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Oana Nechita
Ursinus College

Robyn McGrory
Ursinus College

Jim Brett
Ursinus College

Larry Santucci
Ursinus College

Joe Catalfano
Ursinus College

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Oana Nechita, Robyn McGrory, Jim Brett, Larry Santucci, Joe Catalfano, Meghan Gualtieri, Kate Buchert, Lauren Newkirk, Brian Hamrick, Jesse Federman, Jennifer Herbst, Kate Pinches, Lyndsay Petersen, Jessica Demers, Lou Nemphos, and Pat Vesay

THE LANTERN

OOOF

The Lantern

Editor: Jessica Demers
Layout Editor: Jared Rakes
Patron Drive Coordinator: Oana Nechita
Circulation Manager: Meghan Gualtieri
Advisor: Jon Volkmer
Poetry Judge: Donald Zucker
Cover Art: Kristen Schumann

Staff:

Amanda Chiampi
Jeff Church
Denelle Godek
Brian Hamrick
Jennifer Herbst
Michael Lease
Lyndsay Petersen
Janel Reppert
Larry Santucci
Kristen Schumann

Editor's Note:

If you asked me in the fall if I wanted to make drastic changes in the design of *The Lantern*, I would have said no. But the more I thought about it, the more I felt we could do better in matching the personality of the work including with the visual look of the journal.

Thanks to the guidance of Nzadi Keita, Jena Osman, and Jon Volkmer, publishing the “new” *Lantern* was possible.

Thank you, Dr. Zucker, for making the difficult decision as Poetry Judge—your excitement about young writers is encouraging.

The Lantern congratulates Oana Nechita on her prize-winning poem, “Mother.” We also want to congratulate Kristen Schumann for her prize-winning cover and we hope she likes the design.

As always, I'd like to thank everybody who submitted and the entire staff of *The Lantern*. I hope you agree with me that the new format effectively showcases the incredible creative talent of the Ursinus community.

—Jessica Demers

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Judge's Note:

I am a musician and only somewhat a poet, so to me poetry is an aural experience. Thus I listen to a poem as much as read it, expecting it to speak, if not sing, to me. Poems *do* sing to me, and when they do, I usually head for my piano and set them to music, sometimes as solo songs with accompaniment, and sometimes as four-part choral works. I tell you this so you and the students who submitted poems will know my bias.

That is not my sole criterion, however. I also stay alert for the poet's depth of feeling, for a sense of gratitude, a reaching out to the soul of the listener, for a universality of the ideas or sentiments expressed. *Mother* fulfills these expectations.

As a man of few words (I like to think), I respond to brevity of expression—just enough words to do the job, to say what's on the mind. The author of *Mother* has succeeded in crafting an eminently accessible poem thanks to his/her economy of words and exactness of language. The stark, striking imagery of this carefully sculpted poem appeals to me across the generation (I am 70) and perhaps even across (artificial) cultural and geographical boundaries, thus revealing its universality. In short, I was deeply moved by *Mother*.

All of the submitted poems possessed some admirable qualities and imagination. I hope all the authors will persist in developing their poetic powers. Meanwhile, *Mother* transcends.

Donald Zucker
Professor Emeritus
Ursinus College

Mother

Oana Nechita

I come from open wounds staining potatoes buried in the ground
behind the house,

I come from feet pierced by glass, slapped by wheat mustaches, stung
by mosquitoes,

I come from sun-bitten shoulders carrying stacks of dry wood to store
for winter,

I come from blistered palms knitting wool next to the rebellious fire,
storm roaring at the door,

I come from clear sweat spit from swollen pores like angry geysers,

I come from bellies wrinkled like tired apples, hanging hollow out of
rope-tied pants.

Where I come from there are wounds, and mosquitoes, there is winter
and fire, sweat and dry apples.

The Mountain

Robyn McGrory

—*for LaMont Steptoe*

Southern Comfort

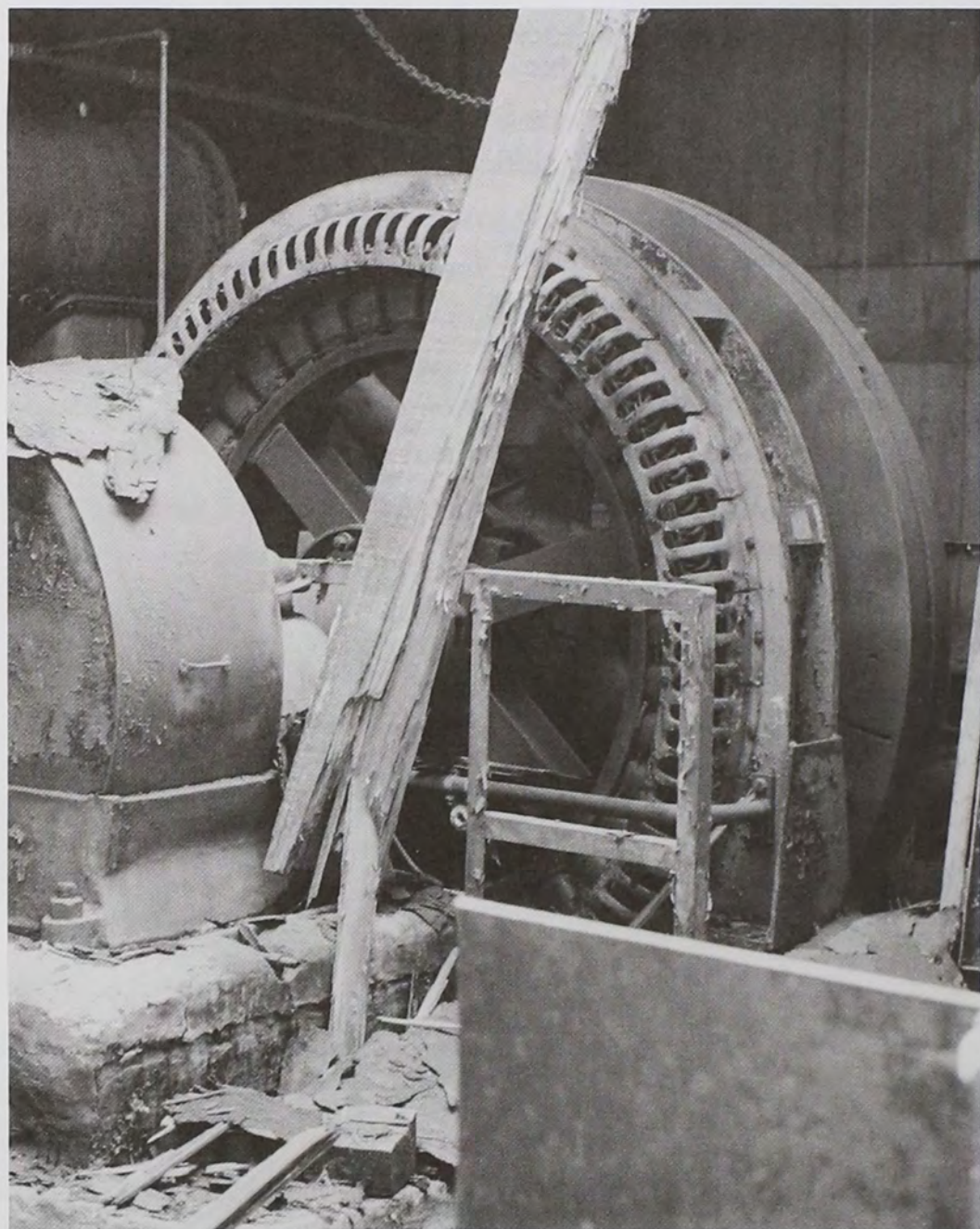
was an oxymoron in his song
Scarred backs and broken souls
made dreaming sleep difficult.

Tattered, callused, black hands
Harvesting ancient crops gave birth
To these scholarly hands
That harvested a modern consciousness.
Tight unripe buds opened their minds.

He sang his ancestral hymn
to a field of cotton
And although they were centuries removed
The observant listeners remembered.

Big Wheel

Mark Peacock



The Record-Keeper

Jim Brett

It's cool looking at other people's stuff. I think I can speak for 99% of the world when I say that. Sure, you'll have those who value others' privacy enough to criticize little invasions, but most of them are lying. If they got paid for doing it, the story would be totally different. That's my story, I get paid to be nosy.

I'm not a spy. I work in the photo lab of a CVS pharmacy. It's not really a lab as much as a bunch of photo-developing equipment sequestered to the left of the checkout. A little wall that's about three feet high surrounds the lab. The separation from the rest of the store is a plus, although the wall is short enough to allow us to talk to customers. The centerpiece of the lab is a Noritsu film processor which is roughly three-fourths the size of a small car and twice as high. This hunk of machinery rests against the wall. The developing process includes extracting the negatives from the roll of film and sending them through the first developer, then slipping the developed negatives into the "imaging console" to make the actual prints. Some packaging and clean-up routines are also involved. The whole deal is fairly easy and one doesn't need to have much knowledge of cameras or film to do it. In fact, I just recently learned how to load a camera. It's not a bad job for a recent high school graduate with little to no college aspirations.

My job description includes counting the prints so that they match the number that is supposed to come out, and making sure no mistakes are made. Sure, I do that, but in all honesty, I look. I look to see if there are any hot girls in the party pictures, not to mention nudies. I look to see what people are doing at their private events and family gatherings. I look to see if anyone I know pops up and what they're doing. You wouldn't believe what people take pictures of—it's amazing. They must think that the whole development process takes place without us "photo-techs" seeing it.

There was one time when we developed what looked to be amateur porno pictures. Real porn is one thing, but when your average suburban woman, (sometimes guy—I hand those off to Carly), bares all for her boyfriend's Kodak, it usually ain't pretty. Another time we caught a guy taking pictures of driver's licenses . . . real ingenious. He shot from various lengths, trying to get a perfect match for

his operation. Carly called the cops on that one. It was interesting to see three undercover cops strolling through the store, acting like they needed Cold-Eeze and VO5 hot oil, approach this guy. The kicker was that the guy never expected to get nabbed.

Another perk is freedom. The photo-lab isn't under the control of the regular store manager, so we're not monitored. This is how we get away with checking this shit out. And, the really good pictures—they go in my personal collection. Since no one who works in the store really takes notice of what we're doing, we're able to make copies of anything, at will. I have an album full of the best ones at my apartment.

Intrigue and conspiracy are uncommon though. Most of the day filled with regular customers dropping off rolls of their families, or business people with pictures of real estate properties or damaged cars.

Mrs. Train had been one of those regular customers for at least a year. She would drop off a roll every couple of weeks—usually of a gathering or trip or something. They weren't interesting enough to remember in detail. Then, about two months ago, she started coming in all the time. She'd have at least four rolls a week in our one-hour service. Even these weren't unusual pictures. They were of her family, especially her son, more than anything. He was a fragile-looking Asian kid and was obviously adopted. I found out that his name was Bobby and he was thirteen. Of course I didn't get this information from Mrs. Train herself. As it turns out, it was his birthday three weeks ago and his cake had "Happy 13th Bobby" written across it in blue icing.

I took one of Bobby's pictures for my collection. He was at the zoo, in the reptile house and was wearing a Hootie and the Blowfish T-shirt. I made the copy for my friend Vic, unfortunately a Hootie fan as well, to show him who his contemporaries were. Vic was not amused and started at me about my collection. He kept saying it was sick that I had an album full of strangers. Ironically though, he had salivated over the best ones with me many times. I started calling him Bobby and asked him if he liked the zoo.

The album itself was innocent enough, I guess. I didn't collect pictures of naked kids or anything. The majority was hot girls I thought Vic would like and a few other interesting people.

What was more out of the ordinary about Mrs. Train's pictures was that they were more and more of just Bobby. I knew Mrs. Train had more kids. Hell, I'd seen enough pictures of them. It seemed

like she was being a little biased in her kid-picture taking.

I mentioned this phenomenon to Carly. She's the other photo-tech at CVS and pretty much my best friend there. She's about an inch or two shorter than me, (I'm average height), with fairly long blond hair. Everyone else that sees her thinks she's cute. I've been working with her too long and have been friends with her too long to think like that . . . anymore. She takes classes and works here 25 hours a week. For the past year, since we graduated, she's been trying to get me to go to school too. I tell her I've got all I need here: a job that pays for my apartment. Anyway, Carly's all-work. She looks at the pictures to count them and check for mistakes—that's it. If something extraordinary comes out, she'll show me subtly, but not usually. Her response to my observation of Mrs. Train was what I expected.

"Maybe she just got into taking pictures more," she said.

Then I described how last week there was an entire roll of Bobby playing the piano—close-ups, angles, different lighting and all that.

"You're getting crazy about this," she said. "Maybe she's just one of those Moms who can't stay out of her kids' lives."

Carly made sense, but I was still curious. It was like the time this super-hot woman started coming in. Her body was amazing, but her face was, well, it was still hot, but a little odd. I began to pay close attention to this Mrs. Feldman's pictures. After months of studying every inch and curve of her body, in person and in the prints, I realized that Mrs. FeldMAN was a damned guy.

My suspicion of Mrs. Feldman and subsequent discovery proved to me that my questioning of slightly odd things had some merit. I found myself wondering why I was drawn to Mrs. Train's pictures. Bobby was an average looking kid. He had dyed-red hair that grew flat against his forehead in one of those bowl haircuts. I remembered developing pictures of Bobby having his hair dyed. That would probably be unusual for other families, but since Mrs. Train had taken pictures of it, I assumed it was something fun. He looked serious for a thirteen-year-old, in that there weren't any shots of him acting goofy or messing with anyone. He smiled a lot and he always had rosy cheeks. He had one of those smiles that took up almost half of his face.

One day about two weeks ago, Mrs. Train came in with a roll. She requested the one-hour service and asked if I would "Please take special care of these, honey." I loved it when women I only knew on a professional level called me things like that. I promised her that I

would start them right away and they'd be done in 45 minutes. I pushed aside the other rolls and did Mrs. Train's first to appease her, but also because I wanted to know what I was taking special care of.

As I was waiting for the prints to come out, Carly came in. She had been off that day, but came in to pick up her paycheck. She said "Hi" and noticed the name "Train" on the envelope I was processing.

"Did Mrs. Train leave that roll last night?" she asked.

"No, why?"

"She dropped it off today?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Like . . . fifteen minutes ago, why?"

"Do you realize that you have five rolls sitting over there that are due in an hour?"

"Yeah."

"Come on! You're that interested in this Bobby kid?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I feel bad for this lady. She puts so much faith in me. I wanted to do them first."

"Whatever." Carly left the lab to get her check. By now the pictures were slowly falling from the printer, one by one. I waited until they all were finished before I looked. They were warm from being freshly printed and the heat had slightly curved them. The pictures were a little different from Mrs. Train's latest ones. Most were of a man that I had never seen before. He was just sitting in the Train's house, sometimes posing, sometimes not. He looked to be in his late thirties and had short red hair and a full beard. He was pointing to his arm and giving a thumbs-up with the other hand in a few pictures. He looked very warm and smiley, almost a "nice uncle-type," but I never see him in any of Mrs. Train's family gathering pictures. Bobby was only in about three or four of them. He appeared to know the guy and posed for the camera with his arm around him. His smile took up most of the picture. His dyed-red hair clashed with the man's natural orangey-red hair.

I counted the pictures, cut the negatives into sections of four and packaged them. Considering the mood Carly was in, I decided against showing her the new set of baffling pictures. Mrs. Train was right on time and seemed to be in a big hurry.

The following couple of days were unusual in that I didn't see Mrs. Train at all. I checked with Carly too. I figured that maybe since she worked a different shift from me, she developed the pic-

tures. Carly only told me to stop caring so much about her. I told her that it wasn't so much that I cared, as much as this shit was confusing me. I developed hundreds of pictures everyday and remembered maybe ten of them. Mr. Gilmore came in every single day and always with different pictures—usually of his retirement community buddies—and I couldn't have cared less about him.

Carly pissed me off when she did this holier than thou shit. She used to look at the pictures with me sometimes. But now, especially with Mrs. Train's stuff, she won't even glance. I often wondered if she just got sick of looking. After all, she's been working in the lab longer. Maybe she was just sick of me, and poring over pictures like I did reminded her of my negative traits. A therapist could figure her out.

Mrs. Train finally made it in. But it was the first time she didn't come in alone. The man with the red hair and beard was with her. He looked a littler paler than in the pictures, but sometimes pictures are taken in weird lighting and make people look different. Mrs. Train and I actually did a little more talking instead of the usual "Can't get rid of me in here, can ya" routine.

"Hey Mrs. Train. How's it going?"

"Pretty good, pretty good . . . uuumm, how fast is the one hour service today?"

"We're on time. I can finish it in under an hour if you want to come back in like forty minutes or so," I said.

"That would be great."

I kept sneaking peeks at the man while I was writing down Mrs. Train's information. He had on a T-shirt for some charity marathon, black jeans and had a large bandage on the bend of his arm.

"Could you do them in 4x6 doubles?" she said.

"Sure . . . pretty important stuff, huh?"

"Yeah." She put her hand flat on the counter. "Look, I know you guys see these pictures, but would you mind keeping these guarded?" Mrs. Train was very quiet and serious, but nowhere near pushy. "My son is having some problems and it's a private thing, okay?"

"Yeah . . . sure."

The red-haired man looked at me funny and I couldn't help but think that he saw me as some kind of violator. He was probably in the majority of people who thought we ever saw the pictures.

"Thanks, I'll see you soon."

Mrs. Train's request shocked me. I respected her more than

other customers because she was always nice to me, but I lumped her in with those ignorant others. Now I realized, she didn't see what I was doing as taboo. She probably saw it as a fact of life and making a big deal of it wouldn't help. Mrs. Train didn't have time to pore over trivial things. She was too concerned with the things that actually meant something.

