, and when they were done working, they drank at their own bars. Townsfolk and barkeepers would say, almost bragging, that the taste of salt in their mouths had become a genetic trait.

"The mine is no place for a woman, dammit! No Place!" Susan could recall one incident when she ran into an old miner outside of a bar when she first moved to the town. She was unaware of the hostility to outsiders, especially those of the opposite sex, and had tried to spark up conversation with one of the locals.

"I just moved into Ontario. I'm born and raised in Saskatchewan," Susan said, baiting the man next to her for conversation. He said nothing, staring into his glass. Susan noticed his empty gaze grow deeper into the last sip of beer. She baited further.

"I came in to work here at the mine," upon utterance, the man's eyes widened and bulged from his eyelids. "I'm taking the maintenance job," as she finished her sentence Susan glanced down at the old man's hands. They were gripping the mug tighter and tighter. Susan watched his knuckles turn white. He looked up to her and said,

"Who do you think you are? Just who the hell do you think you are? This is our land, these are our homes. The mine is no place for a woman, dammit! No Place!" The words burned into Susan's brain. She turned to Malcolm in protest.

"You've got to be kidding me! I'm not going over there. Send Derek."

"I can't. He won't be in until seven, and you're the only one here who knows the cutter," Malcolm persisted, "Look, I'm sorry Sue. But, they're at a standstill over there. They need the help. Think of it as breaking another barrier," he mocked her lightly.

"You know I didn't come here to do that. The plant is what I know. I just want to stay out of it," She was indignant, but she knew that ultimately Malcolm had final say. His silence informed Susan of his response.

She clocked in and headed into the locker room. She came to work as ready as she could be, and over the three years she had managed to only need to carry in her tool belt. This helped make her less of a nuisance to the men of the plant. She had grown accustomed to the routine. She woke up earlier to take a shower at home; she put on her coveralls in the truck when she first arrived at the auxiliary road. She purposefully kept her presence in the bathrooms down to an absolute minimum. The men in the plant appreciated it and eventually they grew to accept her.

On the way into the locker room she saw Jim out of the corner of her eye. They waved, and he jogged over. Susan remembered how he used to walk her to her truck at the end of her shifts. They would talk the length of the road. Mostly they would talk about work and other random goings on. Night after night the walks grew longer. Susan, being all too familiar with typical courtship was aware of Jim's soft advances.

She thought it was cute and innocent, but most of all she enjoyed the attention. Her suspicions were confirmed one night as Jim made his feelings known.

“Sue, I’m not sure how to say this, and I wish I had a more clever way of putting this out there, but if you’re not doing anything tomorrow night maybe you’d like to grab some food... With me... Alone.”

Susan let the silence linger a bit more, letting the question simmer in Jim’s mind. She couldn’t contain the smile any longer.

“Sure,” was all she said.

Months passed and the two developed their relationship further. Susan began opening herself up more to him; her openness being a trait that she learned to hide after her first meeting with the old man in the bar. Jim, in turn, exchanged information about himself that Susan could only imagine weren’t disclosed to everyone he encountered. She learned one night at local fair of their mutual outsider-ship.

“My mother and father moved from Quebec before I was born. She was a First Nation and my father was a true Francophone,” Jim said, biting into his fried cheese on a stick, “My parents bought a house in the boonies, took jobs, and had a kid. It didn’t take me long to realize that I wasn’t going to make many friends with a lineage like that.”

“Poor thing, you probably were picked last every day for kickball,” Susan jabbed lightly, but Jim was not as amused as she had hoped.

“Truthfully, it was painful. Screw getting picked last. I had to fight tooth and nail just to make it back in from recess.” Susan froze in her tracks as Jim’s pace picked up intensity.

“I’m sorry, I just didn’t realize.”

“Most people don’t. It’s not a big deal. I’m over it. ‘What doesn’t kill you...’ right?”

“Right,” She forced a smile but knew right then that the relationship had changed, and it probably wouldn’t work out. Once again, Susan’s suspicions were confirmed on the ride home.

“I think maybe we should take it easy for a while,” Even though Susan knew it was coming, the hurt still surprised her.

“Look, Jim, if it’s what I said earlier, I’m sorry. I had-“

“No, no. It has nothing to do with you,” He paused, taking a deep breath, “if anything it made me realize I have some things to handle with myself before I can be here for you.”

“Jim, there is no reason to think that this has to change anything between us. I can still be here while you sort it out.”

“Have you thought that maybe I don’t want you here?” His words bit a chunk out of her heart.

“You can’t possibly mean that.”

“I know. That sounded worse than what I meant. I can’t get it out right, and that’s part of the problem.”

“I understand,” was all she could get out. The car shifted down a narrow gravel road where Susan’s house stood perched back between two massive maple trees.

