

2014

Expressions 2014

Laura Runyan

Benjamin T. Rittgers

Norah Mandil

Tony Guerra

Kevin Cook

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openspace.dmacc.edu/expressions>

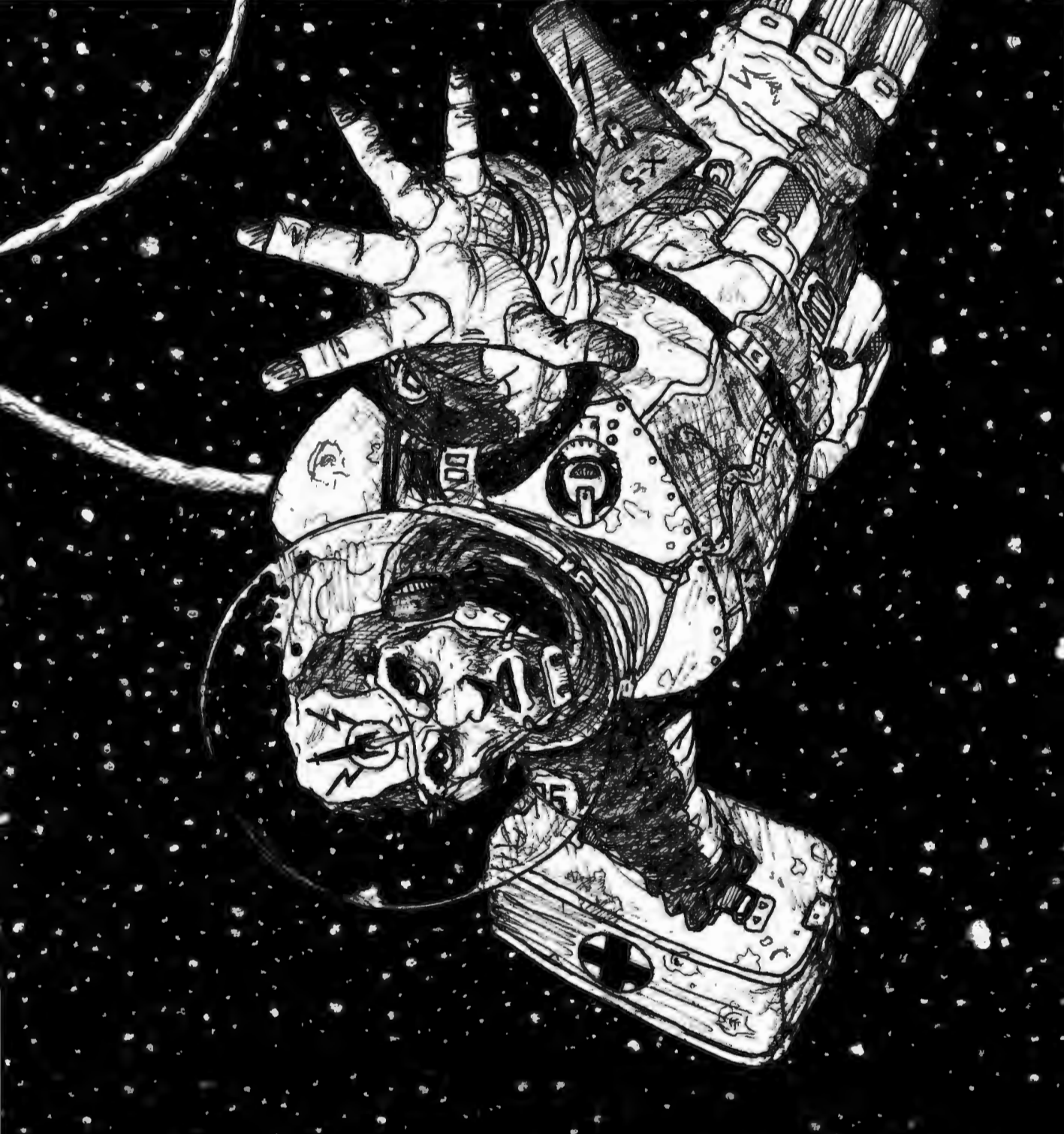
Recommended Citation

Runyan, Laura; Rittgers, Benjamin T.; Mandil, Norah; Guerra, Tony; Cook, Kevin; Rutledge, Michael; Voight, Ann; and Brawley, Brianna M., "Expressions 2014" (2014). *Expressions*. 12.
<https://openspace.dmacc.edu/expressions/12>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Open SPACE @ DMACC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressions by an authorized administrator of Open SPACE @ DMACC. For more information, please contact rsfunke@dmacc.edu.

Authors

Laura Runyan, Benjamin T. Rittgers, Norah Mandil, Tony Guerra, Kevin Cook, Michael Rutledge, Ann Voight, and Brianna M. Brawley



EXPRESSIONS

2 0 1 4

DMACC Literary Magazine

Acknowledgments, Expressions 2014

Educational Services

Jim Stick, Academic Dean, Arts & Sciences;
Kari Hensen, Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences;
Scott Ocken, Academic Dean, Industry & Technology;
Kim Linduska, Executive Vice President, Academic Affairs;
Rob Denson, President

College Supporters

Ankeny Campus Student Action Council, Erin Wheat, Coordinator;
Breck Danner, Coordinator, Alumni Affairs; Tom Lee, Provost of
Boone Campus; Lisa Cappaert, Administrative Assistants, DMACC
Foundation; Tara K. Connolly, Executive Director of DMACC
Foundation, Veterans/Foundation Coordinator

Corporate Donors

West Des Moines State Bank

Individual Donors

Christine and Clark Bening; Neal and Kahn Hamilton; Keith and
Diane Krell; Janet and Loran Parker; Dean and Diane Peyton;
Curt Stahr; Anthony J. Stoik

DMACC Creative Writing Judges

Marc Dickinson, Matt Alberhasky, Lauren Rice
Creative Writing Contest Coordinator: Caitlin Hainley

Additional Academic Support

Monte Ballard, Melissa Rarick, Co-chairs, Graphic Design Program;
Steve Bendy, Computer Instruction; Ann Shuman, Design Instructor;
David Purdy, Photography Instructor; Michael Blair, Art Advisor.

Expressions Staff

Marshall Sharp, Art Director
Benjamin Dupey, Illustration and Design Assistant
D. Ryan Allen, Cover Illustration
Christine Mullane, Faculty Art Advisor
Caitlin Hainley, Assistant Editor
Michael K. Bryant, Editor and Advisor

DMACC Creative Writing Contest Winners, 2014

Laura Runyan

(First place overall, DMACC scholarship, for poetry and fiction)

"Emergency Management"

"The Principle of Inversion"

Benjamin Rittgers

(Second place overall, DMACC scholarship, for poetry and fiction)

"Letting Go"

"The New Neighbors"

"A Gift From Space"

Tony Guerra

(First place award, poetry)

"Meeting *The Poet's Companion*"

Brianna Brawley

(Second place, poetry)

"The End"

Nora Mandil

(Third place, poetry)

"The Circle"

Michael Rutledge

(First Place, fiction)

"Sincerely Yours, The Thing Under the Bed"

Kevin Cook

(Second Place, fiction)

"Matinee"

Ann Voight

(Third Place, fiction)

"Family Decisions"



“The Principle of Inversion”

Laura Runyan

Northridge Elementary lay across the street from the neighborhood of four-plexes we'd moved into that summer. The school was in plain view from both our small patio and my bedroom window. Eventually, the close proximity would make me feel I could never completely escape the place.

It was 1968, early September, the first day of school. It was also my first day ever at this particular school, where I was about to start the second grade. The desk I was assigned to was in the row closest to the windows. A tiny blond girl sat at the desk behind mine, at the very end of the row. Her hair looked like it hadn't been combed that day. As I made my way toward my seat, the girl absently scratched the tip of her pencil against her palm. She glanced at me and then looked away. The desk across from mine was taken by a lanky boy with sandy hair and long legs that stretched out below the chair in front of him. He leered at me as I took my seat.

Because this was my first year at the

school, Miss Grey asked me to stand and say something about myself to the class.

I explained that my parents had just started new jobs at Iowa State University and that we'd moved here from Boston, Massachusetts, which was next to the ocean, and then I launched into a list of just a few of Boston's innumerable virtues: the street cars, the swan boats on the Charles river, Fenway Park, the Prudential Center—fifty whole stories high—the mountains, the ocean, steamed clams dipped in butter, the brick streets in Cambridge, my old school—it was very tall, not like this one, which was only one story—the escalators in the stores...

Miss Grey interrupted me. “Yes, that's all fine, Aaron. But you're living in Ames, Iowa now.” She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “What does your father do?”

“Do?”

“What job does he have?”

“He's a biologist,” I said. “Both my parents are biologists.”

“Both of them?”

I nodded. “Biology is the study of living things.”

Miss Grey tightly wrapped her arms in front of her, cradling an elbow in each hand. “Yes, I’m well aware of the meaning of the word biology.”

The lanky kid snickered. “How come you talk so funny?” He’s said it loudly enough that some of the other kids turned around to look at him, then at me.

“That will be all, Randall,” Miss Grey said.

“Randy,” he protested.

A boy with glasses giggled. Randall/Randy swung his head in the other boy’s direction. The latter nervously looked away.

At recess, Miss Donnelly, the young, auburn-haired teacher across the hall, talked with some of the girls who were playing hopscotch. Miss Grey, her suit jacket still on, stood stiffly in front of the entrance to our wing of the squat school building. After we all returned to the classroom, she blotted her face with a tissue, though she kept the jacket on.

Miss Grey’s upper arms often appeared permanently fixed to her sides, her hands moving marionette-like from the elbows down, except for when she was at the blackboard, her skirt rising just enough to reveal part of her right thigh as her butt jiggled to the rhythm of her handwriting, the students covering their mouths to muffle their giggles. When seated, she crossed her legs only at the ankle, her tense fingers tugging at her hem whenever a stocking-covered knee peeked out from under the skirt of whatever drab tan, brown, or gray polyester suit she was

wearing that day. It seemed to me that she was around my parents’ age, which would have placed her in her thirties, but her black cats-eye glasses and chunky low-heel pumps, as well as the tightness of the dark curls she wore so close to her scalp, made her look older.

I wasn’t the only kid in my class to feel short on his luck whenever Miss Donnelly—soon to be Mrs. Larsen—bounced past us in her “mod”-style dresses, the hems of which hung above the knee, her shiny-smooth hair swaying against her bare shoulders as her pastel high-heel sandals clicked against the linoleum just before she turned into the classroom across from ours, a trace of her citrus-y perfume lingering in the hallway.

I wondered how I ended up in Miss Grey’s class. I hated the person responsible, whoever it was.

My father shut the refrigerator door with his foot as he pulled the tab off his can of Old Milwaukee. My baby brother, Graham, gurgled in his playpen in the living room. Dark, bulbous clouds gathered in the west, just behind the school. I couldn’t remember the storms in Boston ever being as bad as those in Iowa. Already, in the short time since we’d arrived, several powerful electrical storms had arrived in town.

My mother sighed audibly. “Can’t you wait until after dinner, Ron?” she said, her eyes on the plastic bag of Shake ‘N Bake-covered chicken pieces she held between her fingers.

He sat at the kitchen table across from me, where I was coloring a school

assignment about autumn leaves. He winked at me. “Your mother is afraid of having too much fun.” He looked in her direction but not at her face. “Isn’t that right, Beth?” The kitchen window flashed, followed by a loud and high-pitched clap of thunder. Graham squealed his annoying baby squeal.

Dad reached across the table and tousled my hair. “I’m gonna get us tickets for one of the Cyclones games this fall. Maybe Homecoming. Just the two of us.” He nodded toward the stove. “I mean, since your mother doesn’t appreciate that sort of thing.”

My mother set the skillet on the burner, the pan landing on the coils with a louder clang than usual.

Apart from the storms, Ames was quiet, as college towns go, at least on our side of town. From our neighborhood, I had no idea that a few dozen students at the university had grown their hair long and marched against the war, gripping protest signs in their fists. Soon, the number rose to the hundreds. I almost never saw that side of Ames, though. We lived on the northeast end, the corner opposite the university. Our end contained the site where the town’s first indoor mall would soon begin construction.

At my school in Boston, the big globe next to my first grade teacher’s desk included ridges where all the mountain ranges were located. The gold plaque on

the base of its stand read A Gift from the Boston Globe. After I was told we would be moving, I ran my index finger over Iowa. No ridges. No oceans anywhere nearby, either.

Still, I was eager to see this new place, the sheer novelty of it enough to sustain my anticipation those last weeks before the move westward.

In Boston, the couple next door wore jeans and sandals and had hair down to their shoulders, even the husband. No one in our new neighborhood in Ames—not yet, anyway—dressed like our neighbors in Boston. The closest, I suppose, was Miss Donnelly, but she was more like a tamer version of the pretty girls I’d seen dancing in go-go cages on TV. When I went over to our Boston neighbors’ apartment to play with their son, Noah, sometimes my mother would come along and sit at their kitchen table and drink coffee with Noah’s mother while Joan Baez records played in the background. That’s when my mother bought her first and only Joan Baez record. I remember the album cover. Joan’s profile was so

I sensed that our neighbors, and everyone else in Boston who dressed like them, were part of something new and thrilling that separated them from most of the people I saw on the escalator in Sears.

dark and pretty. That spring my mother played the record for whole afternoons on her days off. I sensed that our neighbors, and everyone else in Boston who dressed like them, were part of something new and thrilling that separated them from most of the people I saw on the escalator in Sears, where my mother, and sometimes my father, took me and Graham shopping for clothes.

There were no escalators in Ames.

Miss Grey started us in on what she called “writing exercises.” For the next few weeks she wandered up and down the aisles, pausing occasionally to comment on the neatness of a student’s handwriting. One morning she stopped right behind me, at the desk where Fran, the little blond girl who scarcely spoke a word, sat.

Miss Grey’s shadow crossed its arms. “Fran, you write like a boy,” she said. “Very messy.”

I set my pencil down. My only “C” in Boston had been in “Handwriting.” Mrs. MacNamara, though, had made it clear on my report cards that she’d never had any trouble making out what I wrote.

The sheet of paper on my desk darkened as Miss Grey took a step forward. Her tongue made a sucking sound against her teeth.

“Which is it, Aaron?” she said. “Are you left-handed or right-handed?”

I craned my neck to look up at her. “What?”

She stepped in front of me. “What I said was, are you left-handed or right-handed? Which is it?”

“I guess I don’t know,” I said.

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“Well, I guess I’m left-handed until my left hand gets tired, and then I’m right-handed.”

The lanky boy, Randy Silverthorn, stared at me with his mouth gaping open as if I had relocated not from Boston but the moon.

Miss Grey resolutely shook her head.

“No. You can’t be both-handed. You need to pick a hand. One or the other.”

Just as I was about to look up at her again and say *How come?*, the bell rang. It was in the intermittent pattern—long ring, then short, then long, then short—that signified a tornado drill. The sky outside was a crisp blue with barely a cloud in sight. She clapped her hands several times. “Alright, children,” she shouted over the alarm, “let’s everyone get into line.”

Near the doorway, where several kids were already in front of me, Randy Silverthorn shoved me aside, and hard enough that I almost lost my footing. I felt my hand—my right one, the one I always threw with—ball into a fist, and then I sensed Miss Grey’s eyes on me. I looked up. She was staring straight at me. The corners of her mouth rose slightly, but not in a friendly way. I turned toward the hallway.

Miss Gray kept clapping her hands and then led us down the hall toward the stairs to the basement, where the art room was located, so we could do “duck and cover.” As we crouched down there against the walls for what seemed an absurd length of time for a fake tornado, I wondered why, during the real thing, when the TV weatherman had announced a true-blue tornado in the area, my father never took us down to the basement below the breezeway of our four-plex. When it was during the daytime, he would stand on our front stoop or our small back patio, a beer in his hand, his face growing serious, and watch the sky, saying, “It looks pretty bad,” over and over, which only heightened my anxiety.