Not to say that I was eager or anything, but I rushed Mrs. Train's pictures through and had them done in half-an-hour. Carly, who had been finishing up the roll before Mrs. Train's caught a glimpse at the first few pictures of the roll.

"Oh shit. You gotta see these." She sounded excited, but I couldn't tell if it was in a good way or a bad way.

"What's up?" I rushed over to see the prints as they were falling from the machine. They did so one by one and the machine made the mechanical creaking noise it usually makes when printing. Carly turned seriously white.

"Did you know that Bobby was sick?" she whispered.

I picked up a picture of Bobby. He was stripped down to his underwear with an I.V. locked into his skin. He was still rosy-cheeked. His other arm had a large bandage on it, right in the bend of his arm. It matched the bandage the red-haired man had when I saw him thirty minutes earlier. I suddenly realized their donor-receiver relationship. Bobby's red hair was the only color in the antiseptically-white room. He wasn't smiling. His right leg was tainted with huge bruise. It must have been old because it passed the black and blue stage and was now purplish-brown. He was sitting up in the bed and the remnants of his un-hOMEMADE meal were resting in a tray next to him.

I picked up a second. Bobby was turned to his right and pointing to his I.V. His position left his bare back in full view and another large bruise marred his shoulder blade. His hemophiliac state left its evidence and probably held Bobby's life gently captive.

"Oh God . . . this is why his Mom was coming in with all the pictures." Carly sounded like she was sadly solving a mystery.

"I didn't even know." It was all I could think of to say.

"Don't you have pictures of this poor kid in your collection." Her tone shifted to motherly. "I told you that wasn't right when you started doing it."

"Carly, I had no idea—Jesus Christ!"

The collection was in good fun and I knew it, but I couldn't

help but feel guilty. This kid was probably dying and I had a picture of him in a collection marked otherwise by scantily-clad women and human oddities.

I left for the day without telling a manager. I figured Carly could handle the rest of the day's pictures. It was a Sunday and wasn't busy. I went back to my apartment and flipped on the TV, to occupy my mind. I landed on "Hard Copy." I can't remember what it was about that day because I fell asleep. The next day, I went in to work to say hi to Carly and to make sure we were cool. We were, although she bitched at me a little for taking the day off. I asked her if Mrs. Train had picked up her latest pictures and she said that she hadn't.

In Response to *Bonjour, monsieur Gauguin.*

Larry Santucci

Nothing is worth having [but a thick fog]
Men's feet sink into
mud as they grab their steeds
by their muscular thighs and calves
and pull their hooves out of the mud
A small denomination of coin
lay beside an earthen-ware water jug
not ever corked improperly
not now, not ever
not even when it had a handle
A groove is made in the floor dust
by its cool green arched underside
A smaller circular imprint lay just outside the groove
A satellite steadfast imprint
The hard shadow of purchasing power with value
so insignificant that no one will ever
trade an upright posture for it
It becomes a permanent fixture

16

“Valjean himself lived in the sort of porter's lodge at the
end of the back yard [beneath a franc]”
The man in common dress stays seated on a
splintering seat
at the helm of his vessel, two paces away from the merge ramp
Turning his head to shout at the man so he doesn't light the fire
But then we will have no steam
But we will miss our chance and not sail
This other man does not wear his hat over his eyes
and he is shoed in durable leather
Everyday it is just as if they were at sea
At night, he goes ashore into busy metropolitan shopping districts
and rides the escalators
He finds two great pieces of a dinnerware set and buys them

He goes to countrysides alight with harmonious bustle
to find a cheap bottle of good wine
With bulging pockets he finds higher ground
and settles to watch the people below and nap on his arm
and says that tomorrow perhaps he will buy a bookcase

This goes on behind the man in common dress' back
only because he does not care to turn his head
Cross, all day long
Bent over, elbows and forearms resting flat
like being at a windowsill, looking
Blood moving stifled convulsive back from his fingertips
Like weak tributaries, veins grind and must eat for themselves

A little less comes back each time

"I have left some of my blood on every stone

[I have since collected each one of those stones. I lick them.]
on every bramble [The weeds have wrestled their way towards
light.]

on every wall [The one that rises up and over me.]"

It I have known since I first realized I had nothing

17

Blue is what has happened

Like mental notes in miniature text

Clusters of aged men and women

Living because somebody has to keep

Working their hands around

Feeling themselves up in a roughed, scratched
vinyl s[p,k]in

Leaning in close with their heads at a listening tilt

A child at the piano

hearing the sound the rightmost key sounds

and falling down the steps and half steps in a lazy, uneven cascade

A child with two small fingers on the lowest note

too small to reach the sustain pedal

Taps the key again when the note has run out

Taps the key again when the note has run out
Taps the key again when the note has run out
One more thud to a fragile surface
One more object, purchased ashore, placed next
to another. There are thousands

[“mattress
deal table
two straw chairs
an earthen-ware water jug
a few books on a plank
his dear valise”]

placed around and up and over the semisphere in the pale night of
the early hours

by a dedicated dreamer

And to his delight there came a breaking point

In the words of the man in the painting:

“In my land we have erected a gummed globe. we do not believe
in timelessness.

There is struggle to keep “mine” hidden. I hide under layers.

18 There is sex in the blushed cheek and unseen hand. I want to
make a mark,

like the fire did many years ago when it burned this field.”

Orbit Talbott
Kristen Schumann



UTD
216

ART wheels across THE FLOOR

the symptoms of Sunday Feet to stool lips rock miker... also included
BLOOPY SKATCHING Noise
feverish AND A IN (M)
who has lost tell the EARS.

I CAN STEAL
YOU BYE, GET FIXES YOURSELF... AND
TOMORROW THEY DIE Looped
million BUY, come ACROSS CASE, PRICK AND INSECT

Get High On!
who has lost tell the EARS.

KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE ROAD, WIRELY, TIERED OFF (Safety, of course.)
KUR HANDS YEAR (course.)
this ad was brought to you by Dick

AND THEY CHANTED
SHARE LOUD! BRUSH!

TRANSNENDALISTS

THEN
A (S)
DEED
DEAD
the stress
You said it.
little one.
toothbrush

However, Dr. Hightox expected this and minor complications
in a few
Makes oblin
people want
more, and more
difficulties
hallucinated
awest
impaired
conversations
ON the morning
of Aug 1, 1997
Dr. Hightox was
found dead.

Ignore Obstacles and Boundaries, forget about
rules a regulations, be free, wild, spontaneous
Climb Mts. to play fusbec, just avoid an
old man pushing structures into the earth. Tell
your wife you're going out and buy a 4x4 truck.

FINALLY THE PEOPLE they realise what
you realise that once
GET BORED we go too far too
AND GO HOME fast There's no going

**I GOT ELECTRIC LIGHT
AND I GOT 2ND SIGHT.
BUT I GOT NOWHERE
TO FLY TO!**
THE END
SINGAN

MORPHNESS LA MAYBE RELATIVE NAME
as funny JUST
WORD MAYBE A YOUNG BOY ON
HE WAS ALONE TURNED TACINATION SET DEAD Merlin Prof
WAS SOMETHING INSIDE THINGS TO LIFE LEG

Merlin dragged that poor of JACKIE
dead dear to his home Went to his room
near by past his father where he laid
who laid in a pool of his cher in his R
monster ch gripping a bottle closet.
TO IT H WAS KEPT
E CAND PRESSED
POLISHED INDUCED
EX RENDERS CLENCHED

DRYIGHTO and educated
for one purpose
according to
him.

A YOUNG MAN WHO KEPT TOX HIMSELF STAYED IN ON
had a girl interested visiting fun-
in him but saw eral phelors
her off for good TV dinner. people
HIGHTOX & C
INVENTED HIS FIRST
DRUG
BEHAVIOR WAS ABSURD. PEOPLE
WERE IDIOTS
TV DINNERS SUCKED
WANT
Scream vendors
SOLD ON THE STREET

SEVENTEEN DRYL Made
HIGHTOX RESULT a new invention
COULD HELP
WITNESS He needed ONE THING NATIONAL
HIGHTOX WAS BECOMING CRE-
DABLE, ABLE TO HAVE CREDENTIALS!

Jesus People BOUGHT IT
WAS TOTALLY NORMAL
VOWED
to himself

BRUSH WAS TOTALLY NORMAL
VOWED
to himself

D.P. HICKORY TAX from school BY THE ROAD
 WALKED IN DEAR **CARCAS**
 HE TASTED THE OVER HE TASTED AND KNEW
 DEAR BY THE **FILMS** **YES**
 Milky White **FILMS**
 DADDY'S YOUNG **MERLIN** **SHOT** **CLOSE**
 HERE WAS DRUNK **SHOT** **IN** **T**
 AND YELLED **SHOT**
 TO MERLIN ABOUT THE **FACE**
 THE SMELL SO... **FACE**
SOCIETY **MELIN** **IS DEAD**
HAD TO STOP **OUT OF ITS**
MISERY
 IS AT NIGHTS READ A LOT **AB STORED ROAD KILL**
 WERE ABOUT HISTORY **IN HIS**
 especially the **BLACK**
PLAGUE
PLEA **RAID** **of** **PEOPLE** **VIOLENCE** **center** **THE** **DELIGHT**
JUST **SALLY** **MON** **SOPRAH** **HIGH** **ATOX** **TALK** **MON**
ETABILITY **MTEL** **Jerry** **HIT** **THE** **SHOW** **ELY**
CIRCUIT **MON**
UNTIL **one day he** **his dream** **was to create** **trust** **between** **people**
we realize **the** **only way** **to** **achieve** **things** **is** **to** **lose**
1000 **achieve** **things** **is** **to** **lose** **only** **your** **tooth**
YOU DO **SHOULD** **CAN** **CARE** **NOT** **LOST** **OUR** **MINDS**
NEW **WILL** **SHOCK** **THE** **WORLD** **JUST** **A** **COUPLE** **OF**
MENTION **SHARE!** **TIMES**
 SLOAN & Eric Lode

MY MIND YOUR MIND A DISTURBED MY MIND IMAGINE YOUR THOUGHTS
 SUCH THINGS LIKE SOUND OR AIR VOICE OR CARE IS IT LIKE RETURNING
 WHY WHEN I TRY NOT TO THINK OF SOMETHING SOMETHING IS COMING
 THAT PROCESS FOR THAT WOULD BE CONCEIVING RIGHT THERE A
 PLEASANT FRUIT CORN SALAD TABLECLOTHS LEAVES IN FAIR
 ICE CUPS YOUR DOG SHAKING OFF SNOW IN YOUR KITCHEN FULL OF
 SOFT BLANKET YOU COVERED IN ON A COLD MORNING YOU CAN SEE
 START STORY BEFORE BEDTIME TO AID YOUR DREAM A SNOW DAY
 THE FIRST DAY OF YOUR LIFE BASEBALL LITTLE KIDS FIGHTING FOR
 FAVORITE CHAIR THE TASTE OF SWEET CEREALS AND BRUSSEL SPROUTS
 A LATE HOUR AT THE BEACH BIKES CARS JOBS RUNNING FASTER WITH
 BEING YOUNG NOT KNOWING CLIPPING THE ERASERS BAGGED LUNCH
 35 LONG RIDES GETTING GITTY WITH YOUR BROTHERS SISTERS MOVIES
 1955 ROCKY THE EXORCIST POPCORN SODA GROWING UP YOUR FIRST LOVE
 BAD THINGS YOU BECOME AWARE OF PAIN CRIME PEOPLE WHO WOULD SELL
 CLEAR OUT AS YOU THOUGHT IMAGES OF MURDER RAPE ROBBERY ON THE NEWS
 NOT SOMEONE TO FOLLOW LIES LOSING YOUR PARENTS TRUST BEING ARRESTED
 LIFE IN DANGER KNOWING THE TRUTH SPILLING THE TRUTH WISHING
 IN YOUR FAMILY GO MUCH DEEPER THAN YOUR OWN LIFE MOM'S DREAMS
 WONDERING IF YOU WILL EVER MAKE SENSE OF THIS RELIGION
 OUGHT OR MUST WE LISTEN TO THAT MAN WE KNOW NOTHING ABOUT TEL
 MONEY FOR AN NEW STOKER STOP PERHAPS GOOD THINGS AND BAD THINGS
 EVIL OR COMPLETELY GOOD A PERSON YOU WHO MURDERS THEIR PARENTS
 RAGE CANNOT BE COMPLETELY AT FAULT IF RAGES WERE CONTROLLED
 IS THE KEY BUT THEY CANNOT CLIMB INTO A PERSON'S MIND OR HEART
 GOOD AT BIRTH BUT FROM THERE WE ARE BLANK PIECES OF PAPER
 MAYBE LIFE CAN BE JUDGED BY OUR EXPERIENCES IMAGINE FIGHTING
 STRONG AND STANDING ON THE MOON LOOKING AT US JUST LOOKING AT
 VIETNAM AT NIGHT BEING A MOB LEADER PUSHING A BUTTON ON A
 PEOPLE YOUNG PEOPLE BEING RICH BEING EVICTED WITNESSING A MURDER
 SEEING JESUS DIE THAT DAY ON THE CROSS CROSSING THE GYPTO
 ING NOT TO BE SCARED SAVING SOMEONE'S LIFE HAVING YOUR LIFE SAVED
 CHANGE ME OR YOU FOOLING A NATION PLAYING IN A BAND KNOWING JIMMY
 IMPORTANT NOVEL OR STAYING AT HOME GOING TO WORK BEING UNUSUAL
 PECIALLY YOUR KIDS MAKING YOUR CHILDREN PROUD CREATING AN
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 SIMPLE MAYBE EVEN BORING I MEAN MONKEYS NICE BUT I NEVER RIDE
 TRAVEL THOUGH I LOVE NEW YORK IN THE WINTER TIME ESPECIALLY
 THERE IS SOMUCH OUT THERE I DONT KNOW I WISH YOUR LIFE COULD
 YOU KNOW EVERYTHING YOU DIED KNOWING IN THE PREVIOUS LIFE
 ... NEW LIFE THERE WOULD BE AT LEAST ONE EPISODE YOU COULD
 ... DIED ... CARON MAYBE YOU WOULD ...

ITS HOW THE VENTER YOUR BRAIN NOT EVEN A WISH FOR
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L RED WINE PALLS SATURDAYS MUSICALS TWINCICLE S
ALLOW SOF MILK A COLD GLASS OF GUINNESS A WARM AND
LEAP IN A FIREPLACE WOOD THAT CRACKS AND SMELLS ASH
OFF OF SCHOOL A SLEEPOVER AT A FRIENDS HOUSE SUMMER
R THE BACK SEAT OF THE BUS KICK THE CAN ICE CREAM YOUR
ITS YOUR IMAGINATION WHEN YOUR BORED SAND SALT WATER OIL
NEW PAIR OF SHOES GRANDPARENTS HAMS TURKEYS LEFTOVERS
J&M MILK CHOCOLATE ROLLERCOASTERS COTTON CANDY LIGHTS WHE
F YOUTH LOST ARK GHOST BUSTERS BACK TO THE FUTURE NOV. 5TH
ALKING ON THE PHONE IN THE DARK YOUR FIRST SMOKE PETS DEAD
YOU OUT FOR A NICKEL LIES KNOWING GOOD AND BAD ARENT AS CASH
EERING A FRIEND CHANGE CHANGING YOURSELF BEING A FOLLOWER
TED PUTTING YOUR LIFE IN DANGER PUTTING YOUR FRIENDS
TO THE TRUTH WAS SAFE IN YOUR HANDS REALIZING TROUBLES
ADS AN ALCOHOLIC YOU COULD BE TOO AS WELL AS YOUR BROTHER
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MIC RIVER BEING A JAPANESE PILOT ON DEC 7, 1941 PDR PRETEND
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CHRISTMAS I LOVE THANKSGIVING BUT IT GETS HARDER TO ENJOY
-D BE LIKE THE MOVIE GROUNDHOG DAY BUT AT THE AGE OF 3
- SOONER OR LATER YOU WOULD GET IT WRONG AGAIN BUT WITHIN
CHANGE AND MAKE THAT RIGHT YOU WOULDN'T HAVE MADE
E SAT ON POPPO'S LAP AND LISTENED EVEN IF IT WAS TO GET TO
A BETTER YOU WOULD SAY SOMETHING TO MOM ABOUT HER TROUBLES
A BETTER YOU WOULD SAY SOMETHING TO MOM ABOUT HER TROUBLES
THEY WOULD GO AWAY.

Farewell Again

Joe Catalfano

Nice room you got yourselves here, Steve. All dark and intimidating. I'm sorry. Officer Reilly. Looks like someone's been watching more late night cop shows than me. Yes, I seen many waiting for Billy to come home nights. Is that wall one of those one way mirrors? You mind turning that light down? I ain't no criminal, and these eyes are so sensitive to light I have trouble sleeping with a nightlight on. Aren't you going to offer me a cup of coffee or a cigarette? That's alright, I don't smoke. But I wouldn't mind the coffee.

You might be wondering what's taken me so long to come in and start talking. After all, it has been a year to this day since the accident, and believe me, those days have been no easy living. My days wait on night, and my nights wait on day. Sleep is especially difficult. I have this godawful chill that he's watching me when I shut my eyes—which is probably why I'm here. To make sure that ain't possible. Though I was married to him for over seven years of my life, carried his child for chrissake, I suddenly feel as if I didn't know the man at all. But the worst part is I don't know how to feel. Sometimes I cry, sometimes I'm so furious I smash anything of his my eyes meet. But most of the time, I'm just numb. And quiet.