In the months that followed Jim’s lack of presence was easier to bear, and since the other men in the plant had grown more comfortable around Susan, Jim’s protection was no longer needed. The two were left with a passing hello at work and occasional drinks at the bar on the weekends, which seemed to Susan more of a chance encounter rather than a planned meeting. Jim bent over to tie his shoe.

“Hey Sue, what’s going on?”

“They’re sending me over to the mine,” she shuddered again as she said it.

“Well, it might not be too bad,” Jim delivered with his focus more on retying his boots than on her. Susan was hoping he could come up with something better, but there wasn’t. All she had was hope, and it wasn’t offering her much comfort.

“Hey I gotta run, but good luck. I’m sure it’ll be fine,” His words rung hollow to Susan. She continued into the locker room, splashed some water onto her face for a quick pick me up, and gathered her courage.

An alarm blared as the elevator approached the top of the mine. Susan walked onto the outer rim of the entrance. Men were strewn about in no sort of pattern around the elevator. Some men were lying down, using their lunchboxes as headrests. Others were standing or leaning on equipment with their shirts draped over their shoulders. The men talked loudly, sometimes interjected with shrill laughter. The men were covered from head to toe with soot and dirt from the mine. A grey hue hung in the air around her. The conversation grew softer as Susan came into their sightline until eventually all conversation stopped. Her steps remained strong, and her eyes did not stray from the elevator. A sharp whistle broke the silence. The cat call sent the men into a frenzy with laughter. Deep throaty laughs rang down into the mine below. Susan did not waiver. She stood tall waiting for the elevator. The laughter faded above her as the elevator

proceeded down the mine. When Susan reached the bottom she was approached by an old man carrying a Coleman electric lantern. The sun's light hadn't escaped them yet, but the lantern let Susan know that soon it would.

"It's down this way," The old man said motioning to his left. They began to walk in that direction as he further described the problem, "It went down around four, but it started losing pressure around two. We had to run it until it went completely down," as he finished his sentence they approached the large machine. His lantern poured light out just far enough to see the massive chunking blade. It was used to cut large holes and create new caverns for further generations to explore with axes. The machine's stillness frightened Susan a little, but she continued with her work, blocking out her nerves. She knelt next to a box toward the back of the behemoth cutter. She immediately found the problem upon opening the box. She turned back in the direction of the light,

"The Backflow is broken. The compressor can't build pressure. I have to run back to the plant and get the part. I'll get it tomorrow."

"No, no, no, this can't wait 'ntil tomorrow. I got at least fifty men up there that won't wait." The man made two steps toward Susan and shined the light into her face. Backing up and holding her hand up to her eyes, she responded,

"Well, that's just too bad. It'll be at least an hour until I get back. I'm not pulling overtime for this shit. Get your own guy to fix it," She regained her ground confidently, but the man would not rest.

"I'll have a riot on my hands, and I'm pretty sure you don't want to be the reason for it," his cracked smile back at Susan glowing in the darkness.

"Just what the hell are you getting at!" She said as she drew her hand from her eyes and inched in close to the man.

"Nothin', I ain't gettin' at nothin'."

"I didn't think so," she said and defiantly pushed past the old man.

Susan reached the top of the elevator to the same silence that she arrived to. The men had organized themselves into packs. Each group turned and looked as indeterminable whispers grazed past Susan's ears. An unusually large man nudged himself to the front of one of the small herds and drew a knife from his pocket.

"Hmm, don't see many pretty ladies around here," he said as he scraped the dirt from under his nails with the knife.

"Wonder why that is?"

Leaning in close, the man drew his knife up to his face, "Maybe it's because they could get hurt in a place like this," She withdrew from the grey giant in front of her and

continued walking. She stared straight ahead and walked as confidently as she could back towards the plant. An explosion of laughter and roars came from behind her as Susan quickened her pace to a jog. She knew that if the men saw her run they would think she was afraid, but by that point she wanted nothing more than to be back inside the plant.

Jim grabbed Susan as she past by him still in a jog and said,

“What the hell is going on?”

“Nothing, I was just running back from the mines to grab a part,” she said in between gasps of air. Jim’s expression grew serious as he positioned her directly in front of him. Staring her right in the eyes he said,

“Susan, did they hurt you?”

“No, God no. I just got a little spooked,” she surprised herself with her honesty to Jim. “They didn’t touch me.”

“Animals! I swear to God, they’re animals,” he stammered through a couple other words before he managed to get out what he was really trying to say, “If you need anything, let me know.” Susan smiled and lowered his arms from her shoulders as she said,

“Thanks, but I just got a little spooked. Everything is fine. If I need you, I’ll let you know,” Susan turned and walked back into the plant.

The rest of the day continued uneventfully, but the events of the morning couldn’t escape Susan’s mind. She shivered and thought of the grey, dried mud on the men’s skin that blended in with the background of gravel and soot covered bushes and patchy, dead grass. A hard, shrill whistle broke her concentration. Susan flipped the light to her work station and headed out the door toward the access road where she had parked.