Right before Halloween, we got our first color TV. We abandoned the small kitchen table and started eating instead in the living room, mechanically shoving food into our mouths while we watched *Laugh-in* or *Dragnet* or *Get Smart* as Graham lay on his back in his playpen and wiggled his arms and legs. We were still dining on an East Coast schedule, a couple of hours after most of our neighbors, which was just as well; the nightly network news footage of the war would have made for lousy dinnertime diversion.

Dad had started drinking from two or three large bottles of whisky he kept in the cabinet next to the refrigerator. In Boston, he'd drunk only beer, at least around me, but now, after a beer or two, he was switching to whisky. After dinner, when the short glass of amber liquid remained mostly in his hand the rest of the night, he'd make funny asides about whatever was on TV, like when he did dead-on imitations of Richard Nixon on election night, when Nixon beat Humphrey and Wallace. I'd laugh, then stop abruptly if my mother's jaw muscles started to pulsate. By the time she took me upstairs to bed, Dad was sometimes already asleep on the couch, though he was sitting upright, his mouth hanging open. Sometimes he'd snore and she'd push up on his chin. He'd stir, then fall back to sleep. Once, he had a line of drool down the side of his mouth, like Graham usually did.

Outside, Miss Donnelly grabbed

the soccer ball from out-of-bounds a couple of times and heaved it at us over her head, not in the pathetic under-arm way the girls tossed it in gym class. As it landed back inside the yellow lines, she clasped her hands together and laughed.

Miss Grey took her usual post by the door.

The next time the ball went out-of-bounds, I ran to the side of the building after it, near where some of the girls, all wearing their knee-length coats, were taking turns jumping rope to some sing-song-y thing I had heard dozens of times before: First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage. Fran was sitting by herself, scrawling something on the blacktop with a piece of chalk rock. She looked up at me. I turned away. Actually, I felt bad for her. Just not bad enough to risk joining her at the bottom of the pecking order by letting the other kids see me talking to her. Nobody disliked her, really, while probably every single one of us hated Randy Silverthorn's

Fran, on the other hand, was easy to ignore: Always quietly on the outskirts of whatever activities were taking place on the playground, she was considered too inconsequential to associate with.

guts. None of us, though, would have dared let on to him how we felt about him. Fran, on the other hand, was easy to ignore: Always quietly on the outskirts of

whatever activities were taking place on the playground, she was considered too inconsequential to associate with.

I kicked the ball back into bounds, glancing out of the corner of my eye to see if Miss Donnelly was watching. She was. She applauded, tossing her head back. Her jacket had a fuzzy off-white

collar, and the rest of it was an orange-y brown that matched the color of her shiny hair, which swayed whenever she turned her head. Her laughing teeth glittered in the cold sunshine.

Something hit my left shoulder. I turned around as the soccer ball bounced back into Randy's hands. He smiled and shook his head as if I were the sorriest example of a second-grade boy he'd ever seen. He dribbled the ball toward the door. I glanced at Miss Donnelly, hoping she hadn't seen. She was busy picking up the jump ropes.

Inside, while Miss Grey droned on about the same arithmetic problems we had been working on for weeks, the sequence of events described in the jump-rope jingle began to trouble me: First comes love, then marriage, then baby. Marriage, then baby.

When my parents got home I stood on the staircase next to the front door, while my mother wrote my babysitter her check for the week. Mrs. Clemmons smiled at me as she put on her coat. "Have a lovely weekend, Aaron," she said, tucking the rest of her knitting into her bag. The only time she ever smiled at me was in my parents' presence.

As soon as my mother shut the door I came down to the landing next to the coat closet. "I have a question," I said.

"Yes, Aaron?"

"How does the baby know that the parents are married before the baby starts to grow in the mother's stomach?"

She looked at my father. "Do you want to handle this Ron, or shall I?"

"Whichever you prefer," he said, a beer already at his side and the Ames

Tribune in front of his face.

While she stirred the spaghetti sauce, she calmly explained how the man inserts—that's the word she used, inserts—his penis into a place between the woman's legs, a space called the vagina, where the baby later comes out, and how after a while the man emits something called semen, a fluid that contains certain organisms called sperm cells, which sort of swim up the vagina and into the uterus—not the stomach—and how the sperm cells look a little like tadpoles under a microscope but are too small to be seen by the naked eye. One of the sperm cells joins together with an egg that the woman's body makes, she said, a little like the eggs we eat, except that they're much smaller, and then the sperm and egg, together, turn into a baby.

An embryo, she also called it.

I was aghast. I tried to picture the mechanics, those on the macroscopic level, but I couldn't do it.

"Do you have any questions, Aaron?" she said.

"Yeah. So how does the baby know that the parents are married?"

"It doesn't." Her eyes shifted toward the ceiling while she thought a moment, then back to me. "Most people think it's wrong for people to have sexual intercourse if they're not married."

"Is it?"

She laughed silently and looked down, pressing her fingers into her forehead. "Not always." She knelt in front of me. "I'm sure it doesn't sound like it now, Aaron, but it's really a beautiful thing, making a baby. It's a very special way for two grownups to get close to one another."

By the time the spaghetti was done cooling, my father had fallen asleep, the paper open at his side. She nudged his shoulder. He looked up at her, startled. "Just gimme a minute," he said. He closed his eyes again.

She and I ate in the kitchen while he and Graham dozed in the living room.

Over the next few days my mother got calls from several of the other mothers who were furious over my impromptu biology lessons during recess.

"Honestly," she said, shaking her head. "In this day and age. You'd think these people never have sex!"

I kept trying to imagine Miss Donnelly doing this horrible thing my mother had described. I pictured her squeezing her eyes shut while it happened, the way I did at night during lightning storms. But she would have to go through with it if she wanted babies. And, naturally, somebody as pretty as she was would want babies.

I tried to imagine Miss Gray doing it

if she ever got married, but it was more than I could bear, even worse than trying to picture my parents going at it.

"Aaron!" Miss Gray said.

Startled, I sat upright.

"Now," she continued. "In this assignment I want you all to write anything you like to complete these sentences. Anything at all. Just as long as it consists of complete sentences. By now you should know what a sentence is."

On the blackboard she had written, in large, bold letters:

I like _____
_____.

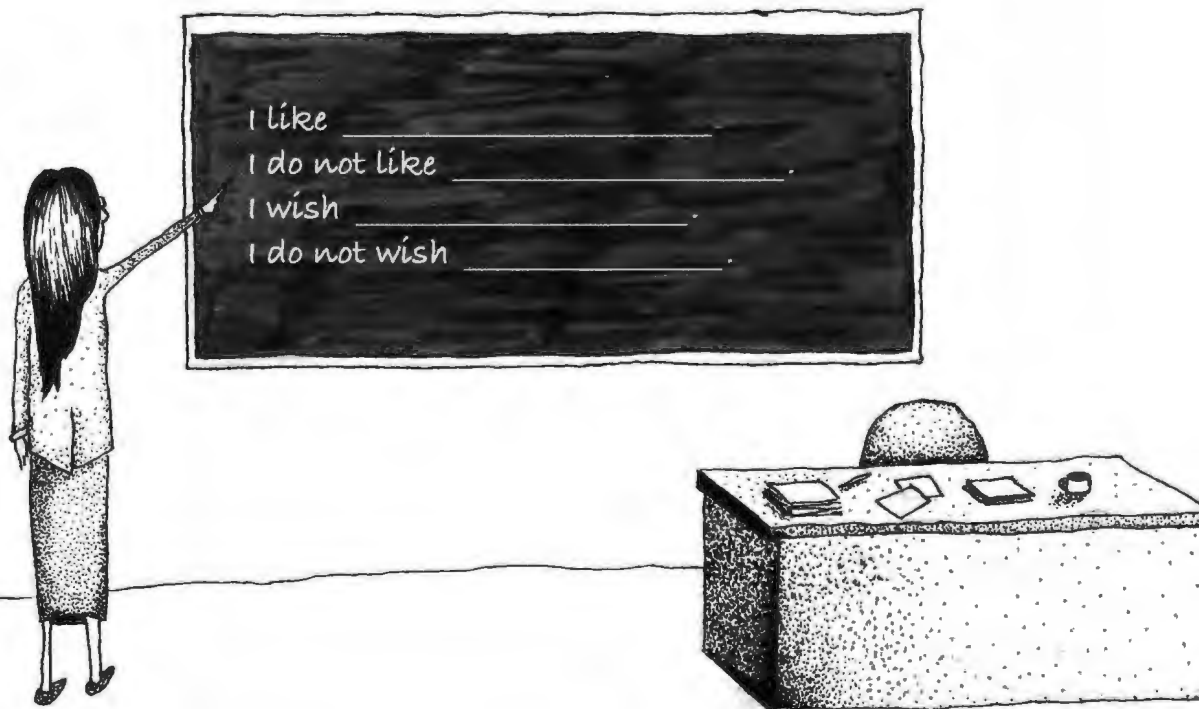
I do not
like _____.

I wish _____
_____.

I do not
wish _____.

She set the chalk back in its tray. "Now don't be afraid to use your imaginations," she said in a serious tone. "Or just write whatever you honestly feel."

I knew better. If I were to have been



perfectly honest, I would have written I do not like Miss Grey.

Instead, I wrote: I like Boston. I do not like Ames. I wish we could move back to Boston. I do not wish that we would stay here anymore.

As she collected our assignments, she paused at the head of each row, shuffling through the papers, her elbows pressed against her sides while she glanced at a few of the responses, occasionally nodding approvingly before moving on.

At my row, the last, she did the same but then stood very still, one paper in particular holding her gaze.

She looked up at me, her features sharpening. "I need to see you after school, Aaron," she said.

Randy Silverthorn's eyes widened. He looked almost afraid for me, which made it even worse.

As soon as everyone else left, Miss Grey pinched the bridge of her nose, the part right between her eyes, with her thumb and forefinger, then returned her glasses to her face.

"This is unacceptable, Aaron," she said. "I hope you can see why."

Was it my handwriting?

She folded her hands on top of her desk calendar. "Ames is a fine community, Aaron. Granted, it's not Boston. But you should consider yourself lucky to live in such a lovely little town."

She wrote a large red U for "Unsatisfactory" at the top of my assignment. "All right," she said, handing the course sheet of paper from my Big Chief tablet back to me. "As long as we understand each other."

I headed for the door.

"Aaron."

When I turned back she was looking at another student's paper.

"It gets better," she said, her eyes still on her desk. I waited.

"That's all. You may go."

The globe in my room at home, which my parents had given me for my seventh birthday, was tiny compared to the one at my old school, and it didn't have any ridges for where the mountains are. I ran my finger over Massachusetts. I could almost feel the Berkshires.

It was all Iowa's fault. Everything.

A thud came from directly below my room, where the kitchen was, followed by the sound of glass breaking. "Goddamn it!" my father shouted. I heard my mother say something and then heard his voice again: "Get away from me, Beth!"

Later that night I heard him at the top of the staircase. I turned over to face the wall. My door squeaked open and he took a couple of steps toward my bed. I tried to look like I was peacefully sleeping, but I worried that my eyelids would flutter open if I relaxed them too much.

"Oh, Aaron," he said softly. His speech sounded clenched, as if his throat had tightened. "My baby boy." He leaned over and kissed my cheek. His lips and his own cheeks were wet. I skipped a breath until he rose, taking the smoky-sweet smell of the whisky with him.

"My good little Aaron," he said, his voice cracking. My heart sped up.

I wasn't afraid he would do anything, that he would hit me or do something else bad to me, whatever that might be. I just

didn't know which father was real, or at least more real than the other: the earlier on who had screamed at the top of his lungs at my mother or the one standing over me now, wet-faced and sentimental.

With less than a week of school left until Christmas break, half a foot of snow clung to the bushes, the kind of snow that crunched under our boots. It was leftover from Thanksgiving, when Mom, Graham, and I ate turkey on the good dishes, a long candle burning in the center of the dining table, where the three of us sat, Graham in his high chair, while Dad slept in front of a football game on TV.

Miss Grey quickly flipped through the pages of the Teacher's copy of our math book, then tossed it onto her desk.

"Today I want to talk about the principle of inversion," she said, and then she wrote inversion on the blackboard.

I looked down at my own book. More addition problems.

"And don't expect to find this in your textbooks. We've been moving far too slowly this term. Because, to be quite frank, this has been a particularly slow second-grade class."

We all, my classmates and I, looked at one another.

"But," she said.

Randy Silverthorn snickered.

"Yes, there's always a But," she said.

Several of the other kids giggled.

"And yes, I'm sure you all find that word terribly amusing, don't you? Which is why I think it's finally time to challenge your little brains."

She took her glasses off and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Now," she said, putting her glasses back on. "Inversion has to do with fractions. It has to do with many other things as well, but for our purposes today, it has to do with fractions. Can anyone tell me what a fraction is?"

No one said anything.

"No, I didn't think so," she said. "So much for living in a college town." She scanned the classroom. "I'm going to need a volunteer."

As she glanced a couple of times at my row, I slid down in my seat. Her eyes finally stopped in my direction. I froze. Then I realized that she was looking just past me.

"Fran," she said. "You've been a good little girl all year. Would you please come to the front of the classroom?"

We all turned and looked at her, pale little Fran, who had hardly uttered a peep all term.

She hesitated, looking back at us, and then she crept to the front of the room and took her place beside Miss Grey.

"Now, Fran," Miss Grey said. "For this demonstration you'll need to stand in front of me and face the class."

Fran paused a moment before doing as she was told.

"That's right," Miss Grey said, adjusting Fran by the shoulders, moving her a step back and to the side.

She slipped her hands into Fran's armpits, hoisted her off the ground, and then she—Miss Grey, a woman I couldn't have pictured ever possessing the strength to toss a softball more than a few feet—she somehow flipped Fran over, in midair. Fran emitted a muted yelp that seemed

to have trouble escaping her upside-down vocal chords and then she kicked her feet at the air. She was wearing Mary Janes with yellow ankle socks. The skirt of her jumper fell down over her waist so that her pink panties showed. She kicked harder until, finally, a full-fledged scream issued from her throat.

I imagine myself sitting there with my mouth gaping open. I imagine the rest of the students sitting at their own desks with the same stunned expression. But what I remember, vividly, is Fran's pink panties, and then her legs thrusting, knees outward, frog-like, while Miss Grey held her by the waist, then raised her several more inches above the ground, chest-level, so that everyone could see better. I also remember how the underarms of Miss Grey's suit jacket revealed slender perspiration stains around the seams.

Fran's shrieks filled the room for what was probably only a few seconds, but it seemed much longer than that before Miss Grey flipped her right-side up and then delicately set her back on her feet.

Fran ran back to her desk. When I turned around to look at her, her head was down, her face buried in one arm and her shoulders and back jerking up and down as she sobbed.

An errant curl had fallen onto Miss Grey's forehead. She brushed it back in place with her fingers. Her mouth closed, her breathing only slightly faster and heavier than usual, she was looking toward the back of the classroom, her expression so intent that I felt compelled

to turn around. When I did, I found the same cupboards as before, all covered with the same paper snowflakes we had made right after Thanksgiving.

“What?” he muttered, a confused look on his face as if lying semi-conscious in the middle of the living room floor were something everyone did every now and again.

“That,” she said, still looking past our heads. She took a deep breath. “Yes, that, my friends, is the principle of inversion.” She crossed to

her desk, retrieved her purse, and calmly walked out the door.

It was Randy Silverthorn who first got up from his desk and followed Miss Grey's path out of the room. Soon, others followed, until it seemed pointless for the rest of us to stick around. Mr. Franklin, the principal, suddenly appeared, at first telling those of us who were still putting on our coats and jackets to return to the classroom, but when he realized that half the class was already gone, he shrugged and told us we could go.

Dad was already dozing on the couch when the phone rang, though it couldn't have been later than seven or eight o'clock. He stirred a little at the ringing but didn't open his eyes. My mother answered the phone. She was told that there was to be a meeting at the school the next night.

The next morning a young and bewildered-looking blond woman appeared in Miss Grey's place.

While my mother was at the school that evening, I played Don't Spill the Beans and Operation with the soft-spoken couple next door. After my mother got back, the two of us stood in the breezeway for a minute, the white bursts

of our breath glistening under the porch light, while she explained to me that Miss Grey would be taking some time off from teaching school.

“Isn’t that skipping school?” I said, somehow knowing it wasn’t.