Besides, I'm pretty sure you'll be passing judgment on me today one way or another, and I don't need that. I'm barely holding onto reality as is. I've been afraid anyone in their senses would hear my story and call me either delusional or crazy. Hell, the only way I figure I'll be walking out of here today is if I'm the former. I've already cast my vote. But I ain't no criminal. I know that much.

I was widowed over two years ago. Billy was killed in a plane crash over Toronto which was news for all of ten seconds. It was a private plane. Only two others were wounded. Billy, they told me, unbuckled his belt and hot clear through the windshield just when the plane dove.

There I was, fanning myself in the kitchen and watching spaghetti simmering on the stove. Waiting for the door to creak open as it always does. The man was so polite, insisting I go to bed instead of waiting on his midnight returns. I swear he though he'd find me dozing on the sofa one night when he walked in. But with his limp and all, his right foot had a bad habit of crashing to the floor just when he tried to be most quiet.

Then the phone rang, and Billy was gone from my life forever.

No more going to the Vineyard in August. No more late Friday night dinners at The Candlelight. No more promising that his business trips would end soon and that, sometime in the new future, we would have a life and not a job together.

Why he was going on that plane I'll never know. I'm not sure I want to, come to think of it. Hell, I barely knew what the man did day by day. I had my suspicions, of course. Something to do with the CIA, though I don't pretend to know much about that. He told me from day one: *Honey, there's a lot I can't tell you, but it's for your own protection. You understand, I'm sure. Once this new job ends in a few months, these trips will calm down. We'll even try again, if you're ready.*

Yes, I knew I was marrying half a man, but I carried the hope that I'd get the other half eventually. And we were going to settle down in a few years. He promised. But now that he's dead, he won't be holding no promises no more.

A girlfriend? It crossed my mind once or twice. But I didn't see any of the signs they talk about. Yes, I picked up a magazine on it. Said that he'd be more distant when we were together, which wasn't so. Said he wouldn't want sex, which, believe me, was not the case. Did I ever confront him? You obviously never met the man. His temper could light a book of matches from across the room when he got started. Mixed with a bottle of JD, that man was a nuclear warhead.

Did he ever hit me? I don't see why that's relevant, to be honest. Sure, I put up with a lot and been promised a lot. Moved over four times in seven years of marriage, without the slightest idea why. If he did hurt me once a few years back, it was because his job had him frustrated to no end. He had to make this deal or it was his neck, and it wasn't going so well for a few weeks. He'd run in all strange times of the day, shirt all pulled out, tie flying all over the place. He'd grab some papers in the study, maybe a piece of fruit, and then shot out the front door with hardly a word to me. Man wasn't sleeping or eating, though he did go back to the bottle for a spell. It all didn't last long, and no harm done.

Let's just say our exchange of how-was-you-day-dears over dinner was minimal. When he was home for dinner, that is. He was a good listener, though, and he was always ears-out for my mundane stories of factory life. He'd been telling me to quit that job for over three years. Boss Hog, as everyone on the line calls that ill-proportioned tub of a man, has a bad habit of talking to us girls like yesterday's

garbage. That man has more venom than a roomful of vipers. Yet we can't help ourselves from laughing the way he waddles like a fat penguin back and forth. Billy respected my wishes and didn't punch the liver out of him. That is, if that drunk still had one for punching. I'm sure you guys know about that quite well. Probably been pulled over more times than Ronnie Hallman, I suppose. Besides, Billy argued, what did we need the extra income for anyway? He was bringing in a hefty paycheck, none of which he would let me deposit. Yes, for my protection. I always had my own account with a few hundred for groceries and what not. He kept it full, and would even put an extra hundred in now and then and tell me to buy something special.

Doing something dirty? No sir. That never occurred to me. He was too upright and honest to do anything of the sort. That man couldn't hold a lie if God himself had asked him.

Yes. I'd be lying if I said I didn't love the man, though he did leave me empty sometimes. I couldn't have found anyone more devoted or generous. And let's face it, I ain't entering no beauty pageant myself. Why you grinning, Eddie? Sorry. Officer Knowles. I felt, in some odd way, that I understood him. And even though he fleted in and out of my life on government business, I felt he understood me. And I can be a hell of a puzzle myself at times. I've gotten a lot of flak from my family about not talking to my sister for so many years, but he understood and supported me. He knew exactly when I wanted to be alone. I think a part of him understood why I kept my job at the factory. I needed to be something more than a dog waiting with his master's slippers when he walked in the door. I have much more self-respect than that. And the girls have always been good to me.

Well, if I keep up at this pace, I'll be here all night. I haven't even gotten to what I'm here to tell you about. Let me stop gnawing the bread and start chewing the meat, as my pop says.

After breathing over a year's worth of stale air, I started being hassled by Brooke, a good friend from the line who I adopted when the others mocked her color. They had no malicious intent, but Brooke grew up in a community where people were afraid to drink their coffee black. Anyway, she began striking a nerve, telling me:

Laurie, he's not coming back. And here you are, passing the time in a rank sweatshop for six bucks an hour and going home waiting for a visit from the reaper. It's no life to live, girl, and I hate seeing you live it. I consider you a best friend, and the best I can do for you is either to end your misery sooner or get you the hell out of the hole you're living in.

She insisted I go out with one of her husband's friends. Not

on a date, she lied, but just to get out of the house. I couldn't imagine what one of Raymond's friends would be like. If friends are friends because they share interests, then I would be looking forward to a night of swilling dollar-whisky and waiting for a welfare check. Brooke is too good for Ray, and she knows it. I think that's exactly why she married him, but that's her story, not mine.

Despite my constant *no's*, she persisted until I nodded. I considered that giving some Karl Wilkes four hours of my life for dinner and a movie would be much less irritating than months of painful badgering. And, who was I fooling? I needed to get out of the house and I knew it. I was just watching dust collect on the furniture. And some part of me kept waiting for Billy to walk in the door, apologizing for being so late. I swear. Promising it would all end soon.

For a date that was not a date, Brooke was very concerned about my appearance. So much so that she came over an hour before Karl was to pick me up, to make sure I had done everything right. I reminded her that I was not quite thirty-four and, more importantly, not quite ready to forget how to do myself up. But I knew she was only trying to help, so I appeased her and let her choose me a dress.

Then she started asking me:

When's the last time you bought a dress, girl?

It's been a few years.

You enjoy living in self-neglect? You have money—

Billy had insurance, but the money he left has been difficult to spend. It still seems morbid, in a way. There's no other word I can think of.

Brooke must have seen me being quiet and assumed as much.

Then I'm buying you a dress my-damn-self, she told me. *And I don't think I won't. Boss Hog owes me ten hours over this week.*

After another half-hour of such friendly arguing and chatter, Brooke pulled out of the driveway with ten honks for good luck. And there I was, in the kitchen, waiting for my prom date again. Feeling young and nervous. Sitting at the table, watching the second hand make endless circles, marking off time from my life. For a brief moment, I began thinking that this may not be so bad. What if he was handsome? Dark, wavy hair, parted in the middle of a smooth, yet rough, face. Deep, brown eyes like autumn leaves. Muscular, yet modest. Then I began thinking it was too soon to think of such things.

And then the phone rang, sending lightning through my body along with a weird sense of *deja vu*. My hand, I imagine, took quite awhile to reach it. That phone must have rung over seven times since

the machine started to kick on.

Laurie?

I just about hung up before he continued.

This is Karl Wilkes, Ray's friend, your date this evening. I'm horribly embarrassed, Laurie. The first time I ever hear your voice, and I'm about to tell you that my car won't turn over. Tried it over a dozen times in the past fifteen minutes. The battery must be frozen.

"Would you like to make it another time?" I asked.

Are you kidding? he screamed. Hell no. I barely can get away from the office for a night like this. I was wondering if you had a car and would mind picking up a man who makes lousy first impressions.

As you could probably guess by now, practical, flawed men have always been more real to me than men who greet you at the door with a dozen roses and a box of chocolates. I'm starting to believe there are only half men out there. No offense to the men at the table. I was actually relieved in a way that Karl was walking into my life on his knees.

So after taking some directions from him, I walked out of the house to find it snowing lightly. Just enough to cover the Ford with a thin cotton foam. Then I heard Billy calling me from the house. Like he always did when God decided to start shaking out his dandruff.

Laurie, I'll drive you to the live today. The snow'll be getting deep, and the Ford doesn't handle so well these days.

I don't know whether I was talking out loud or in my head, but I called back.

"I'll be fine, Billy. Really."

Then I wiped the windshield off with the sleeve of my coat, bad habit of mine, getting Billy all angry and worried.

How many times are we going to go through this? Now your coat's all wet. Not to mention I spent over a hundred bucks on that coat. That's why I bought you a scraper and shovel. Winters are fierce up here, and you'll need them. Use your senses, will you? Now go change your coat or you'll catch cold.

It seemed like Billy was telling me to go in the house and stay put. I began twisting the ring on my finger, deciding whether I should run into the house, call Karl, and apologize for thinking I was ready for this. But some man, watching the second hand of his clock no doubt, was waiting at the kitchen table for me. And I've never been one to disappoint.

The Ford kicked over on the first and slowly drifted down the driveway. Billy was right. It didn't handle so well, and both my

hands were struggling with the wheel to keep it steady.

Now I'll spare you the details of the date, unless you would like to hear them. Karl isn't important until later. Damned if he wasn't handsome in that rough way I've fallen for since I was sixteen. Held himself real nice and polite. And I'll be damned if he didn't take me to The Candlelight. I had to request a different table we were so close to our old one. I hadn't drank for over a year. I seen what it did to Billy and I guess I was scared to start. But Karl insisted, telling me it would help me relax. And after a few glasses, it did all right. Put my nerves right to sleep. I guess there are different types of drunks. Some grow slow and tired, some get violent and start throwing words and glasses all over the house.

The food was just fine, as it's always been. We shared stories, and I was especially thankful he didn't mention Billy, although he seemed to ask about every other part of my life. I found out his job as an engineer pulled him around the States. And I must admit, I hardly remember what the movie was about. I sat in the theatre for two hours thinking how Karl had turned out to be better than I could have imagined, even though he did greet me with half a dozen roses. I felt important in a way I hadn't felt since my wedding day. And I got them first date nerves that I both wanted to leave and stay at the same time. Hell, I felt sixteen again.

Now here's the part you want to listen close, although I'm sure your mind's been ticking away on my every word, punching holes in my boat while I'm trying to bail myself out.

Karl told me he knew a shorter way back to his house, though it required driving a deserted stretch of road for a few miles. I told him the Ford didn't handle so well, but he assured me we would be fine. I honestly don't remember the name of the road, but it was up in Oaksville near the campground. By that time, the snow was at least five inches deep and completely untouched. No sign of tire indents. No one had driven that road in the past four hours. Nothing there but tall, lonely evergreen lining both sides of an invisible road and an occasional deer with his nose to the ground. And as you know, the deer in these parts are anything but skittish. They don't so much as look up when you drive past them five feet away. Too hungry to run. The Ford was handling fairly well, give or take a pull here and there, but I couldn't help but wonder if this was wise. Another part of me didn't mind at all if the Ford stalled.

The Karl unbuttoned his seat belt, and leaned over to kiss me on the cheek. I didn't know how to feel, but I know I felt a brief

spark of disappointment when he leaned back in his seat. He started saying:

This has been such a wonderful evening, Laurie. One long overdue for both of us, I think.

I couldn't do anything but grin like a dumb child. There was no way I could be falling in love so quickly. A year was not enough. What I was feeling was relief from locking myself up in the house, I tried telling myself. The stale rhythm of my life between home and work was numbing me, and a faint glimpse of lost feeling had suddenly emerged. Or maybe a sense of renewed presence. A dog could have done the same, but I've been allergic to pooches all my life. So I was fighting the swell of year-old emotion when the image of the kitchen clock started gnawing at my mind. The second hand was gliding through what seemed like eternity, and I kept driving a lonely road.

Then Karl screamed.

LAURIE—WATCH AWW—

A solid mass of something crashed into the fender, thrusting me forward until the belt snapped me back. It flipped onto the hood, and rolled onto the windshield. Before I could slam on the brakes, it disappeared above my head, rolling like a log along the entire top of the car. The rumbling stopped after it fell to the road behind us. Snow must have cushioned the fall, because something that big would thud. The car creaked and rumbled until it slid to a long stop.

I didn't move. I was staring out the window at the thick falling flakes, thinking kid thoughts like God having a heavy dose of dandruff.

Then Karl whispered:

I think I'm bleeding.

My head slowly turned to look at Karl, who I briefly forgot was sitting beside me. He was holding his forehead, blood oozing through his splayed fingers and shards of glass glittering all over his fingers and hair. The windshield was a crystalline spider web in front of him.

"Don't open your eyes or you might get cut," I told him. "You could blind yourself."

I think I'm alright. Just bounced right off it.

He pulled the rearview towards him and began examining himself, saying he'd need stitches. Then he reached for the door handle, mumbling some nonsense about seeing what we hit. I pulled him back and he started to argue, telling me I didn't need to see this kind

of thing. I told him to stay in the car and be quiet. He looked much worse than I let on, but the majority of pain is in your head, is you ask me.

I'd be lying is I told you I was in control of myself at this point. It took me awhile to find my hands, and even longer to find the door handle. A frigid gust of air breathed into the cozy heat of the Ford. The snow was falling more heavily than ever, and it instantly turned to water as it hit the warm upholstery. A few icy fingers reached out for me and touched my face, like being touched by a ghost. I caught a glimpse of the thing through the foggy rearview before I exited the car.

The body was a good distance from the car, farther than I had expected. I should have run because Karl needed to get to the hospital, but I walked carefully, measuring each step as if whatever it was I had disturbed would jump back to life and throw me to the ground. But it remained motionless. Humped in an awkward position like a wet bag of laundry.

Then a wailing gust of wind crept up behind me and seemed to push me towards the body. The wind stirred the brownish-black thing and lifted what looked like the tail of a long, dark overcoat into the air, flapping wild like a flag on a pole.

Although it was difficult to see through the fat, intruding flakes, I could tell it was a man. One arm reached out from underneath the coat, as if trying to pull the rest of the body out of its shell. I started to scream, but nothing came out. Instead, I began to turn to make a run for the car when I heard:

Laaaaaurrreee . . .

I jumped back as the head began emerging from under the coat. The face was not just white, but pallid, streaked with thin, bright lines of blood. The hair was slicked back with either snow or blood. It was impossible to tell. Dark, heavy eyebrows and a mustache formed an even greater contrast, making it seem as if there were no color in him at all. But then its red mouth opened agape, screaming a silent scream.

Laureeeee . . . kum hhhe . . .

I swear I didn't see its mouth move to make these words. The voice had this strange airy quality, and I briefly thought I was mistaking the wind. Trickle of blood fell from its open mouth, rolled down its chin, and painted tiny, brief roses onto the snow. Then I heard:

Hellllp' meeeee

The body somehow crawled closer to me. If anything, I was

stumbling backwards, so it had to be pulling itself. But these were no marks in the snow behind the body, and the constant snow was not enough to instantly fill in the wide indent it would make. But there it was, too close, within a few yards. It seemed impossible, as if it had hovered over the ground in a blink of an eye.

It extended a shivering hand out to me, wanting to grasp my leg and pull me down. Then I heard:

Keeeeewdent tellll—

I turned my back on it and walked over to the car.

Don't waaaa—

I opened the trunk.

—fur mmmme—

I removed the shovel and hesitated.

I prramessss—

I turned around and there he was, standing in front of me. His glazed, accusing eyes screwed into me like daggers. And at that moment, his eyes were the only thing human about him. Deep brown like autumn leaves. Seemed to look through me more than at me. As they always done.

I lifted the shovel into the air, turned my head, and swiftly pulled it down. The body collapsed to the ground. Hardly made a thud at all. Its hand still fumbled around in the snow. I briefly felt it touch my ankle before it stopped. Talk about a feeling you can't put words to.

Then Karl started screaming from the car.

Laurie? What's the matter?

I yelled back:

"Stay in the car, Karl. One minute. All's fine."

I briefly considered rolling the body to the side of the road, but I didn't want to touch it. Some naive part of me believed that if I avoided contact, I could convince myself it wasn't real in the morning. And I can usually count on my defenses. But another part of me wanted to make sure he was dead.

I returned to the car, unconsciously tossing the shovel in the trunk. Karl was still holding his head with blood-caked hands. Reaching into the back seat, I found an old scarf of Billy's which I began to wrap around his head. The he asked:

What was it?

"Nothing," I said. "A deer. Your head okay?"

He mumbled: deer just asking for it around these parts.

The next fifteen minutes were silent.

Karl insisted I drive home after I dropped him at the hospital. I had had enough shock for my first night out in a year, he assured me. I was to get some sleep. He would call either Ray or a cab to take him home. Good luck on Ray, I thought. He was probably pissing away his latest welfare check with Ronnie Hallman. Karl said he would call me tomorrow morning. I didn't have the heart to tell him I never wanted to hear his voice again.

Why did I do it? Instinct is the best answer I can think of. It sure felt like I was on automatic pilot for those few minutes. I guess I figured he was gone already, and killing him a second time wouldn't matter none. Though it did feel good at the time. Felt free. But I'm not a blood-thirsty criminal. Besides, since when is it a crime to kill a dead person? I'm the same girl I was two years ago, waiting for the man I love to come through the front door at midnight. If anything, I've been the victim. It's others who have changed. Though I admit I picked a lousy time for an epiphany.

Why did I come in? I'm not looking for sympathy, that's for sure. I'm ready to give up my demons for a little bit of relief. And maybe a bit of understanding, because it sure ain't coming from inside this head. But either way, the blood's off my hands now. Hiding that night in my head was harder than spilling it here.