As she pushed her key into the door lock a presence forced itself on to her, pushing Susan into her car, pinning her hand between herself and the door. A hand slowly guided its way up her side to her throat, and Susan felt the salt and gravel from the mine grind against her skin. Before the hand secured its grip around Susan’s wind pipe the weight was lifted from her back. The shadow had been thrown to the ground. She watched as two dark figures wrestled just out of reach of the lot light’s glow. The scuffle echoed in the open parking lot. Punches landed and resonated off of the surrounding cars. Grunts and growls bounced off into oblivion. One of the figures managed to reach its feet and delivered two hard kicks to the side of the other. The two figures became motionless; one towering over the other. After a moment the tall shadow moved into the light. Susan stared into the dark until Jim’s face became clear.

“Bastard,” Jim said, wiping blood from his nose and spitting on the ground next to the unconscious body.

“Oh my God, Jim, are you ok?” Susan rushed to his aid.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. He was a slouch,” he chuckled to himself as Susan helped him into her side seat.

“I suppose I could still use some help now and then,” Susan said, hoisting Jim’s badly beaten leg into the truck.

“And suppose I could use a drink,” Susan laughed and closed his passenger door. The truck sped away kicking up gravel on to the dark figure still lying on the ground, just out of reach of the overhead lot light’s glare.

Jane Fountain

Steven McBrearty
Austin, Texas

steve78723@yahoo.com

Jane Fountain was just one girl in the history of the world, but I felt like the luckiest guy in the history of the world to know her. It was so much fun hanging around her. She got my jokes, she told good jokes herself. She was quite savvy regarding the visual imagery presented by her name. I loved her name – Jane Fountain.

“Did anybody in school call you Jane Fountainbleau?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” she replied. “I got Fountainbleau, I got Overflowing Fountain, I got Fountain of Plenty. My name was a never-ending source of amusement for all my friends.”

We both laughed. I laughed possibly more than was strictly warranted by the quality of her humor, but I wanted her to be sure that that I found her amusing. She seemed to believe I was amusing, too.

We met during our junior year as fellow staff members on *The Daily Texan*, the student newspaper at the University of Texas. We were both new additions to the staff, transfers in from out of town colleges. She was a pretty, pouty-lipped, peasant blouse-wearing, would-be photographer from Lubbock, out in the West Texas plains, and I was a skinny, sarcastic, “Peace and Love, Man,” secretly-romantic, romantically-deprived, insecure, would-be features writer from San Antonio.

Goofing around the copy desk late at night, we developed a friendship and a rapport. During breaks in production, we hopped over to a back booth in the Orange Bull coffee shop across Guadalupe Street from the newspaper office, where we teased each other and criticized the hell out of everybody else.

Her feet, folded nonchalantly beneath the table, pointed toward me, pointed significantly, I believed, pointed with emotional and emphatic purpose. I felt that her feet at that moment personified her feelings toward me – alert, unfettered, impressed, open to new adventures. It’s hard to explain, but with Jane my poor self image melted away, leaving me sharp, entertaining, honest, in control. This was my real self, I hoped, or at least an authentic alternate self that could rise to the fore occasionally.

“So when you’re a hot-shot writer on *The New Yorker* you’ll still be afraid to call up girls,” Jane said, shooting off one of her usual lines of repartee.

“I might call *you* sometimes,” I shot back. “I might even give you an assignment. If you’re lucky.”

We had a shoot and shoot back kind of relationship. I liked to compliment her, she liked to tease me. I wanted to think that her teasing meant that she liked me. Though I understood that there was nothing sexual, nothing serious.

For one thing, she was taken. Jane said that she had a boyfriend back home in Lubbock, an intern at a hospital there, a doctor-to-be, and the plan was for them to marry as soon as Jane completed college. I had a girlfriend from a formerly Soviet-bloc country in Eastern Europe, I said, a discus thrower for their national team – and *we* planned to marry as soon as the Olympics were over and the steroids had washed out of her system. Jane laughed, covering my hand briefly with hers. As she did, my gaze took in our two hands as if they were some freshly-hewn natural wonder. My heart leaped like a gazelle in the African veldt. It was all I could do to keep from leaping into her arms.

Her father was an oil company executive, Jane said, her mother a realtor, one of those dress-to-kill to show you around types. Both her parents were politically conservative, solidly square. My parents sold turquoise jewelry in a city square, I said. Sitting on blankets. With a large, panting dog chained behind them. Jane laughed again, swinging her legs delicately, and deliciously, around the table legs alongside mine on the concrete floor, and a huge shock of excitement engulfed me, like a tidal wave. I felt pleased to be near her, happy to be with her, honored to exist in her presence. She spoke, and her melodious West Texas voice, more lilt than twang, propelled me forward in a rush of absolute joy. God, how I loved that voice! God, how I loved her sensibleness. God, how I loved her teasing me. God, how I loved – I couldn't tell her, of course, but God, how I loved *her*.