“It’s not skipping if you have an illness. Miss Grey has an illness. Like when you had a cold last fall.”

Miss Grey had looked and sounded fine to me, even up to the very end. Whatever she had, it was no cold.

Upon entering the apartment, we found my father lying face-up on the living room floor. At first I thought he was dead.

“Dad!”

He raised his head and squinted in my direction. My stomach dropped, the way it sometimes had on the elevators in Boston.

“What?” he muttered, a confused look on his face as if lying semi-conscious in the middle of the living room floor were something everyone did every now and again.

He sat up and then halfway stood, staggered a few steps, and fell onto his side. He lay on his back again and laughed for several seconds.

“Damn it, Ron!” my mother said.

He pushed himself to a seated position again.

His arm around her shoulder, my mother helped him the rest of the way up and then took him to the staircase. He grabbed onto the banister. A couple of times he fell to his knees. She crouched down so he could use her shoulder to push himself up.

The next morning he shoved his cof-

fee cup aside after one sip and grimaced, but he somehow made it to work.

I realized it didn’t make any sense, but for those few weeks over the break, I kept hoping that Miss Donnelly would be our teacher when we returned to school, that they—whoever they were—would determine that our class had already been through enough, what with Miss Grey getting sick and all. Instead, a benign young woman—younger than Miss Donnelly, I was pretty sure—took over. She smiled almost all the time. At everyone, everything. At the air. I didn’t get anymore “U”s on my papers. School took on a predictable rhythm that became almost stupefying.

In the hallway, or outside at recess, Miss Donnelly showed off her sparkly engagement ring whenever the girls asked to see it, which was almost every day, it seemed.

Fran’s parents had gotten permission from the district to enroll her in another school.

By May, after much effort, I wrote with only my right hand.

A few weeks before the new school year started, Miss Grey moved to our neighborhood of four-plexes, into the bungalow portion of the building that lay diagonally across from ours. You could see her kitchen window from our patio. Her red sports car stood out from all the other cars in her parking lot. In the months that followed, I would sometimes see her outside, only at dusk, and always in a black miniskirt, her lips painted bright red, her hair curls looser than

they were when she was my teacher. She looked the same age as before, yet she seemed somehow younger. In pointy high heels she would sashay across the black-top, slide into her long and lean car, and zoom off into the impending darkness. Sometimes she would notice me watching her and then she would smile and wave. “Hello, Aaron, how are you?” she would call out brightly as she shoved her key into the car door.

The summer after that, a big U-haul pulled into her parking lot. It was driven by a man and woman I had never seen before, and it took Miss Grey’s furniture away.

My father stopped drinking when I was in high school. Lacking the drama that dominated their marriage when I was younger, they drifted apart, realizing that they had little in common but their jobs. Ten years later, during my freshman year at the University of Iowa, where the students referred to Iowa State as Iowa Straight, my mother filed for divorce. Both seemed happier afterward.

“Letting Go: A Sonnet”

Benjamin Rittgers

It's hard to start to date and then just end
 such a great potential for our true love.
I was surprised you could remain my friend,
 since our relationship wasn't from above.

Usually when ending such seduction,
 when love and happiness do not abide,
 it leaves in its wake awful destruction—
 instruction we gain from having no guide.

But since you give me a friendship so pure,
 we can give up the kisses like before
 and have great conversations about your
 life and dreams and the things we both adore.

I don't regret our touching and each kiss,
 but it's not the part of us I most miss.



“Emergency Management”

Laura Runyan

A week after Los Alamos was officially declared a disaster area, my father announced we were moving to New Mexico.

On a professional level, his decision made perfect sense: A year earlier, we'd pulled into Oklahoma City just a couple of days after a tornado—an F-5 a mile in diameter—had flattened the suburb of Moore, fourteen years before that city would suffer the same fate a second time. Before Moore, it was Grand Forks, North Dakota, in the wake of the Red River Valley flood, following thirteen months in Fort Smith, Arkansas, after a couple of deadly storms systems had ripped through western Arkansas.

I had to wonder, though. Why now? After so many years away from New Mexico, why was he suddenly willing to move back there for a stretch that would last several months, at least, if not a couple of years? Whenever we visited my aunt and uncle in Albuquerque for Christmas, he was antsy to get back on the road after

only a couple of days. Besides, they still needed people in Oklahoma City; as bad as the fire was in Los Alamos, he could have easily turned down this job.

Instead, one bright Oklahoma afternoon in May of 2000, two months after my sixteenth birthday, he burst through the front door, a cardboard box of his office supplies under one arm, and said with an exuberant smile, “So how'd you like to live closer to your aunt and uncle for a while?”

Dad worked for FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency. He had worked for FEMA for as long as I could remember, first as a contract specialist, then in infrastructure. The Cerro Grande Fire in and around Los Alamos—his eighth deployment for the agency—was pre-9/11, before FEMA would be taken over by the Department of Homeland Security, a move my father would vehemently oppose.

As we exited I-40 and headed north, Dad turned down the car stereo. “I've

seen a lot of amazing skies around here, but this is as good as it gets. I hate to say it, but it's because of all the smoke particles in the air." The fire, just thirty-five miles northwest of Santa Fe, had spread so quickly that firefighters were being flown in from as far away as Idaho.

"This is great ski country," he said. "Maybe I can take you sometime."

He had said the same thing in December, the winter before that. Until now, though, the two of us, together, had never been back in New Mexico for more than a few days at a time. I was born here, but I hadn't seen much of the state beyond what lay on either side of I-40 and my aunt and uncle's neighborhood in Albuquerque.

As we approached Santa Fe, where Dad would be deployed, I glanced out at the sagebrush along I-25. The idea of skiing near a desert still, after all these years, struck me as sort of surreal.

"The snow should come in November, possibly even October," he added. "Maybe we can make it up to the mountains then. I mean, now that we're gonna be around awhile."

The fire in Los Alamos, birthplace of the atomic bomb, was started deliberately by the National Park Service as a "controlled burn" meant to rid the area of parched undergrowth that had become dangerously flammable after years of drought. Soon, high winds carried embers a mile or more outside the fire line until, just a few days later, the flames grew beyond the Park Service's control.

Soon, high winds carried embers a mile or more outside the fire line until the flames grew beyond the Park Service's control.

In less than a week, all 11,000 residents of this high-tech town filled with science and math geeks were evacuated, the main route down the mountain being only a two-lane highway. I took all my final exams over the course of a couple of days so I could finish the tenth grade a week early, and on May 23rd, we drove into north-central New Mexico under a sunset so vivid it lit up the entire desert in rose, coral, and lavender light.

I secretly hoped we would stay here for the next couple of years. I was tired of changing schools every year or two, and I wanted to be closer to the only extended family I knew at all well. I'd never understood why, but just as we would begin to establish some roots in a place, Dad would turn restless until we landed on another spot of land.

Our nomadic lifestyle had begun after the '87 earthquake in Whittier, California, a little more than a year after my mother

died. I was two when she died, and most of the details I knew about that period had come

from my Aunt Ruth. Dad had never talked much about my mother except to say what a talented painter she was. He met her in New Haven, Connecticut, where he was in law school and she was finishing an MFA in art there. My father never ended up practicing law, but his JD diploma—Yale School of Law, 1983—continued to hang in Aunt Ruth's hallway, near some family photographs. My favorite was a photo my mother had taken of dad in New Haven. In that one he's lying on his side on a snow bank, his upper body

propped up by his elbow, his jacket unzipped, his cheek casually resting against his palm while he's wearing a serene smile as if he were lying instead on a Hawaiian beach in June. You can see my mother's shadow falling across the snow in front of him. I had never been to New Haven, or anywhere else in the northeast, a region that seemed almost exotic to me.

"You know," Dad said, "Santa Fe is one of the three or four biggest art markets in the country."

I nodded. A couple of years earlier, Aunt Ruth had shown me some of my mother's drawings and paintings, which were stored in the attic of the house where she and Dad where grew up. They were good. Breathtakingly good. I liked to draw, but I doubted I could ever be as good as my mother was.

I wasn't sure, but I thought I might carry around a couple of memories of my mother. Just flashes. In one of them, a ginger-haired woman is reaching into the back seat of a car—our car, I'd always assumed—to buckle me into a safety seat. I'm looking up at her but I can't see her face clearly because the late afternoon sun is behind her head. In the other memory, I'm sitting in a chair with a shiny silver-colored tray in front of me—it must be part of a highchair—while she's standing at the sink and holding something under the faucet. Even today, I don't know whether these are real memories or fabrications based on the mental picture I'd drawn from the few dots of information I'd gleaned from photographs and the little I'd heard about her from my dad and aunt.

I waited to see if Dad had anything

more to say, then turned up the stereo again. We were listening to a Steve Earle tape Dad had put together from our CDs, great road-trip music: "I hitched through Texas when the sun was beatin' down, Won't nothin' bring you down like your hometown."

Within ten or fifteen minutes, we carried everything we'd packed in the 4Runner into the trailer, a place on the edge of town my father had heard about through an old friend of his, a sculptor who had gone to school with my mother. We would stay here until we moved into our apartment in another week, where we would repeat the process of moving. We had packed and unpacked so many times over the years that we probably could have done it while sleepwalking.

Although we were a twenty-five-mile drive from Los Alamos, we could smell the smoke. Above us in the distance, small plumes of smoke rose from the flames that leapt above the trees, or what was left of them. According to a satellite image, the largest plume of smoke reached the Oklahoma panhandle. By the time we had emptied the car and were ready to drive somewhere to get something to eat, our car was covered with a thin layer of dust that shimmered under the moonlight. Downtown Santa Fe is 7,000 feet above sea level, but looking up at those heavily wooded mountains, it was easy to see why Los Alamos was chosen as the location for the development of the bomb, where physics eggheads could work in secret in the northern New Mexico wilderness.

Before we got in the car, Dad wiped his index finger across the hood of the car and examined his fingertip. “Ash,” he said.

It was early afternoon when we pulled up to the curb in front of Aunt Ruth and Uncle Ned’s house in Albuquerque. Ned was watering a patch of their garden in the front yard, his sprayer aimed at a cluster of bright yellow flowers at the edge of the garage. It was Saturday, our fourth full day back in New Mexico. Already, this was the longest I could remember being in New Mexico with Dad. We had always left Albuquerque the day after Christmas, two or three days after our arrival.

My aunt and uncle’s well-manicured neighborhood consisted of middle-class and upper-middle-class ranch houses and hacienda-style stuccos, like their own. Uncle Ned looked up and waved when we got out of the car. I hadn’t seen him in shorts or sandals since I was in the fifth grade, during my only summertime stay with them. When we all met at the edge of the yard, Ned wrapped his arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head, then wiped his damp palm on the front of his shirt and shook Dad’s hand. “Good to have you home, Mike,” he said.

“Good to be back,” Dad said, though I thought I saw an uneasy expression flash across his face. A family with a couple of kids in the back seat drove by. Ned waved at them and then turned to me. “So, kiddo.” He put his hands on his hips and looked at my face a moment before shaking his head. “Jesus,” he said. “She looks more like Lindy every time I see her.”

Lindy was my mother’s nickname, short for Belinda.

I looked at the side of the garage. “Pretty flowers,” I said to break the sudden silence. Dad smiled slightly and then gazed at the family in the car as they continued down the street.

“My wife’s handiwork,” Ned said. He slapped his hands together. “Ruth is inside getting everything ready for the grill. Why don’t we go on in?”

Dad’s expression brightened. He liked my uncle. The name Ned suited him: Like him, it was sturdy, easygoing, and straightforward. Dad patted him on the shoulder. “Why don’t we?” he said.

I joined Aunt Ruth in the kitchen while the men chatted over Scotch and water in the living room. Ned wasn’t much of a drinker, and neither was Dad, but it was a ritual between them whenever we first arrived in town.

A burst of hearty laughter came from the living room. Aunt Ruth smiled. “Silly boys. God knows what they’re talking about already.” She poured me some iced tea and then pulled a Pyrex baking pan from the refrigerator. “Grilled salmon tonight,” she said. She poured a little white wine into a bowl of marinade. “So,” she said. “How’s your dad doing these days?”

“Same old same old.”

She smiled. “Do me a favor, would you? Just let me know once in a while how he’s doing?”

“What’s to know?”

“Well, the anniversary is coming up next month.”

“Anniversary?” For a second, I didn’t know what she meant. “Oh. Of course.” She was referring to the accident. My

mother's car accident. June 30, 1986. "The anniversary comes every year," I said. "He's always fine."

She brushed marinade on the salmon. "Maybe so. But he's never been back here this time of year. Not since you moved." She peered out the window as she recalled the timeline of events. "You were what? Just three when you left?"

"I guess so. But the accident happened in Albuquerque, didn't it?"

"Santa Fe's more or less the same neck of the woods. And he and your mother spent so much time up there. I'm pretty sure they were hoping to move there eventually."

Actually, by the time I was in the seventh or eighth grade, I was aware of the significance of the date. I always tried to be especially considerate around Dad that day without looking too obvious. He was probably was onto me, but he never said anything about it.

My uncle appeared, a metal ice bucket shimmering at his side. "So, hon, how much longer?"

She turned one of the filets over with a fork. "You can start the coals now, if you're ready."

He gave her a peck on the lips. "Hey, Mike!" he called to the living room. "It's time for the menfolk to get our butts in gear!" He poured part of a bag of ice from the freezer into the bucket, and then Dad followed him to the patio. Through the screen door I could hear chunks of ice being dropped into their empty glasses.

Aunt Ruth wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "Anyway, I'm just so happy to have you back. Wouldn't it be wonderful

if you could finish high school in Santa Fe?"

I opened my mouth but couldn't think of a response. It's what I wanted, but I hoped she wouldn't say anything about it to Dad just yet; we'd been in town only a few days, and the mood of a sunny Saturday afternoon barbecue felt all wrong for any serious talk about the future.

While we ate on the patio, the adults talked about their jobs. Ned was a civil engineer for the city of Albuquerque, and Aunt Ruth did some tutoring during her summers away from teaching high school English. Dad, as always, referred only briefly to his work, and when he did, he treated it as something a trained basset hound could do almost as well, though I knew that wasn't true; he had had earned a few employee-recognition awards from FEMA. He always played it down, but I think he appreciated the recognition.

Uncle Ned looked at me. "So, eleventh grade next year, right?"

"Yep."

"That's right," Dad said. "Gail was in three honors classes last year. English, biology, and—what was the other one, Gail? History?"

I nodded.

Aunt Ruth shook her head. "I don't know how you do it, moving around so much."

Dad took a sip of his wine. "Traveling, seeing so much of the country... That by itself can be a fine education, Ruth."

"I'm not saying it can't. I'm just saying that I sure wasn't smart enough to have

pulled it off.”

He looked at her intently for a second. “Sure, you were.”

Aunt Ruth rested her elbow on the clear tabletop. “So,” she said. “Are you two planning to hang around awhile this time?”

Dad swallowed more wine. “We’ll see how long the job lasts.”

She looked down at her glass. “But Michael, don’t you think it would be nice for Gail to stay in the same school until she graduates?”

“We’ll see,” he said.

“She’s gone to so many different schools already, and it’s just a couple of years until she graduates.” She turned to me. “Gail, how many schools have you attended so far?”

He banged the table with his fist, hard enough that for an instant, I thought the glass tabletop might shatter. “Jesus Christ, Ruth!”

She flinched a little and then her mouth fell open. I’d never heard him raise his voice to her.

“Can’t you just leave it alone?” he said. “We just got into town, for Christ’s sake! Do we have to talk about this now?”

“Dad,” I said meekly, my paltry attempt to diffuse the tension between them.

Her lower lip trembled slightly.

“Come on, everyone,” Ned said softly. “Let’s all just relax.”

Her eyes glistening, she stared at Dad for a few seconds and then turned her face to the yard.

After a long silence, Dad leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. “I’m sorry.” With the heels of his palms, he

pushed his hair back from his forehead and then took a deep breath. “Really, I am. Sorry, I mean.” He sat upright and, staring down into his drink, forced a small laugh. “Since we drove all the way from Oklahoma, I guess I can’t blame it on jetlag.”