Besides, you don't have anything on me. No body was found. There was never anything in the papers and news travels fast over the line, so I supposed this would be new to you. And part of me believes it wasn't Billy, or human, at all. Billy never had dark hair. And a mustache? That man would shave twice a day he hated facial hair so much. But everything happened so damn quickly, there's no way of telling for sure. Maybe my head filled in all the details after the fact. All I know is, before I knew it, there it was in my hand. Maybe I came here hoping there was a John Doe found last year up in Oaksville. Maybe I wanted it to be Billy. It would sure help me move on with my life. I can't shake the feeling he's still out there. Looking at me when I close my eyes. That man needs to go away for good.

I suspect you'll be calling in Karl and maybe even Brooke. Tell her I said hello. Haven't seen her in a few months. She quit the line after Ray crawled on the wagon and got a well-paying job at the mill. I guess some people have a way of defying your expectations. I've tried to call her a few times, but there's never an answer. As for Karl, I heard those minutes of the accident are a black hole, so I doubt he'll be much help to you or me.

As for me, I've been thinking about moving a good distance

away from Aspen. Too many memories and associations. I've even bought a new dress for the occasion . . .

The Midwife

Meghan Gualtieri

She was a modern midwife. Witch. Midwife. She had no certification for the practice of midwifery. She simply did—exceptionally. Women said that her exploring, soothing, gentle fingers were to their bodies as familiar as their own hands. Her touch enticed their flesh to remember the sensation of pulsing raindrops, of the warm waves of her strange teas lapping the walls of their fruited stomachs, and of the cool caress of a breeze that passed through their clothes and across their breasts, encircling their second selves. Both she and her women were extensions of Nature, each challenging the other to yield her gift.

She would allow no men, no pieces of Time, in the birthing room. She had never required the assistance of a doctor nor had she ever lost one of her women nor a child—except her own.

She stared at him. He spoke, but refused language. One could perceive a slight nod of her head. *Yes*. Her body was ripe; soon it would be rotten. Every muscle and corner of her form craved life; her mental wanderings yearned for companionship. *Now. Soon. Please. Yes, him.*

She approached him, addressed him, presented her proposal to him and watched him. Studied him. He knew. Knew she wouldn't force him to assume responsibility. Knew she wouldn't require a name. Knew why. And, so, he consented. She knew he would. What an odd place for this near tacit agreement. Indeed, for it to have happened there . . .

They climbed her staircase together.

Days later her midsection throbbed and she began upon her classic regiment of teas, massages, scents, baths, and sounds—chimes, chords, and voices.

And it grew. And it rejoiced each Time she slid another child from its first cradle to its second. And it began to feel. She wondered at the difference between her women and herself.

Stop.

She stopped. She should not have stopped. She stopped. She turned. She watched in silence. She did not blink. He looked familiar—someone she knew? The manifestation of a fear she could not conquer behind which she would not hide?

He smashed a brown bottle of cheap beer against her protrusion and brought his fist to the side of her head as she collapsed into

a heap of limbs, glass, and blood.

She awoke, finding herself lying in a pool of blood, urine, beer, and dirt upon which floated cigarette butts, candy wrappers, and a shriveled fleshy form that had eyes. It had eyes.

She stopped. The midwife stopped.



A Farrier By Trade

Kate Buchert

Out of all the trainers at Liberty Raceway, I liked Harley the best. He wasn't as uptight about the horse bath as the other trainers were. He'd let me come in and watch the horses wade around the giant pool that served as their bath. Harley would lead them around slowly, talking to them in a real low soothing voice while chewing his big wad of tobacco. He said the other trainers had sticks shoved up their asses and that's why they wouldn't let me in to watch. Lucky for me, Harley was in charge of the pool on Saturdays. He was the only one who listened to my theory that it was really the horses that ruled over us humans. Why else, I figured, would all the owners go to so much trouble to have the horses cleaned?

"I can tell ya why, Morgan," he said one Saturday morning after he was done walking Sweet Melody around the tub, "because horses are money and that's what really rules over humans."

"Do you think the horses like the baths?" I asked, looking up at his weathered features and gray wisps of hair that peeked out from under his leather cap.

Harley shrugged, shifting the wad of chew around in his mouth with his tongue. "I think the horses like the attention. Speaking of which, your dad needs to take a look at Melody's left hind hoof, she's starting to favor her other leg. Is he in his shop?"

I nodded. "He's been with Mr. Abruzzi's horse all morning."

Harley walked me back to my father's blacksmith shop. Since he only had me on the weekends, I spent a lot of time with my father at the track. Liberty Raceway was one of the few racetracks that still boasted sulky racing. The horses were hitched to the sulky carriages where the riders sat—it supposedly made the race harder. I was happy for my dad. After years of self-employment, he finally landed a permanent job as one of the track farriers. I didn't mind sitting around on Saturdays, Harley kept me company. Besides, I got to spend time with Dad on Sundays. Sunday was his day off.

The shop was so dark compared to the bright lights that reflected off the horse pool. The small cast iron forge in the back of the workshop cast a warm glow over my father's hunched form, hammering out another horseshoe. It was a bit smoky and the air smelled like burning leaves in autumn. His worn tools were scattered around the anvil that sat in the center of the room. The harnessed gelding nickered as Harley and I quietly slipped into the shop. I took my

usual seat on the tall stool in the back corner of the workroom and watched.

"Good work, Karl. You got this beast to behave himself," Harley said, running a hand over the bay's rump. Dad smiled, the sweat pouring off his face. No horse was unstoppable for Karl Davidson. Even the horses seventeen hands high would stand for a man only five foot five. I admired my father's strength and knowledge, all of which rested in the small yet sinewy hands. A little finesse, a little love, and a whole lot of brute force. That's my dad in a nutshell.

"Yeah, well, I just had to let him know who was boss around here, that's all," Dad replied in a slow monotone voice. I was content to know my father through each horse, by each shoe he fashioned for their hooves. Every one was unique, made for optimal endurance and support. My father could do no wrong, as long as he was in his shop pounding away at hot, malleable iron. He looked over at me. "You've been over at the horse bath again? Don't you get tired off that place?"

I giggled and shook my head no. "Harley lets me sit and watch. He tells me about the horses."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you should thank Harley."

"No, don't mention it, it's a pleasure to be seen with such a cute kid." Harley winked at me. I flashed him one of my biggest smiles. "Whoa, kid, that smile's lethal. Oh, Karl, by the way, when you get a chance, take a look at Sweet Melody's back hooves. She's been limping again." With one last wink, Harley sauntered off back to the bath house, spitting tobacco along the way.

After the morning string of shoes, Dad and I walked over to the small cafeteria and watched the early round of races.

"Which one do you think will win today, Morgan?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe that rider in the middle with the blue and white silk. He seems like he could win."

"See that one, in the outside lane?" he asked, sipping from his Styrofoam cup of coffee. His fingers left smooty prints on the white cup.

"Yeah, oh wait! They're winning! Why is the rider leaning like that?"

"It's the slope of the track—he needs to keep the sulky balanced if he wants to keep the edge over the other teams. He won't though—that O'Brian starts out fast but loses every time on account of his overconfidence."

"How do you know?"

"I just know people. They're like horses. To shoe 'em, you got to know 'em."

I nodded, not quite sure what he meant. I always had a feeling that he was actually more at ease around the horses than with most people. He'd say it was because people were stupid asses who didn't know shit from shinola, but I secretly knew it was because he couldn't hear too well.

"I'm learning about the five kingdoms in school. Horses and people are both animals," I told him. He sorta nodded, still looking out over the track. I sighed. "Dad? Did you hear me?"

He focused back on my face. "Sorry, Morg, what did you say?"

I rolled my eyes. "Nothing. The only way to read my lips is to look at them, y'know."

He grinned, his leathery skin wrinkling up around his nose. "Certainly," he said in his best Three Stooges voice. I rolled my eyes again. I was always glad to visit with my dad but I was more glad our time together was spent at the track. It was okay to be himself there.

We strolled back to the shop, streaks of brilliant silk and gleaming coats whizzing by us. Owners shouting at trainers and trainers shouting at the drivers. Dad could never move as fast as they could. I was constantly running ahead and waiting. Mr. Abruzzi was waiting too.

"Hello there, sweetheart. How are you?" Mr. Abruzzi asked, squatting down to look at me after hitching up his soft ironed pants. "How's school going?"

I smiled, half shy, half in awe. "Good. We're learning about the five kingdoms."

He nodded. I guess he didn't care about the five kingdoms either. Standing up, he ran a hand through his soft, graying hair. "And how's my horse?" he asked my father.

"Just fine, Mr. Abruzzi, just fine. I put a heavier grade of shoe on him to see if we can correct his leg from turning in . . ."

"Heavier? Why heavier?" Mr. Abruzzi said, interrupting. I looked at Dad. Dad looked at the ground. I expected my father to get angry, he always got angry at me when I interrupted him, but he just sighed.

"To fix Chariot's instep, I have to restrain his gait . . . the heavier shoe provides resistance . . ."

"What the hell am I paying you for if you're slowing my horses down? Just last week I had one of my guys put on the number

three alloy and Chariot cut his time down by 1.2 seconds . . .”

“That may be so, Mr. Abruzzi, but you’re only postponing the inevitable. Chariot’s left front nail is growing in on itself, cutting into the blood circulation as well as his gait. I had to peel back the hoof, seal it with Aprax, and add more weight while it heals . . .”

“Davidson, you moron, I need him to win, not heal . . .”

I really didn’t want to be there. Dad was just taking it. I was angry at him for taking it. He knew what he was doing . . . didn’t he? They moved into Dad’s shop so I couldn’t hear them anymore. A few minutes later, Mr. Abruzzi came storming out in a cloud of smelly aftershave. It didn’t go right with the lingering smell of horse manure. I watched him fume off towards the track and went into the shop. Dad was already busy at the forge getting more iron ready.

“Is he mad?”

Dad chuckled. “Is a frog’s ass watertight? He’ll get over it.”

“But will the new shoes slow down Chariot of Fire?”

“Not in the long run.”

“But he’s used to running fast, maybe he’ll not be able to race anymore.”

Dad slowly turned to look at me. “You questioning my decision too?” I quickly shook my head no. “Then don’t worry about it. Harley should be around, why don’t you go over to the bath?”

I left just as quietly as I came in. He had never dismissed me before. What did I do? Was Mr. Abruzzi right? I felt guilty for thinking it. All this time I thought Dad was happy at Liberty.

“Hey kid, why the long face?” Harley asked as I plopped down on the cool linoleum.

“Do you think my dad is smart?” I felt so bad.

“He’s one of the smartest guys around here. Why? Do you?”

I shrugged. “He didn’t finish school.”

“So?”

“He didn’t even go to school to learn to be a blacksmith.”

“So? You don’t need to go to school to be smart.”

I ran a hand through the deep blue water. “My teacher says you do. So does my mom.”

You’re smart to go to school, but school doesn’t make you smart. Not in the things that matter anyway.”

Harley didn’t press the issue, which I was thankful for. I didn’t want anyone to know that I was starting to feel ashamed of my father. He was a great blacksmith, but, maybe Mr. Abruzzi knew more than he did. After all, he was the one who owned Chariot.

I sat at the horse bath for a long time. It felt better being there rather than in my father's shop. No one questioned Harley's performance, why my dad?

"Your dad might be startin' to miss ya, Morg," Harley prompted, sitting down next to me.

"Maybe. I don't want to get in the way."

"Oh, you're not in the way. My job here ain't half as exciting as your dad's. Go on—you can come visit me later."

I sulked all the way to the shop. Dad was with Battle Cry.

"So. You still haven't told me about your week in school. Learn anything new?" Dad asked.

I shrugged. "Not really. Do you have to redo Chariot's shoes?"

"You still on that? No, Mr. Abruzzi'll be fine."

"Why'd he get so upset?"

"Greed. Paranoia. Ego trip—take your pick."

"But he knows a lot about horses, doesn't he?"

"He knows how to run them to death, that's all."

I fiddled with a finishing file. "He cares about the horses though, right?"

Dad gingerly put down Battle Cry's front foot and ran a hand up over his leg as he straightened up. He turned me around to face him. "No, Morgan, he doesn't. He doesn't care about anything except winning."

"How do you know?"

His jaw tightened and his grip became firmer. "I just know. I'm forced to play the game."

As the last round of races were decided, Dad finished up with his last horse. He started to pack up his tools, wiping each one with a soft cloth before stacking them in the big wooden tool box.

"Can I go say bye to Harley before we leave?" I asked, already half out the door.

"Morgan, wait. I need to tell you something." The tone in his voice didn't sound too good.

I went back in the shop and sat down on my stool.

He sighed heavy. "You won't be back next weekend."

"Why? Am I staying with Mom next weekend?"

"No. I'm quitting Liberty."

My mouth fell open. I knew he and Mr. Abruzzi had a fight, but why quit?

"Why?"

"I don't belong here anymore. Things are changing."

"Is it because of Mr. Abruzzi?"

"In a way. Go say bye to Harley—I'll pack up the truck."

I raced to the horse bath. Harley was wiping down a quarter horse.

"Harley. Dad quit." I announced, trying to catch my breath.

He only looked at me, nodded, and smiled. "Guess it got to be too much for him. Can't say I blame him . . . I'd probably do the same thing."

"What are you talking about?"

Harley put down the rag and handed the horse over to another trainer. He took his cap off, exposing the damp gray ringlets that clung to his otherwise bald head. "Your dad is very smart, Morgan."

"Right, that's why he had to take lessons from Mr. Abruzzi. He really knows what he's doing around here," I muttered, more to myself than to Harley.

Harley looked around, leaning in real close. His voice was mean and rough like sandpaper. "You have no idea what you're talking about, Morgan. Things are not what they seem around here, and you better learn that real quick before you judge your father. He's a good, honest man."

I looked at him, embarrassed that I upset him. "I'm sorry, but compared to everyone else, he's not. I know that's mean of me. . ."

"Compared to everyone else, he's the smartest guy in this whole goddamn track and you wanna know why?" I shook my head yes. "Because he declined Mr. Abruzzi's offer last week."

"Last week? But he quit today. I don't understand."

Harley leaned in even closer, his warm breath tickling my face. It smelled of sweet tobacco. "You didn't hear this, understand? Your father would kill me if he knew I was telling you. Pinky promise." He held out his bony finger.

I took his pinky in my smaller one. "Telling me what, Harley?"

"Mr. Abruzzi offered your father money if he's show the other horses."

"But he does shoe the other horses."

"Your father shoes them correctly. Mr. Abruzzi wanted your father to give Chariot an edge over the other horses by shoeing them incorrectly."

"That's cheating," I whispered.

"And it's illegal. Your father refused and Mr. Abruzzi's been lean-

ing on him ever since. Your father was smart for refusing. He's smart for walking away."

"Can't Dad turn him in or something? That's what our teacher tells us."

"Morg, you can't turn in someone who's funding this entire racetrack. He'd only be throwing away his career. Abruzzi knows it too."

I put my hand in Harley's as he roughly pushed the worn leather cap down over his forehead. I think I finally started to understand. "Thank you." He smiled and ruffled my hair. "I guess I won't see you anymore."

"Don't worry kid, I'll turn up eventually. Who knows, maybe next it'll be my turn to quit."

I hugged Harley as Dad came in. They shook hands. "Ready kiddo?"

"Bye Harley," I called as Dad lead me out of the building. I looked back over my shoulder and held up my pinky. Harley winked. We walked in silence back to Dad's truck. I swear he was walking a little taller. Or maybe it only seemed that way because I matched his pace with my own. I didn't mind walking a little slow, as long as I knew where I was going.

civilization

Lauren Newkirk

three hours in and a few pints downed
propels the question of national identity
into that dangerous, shadowed region of the personal.
the five of us—post-lecture looks staring down at wet circles—
no one would be first to say
in fact, i do have the right to argue
on the issue of whether or not archaeology is simply a metaphor
for the state of modern Scotland (not to mention
Wales, but come to think of it, no one mentions Wales anyway).

a Scot, a German, a Yorkshireman, and an American
breathing the intellectual fumes
of our tutor, a short Cornish Celt wedged into the corner of his
Guinness,
and growing knackered with stories:
watery graves, offerings of bone and gold, a man with skin attached
rising 1,500 years later from a Danish bog,
the enameled intricacies of longswords, their scabbards housing
Roman-killers.

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Caesar was a liar.

the German rolls a cigarette and watches me pointedly from across
the table,
as only Germans can.
i imagine him naked and in battle,
the Teutonic white streak of him as the spears spread
out around a muddy field in northern Italy,
lye making his hair stand up straight and yellow
as he crushes Etruscan pottery underfoot.

earlier, it had been the last lecture Ancient Celtic Civilization. at last
i look up.

windows steamed from questions reveal the waning light
of a late afternoon in Edinburgh.
no tourists pass by outside,
just the cold and tired walking towards the bus depot,
dropping cigarettes
and re-shouldering groceries,
thinking of the growing tribe at home clamoring for the daily
sacrifice.

Kweegeebo

Paul Guidry



I Don't Know the Language

Brian Hamrick

Jacob's sitting right there, right across from me, only one seat up on the other side, only a bus, right there, and I can't look at him, no, I can't. I hate him, it's so weird, right there, laughing, laughing with Billy and Frank and James and Kelly, they have no idea, he still hasn't shaved, so scruffy. Tony's not saying anything, he's sharing a seat with me, he could at least talk a little. Come on damn it, say something. Right across from me . . .

I squirm in my seat and lean my face on my hand, staring out the window. In the reflection I can see Jacob smiling and laughing, describing a fight between the band and choir directors. If I look out the window I can see European countryside flying by. We are two of forty students here this summer, spending a brochure-styled three weeks in Italy with a three day home-stay in Switzerland. That's where we are leaving thank god. Our host parents took all of us to the town square this morning, where we got on this stupid bus to take us down to Venice. I hear Venice is nice, even if it does stink in the summer. I don't care, though . . . anything to get away from Switzerland.