"No. Really," she said, rapping a red-painted fingernail sharply on the table top. She had a few carry-overs from her Lubbock upbringing – she wore makeup, for instance, and perfume, a delightfully girlish scent that when it wafted into my nostrils let me know she was near. Many girls when they arrived in Austin immediately shed all that. I was happy that she didn't. "What does your father do?" Her eyes focused on me narrowly – penetrating, serious. Searching for humor there I found none. Despite her superior sense of play, she could be dryly matter-of-fact when wanting something, when prying for additional information. I admired this quality in her. Of course, I admired all of her qualities.

"My father. Really," I said, "is an accountant. He's like head accountant for this office supplies firm in San Antonio. The biggest office supplies firm there." Jane nodded, the animated centers of those deep, dark brown eyes twinkling again, like diamonds, truly, or stars in the sky, and I felt another powerful surge of emotion. Now it was her time to joke.

"So how does he account for *you*?" she said. This was a low-rent joke, I suppose, objectively speaking, but coming from her it seemed an absolute howler. I laughed again, delighted by her quick mind and racing wit, elated that she would deign to spend her time making me laugh. I guess that was it, really – that she would want to laugh made me swell with pride.

"Mrs. Dr. Fountain," I said, in a starched, formal tone, reaching out to take her hand in mine.

"Mr. Husband of National Team Discus Thrower," she said. We looked at each other and laughed. Then we shook hands decorously, like white-mittened art gallery doyens. Our hands lingered for an additional moment, though, and I swear that my heart migrated to a new position on the exterior of my chest. I hoped that she couldn't tell – or perhaps I hoped that she could.

That night, I went home singing Frank Sinatra tunes, campy love songs that made Jane feel somehow closer and more real to me. Other nights, when she ignored me or flirted with somebody else on the news desk, I went home in hell.

One day, late in the spring semester, Managing Editor Nick LaMacchia assigned us two to cover a story together in Kyle, 30 miles down interstate 35 toward San Antonio. Our assignment – photograph and interview Kyle residents for a feature article depicting "small town life." Silently I blessed the Managing Editor, a pompous prig empire-builder who treated staff members with imperious disdain. Today, he was my best friend.

We split from campus in my car, Jane and I, a Nissan Sentra I had cleared out for today by tossing everything into the trunk. Jane held her Pentax camera on her shapely blue-jeaned lap and my spiral notebook lay in the drink-well between the bucket seats. It was a pleasant afternoon, weather-wise, a sunny, soft, warm, lush spring afternoon, with a balmy south breeze blowing sweet scents and the shadows long and the daylight-saving-time induce sunshine lasting forever. I was delighted to sit alongside Jane in the secluded bubble of my beat-up old automobile, grateful for the chance to talk to her alone, without interference from others. Jane told me that she had turned her cell phone off – a huge honor – leaving us blissfully oblivious to the rest of the world. Taking advantage, we talked non-stop on the drive down, full of information, filled with energy, cooler than thou, above it all, smarter than anybody else. Damn, that felt good! Damn, that felt fine.

We parked on a short, shady street perpendicular to Kyle's old-style town square and set out to walk. I took notes and nodded, Jane snapped pictures, we smiled at one another, and all was copasetic. Within an hour or two, we had interviewed the owners of a woodworking shop, a pair of back-to-nature boys emigrated from Chicago; the foreman of the Longhorn Cement Works, a short, wiry man with a Fu Manchu mustache and a shaved head that lent him an intimidating air; and a radical Catholic priest, a throwback to the days of liberation theology. I ached with pride and longing as Jane shuffled along beside me in her white peasant blouse and jeans and open-toed shoes that kept slipping off her feet. We brushed against each other as we walked, and I was happy to tentatively, tenuously, temporarily call her mine.

The shadows were long now, the sun beginning to slide down behind the aging wood facades facing the town square. We had one stop left, a tall, peaked, Victorian-style house on a wide corner lot surrounded by a freshly-painted white picket fence.

"A To Kill A Mockingbird House," Jane said.

"It sure is," I said. "I hope Boo Radley isn't there."

Boo Radey wasn't there. Instead, there was a manic software salesman who had moved to Kyle for the unpolluted air and placid pace-of-life, trading the grinding 55-minute rush-hour commute to downtown Austin for peace and quiet when he arrived home here. Clad in tan seersucker suit and tie with loosened knot and filled with a convert's zeal, Neil Bennett squired us proudly around the perimeter of the town square, pointing out landmarks and historical markers in his adopted home. He surprised us, this man, a good, solid, decent, sharp-minded fellow in his 40's, forward-thinking, observant, analytical, making us realize that we need not become ossified or locked in obsolescence, even though allied to the Establishment. We felt enlarged, uplifted, transcendent even. We had learned some things today – about ourselves, about other people, about the world in general. It had been a satisfying day. We knew we had a blockbuster feature story on our hands. I could see the headline in *The Texan*: "Small Town Life – Not What You Think."