“Never mind,” she said. “I’m sorry I said anything. It’s none of my business anyway.”

“Oh, God,” he said, screwing up his face as if he’d just gotten a whiff of something rotting. “Of course it’s your business, Ruth. We’re talking about your niece, after all.” He gulped the rest of his wine and watched her a moment, then reached across the table and put his hand on hers. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I mean it.”

“Okay!” Uncle Ned said lightly.

“You’re sorry, she’s sorry. The whole world is sorry.” He smiled at her. “Maybe that’s a good exit line?”

He and Dad had planned to top off their evening at some watering hole where they were supposed to meet up with a few friends they knew from “back when.” Ned stood and put his hand on Ruth’s shoulder. “Why don’t we go boy-boy, girl-girl for a while?” he said to her.

She smiled a little. “Sure. That sounds fine.”

While Dad was in the bathroom, Ned knelt next to her and ran his fingertips up and down her forearm. “It’s okay, babe,” he said. “They had a long trip yesterday, that’s all.”

After it got dark, Aunt Ruth and I watched a documentary about the rise and fall of some 1930s movie starlet I’d never heard of—one of those

“true stories” that had become more and more popular on cable TV—and then we played a game of Scrabble in the dining room. By the time Ned’s car pulled into the driveway, she was winning the game almost as handily as Dad always did, even though I knew he dumbed himself down some whenever we played.

She glanced toward the living room windows. “Ah, finally,” she said. The car headlights disappeared as the car moved into the garage. “I was starting to wonder whether your dad was going to get you home at a decent hour.”

Ned came in from the garage through the kitchen door. “So, d’you all have a nice evening?”

She smiled as Ned went to the kitchen sink to pour himself a glass of water. “Where’s Michael?” she said.

“He ran into some people he knew.”

“And you left without him?”

“He’s a grown man, hon.”

She tapped a fingernail on the table a few times and then gave me a tight smile.

“Well, sweetie, why don’t I get the guestroom ready?”

As she headed upstairs, he shrugged, his palms upward. “What was I supposed to do,” he said to her back. “Kidnap the man and drag him back here against his will?” He turned away and then noticed what must have been a bewildered look on my face. “He just ran into some people he knew, Gail. They’ll give him a ride home. I mean here, to the house.”

“Couldn’t you have at least called? It’s four-thirty in the morning!” She lowered her voice, “and by the way, Michael, the bars closed over two hours ago.”

I awoke to a voice. A female voice. A dream, I thought at first, and then I realized it was my aunt. She was shouting. I slipped on the robe she’d lent me and lumbered to the top of the staircase. I heard Dad’s voice. He was laughing.

I went down to the staircase landing. Aunt Ruth and Dad were standing in the hallway near the kitchen. Uncle Ned was standing farther away, and I could see his legs below the hem of his own robe.

“Oh, yes, this is really amusing, isn’t it?” Aunt Ruth said to my father. Her face was flushed.

Dad was leaning against the wall, an odd smile on his face.

“Couldn’t you have at least called?” she said. “It’s four-thirty in the morning!” When she saw me come further down the steps, she stopped a moment. Even from several feet away, I could smell alcohol on him. She lowered her voice. “And by the way, Michael, the bars closed over two hours ago.”

“Come on, Ruth,” said Uncle Ned gently. “It was old-home week for him. You wanted him back here, didn’t you? Let’s all just calm down now.”

“Please don’t tell me to calm down, Ned. I sat up waiting for him, wondering what might have happened to him. I mean, for God’s sake, his daughter is here.”

Dad shook his head. “What would you know about any of that?”

“Any of what?”

“About being responsible for some-

one else?"

She glared at him. "Trust me, Michael, I know. Or have you forgotten what things were like before you left here?"

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"All you had to do was pick up the phone," she said. "How hard is that?"

He tipped slightly to the side and then leaned back against the wall and shut his eyes.

"Michael?" she said.

He just stood there against the wall, his eyes still closed.

I came down the rest of the stairs. "What's up, Dad?" I said, as if he'd just come in from raking the lawn or taking out the garbage.

His head dropped forward, and just as I wondered whether he'd fallen asleep, he slid to the floor, the sound of his shirt against the textured plaster reminding me of sandpaper. He landed on his butt, his bent knees forming two steep triangles with the floor.

Uncle Ned knelt beside him and lifted his limp arm off the floor. Dad's eyes opened a moment and then fell shut again. "Okay, buddy," Ned said to him. Ned slipped his head under Dad's arm and looked up at me. "He's okay, Gail. Just needs to get some sleep." He groaned as he hoisted Dad onto his feet. "Best cure in the world right now."

Ruth came over to me and turned me by my shoulders toward the landing above. Dad moaned softly. "Put him on the sofa," she called down on our way upstairs.

"I'm gonna be sick," I heard Dad say.

"Okay, buddy, Okay," Ned said.

"Let's get you to the bathroom."

Maybe half an hour later, several minutes after I'd heard my aunt and uncle's muffled voices fall silent in their bedroom, I got out of bed and tiptoed down the stairs and to the edge of the living room. A beam of light from one of the streetlamps fell across the sofa, where Dad's chest rose and fell slowly, steadily, his breath like that of someone in a tranquil sleep after a completely ordinary day. I watched him a minute and then, satisfied that he was okay, groped my way up the rest of the stairs and through the dark hallway, back to the same bed I'd slept in every Christmas Eve and Christmas since I was three years old.

Aunt Ruth and I sat at the patio table while Dad slept it off. It was around eleven o'clock, a warm and cloudless Sunday morning. She went back inside for a few minutes, then returned to the table with a pitcher of orange juice.

A couple of yellow butterflies skipped around a patch of flowers next to the grill. She poured each of us a glass of juice and sat.

"Aunt Ruth, I've been wondering something."

"Yes?"

"Why didn't Dad ever take the bar exam?"

She thought about it a moment and then leaned back and looked up at the sky. "That's a very good question, isn't it?" She glanced at me and said, "You don't know many details about the accident, do you?"

“No. Not really. Just that some kid hit the car.”

She glanced at the screen door between the patio and the dining room. “Okay.” She got up and quietly slid the glass door shut, then returned to her chair. “It’s probably long past time you knew some of this. Just don’t bring up any of it to your father. Not right now, anyway.”

“I won’t.”

“I’m serious about that, Gail.”

“I promise.”

She leaned back in her chair again while she figured out where to start. “The accident was one of those stupid things that never should have happened. Ned and I were over at the house that afternoon for a barbecue. I mean, the house your dad and I grew up in. Your parents were living there at the time. The four of us used to get together and do that sort of thing a lot. You were around two at the time. I remember you stumbling through the grass, flailing your arms.” She smiled at the memory. “You were still so excited about being able to walk.”

She glanced at the patio door again. “The day it happened—the accident, I mean—while we were all sitting out in the yard...” She sighed wearily. “It was an argument. A very stupid one at that. The kind of argument all married couples have. It was about their vacation plans, of all things. Your mom was going to make the hotel reservations, and she’d forgotten. Your dad was under a lot of stress, working for a law firm here in town and studying for the bar. He was only a week or so away from taking the test, but you know your dad. I’m sure he would have

passed the thing without any trouble. Anyway, Ned tried to mediate, and I kept telling your father that he was making a big deal over nothing.”

“What happened?”

“Your mother finally got fed up enough with your dad’s complaining that she stormed out of the yard, and then we heard the car start. She just needed to clear her head, Gail. Your dad got to the driveway just as she was turning a corner a couple of blocks up the street.” She shook her head slightly. “Not even half a mile from the house. It was a pickup truck. She was broadsided. The other driver slammed into the driver’s side door.”

“They were arguing?” I said.

“Well, sure. Like all couples do. But Gail, your father and mother were crazy about each other. With different luck, the same thing could have happened to Ned and me. That’s why the whole thing was so—so pointless.”

She watched some birds hopping around near the edge of the patio. I wondered what had happened to the kid driving the pickup truck—where he was and what he was doing. It gave me a chill, thinking how much a life could change in just an instant.

“I have a question for you, now,” she said. “Do you like moving around so much? I mean, are you okay with it?”

She had never asked me this before. Did I like it? It’s all I’d known.

The sliding glass door to the patio suddenly opened. It was Dad. He looked like hell. His hair was sticking up more than it normally did when he first got out of bed—actually, it stuck straight up

on one side and looked like it had been shellacked to his scalp on the other—and his skin had a chalky pallor to it.

He leaned against the doorjamb.

“Hey.” His shirt and khaki pants were covered with wrinkles.

“You’re dressed,” I said with a smile, hoping to lighten the mood from the night before.

He waved his hand in mock humility. “It was nothing, really.” He sounded hoarse and congested.

“Want some orange juice?” Aunt Ruth said.

He squinted at her a moment as if she’d just asked him to solve an advanced logic puzzle. “Sure,” he said. He remained in the open doorway and then grimaced. His shirt was tucked in on one side and hung over his waistband on the other.

“Do you want to shower first?” she said. “Gail took hers a couple of hours ago.”

“Yeah, in a minute.” He shielded his eyes with his hand, then shut the door and sat down across from us, his back to the sun. He guzzled the juice in four or five swallows and she poured him another.

“Listen, Michael,” she said. “Since I’ve been awake a few more hours than you, I’ve had time to get a little perspective. You were right about one thing.”

“Only one? You mean, ever?”

“As I was saying.”

“Sorry. Go ahead.”

“I know I’ve been on your case a long time, hoping you’d ease up a little and not work such ridiculously long hours if you don’t have to. Well, you did ease up last

night. I just hadn’t expected you to take my advice quite so far.”

“Gail,” he said to me, “had you ever seen your father drunk before last night?”

“No,” I said, truthfully. “Maybe you were trying to make up for lost time?”

Uncle Ned’s silhouette appeared behind the screen door and then vanished before he came outside a few seconds later with a couple of large white paper bags in his hands. He smiled convivially at Dad. “Howdy.” He glanced at Ruth and his smile faded some.

“It’s okay, Ned,” she said. “I think we’ve called a cease-fire.”

He looked Dad over. “You remind me of something. What could it be? Let’s see... Oh, I know. Night of the Living Dead.” He set the bags on the table. “Breakfast,” he said and then looked at his watch. “Or brunch, I guess.”

We stayed another hour or so and then, as she walked us to our car, Aunt Ruth offered to show us the old house in Nob Hill. The Nob Hill district had been known for its funky shops and restaurants, though it was becoming more upscale every year. I could tell that Dad would have rather gone straight home, but I think he agreed to swing by the place as a conciliatory gesture. Besides, she did look after the place for him.

She and my father had spent their entire childhoods in that house. Located seven or eight blocks from the University of New Mexico, it was a three-story Spanish-style building that my grandfather purchased after he went to work as a chemist at Sandia Labs. I never met my

grandfather; he died while Dad and Aunt Ruth were still kids. My parents moved into the house after my grandmother moved to Rio Rancho, and that's where they lived when I was born. As we stood there on the lot in front of the house, I was acutely aware of another detail, one Aunt Ruth had told me that morning: that it was also the place the three of us lived the day my father became a widower.

The next year, Dad left New Mexico with me in tow, and Aunt Ruth divided the house into three spacious apartments, one per floor. Most of the tenants were UNM students.

"Don't you want to go inside?" she said to him.

"Why? You've obviously got everything under control. I trust you."

She stood there looking at him a moment and then shrugged but chose not to push the matter. The three of us ambled across the front yard before stopping at the curb, where our cars were parked. Aunt Ruth hugged me goodbye, then said, "Come back down anytime you want, Gail. I know your dad will be swamped with work, but Ned or I can pick you up. We'd love to have you. Anytime at all."

"I'd love to come back," I said.

As her car pulled away from the curb, Dad smiled and shook his head. "I must admit," he said. "I do sort of admire her tenacity." He glanced back at the house. "Come on, let's get outta here."

On our way to the trailer, we stopped in the mountains overlooking Santa Fe, at a spot not too far below the timberline. The pale undersides of aspen leaves flickered in the

breeze. Dad gazed in silence at the trees on the other side of the canyon.

"You okay?" I said.

He nodded. "Sure. Did I ever tell you, Gail, how FEMA got started?"

"I don't think so."

"It was toward the end of Cold War, during the Carter Administration. I probably never mentioned any of this to you when you were younger," he said. "I didn't want you to have the same nightmares I had as a kid. In fact, I had them even later, in college." He laughed uneasily. "God, those were awful dreams. The bombs never did go off. I'd always wake up right before the things were supposed to detonate. It was always about the wait. First the chaos in the streets, then everyone desperately racing for shelter, even though we all knew it was futile. Obviously, no school gymnasium or indoor mall could survive a nuclear blast, but we would—everyone in the dream—we'd scramble inside somewhere and wait for the things to strike." A resigned smile came to his face. "Of course, there was nowhere to run."

The hills below us were covered with spruces, junipers, ponderosas, and, farther down, small pinons, all untouched by the fire.

He rubbed the toe of his shoe against the sandy soil. "You know, your mother used to love skiing up here. Even when we were still living in New Haven. We came here every year for the holidays."

"Really?"

"Yep." He peered at the aspens overheard. "Every single winter."

We stood there in silence a minute before he spoke again.

"You know I can't stay here, Gail."

I nodded. "I know, Dad."

"How? How do you know that?"

"I can just tell. You never wanted to stay here before, so I couldn't figure out why you would suddenly want to stay here now." I didn't mention my conversation with Aunt Ruth that morning.

"I thought I could do it. At least for a while. It's just too many of the wrong kinds of memories, though."

"Yeah, I know," I said, though I shared none of those memories.

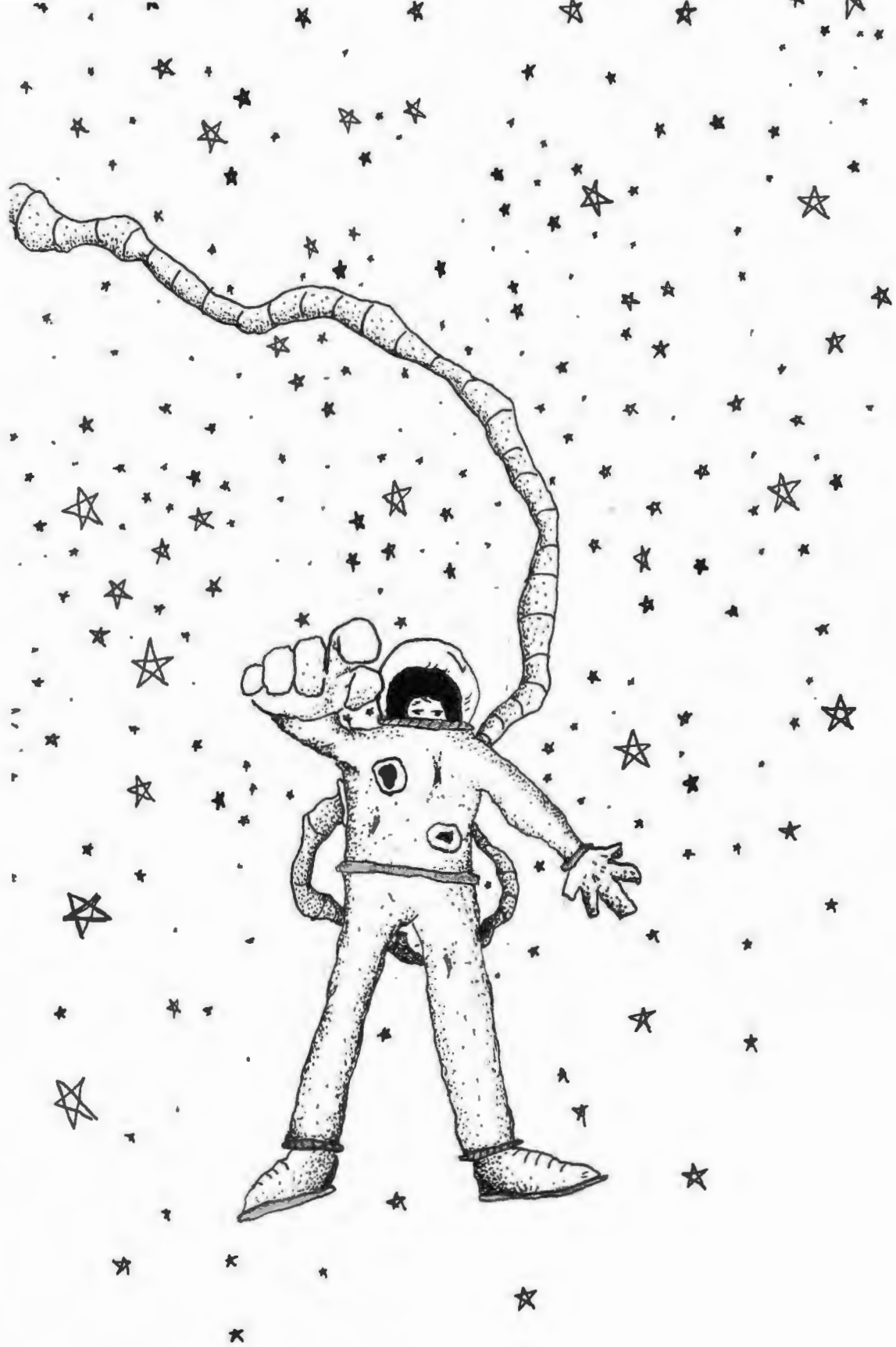
"And I know I can't expect you to come with me this time."