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I wonder how far we've gone. They checked our passports about an hour ago so we must be a least a little ways into Italy. I have no idea how far it is to Venice, no idea. I glance over at Jacob and see him sitting with Kelly, trying to talk her up. I can tell. It's good that it's her, though. He won't say anything to her, he wouldn't; at least, I don't think he would. No, he wouldn't. I wonder when I'll talk about it. I know I'll get the compulsion, won't be able to not say anything, but to who? Not Tony, but that would be funny, though. But even to someone else, what would I say. I've seen Jacob naked, he has a good body, he needs to shave.

What then? Then more questions come—how is it that you've seen Jacob naked? What do you mean he has a good body? What the hell does it mean that he needs to shave? And then I'd have to explain, and if it's someone that I've told this much to I might as well tell more. And so I'd say that well, you see, we were both having sex with this girl at the same time, and he actually initiated a few things with me before it got weird, and yeah I felt his penis and his face against mine, that's how I know he needs to shave. I've never really noticed facial hair before; it's only high-school after all, I never picked up on how woolly a guy looked. But now, now that's the first thing I see, and

I have this perverse feeling of running my hands over the stubble just to compare.

And then I'd have to answer questions about the girl, and when, and where, and why, and pretty soon I'd be so wrapped up in a story that every little thing would come out, and that scares the shit out of me. It's hard enough trying to get things straight in my own head, no pun intended.

She was a Swiss girl, Swiss miss, little miss that I met the first day of our home-stay. The forty of us were split between five tiny villages clumped together at the foothills of the Alps. I had been placed with a young couple with a baby, in a little two-story townhouse up in the mountains. We were forty-five minutes from Lake Lugano, oh, what a breathtaking sight, the lake opening up in the valley, down along the highway that led back into Italy. We had come from Milan, up through Verona, here, and now we were on a bus going south towards Venice.

The couple was really nice. The guy looked a little like Chevy Chase, but to hear him speak broken English with a heavy accent stopped the comparison; it was actually kind of funny. Reminds me of the Swedish chef—Swedish, I know, not Swiss. This guy was Swiss. The girl, woman was Swiss too. She didn't remind me of any movie star, or muppet for that matter, well maybe Janice, plain and mousy. The baby was adorable. My mom's been baby-sitting for longer than I've been alive, so I grew up with babies. He cooed and laughed when I made silly faces at him.

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Their house was small, but it didn't seem cramped. Everything looked really efficient, like nothing was wasted. Plain hardwood or solid colors, few patterns and no wallpaper. Ascetic, but comfortable. Their car was the coolest, though. It ran on nitrous oxide—well, I think it was nitrous, something like that. Anyway, there was a little switch and when you got up to thirty or forty kilometers, you flicked the switch and the motor switched over. It got really quiet but the engine seemed to move easier as the car got faster. It was really cool.

They were driving me to the local high school where someone something some group had organized a dance to welcome us American kids. Whoo-ee. I'm not one for dances, I feel like everyone's laughing at what I do. It's terrible, but if I just walk near someone that's laughing I think it's about me and normally I blush or something stupid like that. I wish I wouldn't, but what are you going to do? And not only were there just the forty people that I only kind of

knew, most of my friends' parents not being able to afford a trip like this, but there were also all these Swiss kids trying out their English on me. I was "dude"-ed and "cool"-ed a million times that night, but never once did anyone try teaching me any Swiss—they were content to try their Sylvester Stallone impersonations on us. As I said, whoo-ee.

Actually there is no Swiss language—they speak German or French or Italian, I didn't know, it had to be explained, I speak none of those. We were way south near the mountains and they spoke German, but around Lake Lugano Italian. It is all moot, though, for as I said no one tried to teach us anything.

I danced a little bit, but things got really weird. There was some strange Swiss music on, and we were all in giant circles of about twenty people scattered across the gym, and the Swiss girls grabbed all of our hands and we spun the circle to the left, to the right, back, and back again. Then we stopped and did some clapping routine that I suppose we were supposed to pick up, then suddenly they all started sinking to their knees and kind of bouncing and bobbing. I didn't know if we were dancing or praying or what. I needed to get out of there. It was hot and strange and I needed relief from this constant blush.

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I stepped towards the door at the end of the dance, I couldn't leave in the middle, and walked outside into a little courtyard. It was almost a full moon, and I sat down on a stone bench encircling a fountain in the middle. I sat there for a few moments, then felt a timid tap on my shoulder. I started, turned around, and looked at a really cute girl. She backed up a step or two, then smiled and pointed to the spot next to me. Please? She asked.

Sure, I said, turning my body around to face her. She sat down and looked around, smiled at me again and looked into my eyes. That's it. Great. What the hell was I supposed to now. I've never been very good with girls, I've only ever dated two people, and that was such randomness that the idea of trying to appear attractive to someone was ludicrous, at least to me. I got embarrassed and forced a smile, looking around. Nice night out, I said. She looked at me and smiled. Nice night, yeah? I asked. She looked at me and smiled. You don't know a word of English, do you? She picked up on the word English, for she looked at me and said please? again.

So I couldn't talk to her, so what. Actually, even though it probably should have made me more on edge, I relaxed a bit. I smiled and she smiled. I pointed to the moon and she nodded, saying a few

words in German I think. It was neat, we were both having a conversation without the other person, babble blah blah.

She was a couple inches shorter than me, thin, I think winsome is the word, a billowy faded sundress, sandals. I saw a thin gold anklet around her left leg, matching dolphin earrings, her slightly crooked left front tooth, adorable. She smelled like hayfields and sweat, wild-flowers and energy, and I wanted her.

She stood up and looked around, over her shoulder to the entrance of the courtyard. I thought she had to go, I had no idea what time it was, I could still hear something going on inside, I was sad, Don't go I wanted to say, but what would it matter? She couldn't understand me, and was probably bored by me already. She turned back to me and held out her hand. Come? she asked. Yes, I said. I took her hand. She laughed and spun around, nearly dragging me along. I picked up the pace and we ran a little ways next to each other, then settled into a walk, still holding hands. Skin like cream—color and kind.

We stopped at the edge of the village near a little grove of trees with picnic tables scattered about, really only a half-mile or so from the school, but twisted around so as almost not to hear anything. We looked around a little bit, well, I looked around, I'm sure she'd already seen everything before, then, kind of awkwardly, I looked back at her. We had been talking for a little time now, her name was Michele, but still knew nothing about each other. I didn't think I'd ever know anything. Then with a gentle pull of her hand, she drew me towards her, reached up to run her hand down the side of my face, and kissed me.

I felt blood rush into my face, I began to sweat but my lips were still cool. She slowly wrapped her arms around me and I did the same. She moved from my mouth to my neck, so I tried that too and it was kind of cool, I liked it, so did she, I think. I liked what she was doing to my neck. Then she grabbed my ass, and that made me jump a little bit. She giggled slightly, then went back to my mouth. What the hell, I thought, and grabbed her ass.

A few moments later we were off to the side of the deserted road, it's a tiny village at ten in the evening for Christ's sake, her shirt open, mine open, my hands on her . . . umm, breasts and her mouth, ah, down my chest open my pants . . . unbelievable—I mean that, unbelievable, I was getting a blowjob in a nearly public place with a girl I couldn't even say thank you to. I was glowing.

Well, after a while she took me home. As we were walking

back into the town we were laughing and smiling, holding hands down the middle of the street. I heard a noise, a slowly building chant, when around the corner came a group of eight kids on the trip with me, very, very drunk. They were weaving and screaming, wobbling and singing. They didn't look quite right, like it was a group of drunk teenagers trying to act like drunk adults. Michele laughed; I later found out that she could've probably drunk all of us under any table. A few of the guys noticed me, or noticed Michele, and wavered on over. One of them was Jacob.

I had never really known Jacob, didn't really have anything against him, but I sort of resented his existence. He was the type of kid that would get a new car every time he totaled his old one. I think he was seventeen but he was on his third car. He wasn't too much of a jerk or anything, he just assumed that everyone had the money to spend that he did, and he acted disappointed in you when he found out you didn't.

Well, they came up to us and began slurring questions, about what we were doing, who she was, were we drunk, blah blah blah. Jacob kissed Michele's hand, and I forced a smile and squeezed her left hand which I was still holding. Asshole, leave her alone. I said I had to be going and tugged a little at Michele's hand, who flashed everyone a departing smile and followed me down the street. The group of guys yelled out the name of a bar they were going to be at, but I just shook my head. Too much has happened tonight, gotta get home. At the gate of my house I turned around and we kissed. She left and I knocked slightly and the man opened the door, smiling as I walked in. Bar good? he asked. What bar? The bar where you and friends go, he said. Oh, yeah, I said, the bar . . . yeah, it was OK. He smiled and led me to my bedroom.

The next morning my host family took me to the town square, where I waited with the other kids for our bus tour around Lake Lugano and our trip to Ascona. While I was sitting there Jacob walked over and sat beside me.

Michele's a pretty cool girl, huh? he asked.

Yeah, she seems to be. I can hardly tell, though, with her only being able to say Michele, please, and come.

Hey, he laughed, those are three good words to know with us. She showed up at the bar after we saw you. She wants to see you again, she told me.

How? You don't speak Swiss.

He laughed there is no Swiss, it's German and I got someone

to translate for me.

Oh. When does she want to see me?

Tonight when we get back.

Oh.

Ooh, I gotta go, he said, and sprang up and towards a group of guys that had just arrived.

She was at the bar last night? I got all nervous and paranoid, jealous and angry. Wait a second, hold on, slow down, stop jumping to conclusions.

But it was conclusions I was jumping to all day long. Around the lake, through the city, in each shop I couldn't stop dwelling on it. It's fine, relax, everything's cool.

That night when we got back I had dinner with my host family then told them I'd be back late, I was hanging out with some people in town. They smiled and told me to just come in when I got home, they'd leave the door open. I walked to the bar Jacob had told me to come to, all the while expecting to be turned away at the door. No such luck. I walked into the place, felt all the adults staring at me, but noticed a group of Swiss kids with some of my classmates in the back. I wandered over and saw Michele sitting with Jacob, his arm around her. When she saw me she smiled and bounded up, throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me. I was so embarrassed, in front of all these people I hardly knew. I was flushed after the kiss, which made everyone laugh all the more. I grinned sheepishly and sat down, holding Michele's hand. A few moments later, though, she kissed me on the cheek, bounded up, and headed for the bar.

She really likes you, you know, Jacob said, finishing a beer. He looked kind of flushed himself—he must have been here for a while. I said yeah, I guess so and looked at her standing there at the bar. Tight jeans, a silk blouse, gorgeous.

She came back with three beers, then sat down beside me again. After that beer came another one, and after that beer her hand was in my pants again and I was pretty happy, slightly drunk and in awe of everything that was happening. I leaned over and kissed her on the neck, blew a little breath in her ear. She giggled, grabbed my hand, and pulled me up. I tried to hide my erection as I stood up, and she took me to the dance floor. We danced for half the song, then Jacob came over and asked to cut in. I said sure, returned to my seat, watched them dance, and finished my beer. When the dance was over they walked back over to the table—Michele held out her left hand to me, her right being held by Jacob. I let her take my hand and pull

me up, and then we left.

We walked through the deserted streets a little ways until we came to a cottage on the edge of town. She took out keys and opened the back door, let us inside and downstairs to the basement. It was furnished in a very different way from my host-family's home; pillows and couches and giant soft chairs with low tables and a piano in the corner. We were sitting on the couch, Jacob and I chatting, when Michele began kissing my neck again.

I turned red, because now it wasn't a group of nameless guys at the bar, but Jacob right there. But she was good at distracting me, and pretty soon I forgot Jacob was there. Until, that is, he sat down on the other side of Michele and began kissing the other side of her neck. I glanced at him over her shoulder. What was he doing, what's happening, what's going on?

I had several beers in me and besides which I didn't know how to stop. I was getting kind of freaked out, especially when I was feeling her up and I accidentally grabbed Jacob's hand, but I felt like I couldn't leave. I didn't know how or what to say—so I just kept going. Soon I was naked, with Michele kissing my body and Jacob stripping hers. And then Jacob started kissing her body, and then he started kissing mine. The side of his face kept scratching my leg, he needed to shave.

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At this point I just closed my eyes and let things happen. I tried to focus on the alcohol in me and not think too much, I tried to have fun and relax, I tried to enjoy what was going on, but the more that happened, the more weird I felt, the more strange things became. I can't even really put into words what happened—I get to Jacob giving me . . . no, I can't say anything. I can't.

After a few hours we all collapsed on the couch, Michele breathing heavily, Jacob dozing off, me with a slight tremor running through my body. I couldn't sleep, couldn't talk, couldn't hardly move now that it was over. The three of us . . . Jacob and I . . . Michelle . . . I couldn't stop shaking. A few minutes later I stood up, put on my clothes, and turned to Michele. Please, she said. Please, I said, kissing her and turning to leave. Come, she said. Come, I thought. Michele, I said, smiled, and left.

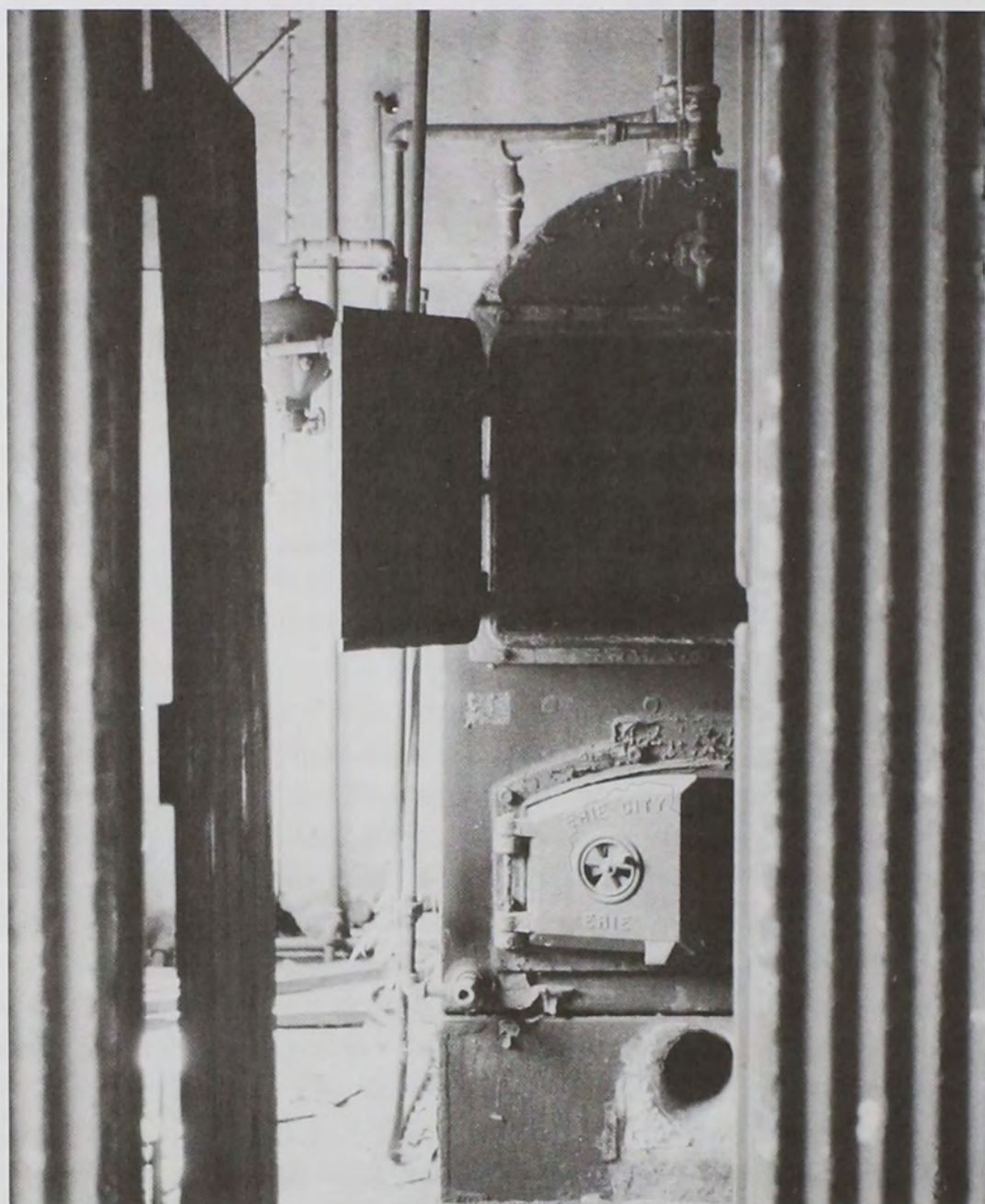
I can't, I can't believe . . . I wandered around the town trying to find the house where I was staying. I need a shower, I need to wash my hands, I need to change, I need to brush my hair, I need to brush my teeth. I felt really strange, upset terribly at something and I didn't know what. I wanted to cry but didn't know why. I eventually found

my house and crawled in bed, curling up and trying to sleep. I watched the night get lighter and dawn edge over the mountains. I heard my host family wake up, the baby start to cry, the father come in to wake me up. I showered and changed, packed my stuff, had breakfast, and was taken down to the bus.

And there he sits, one seat up and on the other side, talking with Kelly. I feel like I should say something to him, but I don't know what. I don't even know that I could put anything into words, let alone speak them out loud. I don't know if I can say anything to anyone. I don't even think I want to admit to myself what happened. What did happen? I don't know. All I know is that he's sitting right there and I can't talk to him, that I can't wait to get back to Italy, and god, he still needs to shave. I shudder and turn away. I wish, I hope, I pray he doesn't say anything. I hope he doesn't want to talk to me. I wish he were like Michele, and talking was never a possibility.