Waving good-bye to our new friend Neil, we turned back toward my car, strolling past an old-fashioned food mart and a row of antique stores on Center Street. We felt like conquering heroes. Always one to take things one step farther, Jane decided we should race to my car, a long block away. Laughing, I pulled ahead early but let Jane catch me in the end. We slapped the car door as we finished. Afterwards, we stood with rear ends propped against the hood, breathing heavily.

"My camera weighed me down," Jane gasped out.

"Yeah, but I had a broken leg," I said.

"Yeah, *right*," Jane said. I pretended to punch her on the arm. We wrestled briefly. We both laughed. Jane sighed.

"Guess we'd better get back," she said. "I need to get these pictures developed and you need to write your story."

"Guess we'd better get back," I said. Reluctantly, I unlocked the car doors and we climbed inside.

As I started the car and pulled away, Jane checked her cell phone for messages. She held the phone to her left ear, frowning.

"What's going on?" I said, uncertainly.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "It's just Charles."

"Charles?" I said.

"Charles," she said. "*The Doctor*. He makes me so mad. He's such an ass sometimes."

"What did he do?" I said.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "He always does this to me. He promised he would take off and spend the first two weeks of summer with me here in Austin. I should have known it would never happen. He tells me now he's going on a trip to California with his parents." I sat with my hands on the steering wheel, appearing bummed out.

"That's too bad," I said.

"What a jerk," Jane said.

"That's too bad," I said again. I hit the heels of my hands against the steering wheel. Jane clicked the cover of her cell phone closed. She looked over at me, in a way

that seemed to assign a portion of blame for belonging to that vile species, "Men." I tried to show by my demeanor that *I* would never do anything like the Doctor did. She turned away.

"Let's drive a little bit," she said.

"Drive back home?" I said.

"No, just drive," Jane said. "Let's see where this road takes us. I don't feel like going back to the newsroom yet."

"Sure thing," I said.

And so I drove, away from the town square and along shady streets lined with historical old homes and then the clusters of fast food restaurants and chain hotels on the edge of town and onto some winding two-lane blacktop road slicing through the green, wooded countryside. Neither of us spoke. I focused on the road.

"Hey, why don't you pull in there for a minute?" Jane said, noting a billboard advertising "Hays County Park, ½ Mile." "Let's just sit."

"Whatever you'd like to do," I said.

"Let's sit," Jane said.

I crunched along down a gravel driveway into the parking lot and stopped, picnic tables and barbecue pits facing us across a barbed-wire fence. The sun was sliding down to our left behind a stand of live-oak trees, a stupendous orange ball shooting off 93-million mile long tendrils of light. The field before us lay in shade, a deep, restful green. My heart was beating fast. I turned off the engine, hand shaking. The silence seemed immense. I sat staring straight ahead. Jane broke the silence with an exclamation.

"That was fun!" she said.

"It sure was," I said.

"That computer guy was wild!" she said.

"He really was," I said. "He was wild." Jane shook her head of dark hair so that it tumbled luxuriantly around her shoulders. She shook her head of dark hair incredibly well. We looked at each other and laughed. I laughed myself into a coughing fit.

"You okay?" Jane said, leaning toward me. She clapped me on the back.

"I'm okay," I said.

"You sure?" Jane said. She clapped again.

"I'm sure," I said.

Jane settled back on her side of the car and shook her head.

"Man!" she said.

"Man!" I said.

We both fell silent then, lost in our own thoughts. At least I was lost in mine. I e-x-h-a-l-e-d slowly, more as an activity than anything else. I explored a gap in my back teeth with my tongue. I held the steering wheel as though driving. I glanced at Jane covertly. Hand over head, she held a plastic barrette not in her hand but in her mouth, very casually, I thought, very efficiently. She was very efficient, I thought, at just about everything that she did. A peaceful feeling came over me then. It felt good that she

accepted me, just sitting there beside her. I almost didn't mind that she had the Doctor. I was almost happy that she did. Amused, delighted, overwhelmed by her presence, I laughed at her, a weird, convulsive snort. She took the barrette in one hand and stuck out her tongue.

"Don't swallow that thing," I said.

"Don't you worry," she said, pretending to throw the barrette at me. I pretended to punch her on the arm with a volley of right jabs. She pretended to shoo me away. I felt emboldened suddenly, energized by her presence, alive in a way that I could hardly remember feeling before. I felt that I could almost say the things I wanted to say. I wanted to reach out and grab her hand, her hair – or some other part of her physical anatomy. I wanted to hold her close to me. I could hardly stop myself.