I didn't respond, but he was right.

On Monday he was approved for a transfer back to Oklahoma City, and a few days later, we moved my things from Santa Fe to Albuquerque, where the guest room at my aunt's house would become my bedroom. After Aunt Ruth and Uncle Ned went back inside, Dad and I lingered by the curb a few minutes and then he held me tightly, as if he didn't want to let go.

He then kissed my forehead, got in the car, and headed for the nearest entrance to I-40 east.





“A Gift from Space”

Benjamin Rittgers

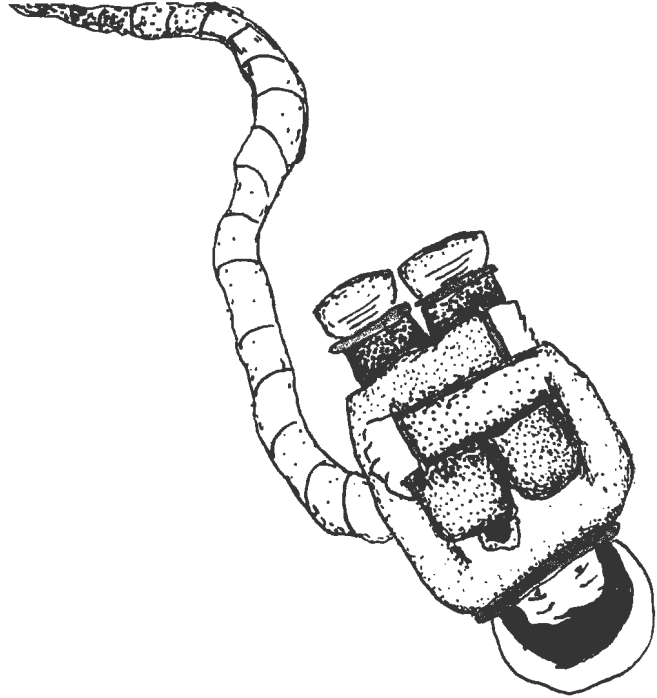
I heard the metal-on-metal clang of a ship docking on Triton Station. I could hear from my quarters that it was a bad docking. I had to go down to investigate, although I didn't care to, but I was alone out here in an empty space station around the orbit of Triton, the largest moon of Neptune. Triton Station: population one; it was just me. Before the advent of Faster-Than-Light travel, Triton Station had a much larger population, since it was the way station at the edge of the solar system. The newer FTL ships would blink into and out of existence at the orbit of Saturn, thus they never needed to come way out here. Only the slow boats came to Triton, and as soon as they arrived in the solar system, they upgraded their engines to FTL and never returned to Triton. The only Slower-Than-Light ships around were those that left before FTL's invention. Still, there were quite a few out there and the Sol System Flight Ops wanted someone out here to greet them.

I took the lift down to the dock level and stood and waited in the elevator before the elevator car took an air sample and decided it was safe to open the doors.

I shivered as cold air shot into the elevator car, but I disembarked and walked out into the dock. My feet crunched on the frost, leaving a trail of footprints behind on the deck. The dock level was the closest level to the outside of the station. The only thing beneath the floor was the cold of deep space.

I looked spinward and anti-spinward down the dock and saw nothing. I decided to walk around the wheel until I arrived where I started. The station was only a mile around, so it wouldn't take more than fifteen minutes. It was a bit chilly, but if that bad docking had caused a hull breach, I needed to know about it.

I walked along, trying to feel if there was wind coming down the corridor. Even if there was a hole open to space, on a station this big, it wouldn't explosively decompress. The leak would be gradual,



but I still needed to find it and take steps to isolate the holed compartment.

I was surprised the ship hadn't radioed ahead. Ships always radioed ahead and when they did, I got the fun of giving them the news that they were obsolete relics of a bygone age. That was always a joy. Their ships, their cargo, and their livelihood were completely out of date. Turning around to go home never would work. FTL travel would beat them home. Their only choice was to retrain and integrate into society, or upgrade their engines to the new mode of travel. In the two years I had been stationed here, I had only given the news to one ship. One crewwoman hadn't taken it well. She had joined the crew of her freighter to get away from a family situation and had meant to travel from place to place to keep ahead of them, but that is another story.

I walked over to the docking ring where the ship had been docked and looked down into the airlock. It was on the floor of the station, so the ship docked underneath and could maintain the same

gravity as the rest of the station. The window was covered in frost, so I knelt down and scraped the frost away and looked down. A woman from the ship knocked a frantic tap on the window to motion me to open the lock when she saw me.

I complied and then had to hold my nose when the air from the ship entered the compartment. The woman scrambled up the ladder in her airlock to climb onto the dock.

"We had a problem with our environmental plant. I'm the only one left." She collapsed on the deck.

I helped her to her feet. "Are you the only survivor?"

She nodded and then shivered.

"Let's get you upstairs and settled into a room in the hotel."

"Thanks," she said. "I've been on board ship too long."

A Slower-Than-Light starship takes at least twenty to thirty years to go to another star system. As FTL travel spread, only ships from more distant destinations come to Triton Station and their travel time increases. It is true that the effect of relativity causes the crew to only feel as if six to ten years have elapsed; still, a crew would be demanding liberty at the first port after so long a journey.

"Of course I need to have your maintenance crew repair my environmental plant and refuel the ship. We have cargo to offload too. Also direct me to the guild offices to hire new crew."

I thought she was a bit matter-of-fact getting to business, despite being sole survivor of a space tragedy, but I checked the station's fuel level. The deuterium tanks were empty. I shrugged. The station

had a cloud farmer running in the upper atmosphere of Neptune, so the fuel could be replenished. I just hadn't bothered since ships usually stayed around long enough to generate new fuel. I hit the controls to send the cloud farmer down to the planet. "Fuel will have to wait. We don't have a repair crew and we don't handle cargo here anymore, so you will have to head in toward Earth for that, but it will take us a few days to generate your fuel."

"What can you do?" She didn't seem very happy with the accommodations.

"I can find you somewhere to sleep."

The station was a mile in circumference and was six levels high, so the station boasted high-class hotels and stores. The stores had been long since emptied and the restaurants had run out of food, but the hotels remained furnished. I stay in the Presidential Suite at the Hilton, because it was empty after all. I was the only person stationed on a station designed for thousands, so I could choose where to live. I could access the communication controls from the holovision in the room, or even the one by the hot tub. I didn't have access to the radar systems, but I knew where Station Control was. It was usually sufficient to check in whenever a ship radioed ahead. Space is big, so even a freighter going relativistic speeds takes a while to arrive at the station.

I checked my guest into a nearby room at the Hilton.

"What's your name?"

"Vikki Birdwell."

I handed her the key card to the

room next to mine. "It's the Honeymoon Suite. Enjoy. Meals are served in the dining room at six and twelve four times a day."

"I don't need such a lavish hotel room. My ship's accounts are going to be low as it is with the repairs I need for my environmental plant. Considering what happened, I just want to be alone, so I don't want to take meals with the other guests in the hotel."

I smiled at her. "There are no other guests. Welcome to Triton Station: Population One. Well, it's two now that you are here. The Presidential and the Honeymoon Suites are the only rooms I've bothered to heat, so it will be mighty cold if you stay elsewhere. Besides, the Hilton staff hasn't been here for at least three decades, so I doubt they will bill either of us." I smiled and indicated she precede me to the elevator.

"But isn't this station the port-of-call for visiting ships? Why is nobody around? It seems a waste to have to travel to Earth and then claw back up the gravity well to return here again."

A chime rang, indicating I had a message. "Just get some rest. I'll brief you on everything tomorrow at breakfast. That's the next meal." I turned and left her in the passageway.

I arrived in my room alone. Today was the day that the message traffic came. The planets aligned just right that messages from Earth could arrive. Receiving a tight beam laser message from over four billion kilometers away takes precision and a really big satellite dish. Triton Station's satellite dish was a mile in

circumference. The whole sunward side of the station was the antenna. Since it orbited a moon which orbited an ice giant, it was touchy when the dish was aligned perfectly to even get a message and that happened to fall on December 21st.

I was excited because the dish was my only contact with other humans. Sure, we could get messages at other times by relaying messages from Saturn or Jupiter or even Mars, but direct contact with Earth was required for personal messages. My eyes lit up when I saw I had a personal message from my wife.

Dawn Meadows was beautiful. She had blond hair and blue eyes and she had the face of an angel. Her skin even had that brand new look to it; I always wanted to touch her and hold her. She was so smart and pretty and I had known she was the one for me the moment I saw her. I clicked on the message and sent the image to the holovision.

"Hey, Bobby." She looked gaunt and I could see she had lost a bit more weight, but I was still happy to see her. I should have never left her to take this job, but we needed the money to take care of her. She smiled weakly through what I knew was pain. I didn't say anything because we were four hours apart. It would take eight hours for a reply to come and she could only talk for five minutes.

She paused as if trying to think of what to say and then she shifted her weight. "Umm, you are too far apart from me. I missed you so much. I'm trying to wait, but I just want to rest." Her voice broke and then she started to cry.

The camera panned back and I saw her lying in the hospital bed. We had been apart for over a year and she was getting worse.

"The treatment isn't working. I'm sorry, Bobby. Hurry back. I need you here to hold my hand until I sleep one last time. I don't know how long I can last, so hurry."

I shut off the screen. I hoped the relief ship would come on time. It

wasn't fair. The ship to pick me up was coming in less than a week. I wondered why I even needed to come out here. Mars was booming. I could have gotten a job there, the second most populated planet in the solar system. I would have been able to see my wife every day.

I wondered why I even let them assign me to such an abandoned post: Aside from the most recent guest, only two ships had come out here since I was posted, one being the ship that brought me here. I had taken the assignment for the money. Dawn's treatments were expensive and I got a bonus for being out here. I had no expenses at the space station, so all the money could pay for her health care.

There were plenty of stores and restaurants in the shopping and entertainment decks, but they were long since empty. All the valuable merchandise had been evacuated along with the rest of the station when it was discovered that the whole business model for Triton Station was obsolete.

It's strange. It was more than thirty years ago when FTL was invented and still there were people who wanted it banned,

"We had a problem with our environmental plant. I'm the only one left." She collapsed on the deck.

most of them were investors in this station. I liked the idea. Before she had become ill my fiancé and I had wanted to travel to a new colony, but that would be a death sentence for her without the health care Earth offered. But now the cancer might take her before I saw her again.

About 5:30 AM, station time, I got dressed and decided to start my day. I waved my tablet up to clear station messages and see if there were any emergencies I had to deal with. My daily ten minutes of work complete, I headed down to the kitchen to get some food. The hotel I used as my living quarters had a kitchen and dining room in the lobby, so I walked down to the kitchen to make breakfast.

To get to the kitchen I had to walk through the dining room. I had gotten kind of lazy in the past: because the stock of food had just been haphazardly stocked in the freezer or cupboards, it took me awhile to cook some ready-meals. By the time I got to the dining room, Vikki was already waiting.

I set down the plates of reconstituted bacon and eggs on one of the tables. "Breakfast, such as it is, is served."

She gave a wry smile, sticking a fork in something that looked like eggs and took a bite. "Not bad. Anything is good compared to the thirty-year-old ready meals we had on the ship. We didn't get to shop much since our last port-of-call."

I knew she didn't shop at all. Nothing exists in the space between solar systems, and other ships don't have fresh stuff to trade. Not that ships meet in the in-between. "It should get even better

when you get to Earth and have fresh fruits and vegetables."

"It makes a nice treat when we hit port," she said. "We can only carry a few weeks of fresh foods before we have to resort to cans and frozen foods."

"Well now that starships travel faster than light between the stars, you might only need a few weeks of foods."

She froze. "You're kidding. How much faster?"

"It's instantaneous."

I saw doubt on her face.

"No, really," I said. "Once you get about ten astronomical units from the sun, it's instantaneous. That's why no one comes this far out in the Solar System. The jump drive engages and then the ship reappears when it gets a certain distance from a gravity well. With the Sun, it's ten AU. Other stars have different jump limits, but the bigger the star, the farther the jump limit is. The only reason I am alone out here is to wait for the ships that left before FTL travel was invented."

She got a thoughtful look on her face. "Where does that leave me?"

"You can do what you want. You can resettle on Earth or on many of the settled planets in human space. You could also upgrade your ship's drive to FTL and continue on. Well, if you can afford it. What is your cargo?"

She frowned. "We are carrying mostly information. We also have a lot of pharmaceuticals, including a cure for certain types of cancers."

"There will be a market for that," I said.

"If you are alone here, what is the procedure when a ship arrives? I need a

tug to get the ship towed to Earth.”

“A relief ship should be coming in a week. It has towing capacity.”

She frowned when I gave the time frame.

“The ship only comes once a year, so be glad you came when you did. Otherwise, you’d be stuck here a bit longer.”

“Well, I guess we’ll play the waiting game,” she said.

I agreed. I read the manifest from the ship over and over. The ship carried the cure for the same disease my wife suffered from - now I had hope.

A few days later an alarm squealed indicating an incoming message. I paged Vikki and we both arrived in Station Control within ten minutes. The relief ship was on its way and they were close enough for two-way communications. I fired up the communications suite and sent a message.

“Earth Planetary Ship Discover, this is Triton Station Control. We have a guest on station. We need to arrange to have her ship towed to Earth for upgrade and passage for the crew woman.”

“Triton Control, we can do that.”

“Hear that?” I asked as I turned to Vikki. “I told you they would...” My voice trailed off. Vikki was gone.

Over the next few days, I scoured the station looking for her. She wasn’t in her room, she wasn’t in the dining area, and she wasn’t even in any of the abandoned shops or restaurants. However, once the relief ship arrived, I was ready.

I stood on the docking level next to

the fuel station and waited as the new arrival docked. Crew disembarked. Fuel hoses were connected and an officer in a blue uniform of the Solar System Flight Ops came out to greet me. He had a permanent scowl on his face. “I’m Commander Pearson Kuttner. I’m ready to read your report.”

I waved on my tablet and swiped the report across to the tablet he held. I watched as he read through the report and I watched his expression as he read my conclusion.

“We need to discuss this SS Fortune. We’ll meet in your office in about an hour.” His expression was not a happy one.

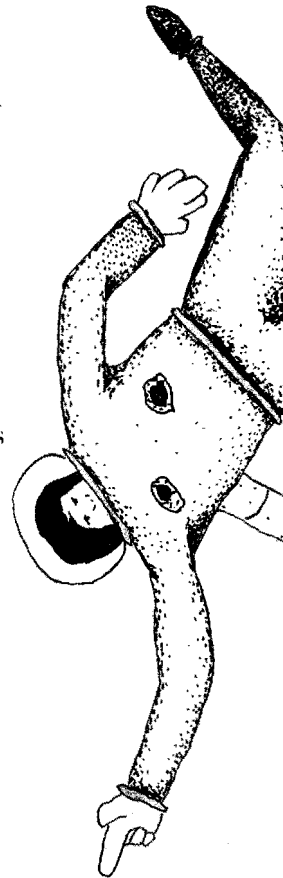
“I think you’ve been away from people too long, Lieutenant.”