Doorway

Mark Peacock



Friday Nights at the Fights

Jesse Federman

The night began unlike most, and we grew restless quickly. Though I don't drink myself, I have fallen irrevocably into college routines and prefer the presence of beer on weekends. Just as it dulls the inhibitions of my company, it also grants me permission to drop my own guard considerably. Once others have buzzed away their senses of proper conduct, I feel at liberty to turn away the microscopes pointed at me, whether actual or perceived. Tonight, however, there was no beer, and barely any company.

At first, I sat out with a couple of house-mates, also good friends. We had taken big, comfortable lounge chairs from the common room and rested our feet upon the porch's front banister. We said hi or nothing to passersby, mostly talking to each other, disinterested and bored, but relaxed. By some stroke of gross misplanning, not a single fraternity or sorority was throwing a party, and by eleven, we had resigned ourselves to the fact that our night would consist of little more than this.

Familiar faces, however, began to appear in increasing numbers. Within half an hour, a crowd of nearly a dozen had accumulated on the porch—most were freshman, all were looking for something to do. At first, they inquired as to what we were doing, then inevitably joined us when we didn't answer. So it was like this, a group of young men filling up a porch and even spilling onto the evening sidewalk, when the jeep showed up and changed everything.

All night cars had streaked by, some beeping at scattered, restless students shuffling up and down the street, but generally coming and going without much notice. The jeep, unfortunately was different. It had hummed by without notice, then came to a screeching halt and backed up slightly.

Its top was down, a testament to the unseasonably warm October night, and thus, the driver only had to stand on his seat to yell at us.

"Who's got a problem?" he yelled, with arms defiantly outspread. Our conversations halted, our chatter waned into uneasy silence. Perplexed and off guard, we offered no answer to the man. He stood for several moments, his car idling rhythmically underfoot.

"Who whistled?" he shouted, and then intent upon an answer added, "Was it you?" He pointed directly at a freshman on the

steps. Several in the crowd sauntered forward, aware that we had numbers in our favor. Feeding off of their bravado, the freshman stepped to the front and spoke. He hadn't whistled at anybody, but now, since the guy was asking, he had.

"Yeah, maybe I did. What's up?" He tapped his chest with both hands and then spread his arms in the exact manner of his challenger. An Asian man, short and stocky like his buddy, stepped out from the passenger seat and added similar provocations. The two from the jeep and about six from the porch approached each other slowly, talking and motioning hands with increasing fervor.

"In my town, they let us do it one-on-one," said the driver trying to even the score a bit without losing face. As he neared, a street light overhead advertised his greased, curly hair and thick Italian features. We stood up from our chairs in unison, and leaned against the banister just in case. If things went according to standard code in this situation, if reason were still at all intact here, then we knew the two men would recognize their disadvantage and back off without turning spoken threat into physical action.

We were right, somewhat. They followed standard code indeed and left, but we would find later, when it was too late, that reason had not played a part in their decision at all.

60 "You have no idea who I am," the driver was swearing as he drove off. He told us he'd be back, but we had already won, proving that we were capable of grossly outnumbering a small enough group of foes and rubbing it in their faces. A regular bunch of Golden Gloves champions when odds were stacked in our favor. I stood at the banister for a minute, debating between concern and amusement. My friend Jay stood beside me. Cynical through and through, he looked thoroughly unimpressed.

"You think they'll come back?" I asked.

"Not unless that chinaman's a Ninja," he shrugged and sat down.

"Oh, man, that's wrong." I suppressed a smirk.

"I know, I'm kidding, Ry. Relax." We were the most imposing of anyone on the porch, each close to six-five, ex-basketball players, yet were not excited even a little bit by what had just happened.

The porch crowd, on the other hand, was already reminiscing and embellishing the encounter as if it had taken place years ago. They recounted the time they had nearly kicked two guys' asses just for being there. I sat down again, and turned my attention to Main Street, chuckling.

"In my town they let us do it one-on-one," I repeated with a laugh to Jay. "Are you kidding me?"

"I know, like that dude doesn't live up the street. Hey, pal," he said as if speaking to the Italian man, "In my town they let us kill jackasses and then take their wives as trophies." I stared at him with exaggerated disgust.

"Sorry . . . oh, c'mon, Ryan, that guy was a jackass."

Without response, I tuned into the conversation on the porch, which had made a seamless transition from the recent, near ass-kicking to past encounters involving similar heroism. The jeep incident all but forgotten, the crowd conducted an informal round-table discussion about the benefits of punching someone in the gut as opposed to the face. Jay and I laughed to ourselves and resumed people-watching.

Another twenty or so minutes passed, and for lack of anything better to do, I became thirsty. I told Jay to save my seat while I went inside.

I opened the fridge in my room to find a new, unopened case of my roommate's iced tea. I ripped open the plastic, struggled with conscience for a moment, and finally took one. I walked back outside, and almost in perfect sync with the sound of the door slamming behind me came the scream of braking tires. This was the second time now.

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The jeep halted in the middle of the road, just opposite the porch, and the driver stood up again.

"You better call every motherfucker you know, 'cause we're going to the bar and getting thirty guys," he yelled almost maniacally. "You guys are fucking dead!" The veins in his neck and temples were visible from across the street, and he spat as he spoke. After allowing a moment for his words to be received, he sped off, still half-standing, glaring back at us. The Asian man stared too.

I rested the iced tea on the banister, and joined in the overwhelmed silence. We stood still, only moving heads to look at each other. We searched eyes, expecting someone's to reveal that they knew this was bullshit. Finding no comfort there, someone finally spoke.

"Yo, we should call somebody," said the freshman who had whistled (but hadn't). "Just in case, you know?" This seemed reasonable to me. The sight of security or police would certainly deter these guys if they came back.

"Yeah," said another. "I'll call 600 Main, there's a bunch of big dudes there."

"Or McIlhenny and his boys, they'll fight," chimed a third. Soon everyone was offering suggestions. They were calling to plan, not prevent, a rumble, and I couldn't seem to find an appropriate reaction.

Some had already gone inside, made calls, and returned by the time I finally spoke. I only repeated myself, initiating a conversation I already had.

"You think they'll come back?" I asked Jay again, more seriously this time.

"If they do, I hope that guy doesn't spit all over the street again. We have to live here, man. Jesus." Little comfort there. I had asked quietly, but others heard and answered as well.

"Man, they better not come back. We'll have the whole school here in a minute."

"Fuck that, dude. I hope they do. It's on, man, it's on."

"I want that Asian motherfucker. Bruce Lee's gonna come here and talk shit to me? Please. He should know better." The uncertainty of a moment ago was gone, replaced (or at least covered up) by bluster and bravado. The small mob quickly talked and gesticulated into frenzy.

I looked around the porch at ten or twelve raging people, none taller than my shoulders save Jay. Surely some of them had been in fights before, and despite size, I supposed some were fairly tough. Still, they looked oddly out of place to me. As if staged, not authentic. This was mere pomp, not courage; pageantry, not conviction. The man in the jeep, that was conviction.

I went inside and Jay followed. Many in the house, friends, fraternity brothers had been informed and were already sharing in the frenzy. Radios on the first floor blasted riotous music, there was talk of filling socks with quarters to use as weapons. The charade seemed just as vivid and odd, same as the porch. I pulled Jay into the nearest room. It was empty, everyone was in the hall.

Thoughts were flashing quickly and I gaped for a moment. Finally, I captured one, and directed it towards my mouth.

"Jay, if these dudes come back . . ." I looked at him, again unable to decide upon an emotion. "If they come back, we're done. You realize that, I hope." Concern it is.

"What? Why? What are those dudes gonna do?"

"Jay, we have a porch full of midgets. They're tweedles. They'll get killed."

"Tweedles, Ry?" I managed a half-smile. It was one of my

words from home. Jay continued, "They're not getting any thirty dudes, calm down. We have a house full of people, what's gonna happen? Now, let's go fill some socks with quarters and relax." He waited for the evil eye, and then added, "Kidding. I'm kidding."

"If they come back and something happens," I thought for a moment then continued, "I'm not going out there." I had faith that Jay would think me sensible, not a coward.

"You're a coward." A crowd of people burst into the room, and so I was left to wonder if Jay was kidding or not.

"What the hell are you two doing? Get ready," one of our friends said. I ignored him, looked at Jay for a moment longer, and slid through the people out into the hall.

Nearly fifteen minutes had passed since the second encounter, and I was no longer able to find reprieve in doubting whether or not they would return. I walked to the front door and peered out onto the porch. As expected, there was a small assembly of people, mostly the same as before with only a few new faces. Either help hadn't arrived yet or it wasn't coming. Nerves were evident.

"You think they'll show?" someone asked, the first time someone other than myself had wondered. No one answered. They were too busy trying to sustain the fire they had felt minutes ago. I pulled my head back inside, where stereos were still blaring obnoxiously. The energy inside hadn't dwindled.

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Trying to keep occupied, I walked towards my own room, first one on the left. It was empty, stereo off, which pleased me, and I walked into the hall just as the call came. The front door swung open for a moment.

"They're here!" And the door slammed. The warning sparked horrible confusion.

"What?" yelled nearly everybody, clamoring to turn stereos down or off. Everyone came into the hall, and someone, possibly me, yelled again, "They're here!" Without words, the hallway filed out in a shuffle of footsteps. "Shit," I said to myself and followed.

When we stepped onto the porch, we caught the tail-end of a five or six car procession turn a corner and park in a lot just across the street. Doors opened and shut quickly, and a small army spilled out, momentarily taking count and heading towards us. There seemed to be about twenty of them. Including myself and Jay, the porch was about fifteen strong. We formed a ragged line and waited.

The approaching mob moved swiftly across the street with the Italian man at the head of the pack. He said nothing, but his

entourage was yelling, every one of them, making for an incoherent, intimidating battle cry. Some on the porch started to yell back, preparing themselves for the verbal prelude—the preliminary trash-talking and chest-thumping. It never came.

The Italian man stormed onto the sidewalk and then, without hesitation, onto the porch and pushed two in our line of defense abruptly and violently. They were sent reeling, one into a chair, one into the stucco wall. The line broke immediately.

“Who’s got the problem?” he yelled as he pushed and swung at another. Stunned and strangely unable to move, I surveyed the crowd, all yelling, but none advancing except him. I spent only a moment, but it was sufficient time to recognize that they were big and grown. They were men, and suddenly I realized we weren’t. The Italian man swung once more, finally connecting, although barely, and turned a freshman’s face flushed and rosy. I wasn’t the first to retreat inside.

I made my way in untouched. Shouts and yells mounted outside, getting louder and closer, and soon there was banging at the door. I stood, along with eight or so other students, just inside the trembling doorway, each of us urging the others to be fucking men and go outside, but none of us mustering movement from our own bodies. Gridlocked, we only stood and shouted at one another over the crunching of boot and fist against door and the yelling from outside. I backed into the hallway speechlessly.

Then, the muffled chants from outside suddenly swelled into a bursting roar as the door opened and a student, badly bloodied stumbled in. It slammed shut quickly, and the yells of those inside and the banging dominated again. Then, moments later, another roar, another injured, then the slam.

There was only one more bellow of cheer. The door opened one final time and dispensed a hunched and beaten figure. It was Jay, head down, hands over face. Without uncovering himself, he made his way by, down the hall to the bathroom. Blood trickled through his fingers and dropped to the floor, marking his path as he passed. Words crept to the edge of my tongue and dissolved. The clamor from outside faded abruptly, and silence ensued. I felt detached and sick.

We all made our way to the bathroom where the wounded were nursing themselves, and looked, ashamed, at the three who had taken the brunt of the attack. The first, a senior who lived next door, had blood streaming from a thick gash above his left eye. The flow was profuse, and the entire side of his face was brightly stained, the

white of his eye turned red. The second, a freshman, had a similar gash on his forehead, just between the eyebrows. Blood trickled down the sides of his nose and met on his upper lip, staining his teeth when he opened his mouth. I didn't recognize either of them, and wondered how they had come to be involved.

And the third, a senior, a fraternity brother, and worst of all, one of my best friends was still covering his face, occasionally dropping one hand into a sink to scoop water onto his wounds. I couldn't even tell where his cuts were. Words continued to melt in futility. I patted his back once or twice, and then slipped out of the bathroom. I felt nauseous.

As I left, two security guards came striding in. Before asking questions or taking names, they caught sight of the injured and immediately called a hospital. Moments later, a police officer who had already scribbled in his notepad entered and began conversing with security. I went outside.

The porch was nearly empty as most had gone in to take stock of the damage. The mob, still excited, whooped and hollered as they crossed the street and headed back to the parking lot. There was another police officer outside, leaning on the front banister speaking with the Italian man, and without moving closer, I listened in. They exchanged breezy banter, chuckling and nudging each other while the rest of the men piled back into their cars. I stood dumbfounded, not sure why the man who must surely still have blood caked to his knuckles wasn't being arrested or at least questioned.

And then, in a final, almost overwhelming stroke of absurdity, I overheard the officer laugh and say, "Yeah, these two houses have been giving us problems all year." The two men exchanged pleasantries and the officer sent the fighter on his way.

A security guard stepped out just in time for the good-byes, and his eyes followed the Italian man closely as he strode away, back to his jeep. Engines groaned, and the procession peeled out of the lot. The guard ran to the edge of the sidewalk as the motorcade passed and yelled, "Hey! Lights! Turn on your lights!" Then shaking his head, clearly disgusted by their carelessness, he stalked back inside.

I slumped into a chair, the same one as before. The ambulances arrived along with a couple of state troopers and the officer showed them inside. I sat on the porch alone and looked out over the street which was now, thankfully, deserted.

Discussion from inside drifted out to me in bits and pieces, the only sounds except for the buzz of a flickering street light over-

head, and the occasional passing of a car. When the numbness had fully subsided, and all the nerve endings in my brain stretched out and began to function again, thoughts stopped racing incoherently. Instead, they pounded my head slowly, individually with painstaking vividness, forcing me to process and work over each.

Snapshots of the three bloody faces, especially Jay's, flashed in perfect detail, and didn't leave until pangs of guilt pushed them out. I hadn't even said anything to him yet.

Still, an equally exhausting and angering thought came and it didn't include any graphic images, it came alone. I had been right all along. I had known from the very beginning what would happen, and as a result, couldn't figure out what I was meant to learn from it all. It would have been easier to stomach, more manageable if there had been some great moral. This was a selfish thought, and I felt even worse for pondering it.

I sat for a great deal longer, dwelling. I rested my head in my hands, which helped, and I closed my eyes to fully revel in the moment of clarity. As expected, it passed quickly, and thoughts crept in and consumed the space where rejuvenating darkness had just been. I opened my eyes again and lifted my head. There, resting on its side on the pavement directly in front of me was my unopened iced tea.

I reached under the banister with lanky arm and pulled it in. At this moment, even the slightest luxury meant a much-needed respite, so I had a lot riding on this little can. Luckily, it was only slightly dented, still in working order. It cracked open with a pleasant spritz, and I sat back to enjoy the second, maybe the last, moment of clear-headedness of the evening.

Naked

Jennifer Herbst

Blood. Blood is such an interesting thing. A corona of red surrounds a head wound, leaking life. Blood rushes to my head in euphoria—nausea or drains away in shock—fear so I faint dead away. The loss of virginity is a red smear on the sheet. Red as the blood rose, red as the angry eyes. Fire. Flesh burns to the bone. Blood oozes out and sizzles on fried skin.

"I would die for sheets on the line. I love how crispy they are," Shannon says in her pseudo-husky voice. She takes a long drag from a Marlboro. A cigarette has its own personality between her fingers.

Cory nods in agreement. "Ditto. But my dog always pulls them down, dammit."

They sit on the flagstone patio, perching on campus-issue desk chairs masquerading as relaxation tools. The sliding glass door to Cory's room flashes their ghosts when they exhale nicotine clouds. I just lay on the grass and let it prick my back through my T-shirt. "You know, I don't think I would die for them. Maybe contract some horrible incurable disease for three days and then suddenly be cured. Yeah, that would be cool. I could deal with that for sheets from the wash line." A squirrel leaps from a tree branch to the awning above them, slip—sliding—scrambling on stray acorns and almost falls. "What if scrambled squirrel brains look like Jell-O? Do you think anyone would eat them?"

They just stare. "Yep, she's back," says Cory. "I forgot how scary you were, Joy."

"Well, you know I try." I ponder the shape of a cloud. It looks like a fish. It morphs into Satan. I look away. "Naked is a state of mind."

"What?" Shannon tries to rattle her ears clean with a toss roll—shake of her hair. It looks like she is having an epileptic fit in her Nike sweatshirt and then finds the restraint to hold it back. "Did you hear her, Cory? I swear, she never lets us prepare for the shit she says."

"Naked is a state of mind. It's a lyric."

Cory's blond curls bounce on her shoulders and the words steam roll from her mouth. "Oh. My. God. Here we go with the song lyrics. What's next, some bitter Live song?"

"What about Bon Jovi, Cory?" She has every lyric of theirs

stored in her head. I have the ones from every other song.

Cory bounces back and forth, head cocked, imitating the rhythm of the words. "You give love a bad name. Ha." Parliament Light ashes dance around her, then leap through the air to stick to me like someone forgot to add the dryer sheet.

"Stop trying to make me laugh. It's not going to work." I want to shove him against a wall, hear his skull shatter, and watch his brain ooze down to his Timberland boots. I see a splash of blood and chunks of diencephalon parietal bone scalp in stone relief. I want it to look like the wave of blood in "The Shining."