"You look awfully cute like that," I said instead. "You look like a movie star."

"Really?" Jane said. "Which one?"

"I can't remember her name," I said. "She's pretty, though."

"Well, that's good," Jane said. "Cool!" But with an oddly curious cast to her eyes, I believed, an alert, strained, questioning gaze. She was on to me, perhaps. I had gone one step too far. I had blown my cover. Whatever she said next, though, was unintelligible, as she had reinserted the barrette into her mouth, her lovely lips distended in determination as she clamped down with her teeth. Distended lips made no difference to me.

A giant groundswell of emotion rolled through me then, a swoon of desire and despair that rendered me virtually helpless. Jane looked so cute and sexy, she was so funny, she made me feel so comfortable that I knew there would never be anyone else like her in my life again. Hardly anyone made me feel comfortable. I was nervous around practically everybody. I wanted to do something. I wondered if I should say something. I turned toward her to try to decide if I should make some crazy declaration or confession – when she leaned forward to kiss me on the lips.

"I love you, Ben," Jane said. My mind reeled. Was she talking to *me*? Was she saying she loved *me*? I thought fast.

"You, too," I said. "I love you, Jane Fountain." We kissed again.

"I'm so glad I found you," Jane said.

"I'm so glad I found you," I said.

"I didn't know I could ever feel so happy," she said.

"I didn't know *I* ever could," I said.

We kissed again, eyes hard shut, holding each other tight. I didn't want to move. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay right there forever.

Lily's Life Support

Erin Connelly
Orchard Park, New York

lilbea34@gmail.com

I opened my eyes slowly, as if I could change reality with the speed of my eyelids. That's my most recent superpower, changing time with my eyes. How cool would that be? Blink! It's your birthday! Blink! Christmas! Blink! Stupid math practice time is over! To think I started with simple flying. So amateur. Everyday I get more creative, soon I'll find one I can actually develop! Thinking of superpowers is a good way to pass the time since I'm not allowed to have electronics in here. It's not like I have homework, I'm only in 4th grade. Lily always has a ton of homework to do but maybe that's because she saves it all for after I go to bed.

"Beep. Beep."

No such luck. That beeping was all I could hear lately even when I left. My mom would sometimes leave me with friends or other family members so that I could "try and have some normalcy." That's what she called it. I don't want normal, I want life two weeks ago.

"If you go get my movie from upstairs I'll let you have some of my popcorn! Pleeese please please Jake it's so far away." Lily's voice echoed from the living room and I could see her feet sticking out from the side of the couch.

"Nope! You go get it you're looking a little hefty lately!" In truth, I was far too involved in my game to run upstairs for her. I didn't mean it though, she isn't fat. In fact, she's very pretty. I wish I could take it back, I really didn't mean it. I hope she knows it.

"Beep. Beep."

I picked up my head and looked around, avoiding the bed in the corner. I could see my mom and dad in the hallway talking to people in green clothes. I was curious but I knew better than to ask, they never tell me anything. They think I'm too young to understand so they just tell me it's okay, that everything will be fine. But fine doesn't make mom cry and dad clench his fists whenever he talks to a doctor. They must think I'm stupid. When my sister is fine, she doesn't lay in a bed surrounded by beeping machines. They shaved part of her head! She's definitely not fine if that happened. I guess what I don't understand is why she's here. Other than the shaved head she looks fine, but she's been sleeping for 3 days. If she's fine, and maybe just really tired, why can't she come home? She has an awesome bed and I need someone to get the cookies off the top shelf for me. She looks sad, and really small in that bed. I know that whatever's wrong is really bad, because it's always really bad when they look okay.

I've never been in a car accident but I've seen them in movies. Cars flipping and exploding, it all looks really exciting. My video game makes it look even better, the cars slip and slide all over the road and everything goes in slow-motion, carefree even. The car glides through the sky while flames grow from its tail, inching up to the hood where a purple-blue cloud will form when the fire reacts with the engine.

Now they scare me. They're not exciting or cool, and there's no restart button in real life. I never thought about it that way before now. There's no restart button. A few nights ago I snuck up to my parents' room and sat outside their door to try and find out what happened. I knew they'd be talking about it and any good detective knows that spying is the best way to find out the information. When you ask people they always lie, so I decided to do what the pros would do- I snooped. From what I could deduce, Lily hit a tractor-trailer head on. Her car was no match for the mammoth 18-wheeled monster. Her little Honda slid right underneath and got crushed, trapping my sister for over an hour. I don't know what happened after that hour but from what I've gathered, eavesdropping on my parents' hushed whispers behind their bedroom door, that hour was a big deal. I don't know why. I never know why.