“I stand by my report,” I said.

“Your report contradicts the station logs and my own observations.”

“I spoke with the surviving crew person and I’m going by what she said. She mentioned that her cargo contained pharmaceuticals and even had cures for diseases that are currently incurable on Earth.”

He sighed and then waved on his tablet. “The station logs showed you never opened the airlock to the SS Fortune. It needs an override code you don’t have. You read the ship’s manifest, but you didn’t and couldn’t read the logs because they are



under the same seal.”

“I swear I talked to her. Vikki, the surviving crew person, opened the hatch on her side, so I didn’t need an override code. I swear that she told me about the cancer cure. I did read her manifest, but only after she told me about the cure.” I looked Commander Kuttner in the eyes. “That cure is just what my Dawn needs.”

“Then I’m sorry. The ship had an environmental catastrophe just like you discussed in your report. Unfortunately, they needed to adapt their environmental plant to keep the pharmaceuticals preserved and it was too much for the algae matrix. The pharmaceuticals decayed away.”

“Oh.” There wasn’t much to say. “But I talked to Vikki. Did you find out if she survived and left the station somehow?”

“Unfortunately, no.” He waved on his tablet. “This is the first body we found when we boarded the ship.” A holograph of the window of the airlock showed a woman from the ship knocking a frantic tap on the window motioning to open the airlock, only she wasn’t knocking. Instead her hand brushed the window as she swayed from her spot on the ladder. Apparently she climbed to the highest part of the ship to gasp the last breaths of oxygen. Her body turned slightly and I read the name tag embroidered on her coveralls: “Vikki.”

She was dead as my wife would soon be if I couldn’t get her that cure for her disease. My only choice was to go home and hold my Dawn’s hand as she dies.

“The Circle”

Norah Mandil

You settle yourself in a seat,
joining a ring of strangers
from all walks of life,
from all corners of the world.
What unites them all: the scraps of paper
they each deposit
into the middle of this circle.

You hesitantly pluck one from the heap,
and the others follow suit.
You unfold your paper,
and cringe at its message.
“I just had my second miscarriage.”
You toss the note back into the pile
trying to fling it as far away from you as possible,
and choose another.
This one says, “I’ve been a drug addict for eight years.”
You don’t find this one any more pleasing.

You desperately sift through the mound of misery,
searching for the note you contributed,
the horror you know you can handle
but you can't find it.

Instead you get.

"No matter what I do I can't feel beautiful."

"Last week we lost our home to a fire."

"I watched my best friend die in Vietnam."

"I
"My husband left me for my best friend."
"I never got to tell her I was sorry."
"My suicide attempt failed. Again."
"I watch my dad being abused and I was driving."
"The crash disfigured me to the point I can't even look at myself."
"He warned I just found out he had been having an affair with a school teacher."
"My family won't accept me unless I accept their religion."
"I went to a boarding school where I am with alcohol between who I am without."
"My instructor is failing me no matter how hard I try because of my race."
"I was raped on my way
"I have terminal cancer."
"I'm afraid of everything."
"They look at me because of my skin."

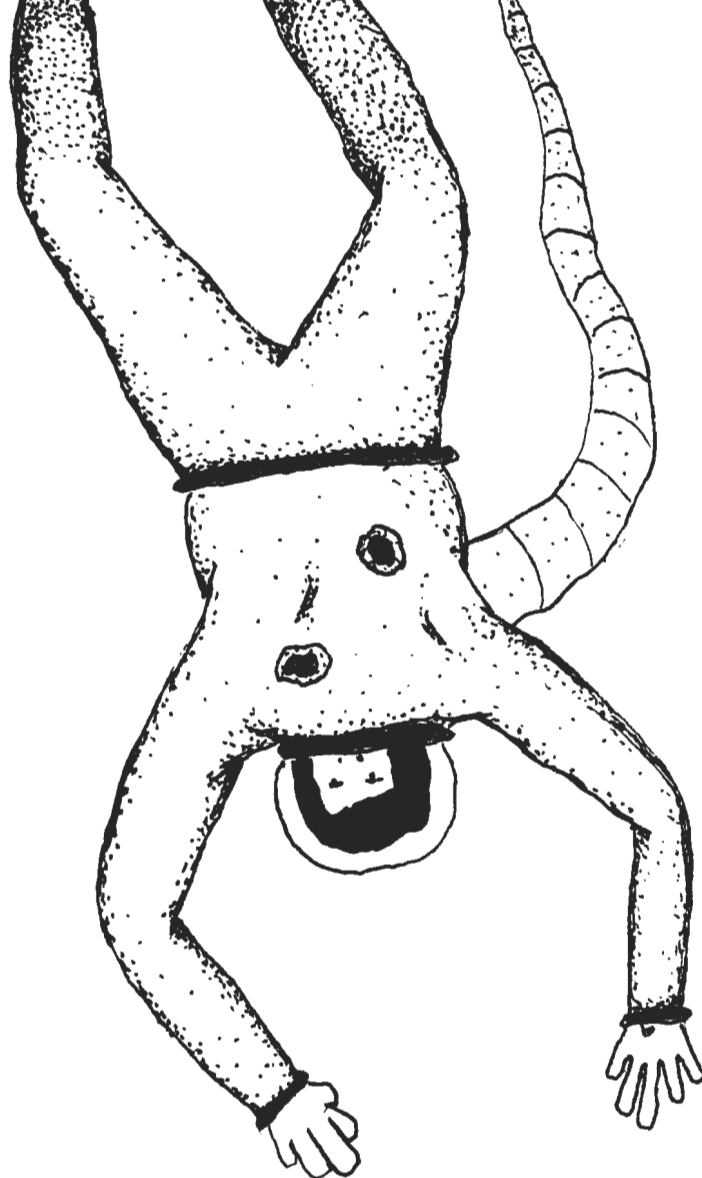
"Every foster home has sent me back."

You rip through papers until you're drowning in them.

We each have a parade of nightmares we battle against
each and every day,
each person's as horrendous as the next.
No single trauma has more worth than another,
because how can you assign value to one's suffering?
And as you read through these scraps
of other people's worst experiences,
you wonder
how they can endure it.







“The New Neighbors”

Benjamin Rittgers

Alarms shrieked. The little star ship vibrated and shook. Cara tried to steady the helm, but the port-side air-breathing engine had taken too much damage from the explosion when she came out of jump. She held the helm and fought it, but there was no way she could abort the landing. She had to ride the ship all the way to the ground.

A gust of wind hit her from starboard. She had to roll forty-five degrees, just to keep the ship together and then she lowered the nose too far, and it was only a matter of time until the ship hit the ground. She had reached the point of no return.

A scan of the horizon showed a few continents with jagged mountain peaks getting closer and closer. She looked for a place to land, but the landscape rushed to meet her, faster and faster. She threw her body weight into pulling back the stick, even though she knew it wouldn't make a bit of difference. The controls were fly-by-wire; once the stick was pulled

against the stops, it couldn't go back further. The port-side air-breather was needed to give additional lift.

Looking around, frantic to find a place to land, a soft, sandy beach appeared to port. “Bingo.” She nudged the stick to the left a tad, all she thought she could spare, toward her target..

She tried to level it from a nose-down position when it struck. A whining screech sounded throughout the spaceship as it slid over the beach, and then the sound was replaced by the roar of rushing water.

Panic set in. A starship doesn't fill with water often, especially a starship she piloted. She didn't even know how to swim. Mars didn't have standing water. Budgeting a dome to house a swimming pool cost way too much in materials and space for any sane domed colony.

She knew she had to get out of there. The ship was canted tail up and the water rose to fill the galley and her stateroom. Soon it would fill the little control room and ship's office. She slid down the an-

gled deck toward the airtight airlock that divided each compartment. She didn't think the ship's controls could handle flooding. She lay on the door and stared down into the water that was licking at the porthole in the airlock. She wanted to cry. Nothing about her McIntyre Survey and Exploration Company was going right. Soon the bankruptcy lawyers would be swarming the ship, if they didn't decide to take the ship outright. As it was, no one could find it. This unexplored planet was far from her own civilized star system.

She had to act and that meant a planetary survey to make the call if it was too dangerous for colonists. It was her job to decide if a potential colony world would be sustainable. Colonists didn't pay for uncolonizable planets. This mission had to bring her the finder's fee for this planet or she would go bust.

She opened the spare parts locker and sighed. The ship was at such an angle that the parts would have been flung against one side of the room during the crash, but there wasn't any mess. The shelves were empty. Only her backpack of survey equipment hung from a hook by the door.

She took the bag and winced. Her left hand was still a bit sore and it was still painful to move her fingers, but it had healed a bit on her journey. It just worried her to no end to think about how she set herself up for failure by selling the ship's spares, but she had needed the money; Mr. La Rossa's goons had made that clear when she couldn't pay.

She hadn't even been able to keep her crew. Maryland had quit when she couldn't afford to pay her, and her engi-

neer Tomas had taken a leave of absence to serve as engineer on a cruise ship.

Cara sat on the beach. Her clothes were soaked and she had lost both her shoes. She clung to her backpack, but it held only her survey gear. She lost the bag that carried extra clothes and rations in the current. Now the tide had come in and she couldn't go back to the ship. Her stomach growled and her wet clothes stuck to her body. The wind picked up and she shivered. Moments before, it was a beautiful summer day, but the sky darkened and a squall line approached from the sea. She had to look for shelter.

She ran from the ocean toward the forested area away from the shore. She'd been to a handful of alien worlds: one had twelve large moons, which played merry havoc with the weather. However, she'd been smart enough to stay in her ship during a storm. Today, she didn't have that option. She looked back at the ship, but she couldn't even see it due to the sea foam the storm churned up. She did see something else, however.

In the distance was a little hut. At least it looked like a hut. She cursed when she saw it. Another scout must have beat her to the planet, and was probably already on his way to stake a claim on it. He would get the bonus and not her. She'd have to go home and let Mr. La Rossa's goons break the knuckles on her other hand. She sighed and headed for the hut.

When she arrived, she laughed. The little hut wasn't human-made at all. It was just sticks leaning together and thrown

together in a pile. An opening a little larger than a doghouse graced the front of the hut. She attempted to look inside, but it was obscured by darkness. She looked around. She hadn't scanned the planet for life before crashing. She tried to think of a natural reason for the shelter and pushed aside the fretful thought that aliens created it from her mind. A rain-drop splattered on her arm. Then one more splashed her, followed by a torrent as the storm caught up with her.

She stood in front of the shelter and tried to peer into the darkness, but she couldn't see anything. She tried to think what she learned in the scout course before she got her license: "Assume all animals were hostile until she studied them." A peel of thunder shook the little hut, and she felt a sting against her cheek as a hailstone struck her.

"Hell." She dropped to her knees and crawled in the hole. It felt like the hut was going to collapse under the racket of hail crashing against the flimsy sticks, but she wasn't hit by hail again. She wondered who had left it here. Was there something intelligent on this planet? The guidebook had said not to jump to conclusions about the intelligence of unknown creatures. On Earth, bees had vast social networks and beavers built complex lodges.

She shivered. Was this hut built by beavers or whatever creatures filled the same ecological niche on this world? What if they were in here with her? She looked around the hut and searched every corner. There were little cubby holes filled with dead grass and leaves. She couldn't get into any of the small places

or tunnels, so she hoped nothing was here with her.

The storm raged outside. Through the opening, all she could see of the beach was gray and swirling rain. The pattering of the rain pounded on the hut occasionally peppered by a wet thud of a hailstone striking the branches of the roof. Even in the hut, it was cold, but her clothes were a sopping mess. She reached into her pocket and she squeal with triumph as she found a waterproof case with matches. She could have a fire.

The dry leaves and grass in the cubbyholes made excellent tinder, and some sticks she worked out of the walls of the structure made decent fuel. Soon she had a roaring fire. She loved campfires and rarely had a chance to have one. Back home, they were never allowed. Who in their right mind would light a fire in the domed cities of Mars? She'd never been to Earth, where that type of thing was done, but on alien worlds it was allowed. The colonists hadn't yet arrived to make rules and laws.

The hail stopped and the rain tapered off to a gentle pattering. Her clothes started to dry in the warmth of the fire. She felt drowsy and, having no other pressing business, she fell asleep.

Cara awoke to sunbeams streaming into the hut. Despite the rain, the ground around her was dry. Whatever had built the hut had built it well. She crawled out of the opening tiny opening and let out a little shriek.

All around the hut stood little creatures and they weren't savage animals. They looked cute and cuddly and furry,

similar to foxes in size and appearance, and their fur varied from red to brown. For clothing, they wore fabric headdresses colored in blues and greens. She thought they looked quite fetching, but the little spears they carried told her that they were not defenseless.

She knelt on one knee to lower herself to their heights. If she appeared less threatening, maybe they wouldn't attack her. "Hey, guys, I won't hurt you."

The red-haired critter raised his spear and chittered. She had no way of understanding what the creature said, but she had to do something since he appeared to be the leader and others were holding their spears with aggressive stances.

She glanced at her waist where her blaster should have been, but it was another piece of gear she had lost as she waded to shore. As much as she regretted not having it, she didn't want a massacre to be the first impression they had of humans. She held her hands out, palms up. She thought that showing her hands would make her look less threatening.

They stepped back, but the leader came forward. She wanted to run away, but she didn't know how they would react. Besides she couldn't make her ship work. She pointed out to sea at her ship, just sticking up above the water. "I crashed down here on your planet." She pantomimed a ship crashing by striking the sand with her fists.

The little aliens looked to sea at her

ship and their chattering increased. Some of them from the rear tried to break ranks, but the leader chittered louder and waved them back in formation. He then chirped orders to another creature, which scampered away. His chirping commands continued and others scattered to wagons and supply carts. In hardly anytime, the creatures set up camp. Little tents spotted the shoreline.

Cara tried to stand, but the small cadre the leader had left to watch her raised their spears and chirped. She froze, but her posture was uncomfortable. Her knees hurt and she wanted so much to sit down. She could understand their reluctance to have her towering above them.

She could imagine what would happen if eighteen-foot-tall aliens landed outside Dome One back on Mars. That would frighten any human being. The cramp in her leg intensified.

After ten minutes, she gave up trying to stay still. She shifted positions so she was sitting. She put her arms around her knees and watched the creatures.

The camp wasn't in a circle or a square. By the time the tents were set up, the camp was shaped like a chevron, or several chevrons. It was almost like they were expecting something to slide into the middle of the camp.

She didn't have too long to wait. She looked toward her ship. The tide rolled in so that just the tip of the ship's stern stuck out of the water. However, beyond her spacecraft, a sailing vessel paddled

To her left and right, panels blinked with red and yellow warning lights. She glanced up and down the list. A hull breach in the forward compartment accounted for most. The other one was an engineering alarm.

in. Green and yellow sails hung from its single mast and what looked like tiny oars stuck out of the sides. She could almost hear the sounds of drums beating over the crashing of the waves, but she thought it was just her imagination. The ship came closer and closer.

She studied the Vikings in history class, mainly because the first explorers to Mars were Viking 1 and Viking 2. Life outside of Earth was supposed to be confirmed, but they only confirmed the lifelessness of the red planet. The Viking probes were on page one of her Mars History textbook in school.

The study of humans on Mars began in chapter two, so she had to spend two whole weeks learning the names and dates of unmanned space probes. In her spare time, she studied the names behind of the

probes and studied the actual Vikings on Earth.