Tracey swings around the corner of the house. "Hey, sexy knickers! How's it goin'?" She swings her keys around her finger and almost drops them as usual. The snaps of her Trident sound like rifle shots two miles away. "Can I just say that men can suck my ass? Especially professors. Dr. Vincent can take his organic class and shove it."

"That's pretty much the consensus," Shannon says around another smoky blue web. This time, her cigarette is posing between her fingers like an aristocrat shopping for polished rocks. "So, what's with that lyric, anyway, Joy?"

"It's from that Luscious Jackson song. You like, lay the line down for someone and clear the air. They know where you're coming from, you know where you're coming from, and your mind gets naked of a bunch of crap." My brain swells inside its bony enclosure. Everything fogs bleeds explodes.

"Am I missing something?" Tracey's mouth curves in an uncertain smile and a laugh throws itself through her teeth. She still stands at the edge of the flagstone like she's going to fail off the face of the earth, tugging at the Princeton T-shirt she always wears.

"Take three guesses, and the first two are WRONG," Cory says. "I think she should go for the knock-down-drag-out scene. He needs a swift kick in the jewels. Literally." Cory prosaically ashes her Parliament Light with a swipe of her hand. It looks like an abbreviated karate chop, staring at her armpit and swinging across her body like you would swat a fly.

Shannon crosses her legs with a scrape of nylon warm-up pants and leans forward to dig in to my life. "Sometimes it's just better to walk away and save your dignity. The cold shoulder has an awesome effect, you know?" Her cigarette pauses at her knee. The stuffed tobacco now shoulders the starving super model look. "Or we could just kill him."

Tracey sighs, plops into an empty chair, and tries not to fall

off. Her eyes shoot a devious look in sync with a twenty-gun salute of Trident. "She should throw him against the wall, do him, and then just walk away. Make *him* beg. Yeah."

"You know, guys, I am still here." The heat from my cigarette burns my lips. I am at the filter. Damn.

With a quick inhale, Cory explodes. "Shut up. You are not part of this conversation. Just listen."

"Cory, I'm going to do what I want."

"You don't even know, do you?"

"No, but I'll figure something out." I was supposed to have gone home last weekend. I missed the bus. We ended up at a party. I saw him across the beer-sodden basement of Gamma Nu whispering smiling caressing someone else's eyes. I needed a shot. Of anything.

The damp of the ground finds its way through the shield of my skin. I feel like drowning. Maybe I will become a fish so some guy with a hairy butt crack can hook filet eat my flesh. I wouldn't have to feel anymore.

I slouch into a chair as Anna shuffles through the glass door and pitches her fifty pound backpack on the patio. "I hate Nazis. This class is going to send me to an early grave. And before anyone asks, I don't have an opinion. Joy, you know what you have to do."

"What if I want to know what you think?"

"I'm not going to tell you. Who wants to smoke with me?" Her voice was music.

We scramble for our packs, eager to kill a few more cells. I pry a beautifully white cigarette from a fresh pack, checking my pack job. Not bad. I fumble with my lighter. Damn child-proof mechanisms. They piss me off. The tip flares red. The first inhale is always the best. The smoke strokes every air sac, coating them with tar and robbing them of their right to keep me alive. I close my eyes and exhale. I wonder how angry I can get when the hurt fades.

Anna tucks a wayward piece of hair behind her ear to signal her intention to speak. "So, whose up for Pizza Hut tonight? I am starved, and I need to get off this campus." She takes a loud drag, Denis Leary style.

I don't want to be distended with grease. "Count me out. I'm strapped for cash."

"You are not going to sulk," said Cory. "Sulking. Is. Bad. I can spot you." Imaginary punctuation is obliterated in the face of her Parliament Light karate chop.

We pile into Cory's car and wail our version of "You Oughta

Know" with the radio. The Hut is the usual stomach-wrenching experience. There's a thing called too much cheese, but you can never convince Cory of that. I sit and nibble on my single piece of grease, sipping Dr. Pepper. Someone plays Tracy Chapman's "The Promise" on the jukebox. I need to go outside and have another Marlboro. I played that song for him when he said he loved me and we had to say good-bye for the first time. His hair was always plastered to his head, crushed beneath his Penn State baseball cap. If I didn't dance beneath the brim to land a kiss, I was a prime candidate for a forehead bruise.

It is dark and the empty house offers more consolation than a good rock concert. Thoughts glow in my brain like insects frozen in amber. I decide what I am going to do.

"Hey, Anna, is there any beer left from last weekend?"

"Yeah. In my fridge. You're going to do it, aren't you?"

I half-smile. I am trying to describe what I feel to myself. His emotions are twisted. I need to know if they used to be straight. Every rose I have is wilted, but the thorns are still deadly.

"Do you want to talk?"

"Nah. I'm exhausted." I only want to sleep, relieve my eyes brain nose heart from crying too much. My nose itches from left over Kleenex residue. I don't feel like scratching it. I am going to go to his room. I need to be naked.

70 Cory plops into a plastic patio chair across from me. "Are you going to be okay? This whole thing really bites. I know how you feel about him."

I nod, waving my hand in dismissal. "I just need to be alone." He tried to bullshit me with the whole "distance got too much for me" deal. It was only three months of summer. Try something else. Why even bother giving it all to someone if it's going to be returned, tags and receipt included? I feel worn ripped returned like a K-mart sweatshirt. I am a fool for a smile and Eternity cologne.

The light in the hallway is forgetting how to work. My knuckles hurt when I knock on the door and a Nascar engine revving up for the Daytona 500 takes over my stomach. Maybe I can get through this before . . . the door swings open.

"What's going on, Joy? I missed you at dinner tonight." He sounds like nothing had happened, like he hasn't broken my rib cage to pry out my heart and shove it in my face. He leans forward to give me a kiss. His Penn State hat glances off my temple because I don't feel like dancing. His bewildered eyes almost make me laugh. "I take it home was a bad time?"

"I didn't go. I missed the bus. We need to talk, Steve. I saw you Saturday night." The color washes from his face. His mouth opens and closes, looking like a goldfish that someone dropped on the floor while they were cleaning its tank.

"What am I supposed to say?"

"What do you think? The truth, Steve. Or don't you have the balls for it? Saying your feelings changed isn't going to work anymore."

"Look, you told me to be honest . . ."

"And you weren't." I am slamming his head against the wall, just waiting for the skull to crack. I want to see taste feel the blood pour. Mine has poured long enough, and I am anemic. "I'm not stupid."

"I never said you were. But it's not what you think."

"Of course. It's never the way we think it is, no matter how close to the truth we guess. Who is she? Were you seeing her this summer? Is she the reason for this sudden change of feeling?" The bone starts to crumble. My fingers slip, but I hold his scalp with white knuckles. I want everything to ooze and get sticky viscous stiff in his hair.

His denial dies in a grunt. "No. I wanted to end it with you first."

"Thanks for the consideration. You couldn't even tell me. You fucked me with the intent of breaking up, right? No, let me guess. You weren't really sure yet?" Shattered pieces of his skull hit my face. His brain makes slap-suck noises as it hits the wall and fragments are starting to dribble down his flannel shirt.

"Don't do this. I was going to tell you. I don't know when. This isn't easy for me, either."

"Don't even try. I thought we were solid. I guess I've been an ass. And don't even say 'It's not you, it's me.' It's the lamest excuse you could use." Blood masks his face and runs down my hands wrists elbows and tickles my armpits under my T-shirt. I can't stop pounding.

"What do you want me to say, Joy? That I'm an asshole? I couldn't help what happened."

"I can't help you think with a third leg. D'you think Jerry Springer would like that as a topic? We could be guests, and I would love to kick your ass with a microphone. On second thought, it's not worth my time." With a left face, I am out the door before he can answer. I double time down the hall, refusing to trip over his shouts.

Fuck him. My arms are finally tired. Pieces of his brain skull hair
cling better than spitballs to the stone wall. Some crawl down to the
sidewalk.

I wander into something that could have been a forest. The
air here suffocates, but I need to kill more cells. I light a cigarette,
savor the first drag, and strip to nothing. The rocks bite my skin when
I lay down. And I start to think.

Blood. Blood is such an interesting thing. My burned flesh
has stopped leaking. All my roses are dead. I am naked.

Ano

Kate Pinches

Sweet dreams blessed by Magandang Gabi—
Godmother titas guarding their angels in frailty.

Little girls with fragrant sampagitas decorating black silk hair—
too short to bun with chopsticks to leave necks bare—

Like Lolas can—
feet of graying satin twisted off the necks, sticky and tan.

Cobras for neighbors when eating hopia and ensaymada outside,
hiding from pet monkeys, choreographed slithering, so sly.

Maligayang Pasko welcomes the Messiah as we pray for direction,
while rubbing Budda's belly for protection.

Home is not U.S. soil, but the islands in the Pacific,
And we blend our languages until our sentences echo Tagolic.

Unoriginal Premonition: The Series

Lyndsay Petersen

He is speaking to the chairs
from a swinging microphone.
The cord extends into the rafters.
The cardboard risers are far below
and his charcoal pinstripes dangle.
He thinks no one is under him
but he's going to keep a grip.

There are plenty of things
that he doesn't want to see.
He can hear rustling and sees
a shadow moving slowly among
the chairs with a broom.
It is moving methodically
in slow pushes and sighs.
There are questions.

74

The man cannot reach
his speech that he had prepared,
but knows what he would say.

This goes to you, I never knew
how you felt about life
and now I'm looking for
a second opinion.

He takes a deep breath,
following his exercises
and reclinches with wet
cold and slippery hands.

This is for you and I never
cared and I've changed my mind

about a lot of things so I added
you to my list of Change.
Did you like the way you thought
or was it more troublesome
than not and do you have
the patience that your mother
warned you about and did
death mean what it does now.

He is slipping as he remembers
twisting bodies of animals
just hit dying but still asking.
He blinks their reply and blinks
to forget but never heard them.

He used to read in the cemetery that was down the street
or bring superballs to bounce off the odd-shaped graves.

He can remember summer
but not spring, winter but
not fall and his memories
never have any sounds.

He wants to tell of his
childhood and something
very important he began
to know a month ago.

He was in the corner of the couch
watching the shows repeat on television.
She had hidden in the closet
for days without a noise
and would twirl through
the kitchen creaking with toes
pointed and sticky feet on linoleum.

He looks at his watch
and checks it with the clock
on the wall but they will
not equal for awhile today.

He hears a match below him.
His glance finds heat and sulphur
a flow of dark wax bubbling
slipping up from between black
and yellow upturned teeth
that are grimaced and grinding
in a low chuckling that shakes
the arm still holding the broom.

The small man opens his mouth
like a striking snake and bathes
the dangling form in hissing
light that makes the shadows
writhe and crawl in their grey.

76

She is sitting in the third row
in her late shadows from home.

The show is on as she stares
at the grey acrobat and digs
into the rustling paper bag
for the fruit she licks her lips
for the soft brown apple
the limp gassy grapes
that will pop against her throat
and crunch in her teeth
leaving bitter chewed seeds
to spit back into the bag.

Her head seems loose
on the socket of her body
and muscles jerk to right
the fallen thoughts up
to focus on her hands tightly
folded and waiting to keep
from throwing the chairs.
The hands are white and taut.

Her skin is warm inactive
but her jaw chews and chews
the bitter seeds to a paste
that coats her mouth
in coughing layered thin shards.

She shoves another handful
of dripping grapes inside.

She is wearing a thin chain
of choking gold that holds her
and digs into her neck
with the charm sticking out
awkwardly askew a cross.

It bobs with her breath
as she pulses in her chair
faintly moving against the will.

Her feet are bare and clean
with a soft pink glowing
that tears into a shudder
as hot black liquid hits first
at her ankles to the creases
of her toes in puddles
of cooling wax on burned
skin that refuses to feel.

She doesn't listen to the match
that breathes through sour
lungs and can not see
the tangled greys and blacks
on the walls and ceiling.

Her memories were of screams
but she didn't know who
they were or how to stop them.

The loose head falls back
snapping the chain letting
the gold slip into her collar.

She opens her eyes and sees
the tree that screams.
It is not who but what.
Her eyes grow full at it
and the apples that dangle.

78

She hears scrambling
and the trunk begins to decay
when she recognizes the acrobat.
He is yelling questions at her.

The bark is peeling off in strips
and the apples are spotted
with overripe answers she never
could give never would give.

She claws at a branch to climb
to the screaming of memories
from the dropping of wet apples
slick and sticky on the ground.

A girl turned off the music
and turned from the hung-man
and climbing woman that flickered
on the television to her game.

The subtitles would run across
the bottom of the screen
unread and blinking offbeat.

She eased her little body
onto the floor and stretched
like a cat a denial of time.

The whine of the screen was the sound of life.

She was silent and surrounded
by windows that held nothing
but the still corpse of a tree
and a windless shiny black night.

She held three carved figures
with one red and two dark.
She sat and nibbled at a nail.

She touched the pieces
and let them fall into order
on the grooved wood circle
with the evil in the front.

She tried to rip them up and failed.
Pieces of scraped black wood
had darkened under her nails
bringing blood and pressure white.

She threw her dark hair
over her face and crushed
her eyes with her palms.
With eyes still closed she reached
and felt nothing but the whine.

Then she felt the microphone
slipping and the rotten breath
coughed on her stained hands.

She couldn't hear if there were answers for the yelling of questions
denied it.

The scene was ending deep
within the screen with quick
actions stopped and words
cut from the talking tongues.

80

She followed the evil and woman
and man with her finger
tracing through the static dust
and left a shaky trail.

She want to her closet to lay
on the floor in a ball on shoes
and clothes and stuff misplaced.
She would heap them over
and quiver in the pile below.

The whine of life wasn't stopped
by the door or the heaping layers.
She crushed her ears with her palms
and began to hummm.

The closet door creaked slowly
opening to the room where shadows

jerked on the walls and new light
ballooned from the candle on the floor.
She inhaled and exhaled again
shuddering the flame still alive.

Sometimes

Paul Guidry



My Muse

Jessica Demers

1

the basement flooded ran down wet stairs
with dolly to save you from drowning and
fell screaming for
my dolly couldn't swim. while you slept on
the couch and floating snored a pool of rain

2

you were the hand that dialed a woman
met at a bar last night when mommy saw
and cried because she tried all the bars
in town and why can't you be a
regular anywhere

3

forgot to visit each apartment
and house revengefor spelling my name with
a G on checks made out for twenty-five
when you remembered me and cigarettes

83

4

you were the hand demanding mine before
we crossed a street when I was seventeen
and you were dying for the blue comfort(er)
you shared with mommy when you lived at home

5

I'm home for winter break and when it snows
I drive to your place with a shovel or
forget and use the scraper under the
front seat to search for your bronze marker and
I always clear one, two, three other plaques
because I can't remember where you are

I've Been Slimed!

Lou Nemphos

Certain moments in your life define and create you. Events early on in life formulate your personality, your fears, and your desires. Now, if you know me, you would think that I'm a bonafide ladies' man, but in reality we mix like oil and water. It's not like I'm the elephant man, but I am so afraid of rejection that I don't even try. A wise man once said that if you don't step to the plate you can't get a hit. I'm the guy that's stuck in the dugout. I contribute most of my fears to one particular incident that seemed so insignificant at the time, but now has me contemplating therapy.

It was a brisk November afternoon, the first Friday of the month. I remember this because on the first Friday of every month we had the routine fire drill. I was sitting in Social Studies class cramming for the upcoming test on American Indians. I hadn't studied for the test, so I began to pray to God for a miracle. The teacher, Mrs. Bonza, began passing out the horrible, fuzzy, yellow paper that would rip any time you'd erase, when the fire bell rang. For once, God had answered my prayers as we lined up in a single file and headed towards the football field.

84

I was standing on the field with my friends, Brian and Andy, as we talked about how badly we were going to do on the exam. We were hoping the school was actually on fire. Then we would be exempt from the test, and we would receive an unexpected vacation. Mrs. Bonza was counting heads and calling role as I surveyed the field for some familiar faces. I said, "What's up?" to my friend Amir, when my eyes focused on her. Not just anyone, but Abby Coleman, the girl of my dreams.

For two years I had pined over this girl, secretly fantasizing about going out with her. I constantly wrote "Abby Nemphos" and "I love Abby" all over my binder, and then scribbled it out before anyone would see it. I used to have this one fantasy where she would slip on ice and I would be there to help her up. As she took my mittened hand, she would pull me down and we would neck in the powdery snow. Hey, I was in seventh grade. She had long golden blonde hair, swimming pool blue eyes, and legs that went all the way up. She used to wear tight, fuzzy, cashmere sweaters that emphasized her—well—you get the point. The problem that kept us apart came in the form of a 6'3", 230 pound boyfriend named Mark Fittro. Not to mention, she was the captain of the cheerleading team, in eighth grade, and had no

idea I existed. She glanced over in my direction and my knees began to tremble. My stomach became tied in knots, and I almost threw up, but I wasn't the one that blew chunks a few moments later.

We had been outside for a good five minutes, which got us to believe that the school was in flames. Repeatedly, smart-ass kids would yell, "I smell smoke," as we all looked to where they pointed. I had been staring at Abby for what seemed like forever, when Andy nudged me and said, "You're drooling."

"Shut up!" I hissed, hoping he wouldn't realize the obvious. Andy gave me a sly grin and the tax sign. The tax sign is where you put your middle, ring, and pinky fingers together and you make a circle with your thumb and index finger. You point it at the person while making a "ssssssss" sound. It's secret code for either they know you're interested, or they know you're hooking up. I broke my gaze to look over at Brian who hadn't said anything for a record five minutes. His pale face was covered with sweat as he tried to breathe in the crisp autumn air. He looked at me and mumbled something.

"What?!" I said. "You're talking like you have marbles in your mouth."