She hasn't changed her appearance since she got here. Her wavy red hair cups her face like a halo, making her look even more peaceful. I'm glad she's so comfortable, I think if she was awake she'd have a headache from whatever's underneath that bandage. I bet she's dreaming about what present she should get me for sitting here so patiently while she naps. She isn't jerking or screaming like you see in hospitals on TV, so that must be a good sign, right? Life support means they're helping her rest so she can get back out there full-force, right?

I heard the doctor say "life support" yesterday after school, but of course, no one even thought I might want to hear the good news. I've concluded, by following the cords from Lily to the machine to the wall, and from good old-fashioned common sense (which every 9 year old needs), that life support must be like a guidance counselor, only a machine. Kind of like in the Matrix where all those people live in their heads while their bodies are hooked up to tubes and wires. Except this is temporary, recharging Lily and maybe even helping her figure out her future, putting ideas and roadmaps to success in her head.

She was sitting at the kitchen table looking at pamphlets from different schools. They all looked the same to me, different colored kids all sitting around a tree looking way too excited to be at school. I bet those kids get free donuts or candy or something. Some kind of bribe to look so happy. That's how my mom always gets me to do stuff, she bribes me with candy or, my favorite, an extended bedtime. I commented aloud on this very fact to Lily but she just glared at me. She didn't think it was funny.

"Jake! Stop, I have to figure this out! My whole life depends on where I go to college and there are just too many options. I need a Magic 8 Ball, or a coin, or a psychic. Something to just tell me where to go! After 18 years of being told what to do, this is the first decision I make for myself? I couldn't start with something smaller, like what car to drive or what color to paint my room?!"

She looked so funny, frantically waving her arms around and getting all red.

Soon her face matched her hair and she collapsed in a fit of desperation. I'm glad I don't have to worry about stuff like college, growing up seems exhausting. I laughed at her and walked away, back to my simple life.

"Beep. Beep."

A flash of blonde hair rushing by the door caught my attention. My mom was back from home. Lately she does everything really fast. She showers fast, eats fast, drives fast. I know she misses Lily and wants to be with her but how much more time does she really get if she showers in 7 minutes instead of 14? I mean, she still has to wait for me to be ready and that always takes forever. I'm really forgetful so even when we get in the car and she finally thinks she's home free, I almost always have to go back inside for my homework or my hat or something. It's just how I am. Besides, sometimes I don't want to come sit with Lily. I can't tell my mom that or she'll get really mad but it's something I think about occasionally. Sometimes I wonder if we all stopped making such a big deal out of coming to see her everyday, maybe she'd get lonely and come home. Maybe she's still in here because she likes the attention. She always was an attention-stealer.

I bet she's doing it again now! Well I'm on to her and I'm not going to play along. Except I'm not allowed to stay home alone yet and I certainly can't sit in the car all day I'll go bonkers! Well fine, I'm certainly not going to be happy about all this attention she's getting. I think I'll wait until she gets home to blow her cover. She'll be so surprised! I bet she thinks no one is onto her. She's probably sitting there right now watching movies and smiling to herself, ready to pretend to be asleep the minute we walk in so we all dote on her and sit watching her. You know what's even worse? Everyone talks around her in whispers like they don't want to disturb her. Helllooo!!! She's awake people! I wonder if I could get away with jumping on her bed that would definitely make her fess up. She hates when I do that, ever since I fell off her bed and cut my eyebrow.

"Whatcha doin' Lily?" My voice bounced with my body as I flung myself towards the ceiling, desperate to touch the elusive white speckles. Up, down, up, down. Whoops, slid a little to the left. Whew, any closer I might have slipped. My fingers are so close I can feel it! If only I was a little taller, or had elastic knees I'd be like Shaq on the court. Slam dunk to the ceiling!

"Jake you're being dumb get off my bed. You're going to hurt yourself. If you get down you can watch a movie in my bed while I finish this research." Lily, I think, knew I just wanted to hang out. And even though the ceiling was of the utmost importance I would postpone it I guess if it meant two whole hours in her room.

"Fiiiine. Just. One. Last. JUMP!" I launched all 85 lbs of my body towards the ceiling and as my fingers just barely grazed the bumps, time seemed to slow. As I floated down to earth I felt one foot hit the bed as the other met her hardwood nightstand. The impact of the contact let me know immediately that this wasn't going to end well. I made the mistake of looking down as both knees buckled and I crumbled face first towards her new beige carpet. For a split second I thought I was in the clear but then I heard a thud as I felt my forehead hit the corner of her nightstand. Then

everything sped up again. The next thing I knew I was bawling, holding my forehead and looking at the pool of blood that still, three years later, left a stain on the carpet.