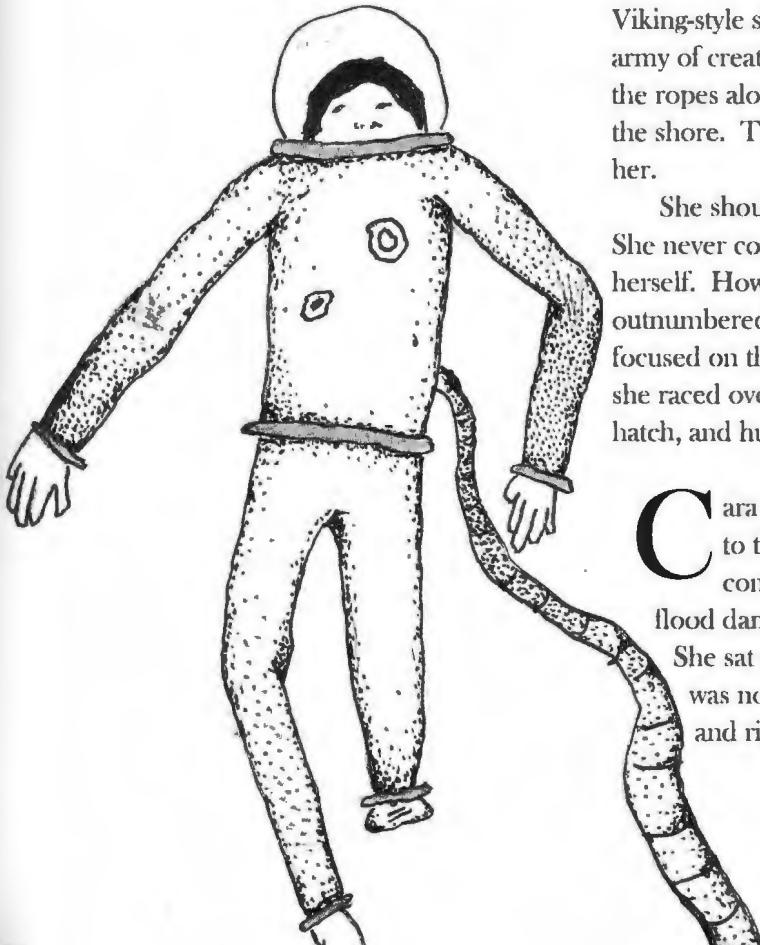
The little ship looked just like a Viking ship from Earth. Oh, there were differences. The ship came close enough that she could see that the ship had two banks of oars instead of just the one on a Viking ship of Earth. The sails weren't striped either, but solid green and yellow.

The ship didn't land on the beach. Instead it sailed toward her spacecraft and made contact. Ropes were thrown, chirps and whistles sounded, and drums beat. Six ropes connected her ship to theirs. More whistles and chirps, and the ship was underway, towing the metal spacecraft that had to weigh more than a wood ship. She was surprised that her ship was actually moving.

Before long, it was too close to shore for the creatures ships to tow. The Viking-style ship sailed away and the little army of creatures took over. They pulled the ropes along until the ship was fully on the shore. They had raised her ship for her.

She should thank them somehow. She never could have raised the ship herself. However, she felt scared and outnumbered. As soon as their attention focused on the spacecraft instead of her, she raced over to her ship, opened the hatch, and hurried inside.

Cara worried about the damage to the ship. She hurried to the control room expecting to find flood damage, but everything felt dry. She sat at the command chair that was no longer canted. To her left and right, panels blinked with red



and yellow warning lights. She glanced up and down the list. A hull breach in the forward compartment accounted for most. The other one was an engineering alarm.

She scowled. Besides the bad air-breathing engine, the only other engineering alarm was for the jump drive. However, she'd seen the alarm before. Usually going back to engineering and manually resetting it cleared it. She meant to get it fixed, but she couldn't afford the repair. It was an annoying problem, but it wouldn't stop the ship from returning to Mars. She got up to check out the forward compartment.

When she arrived at the hatch, she peered in the window. The water had receded, but it soaked everything. She pushed the door open and looked around. The glass window at the front of the ship had a big crack in it, which had let some of the water in. But the floor of the compartment was the problem. The sand and mud pulled into the ship by skidding across the beach and then being dragged back out of the water had ruined everything in the compartment. She could close the airtight hatch she had entered and still safely operate the ship, but this was her bedroom.

She touched the bed. The sea soaked clear through the mattress. The sheets and pillows were a sandy mess. She turned toward her closet. It was open and mud had splashed onto her hanging clothes and worked its way into the drawers as well. Everything was ruined. Her artwork on the walls was stained and waterlogged and the electronics were ruined as well.

This was her home and everything was junk. The insurance would cover it. She was current with that only because they wouldn't let her leave port unless she had proof that it was paid. She was angry at the time, but now that was the only thing that was in her favor. She felt drained. She sat on the bed and cried.

"Crying is not going to solve this," she said. "Pull yourself together." She got up and sighed. Her pants were soaked from sitting on the sea-soaked bed, but she had other work to do. She had to clear the engineering alarm and find a way to refuel. Fortunately, she was near water. She had the equipment to distill tritium out of the ocean so she thought she could take off with just the one engine, if she had full fuel tanks to power the rockets, but she needed to check.

Engineering turned out not to be so easy. At least the compartment was dry. She went straight to the jump drive and hit the reset. The ship shuttered a bit, and alarms flashed on the panel. She'd never seen that combination before. It read "Crystal Failure." Instead of showing red, it flashed on and off.

She looked in the view port into the window. Instead of the red and blue crystals that normally sat in there, there were only two small piles of shards. The jump crystals were shattered. Jump crystals never shattered unless . . . unless there were other jump ships too close to where she came out of jump. She froze as she thought of the explosive entry into real space.

The men to whom she had sold her spares had her only spare jump crystals. How could she have been so stupid?

The jump drive let her bypass light years of space between gravity wells. Her ship only had to take her far enough away from the star at the center of every solar system. Her engines still had to take her as far away from the sun as the orbit of Saturn and that was a couple weeks journey from Mars. When she activated the jump drive it transported the ship to the outer solar system that this planet orbited. It had taken a few weeks to get down to this planet from where the jump drive took her. The plan was four weeks there and maybe a fifth week to explore the planet before she had to return, but now she would never make it home. The Solar System was over one hundred light years away, and a journey taking weeks now would take a lifetime. Even if she could get up to relativistic speeds, more than one hundred years would have passed.

Her sister would need a bridesmaid for her wedding. She would never get married herself. The only contact she would ever have would be with aliens that looked like bipedal foxes. Her breathing got faster and shallow and she couldn't get enough air. She collapsed to the deck plates. "What am I going to do?"

I need to calm down, she thought. Besides, if the crystals shattered, there had to be another ship in the system, or at least a local source of the crystals. She forced her breathing to center and took deep breaths. She could work through this. She could reassemble the crystal. That may hold for one trip. She gathered the shards of crystal and wrapped them in a cloth. She wanted to try to reassemble them in natural light.

As she looked through the passageway, she caught a glance of herself in a mirror. She was covered in mud and didn't really represent the human race well. The ship had the cabin, which had flooded, and two state rooms. She ducked into both state rooms and looked in the cupboards. There was only a pair of shorts and a camisole that she really wouldn't wear out in public, but it was what she had. She showered and dressed, and grabbed the crystal shards to do her work.

She walked down the ramp back to the beach. The furry aliens surrounded her and she gave a nervous smile. "Okay, guys. Be nice to me." She started toward a spot she thought would be a good place to reassemble the crystal. The furry aliens moved back when she started toward them. No matter which direction she took, the aliens stepped out of the way to maintain a distance of twenty feet from her.

"I'm just working on a part of my ship." She looked around. The light was natural, but much different than the light of the Sun. The local sun shone down with bluer light, not the warm yellow light of the sun. Not that she sat in the sunlight on Mars, as the cities there were domed cities.

She sat down on the sand and opened the cloth that held the crystal shards. She took the biggest piece and tried to join the piece that fit it. As a child she had done 3D puzzles, but she had never reassembled a 3D object like this. She remembered the time her sister had broken her mother's vase that came from Earth.

Tara had sat at the table and tried to glue the thing together, but it still ended up with a crosshatch of lines. Somehow Tara had gotten the blame transferred to Cara for that debacle.

With the crystals, she didn't have the benefit of glue. She didn't know the physics, but somehow she thought the refraction of light might be off if it had glue between it. She wasn't sure about the air in between the cracks, but she had to try. The whole principal of jump travel depended of refracting light and gravity through the point between the crystals where space folded over on itself. The gravity of the next star would defocus the other end and push her out of jump.

She got four pieces to fit and took another shard and tried to match it up. The piece fit, but as she reached for the next shard, her fingers on her left hand cramped, and shifted and she dropped the crystal. Despite the QuickHeal, the hand still hurt from mob's gentle treatment with the ball-peen hammer. The crystal fell apart as it hit the cloth. She put her head in her hands and cried. She'd never see Tara again, she'd never get to warn her about Vinnie's position as a loan shark's enforcer, she'd never get to be the maid of honor in her sister's wedding, and she'd never be able to pay her debts. She needed to sell this planet to a group of colonists. Tears flowed down her cheeks and she did nothing to wash them away.

She let out loud sobs with her head bowed. She didn't have the supplies to live here for the rest of her life. She didn't even know if she could eat the food. She hadn't done the tests yet, since

she was more concerned with the crash than doing the survey work. If the local life were made from right-handed amino acids, then she couldn't eat anything local. Even if the proteins in the local plants were the same as Earth life's exclusive preference for left-handed amino acids, there still could be toxins that were deadly to humans.

Her sobs abruptly terminated when a soft, furry paw brushed the line of tears running down her cheek. She looked up. A red-colored fox alien put a paw under her chin and looked into her eyes. She couldn't pull away, but she looked around at the other aliens. They prostrated to her as if she were a terrible, fearsome goddess. Some had looked up and were staring at the actions of the fox alien who had the audacity to touch her. She wasn't a goddess. She was just Cara McIntyre, explorer and scout, not some terrible deity and never someone who was worthy of worship. She'd read about the American Indians from Earth and how they thought the Europeans were gods when they appeared. The Europeans exploited the Indians and she didn't want that power. She touched the fox that brushed her face and ran her hand through its fur. With her other hand she motioned the creatures to stand. "Get up, guys."

They were reluctant. The fox's fur was so soft and she didn't want to stop petting it. However, it was a sentient being, not a cat or dog. She needed to show respect, so she let go and stood while motioning with both hands. "Just get up. I'm not a goddess. You don't have to worship me."

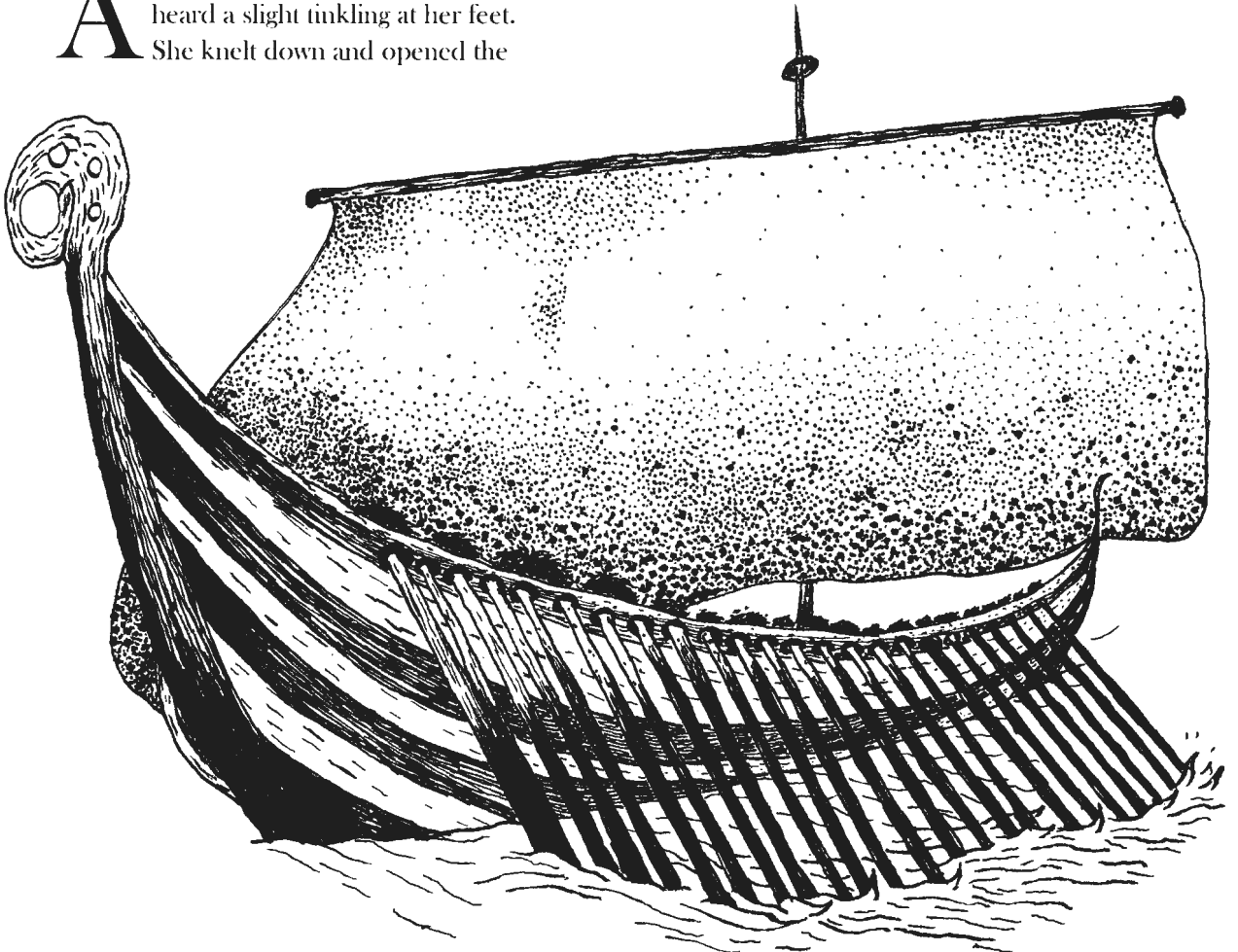
Little by little, the creatures realized

what she wanted them to do, and they stopped worshipping her. She thought she got past that, but when she bent down and picked up the crystal shards, they fell to their faces in worship. She sighed and put both hands on her hips. “Get up. Get up. I’m going to have to live with you guys the rest of my life and I don’t want to deal with this every day.”

The nearby robed foxes held staffs, and each of the staffs was topped with a cloth cover, which matched their colorfully decorated robes.

As the procession came closer, she heard a slight tinkling at her feet. She knelt down and opened the

cloth that contained the crystal shards. The slight vibration they gave off filled her with wonder. Jump crystals usually only vibrated when in the presence of other jump crystals, which was why they kept spare crystal in a heavy shielded spares locker. A slight vibration could defocus the crystal and – under the stresses of jump space – shatter the crystal. That situation remained rare; in fact, it could only happen in jump space or when a ship exited jump. She didn’t know any other way for a jump crystal to shatter. They couldn’t be cut like normal crystals as they were harder than diamonds and



they couldn't be crushed.

The crystals themselves, only found in a remote valley on Mars, were hideously expensive. A single jump crystal, a quarter of the price of a new ship, kept the economy of Mars viable, even though human colonists now settled outside the solar system. Earth-like planets were so much more pleasant to settle on than a space station or a planet like Mars with its carbon dioxide-rich atmosphere and frozen landscape.

The creatures in the rich robes approached and prostrated themselves.

"Get up," she yelled, but they only responded by rocking up and down and waving their hands. They chirped in rhythm. She thought it sounded similar to a chant and she was fed up. She walked up to the first fox and bent down and picked him up. The chanting stopped and she looked around, embarrassed. She set him on his feet and pulled each of them in turn to their feet. She felt mean for forcing the issue, but they looked reprimanded enough that she was sure they wouldn't bow to her again.

Instead, they picked up their staffs and pulled away the cloth coverings and began chittering. The air around the crystal wavered as they chattered and she realized why; each staff was topped with a jump crystal. She coveted the staffs and she reached for one.

As she reached for the staff, they scolded her and pulled away. "But I need those," she said. It didn't matter anyway. Unless the crystals were a matched set,

they would only vibrate apart as soon as she tried to enter jump. She needed two crystals that formed in the same place. She did understand the physics, but paired jump crystals were quantum-entangled pairs.

She heard chirping and looked to the source, but none of the creatures were talking. Instead, the chittering came from one of the staffs. She smiled. There was a matched pair somewhere here and she guessed all the spears were matched pairs to somewhere else. It was almost ingenious. These creatures had discovered

something humanity hadn't discovered. They had faster-than light communications.