Brian wearily peeped, "I said, I don't feel so good." He was done talking because his mouth was filled with chunky vomit. It splashed all over the football field and the adjacent track. Barely digested peas, mashed potatoes, and chicken nuggets made an entire school scatter. It's very important to interject that I suffer from contact puke. That means when someone pukes, I'm usually next. I turned my head and proceeded to go in the opposite direction when I ran into what seemed like a brick wall, Mrs. Bonza.

"STAY IN LINE!!!" she hollered as she grabbed me and kept me in line. I stammered, "But he just puked! I feel sick!" My pleading fell on deaf ears as she helped Brian to the nurse's office. Now the entire school including my goddess Abby was trying to sneak a peek at what Brian ate for lunch.

I stood an arm's length away from the most disgusting thing I'd ever laid eyes on when I felt myself being pushed closer to it. I looked over in disbelief at my friend Andy who was guilty of giving me a playful, little shove.

"Quit it, asshole," I barked, but he pushed me again.

"Stop it, dickhead. This isn't funny," I screamed, worried that I might embarrass myself by stepping in it. My stomach began to rumble and I became extremely queasy as I could not take my eyes off the gobs of mushy puke. Suddenly, I became overwhelmed with

fear, as I had to choke down the vomit brewing in my own stomach. Andy just looked at me and laughed, and pushed me again. This time I came real close to ruining my black Converse Chuck Taylor's so I gave him a push back. Pushing Andy is like pushing a Buick Le Sabre up a hill with one hand, so needless to say, he did not move very far. The theory that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction came into play as I lost my balance. He saw my equilibrium was off, gave me one strong shove, and the rest is history.

I got spun around and slid head first into the mound of tossed cookies. I was like Charley Hustle, Pete Rose, sliding head first into home plate. Luckily, my head missed the regurgitation, but the rest of my body was not so fortunate. My favorite Minnesota Vikings sweatshirt and my brand new \$18 denim jeans that I just got from J.C. Penney were soaked in spew.

I quickly choked back the tears of embarrassment, as I slowly rose to my feet to confront Andy. I glared at him as he stood laughing in hysterics. The rest of the school accompanied Andy by chuckling as chaos had broken out on the football field. I was at a loss for words. All I wanted to do was kick the living crap out of him. I got in my fighting stance, knowing that the year of karate I took in third grade was finally going to pay off. I felt like Daniel-san in *The Karate Kid* as I was ready to go medieval on his ass.

86

My expert fighting style went out the window as I hollered, and charged, pouncing on the unaware Andy. My attack surprised him, but he had enough skill to brush me off like some flaky dandruff. Again, I tried to tackle him, and this time some vomit got on his shoes. He looked at me like as if to say, "What do you think you're doing?" I became tired and sat down on the ground, distraught and humiliated. Andy came over and apologized, but the damage had already been done. Mrs. Bonza hustled her wide frame over and took me inside. Everyone stared, as I walked into school. I glanced over at Abby; maybe she wasn't paying attention! When we locked eyes I saw she was laughing. I wanted to shrivel up and die.

Luckily, I had gym that day, so I changed into a pair of dirty red champion sweat pants and a wrinkled Ocean Pacific T-shirt after my shower in the boys' locker room. I threw away my stained clothes and I got the courage to go to my last class. As I attended pre-algebra, I was called an array of names such as "Pukeboy" and "Bob Uecker," which stuck with me throughout high school.

Incidentally, my fantasy about Abby came true about four years later. My friends and I were enjoying a snow day at my friend John's

house, when to my chagrin, Abby stopped by. She slipped on some ice, I seized the opportunity and sprang into action. I offered her my hand, but she looked at me quizzically saying, "No thanks Pukeboy." I still long for the day to push Andy in excrement, and if I ever have the chance to help Abby up again, I'm going to throw up on her.

Chance in Misery

Pat Vesay

Man, you should have seen those rednecks go at it, I've never seen anything like it before in my life. Three Army boys all sitting around on the bunks in the open bay just talking about growing up in the country, I mean the real country. Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma were represented; that's a one in three chance of winning the Ed McMahon sweepstakes right there. The three of them were right out of a bad stand-up act. All three of them spent time in jail, Claire and Bownes only being seventeen. They were in for all kinds of hill-billy shit, like gettin' into drunken bar fights and smearing cowshit all over the high school walls. Cowan actually was jailed for a night for siphoning gas out of a church bus because his truck ran out. The best of them all was Claire, who spent three nights in the slammer for, get this, discharging a firearm within city limits. He shot the neighbor's dog with a shotgun from his bedroom window. These guys were the real thing, arguing over chainsaws, the best hay-baling technique, trailer sizes, cattle, and hogs to name a few. Claire actually knows someone named Virgil, Cowan's grandmother makes moonshine, and Bownes claimed to go to high school with a kid who screwed a goat for \$100. That's what happens during down time, you talk, you all talk about everything, and that's what makes you close. Out here you need to be close to someone, something, anything. I was close to Slobig.

I guess we all joined for different reasons, some money, some opportunity, and some just for lack of anything better to do. Slobig said he needed a change, he was too comfortable with what I'd consider the perfect life—wife, child, good job, California beach front property. Without telling his wife, he just walked in to the local recruiter and signed up, just like that, idiot. I did it to fulfill a childhood dream, but also so I wouldn't regret never joining later in life. After I had my appointment to the Naval Academy and my ROTC scholarship taken away because they found out I was color blind, I thought I'd never have the chance to join. A few years later I got another chance, so I, like the many, took that chance to sign away my life and ended up in hell; some called it Fort Lost in the Woods, Misery; the destination ticket said Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, but it was hell nonetheless. A hell that was comprised of a mixture of rocks and swamps, mosquitoes the size of birds, poisonous snakes and spiders everywhere, and an emanating feeling of loneliness that broke the ties to the outside, shattering the spirits of everyone there. Hell is

where our devil lived, some got it worse than others, but everyone there got their own personal version. The only way to get through was to be close, and we were.

Slobig missed the rendition of the Dukes of Hazzard meets the Beverly Hillbillies because his wife had twins two nights before and he got a phone pass; so I filled him in as we walked to church, our only safe haven in this God-forsaken place. Slobig and I joke about what all the country boys talk about during the down time. We both think that the military employs half of Texas. He's pretty critical of their ignorances. I'm a little more open-minded about it. Either way it's something worth laughing about. You don't get much opportunity to laugh, so you learn to laugh at anything if the chance arises. The walk to church was always pretty lighthearted. Everyone knew they couldn't touch us in church. The drill sergeants weren't allowed in the church—we were safe for the next hour.

We went to church because it got us away from the pains we endured for the previous six days. It was air conditioned so the 100 degree day was removed for a while. It was relaxing and quiet. I couldn't hear the ringing of gunshots anymore. All the yelling was gone. For the first time that week, like the previous three, I no longer felt homesick. The priest reminded me of my own pastor back outside Philadelphia. Slobig agreed with me, the loneliness subsided for now. Every Sunday the format was the same. The priest would tell the same jokes, the same hymns were sung, but at the end of mass, Private Besario would get behind the piano and sing a song he wrote for all of us. He said when he sung it he felt like he was at home. The combination of a soft melody and the clear lyrics, "We need someone who cares," took everyone back to those who they cared for but were so far from, isolated from. It reminded me of my family and friends that never understood why I left. I didn't head from them much, but I missed them inside. It was a song that made people cry, but everyone who cried cried together. Everyone was in the same boat.

I asked Slobig what he thought about when Besario was playing. He always said the same thing, "Jennifer and my kids." I felt bad for him, he signed up in the delayed entry program eight months before he left. Soon after signing he found out Jennifer was pregnant with twins and would be due in late June. He wouldn't be there for the birth of his new children because he had gotten bored in San Diego. He had no choice though, he signed. Just by looking at him I knew he was thinking hard about his new family that was missing a

father. I said a few prayers for his new twins. God I wouldn't want to be in his shoes. Even though he skipped out of some responsibilities at home, he was still a decent guy.

As it did every week, the music came to an end, everyone sat in silence for a few minutes, saying a last few words to somebody hundreds of miles away, but yet so close for those three and half minutes that Private Besario gave us, and then gone again. It was time to go back to work, back to the hell we bestowed upon ourselves. Home was so far away.

"Now that you're all done talkin' to God, you'd better forget about 'em because he cannot help yer ass now."

Somebody must have really pissed Sergeant Miller, he never came to church to get us. Sunday was sort of our day, for three or four hours at least. He was really hot, and I could sense the pain that was coming just from the tone of his voice in the church parking lot. All I could hope for was nothing, when we got back it was on.

As we stood at attention, all 269 of us in Delta Company, Sergeant First Class Rodney P. Miller walked up and down the squad lines, all four squads in each of the four platoons. He would stop and whisper something in each person's ear, staring them down from the front in between threats or promises. SFC Miller walked through my squad, one by one stopping, until he came to me. He stopped, stared, breathing his weathered Gulf War death breath in my face. I was scared, really fucking scared. The more I got scared, the harder I tried not to move. The harder I tried not to move the more I shook. The more I shook, the more I got scared. He leaned over to me, my personal space was gone, he was practically inside my ear, breathing into my head. And then he whispered it to me, the words that in itself made me, and everyone else who heard them, cringe. The pain to come would be practically unbearable, and I knew it. Everybody knew it.

"Prive, you just ain't gonna learn." That was always what he said before pummeling us into the ground. My whole body went numb as I let out one last quiver.

"I'm just gonna hafta teach ya about lookin' after yer battle buddies. Class is in the pit, and I got a Ph.D. for pain."

Oh shit, somebody must have really fucked up. I'm talking slept with his wife, scratched his car, pissed in his boots, called him a nigger, that degree of fuck up. My life was about to take a serious turn for the worse. My life was in jeopardy as far as I was concerned. I had to talk to Slobig, he always found out what was going on.

“Class is in ten minutes! Better write your loved ones.” On my way down to the pit I searched the squads for Slobig, but could not see him. I guess it really didn’t matter at that point. If the drills decided to send us to the pit, something was already done by one of us and there was nothing we could do about it. We had to meet them in the pit.

No matter how many times we were sent there, there was no getting used to it. I still remember the first time I was sent. There were eight of us that got caught smuggling sugar packets from the chow hall. I let the group into this makeshift barn about the size of a four car garage. My boots sank up to mid ankle in the floor of dry dirt and wood chips. It was like wading through a sea of dirty saw dust. Just from us walking, the air became cloudy and thick, it tightened the chest with every breath. As the drills came in behind us they pulled the doors shut cutting off any light or fresh air. The loud clank of the lock being bolted shut struck a fear never imagined through my body. Eight of us in a row, standing at attention, facing the direction we thought was front. The only sounds were the drills walking around us, we couldn’t see anything it was so dark. Then the silence was shattered.

“Go!” shouted the drills. We started running in place with high knees. Instantly the air was one large dust cloud.

“Front!” We all dropped to the front leaning position and started doing push-ups as fast as we could.

“Back!” We flipped onto our backs and did straight-legged flutter kicks, our boots acting as weights.

“Go!” Back to our feet and stationary running. This continued for an eternity.

“Front!” “Back!” “Go!”

“Front!” “Back!” “Go!”

“Front!” “Back!” “Go!”

“Front!” “Back!” “Go!”

The faster the changes came, the more it hurt. The air was so thick, breathing was impossible. That feeling of being punched in the chest and losing your breath, then that gasping for air. It was that gasping that struck panic in me because all I could do was gasp. There was no air to breathe, just dust. I could feel the sweat pouring out of my body, but it just collected the dirty air onto my skin. I couldn’t breathe. No one could. I remember hearing someone, I think it was Slobig, trying to cough out the dirt from his lungs. But when he coughed

no air came out, just the sound of someone forcing out the last bit of breath possible, hoping to suffocate and go unconscious. That was the only way, that and death. Both were feasible ideas at the time. I was practically dead already. No air. No eyesight from the combination of burning sweat and coagulated dirt. My legs would fade between feelings of numbness, a burning that felt as if gasoline was poured onto my flesh and was left to eat its way through, and cramping that knotted up my legs so bad all I could do was lay there on the dirt floor. I could no longer hear the drills screaming at us. I didn't even try breathing. I just lay there, drenched in sweat and painful tears that mixed with the dusty air and turned into a makeshift cement that held me to the floor. All I could do was pray to God to just kill me, save me. I looked around and saw nothing. The air was too thin and it was too dark. I felt as if I was the only person in this place of death. Tears wouldn't help, my body was depleted of all liquid, and I was alone in my Golgatha. When the drills opened the doors and left, letting the first bit of light and air in, I looked around only to see the other seven the same as I. Broken and wishing for death. Our lives could be no worse at that time, at any time ever.

This time was to be worse though. Instead of eight, now there were 269 of us all packed into the enclosed dirty torture chamber. I didn't find Slobig before we got there, I hoped he'd be all right. I hoped I'd be all right. I knew however we both would not be all right. As the door shut I filled my lungs one final time. It would be a long time before I took another, minutes, maybe hours, hopefully never. Just as I prepared myself to be driven to deals with the devil, the door opened and a massive unfamiliar silhouette stood in the doorway. It spoke in a firm commanding voice.

"Private Slobig! Private Wolfe! Fall out to barracks and report to Sgt. Simmons."

This silhouette saved our lives. I quickly fell out and met Slobig at the door and we double timed it back to the barracks. We'd been given a second chance. Our lives could get no better. We went directly to Sgt. Simmons and reported as told. He faced us as we stood at attention.

"At ease. Private Slobig, Private Wolfe, the company commander would like to meet with you two in one hour. I don't know what this is about and you'd better hope to God I never find the fuck out. You have 'til 13:30. Shower and put on clean BDU's, and don't worry, you'll get a private pit session when you get back. Dismissed!"

We high tailed it to our latrine and jumped into the wide bay

shower. I asked Slobig what he thought about the situation. He just said, "Wolfe, I really don't give a shit what's happening, it can't be worse than what was about to happen to us." He was right, we were real lucky, for now. That private pit session still worried me, but that was something for later. Right now we were sitting pretty. Nice hot shower, freedom to talk plainly to each other, and a meeting with the top brass, Captain Martin. It was strange, in Misery the minutes would take days, but after one blink and two showers, my hour was up. I toweled off and slid into my fresh camos, going over the chain of command and my three Order of Duties in case I got quizzed, Slobig did the same. Then we left.

We time and a halfed it to Delta Company Headquarters so we didn't get smoked for being late. As soon as we walked in, the large silhouette from the pit could be seen through the translucent divider in Capt. Martain's office. I got a bad feeling in my stomach. I don't think this trip was a saving grace at all.

"Private Slobig and Private Wolfe, Captain's ready for you," the administration specialist said. I looked at Slobig and I think he had the same scared feeling, that doomed feeling. We walked into the office.

"Private Slobig and Private Wolfe reporting as ordered Sir."

"Stand at ease Privates. Privates this is Major Long, he flew in from San Diego to speak with you two." It was the man behind the silhouette, large but friendly looking. His graying hair and calm smile made me feel a little more comfortable.

"Private Slobig, Private Wolfe, I understand you two are battle buddies, correct?"

"Yes Sir, we were paired our first day down range," I answered.

"You two understand the meaning of battle buddies and the duty and responsibilities you owe to each other, correct?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Well that is why I called you in together. That is why I flew from San Diego to speak with you. I am a serviceman's affairs officer. My job is to meet with soldiers when there is a problem that needs to be addressed. That is why I am here." When he said that I felt my stomach drop, whatever was to come couldn't be good.

"Private Slobig, Carlos, I'm afraid I bring bad news about your family. One of your twins, Chance, died last night of an enlarged heart. I am sorry soldier."

He kept talking but neither of us heard anything else. The

Major's voice just blurred into the background noise that also disappeared. I turned to look at Slobig, but as I looked, tears filled my eyes and blurred my vision. I could make out his outline, his head buried in his hands, body bent down in the chair. But I heard him. At first it was just a few snuffles of disbelief. But when the Major left us alone, he broke. I sat sturdy, clenching the back of my teeth together as to not let out a sound. Until now Slobig had been a soldier of impeccable character. He had all the traits the military bragged of on the commercials, until now. Slobig detracted from himself the military bearing we swore to keep at all times, no matter what. He broke.

"I hate this place, it cost me my son," he cried softly. But then his voice vanished. Only sobs came out. There is no sound that could ever pierce the heart like that of a father crying for a son that died before ever living. Crying for a son he never met because he was here, in Misery, in hell. Although the other one, Cyrus, was fine, it did not matter right now. He was a father that outlived his son, and there was nothing he could do. He was the most helpless person in the world, and I felt it in my heart. I held on to him to keep him grounded, but that's not what he needed. He needed a second chance, he needed his Chance. The world disappeared in an instant, and like the pit, we were helplessly alone.

As I sat there, holding a broken man, I could only think to myself that the saying "It can't get any worse" never holds true. It seems that if things can't get worse, they do. To look at Slobig, a man who had the picture perfect life before coming to this place. I realize this place is the epitome of worse. This place took hold of us all, in one way or another, and stripped us of our spirit, our soul. It left us all naked and hollow, only to be filled with a welcoming for our own death and the means to kill others. The reasons for coming to this place are long gone. There are no more feelings. The last feelings allowed, were ones not welcome. Slobig knows this more than any. There is nothing I can say to him. What he needs I cannot give him. The only thing I can do is keep him alive until he goes home, but I guess that's what we're taught here, just to stay alive, no matter how bad it hurts; because if it can always get worse, death will be unimaginably worse. I guess that is why this place is called Misery. Misery is the gateway to hell. This was our gateway, this was our hell. We all wish for a second chance.

As these thoughts raced through me, I looked out the window over Slobig's bowed head—SFC Rodney P. Miller was waiting for us again.

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