"Jake! Oh god! I've gotta get mom! I told you not to jump! Shit she's going to blame this on me and I'm going to get in so much trouble and I was supposed to go to the movies and now I won't be able to stupid kid!" I wanted to tell her I was sorry but I couldn't get any words out through my screaming. Instead I wailed and wailed while my mom rushed me to the ER for stitches and Lily, always loyal to her family, accompanied us. I still feel bad about that. She missed her plans all because of me. I never listened to her right away and I guess that time I should have, then my eyebrow wouldn't have a little gap that makes it look like I have three of them instead of two. She always calls me caterpillar face because of it and I always tell her not to, but really I like it. It makes me feel special and it's our own thing. When she wakes up I'll let her call me it whenever she wants.

"Beep. Beep"

I'm not sure where my mom went, probably to talk to more doctors and nurses. I'll do some more detective work later on, for now I've got some talking to do with Lily. The bed squeaked when I slid onto the edge of it and I checked her face for a reaction. Nothing. Man she's a good actress! Or she could really be sleeping, I know sometimes she really is because everyone has to sleep. Plus she probably gets really bored just pretending to sleep all day. Well, it's time to tell her I know. I leaned in close, careful to avoid her life support cables and tried to think of the best way to tell her that her secret's blown. Geez, it's so hard to keep my thoughts straight with that stupid beeping! It never stops. It's like an alarm clock with no snooze button. Lily taught me about that. She calls it "the beauty of the snooze."

We had to leave in like fifteen minutes and Lily was finally stumbling down the stairs, wiping the sleep gunk out of her eyes. It was obvious she just woke up even though I heard her alarm going off a half hour ago when mom woke me up. It's a good thing our school doesn't have a dress code because she always goes in her sweatpants and I know they're the ones she slept in.

"Lily how come you're never ready for school in the morning? Man, you could at least get rid of your dragon breath before you torch someone's hair!" Ha. Mission accomplished. Her scowl told me I got my message across and I was in the clear for another day.

"Jake, that's the beauty of the snooze button."

"What?" She's crazy.

"The snooze button- it's a button on your alarm clock that turns your alarm off for five more minutes, just enough to drift back into sleep again before it goes off and wakes me back up. I know it sounds weird but I swear five minutes is perfect I could hit the snooze button all morning."

"Beep. Beep. Beeeep"

At first I thought it was her alarm clock but I realized it was her machines. All of a sudden things started happening really fast. People rushed into the room and my mom scooped me off of the bed. Everything started to blur as I watched from outside her room, harnessed in my mom's arms like a baby kangaroo in a pouch. Within

seconds everything was back to normal and the beeping had gone back to its same boring pattern.

“Beep. Beep. Beep.”

I slid back into the room while my mom talked to the guy in charge. I didn't go near her bed this time because I might have caused it! Maybe I tugged on something? I don't think it had to do with her because she was still sleeping and I know she wouldn't sleep through anything exciting. It's that attention stealing in her. Sometimes, she's such a girl.

Time to go home for the night. I feel better leaving tonight. I think things are getting better I even heard the doctors say “false alarm.” I think she's almost done with her life support and she's getting ready to wake up. That's really exciting! I can feel myself getting squirmy in my seat but I don't want to tell my mom about my amazing discovery. She never tells me anything so I'm certainly not going to tell her my good news.

I thought I'd play some Xbox when I got home but I was really tired so I just fell asleep, wondering if maybe Lily would finally come home tomorrow.

It's morning. No need for an alarm clock for me I'm just excited to get through school and see Lily! I just know she's going to come home today I can feel it in my bones and I'm so excited I can barely hold it in. I couldn't finish running down the stairs so I jumped over the last two and landed in the kitchen with a thud. Mom and dad are at the table, looking at each other but not saying anything. It doesn't feel as light and airy as it did in my room and mom's eyes are all puffy. Something's not right, maybe grandma is sick. I sat down at the table and my mom took one of my hands. I don't get it I thought everything would be put aside for Lily's homecoming, usually she gets to be number one.

“Jake.” My mom's voice sounded shaky, like when she told me Lily was in the hospital. “Lily's gone.”

All at once everything felt like it was falling.

Gone. I was in a tunnel and that word was echoing all around me.

Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone.

I saw spots and felt dizzy.

How could she be gone?

Yesterday she was fine and she seemed like she was getting better! I ran up to my room and didn't even bother closing the door. Lily is gone. I didn't get to tell her about my eyebrow nickname, or how I got to sit at the cool table at lunch this week, or how I accidentally spilled on her desk and left it. I thought it'd be funny when she came home. But she's not coming home. Lily's never coming home.

I felt tears start to slide down my cheeks as a sickening realization crept into my head- never, not once in my whole life, did I ever tell Lily I loved her. I never told her what a great big sister she was, the best a kid could ever ask for. She was my big sister, and I never told her I loved her.

She was good yesterday, now she's gone. I don't understand what happened.
Maybe someone will get around to filling me in this time, now that Lily's gone.