She thought about how she could revolutionize FTL com-

munications and frowned. Any useful ship would need a matched set of jump crystals to go into jump. The use of crystals for communications would require one crystal on the ship and another one at a base station somewhere. The fact that two sets in close proximity interfered with one another would severely limit the usefulness of such an invention. Such a communication system, while useful for communicating with distant star systems would pull every ship in between out of jump and perhaps shatter the crystals for both applications. This very star system was a hazard to navigation.

She looked around and saw the creatures were already striking camp. The foxes ran around taking down tents and loading supply carts. The aliens took spears in hand and lined up in formation

Earth-like planets were so much more pleasant to settle on than a space station or a planet like Mars with its carbon dioxide-rich atmosphere and frozen landscape.

with military precision.

The commander that she had touched took her by hand and led her to the front of the column where they marched inland.

The march continued for a few hours and Cara worried that she would never be returned to her ship, but she needed to find both ends of the crystal. It had to be done that way. She could tell they wouldn't give up the crystals willingly, so she'd have to use stealth.

When she thought she could walk no more, the party crested a hill and she saw below them a vast city. It was a little city filled with buildings that seemed to glow in the sunlight. At first she thought they were built of gold, but as they walked down into the city itself, the building material was revealed to be yellow brick. There was no chance of making a profit out of this journey.

The march continued through the city, and by sunset various creatures fell out of the march and entered certain buildings. Soon only the foxes with jump crystals and the commander remained in the party. As they approached the center of the city, the creatures with jump crystals entered a building with a sign depicting a jump crystal and then exited without their staffs. The exiting creatures departed, presumably to their own homes.

The commander guided her into a nearby building with its tiny door that she had to crawl in to enter and showed her a tiny bed and tiny furniture suitable only for aliens. He chittered at her. And she realized that he meant her to sleep there.

"Okay, I guess I can stay here," she said.

He chittered at her again and then left, closing the door behind him.

Cara looked around. Aside from the bed, the tiny furnishings included a trunk at the foot of the bed and a large wardrobe against one wall. The trunk only contained blankets, but inside the wardrobe contained a tool set and a fox alien-sized cloak. She sat on the bed and tried to curl up enough to lie down, but it was too uncomfortable for her adult body. She didn't even think she could have slept in the bed as a child.

She went to the door and tried it. It was locked. She didn't know what they had in mind for her and she didn't intend to find out. She had to leave. The window wasn't locked and she opened the sash and peaked out the window. The streets were dark and deserted. She was surprised there were no street lights, but she didn't know how primitive the technology was.

Since they left her unguarded, perhaps they thought the lock on the door would keep her inside. She examined the lock. It looked like solid steel. She didn't think she could destroy it by force, but she knew she would have to somehow pick the lock. If her twin sister Tara were here, she'd be able to crack the lock. Tara had a more criminal mind. She hung out with the wrong people. She was even dating the same goon that Mr La Rossa had sent to bust her knuckles.

Without being able to force the lock, she had to think around it. The lock was bolted onto the solid wood of the door with huge bolts. In fact the fasteners of

the bolts were exposed where she could see them.

“Well, that’s stupid.” If she had tools, she could disassemble the whole thing. She went to the wardrobe and took out the tool set.

It was short work to break out of the house. The lock was solid except for being easy to disassemble and soon she had metal parts lying on the floor next to the door. She took the tool set with her and left the building.

Her next destination with the crystal sign was only two doors down. The tools made short work of the lock and she entered and found everything was left out and ready. The crystal staffs were left in what she thought of as a little umbrella stand, but she couldn’t find the matching sets. They had to be somewhere.

The place reminded her of a communications office. There was a microphone-like object on the desk, and there were connections to various holes in a wooden cabinet against the wall. She walked over to the cabinet, but it was nailed shut. Were the crystals inside? She found a hammer in the tool kit and pried the cabinet open. Inside were matched crystals for each of the staffs.

She pocketed the crystals and took the whole umbrella stand full of staffs and headed for the door. She was just about to leave when she felt bad. She was about to deprive them of their entire communications system. “Good riddance,” she said. She knew others would be trapped if they entered this system. However, maybe that was all that protected the little foxes. She scooped a crystal out of her pocket and found its matching staff and

left them both on the desk. Then she sneaked out of town.

The ship fell out of jump just outside the orbit of Saturn. She steered the ship toward Mars and aligned the antenna to report in. She sent off a message for Mr. La Rossa. “I’ll have your money. Give me two days after I arrive.” The message would take eighty minutes to reach Mars and the same distance back, so she had plenty of time to worry.

She sat in her chair and dreamed about the wealth she would have. She could buy a new ship, free and clear. She could hire actual crew or she could simply do nothing. If Coronado had actually found his cities of gold or Ponce de Leon actually found the Fountain of Youth, they would have had a similar experience. She liked the furry natives; they had helped her from being stranded, but she had an understanding of history. What would happen when the Mars Corporation discovered that her planet was rich in jump crystals? It would not only destroy Mars, but she could imagine corporations enslaving the alien foxes to mine crystals.

She wondered if Mr. La Rossa’s goon would torture the info from her? She hoped Mr. La Rossa was only concerned about his money.

In the days that followed, she tossed and turned in her sleep. Her worries and nightmares of torture left her with little rest. When she was awake, she worked on her reports. She described the land, the issues with colonization, and her verdict of habitability. She then repeated the process, this time adding bits of untruth

and deception, and a danger to navigation. In the end, she had two reports.

The ship was a flurry of activity. Re-fitters and chandlery workers swarmed her cabin. Soon she could sleep in her own bed. She froze when La Rossa's goon arrived. He was the same goon who was engaged to her sister.

He entered the office and stood just inside the door. "How was the mission? Did you find anything good?" He fidgeted. His hands were empty. His sidekick was nowhere to be seen.

"Did you read the report?" She felt nervous.

"I saw that you filed it and it was immediately sealed. That makes me nervous. Do you have Mr. La Rossa's money?" His eyes looked pleading.

"Officials are still determining what to do." She opened her desk drawer and pulled out an envelope.

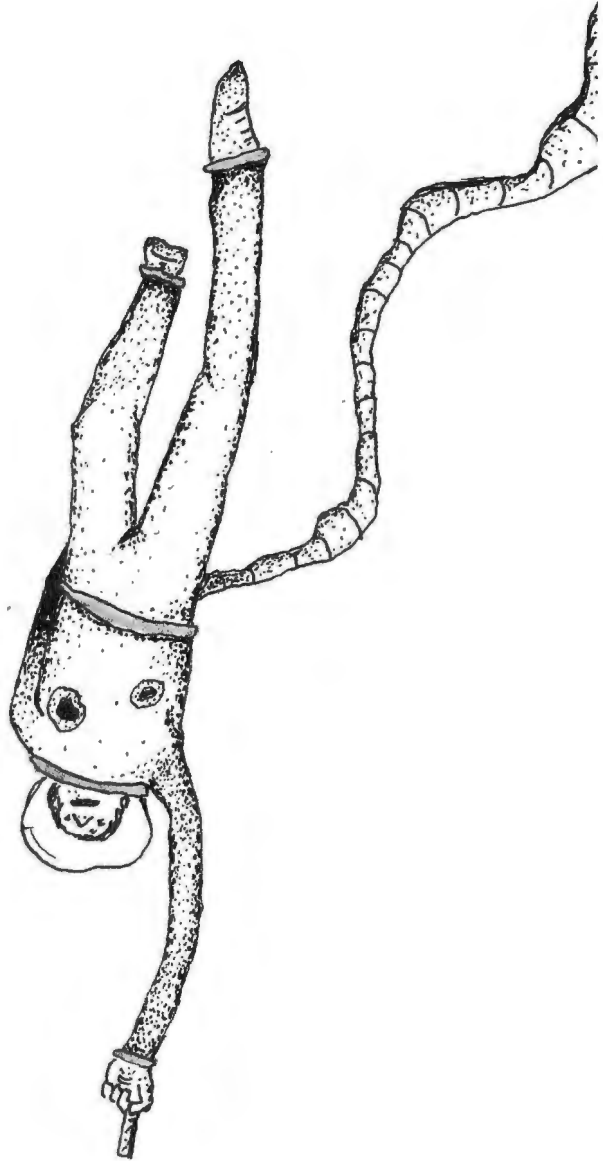
He picked it up and looked inside. "Mr. La Rossa's happy as long as he gets his money." He turned to walk out the door, but turned back and looked at her. "I'll see you at dinner tonight at your mother's house."

"What?"

"We're celebrating. I'm marrying your sister, Tara." He walked away.

Cara pulled out two folders and put them side-by-side. Was it better to report a hazard to navigation or cash in on the exploitation of the fox aliens? She opened the two reports on the desk in front of her. One was a source of riches without morality; the other was the source of morality without riches. She was glad

she turned in the report she had. She dropped the other in the shredder and smiled.



“Meeting *The Poet’s Companion*”

Tony Guerra

The poet Joseph Millar waits
in a concrete college classroom.
Olive green sweater covering a

button down; his spiked white hair
and goatee give him a wizened air -
one of only three people

I know with white hair - he,
Jor-El, superman’s father
and my own father.

Western Pennsylvanian.
I’m sure I’ve sat
next to him at a bar.

I ask about “Keats Shadow”

His fingers lift Keats five great
odes from memory. In a few weeks
Keats completed a lifetime.

“Like James Dean?” I ask.

“Like Jimmy Hendrix.”

I ask about “Heart Attack.”

Millar recounts the story
still wet from the rafting trip
pulse rate bouncing

tachycardic to bradycardic
the nurse twisted the monitor
so he couldn't watch life slip away.

He signed Overtime
without a dedication
"Might be worth more someday."

His pen crosses through
his typed name
his signature penned beneath.

That night, at the reading
I acknowledge Millar
and his edits

Felt pen marks he's made on
my poem, check marks for good lines,
crossed out articles – line breaks,

chop the poem
hit the reader
vivid images

As I read about my
nine-month old daughter's
stopped heart,

the black felt marks dissolved
the phosphorescent QRS complex
of an EKG monitor

two parents, desperately pushing on
her tiny chest, breathing into her,
helpless and persistent.

Falling into a
dirge of tears,
travelling back

I stopped where
my dead daughter
fell into the vacuum

the paper crumpled
blurry, behind a fogged
lacrimal lens

until with a gasp
she sputtered back,
refusing to leave us.

refusing the shadows

“Matinee”

Kevin Cook

They lay in the darkness. One on one side, one on the other. Dan stared into the darkness, groping for something. Leslie lay staring at the wall. They kept it dark because they liked to sleep late. After several hours of lounging, the morning sun was never welcome. Dan groped at the darkness again letting out a murmur. Leslie squeezed her eyes shut tight and tried to forget. She loved Dan but she needed to forget to get past it. She promised Dan she would, so she squeezed her eyes tighter as Dan groped at darkness behind her. They lay with the darkness closing in tighter like Leslie's eyes. One on one side, one on the other.

In the dark it wasn't clear, but Dan was a strong man. He worked at a local factory in town making washing machines. It was his job to pick up sheets of steel that had been cut for size and lay them on another machine to be bent, folded, and drilled so they could be assembled later. The sheets were extremely heavy and Dan picked up thousands a day. He would pick one up and move it to another place then start the whole process over. It was very dull, boring routine work and Dan had done it without complaint every day for 15 years. The other workers

and his supervisor all called him “Dan, Dan, the reliable man” due to his consistent performance. Dan didn't mind. He worked at the same pace every day, regardless of the hot-shot young kids that would come in and try to show off. Throwing sheet metal around all day was difficult work and many young kids would come in and try to show up Dan. They would double his count for a day or two and then be out with a broke back. Dan just worked consistently at the same pace and it showed. “Dan, Dan, the reliable man” they called him.

It didn't show in the dark, but Dan's body was hard like an oak and lean with scars in places where he was careless at work. He had learned from those scars to be slow and careful. He wouldn't venture out beyond the safe methodical system he had learned. He was reliable to the point of boredom.

Yesterday at work Dan had called Leslie on his lunch break. He didn't normally call her, but yesterday was different.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked trying not to sound eager.

“Yes, Dan,” Leslie replied, annoyed. “I told you I would try, and I want you to be happy, too,” she said for what felt like

the hundredth time since they first talked a week before.

“Okay.”

“Oh, you. You sound like a school boy all over again.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Les.”

“I read all about it, Dan, I told you I would do it and I will. I will see you tonight.”

“You don’t think I’m weird?” he asked again.

“Dan. I love you. I will see you tonight. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” Dan said.

The rest of the day seemed to drag on. Factory work was always slow, but for Dan it seemed worse than usual. He tried to focus on work but couldn’t.

Leslie put the phone down and thought about all Dan had done for her. He was an amazing husband. He never complained and always would help with dishes after dinner each night. Some nights he would take her firmly by the waist in front of the sink and push his body against hers, kissing her on the neck gently. Then he would reach up and turn the kitchen radio up and dance slowly with her to the late night radio station.

When the doctor told Leslie she couldn’t have children, Dan smiled and held her close. He whispered something to her that day that made everything okay again. Dan had that ability to make Leslie always feel safe and happy that she had finally decided to do something for him. It took weeks of wheedling but she finally got it out of him.

As darkness goes, Leslie’s beauty could not be seen that night either. She was a beautiful woman. She had long,

smooth legs that ran for days, and although she wasn’t as curvy as the women on TV, she had some kind of way of carrying herself that made her look like royalty. She always wore soft, bright colors that made her look like a duchess, and she wore such a soft, radiant smile men were always falling in love with her. Leslie had a look of coming home, and men want only that in a woman: to be home.

In the darkness that night, Leslie didn’t feel beautiful. She felt tension with her eyes shut tight. She loved Dan and it wasn’t so bad. Also she kind of felt like a kid again. Dan and Leslie were always called the reliable couple by their friends. Neither of them minded, though. Tim and Mary had been divorced; John had been arrested for rolling Pam over a few times. Dan and Leslie were reliable, but not tonight. As Leslie lay there she felt tension, but excitement as well. If she could be adventurous sometimes, who knows what else she could do?

Dan murmured one last time and Leslie lay there thinking about what she might do the next day. She might get up early and go to Des Moines to see a matinee by herself. She went to the movies once by herself while Dan was at work and loved it. She had even snuck in the backdoor without paying. Maybe she would do that tomorrow. She didn’t like to drive out of town, but after tonight she felt like she could do anything. Dan flicked on the light to the bathroom and Leslie lay there, lost in tomorrow.





“Sincerely Yours, the Thing Under the Bed”

Michael Rutledge

I wasn't proud of my current address. It was cramped, coated in a membrane-thin layer of grime and home to a haphazard collection of purple polka dot socks... and occasionally Rupert the cat, if the vacuum was running. I probably should have lowered my standards; there is only so much the underside of a bed can provide in the form of creature comforts.

I wasn't particularly proud of what I did for a living either, but I never got much of a choice in those regards. I was typecast pretty early in life, a young child star on an endless Nickelodeon loop if, of course, there was a Nickelodeon show where the fearless and tween heartthrob hero siphons out the gooey dreams of unsuspecting children (which there was not). I suppose I should have been grateful to at least have a calling in life; the majestic lion of the Serengeti probably isn't thrilled that he has to kill zebras on a daily basis, but he doesn't complain. I just wanted more out of my endless continu-

um of existing than to stare into the back of someone's head waiting for them to stumble their way to sleep.

Well, it wasn't just any someone tonight; it was Gary Winworthy, a particularly unsavory 21-year-old, home for the summer, who slept with a copy of *An Introductory Approach to College Spanish* under his pillow for osmosis purposes. He dreamed about cheating on his girlfriend with the one and only Sarah Moretti, the cut-off-shorts-wearing, sports-bra-adorned, bop-of-brunette-hair college junior he had met at school. She was voluptuous, she played soccer, and she was oblivious to the fact that dream Gary awkward flirting was still as creepy as real life Gary flirting. If you were in the business of cheating on your girlfriend, Sarah Moretti was not a bad choice per se; I was more gender neutral myself, but if I was into that sort of thing, I could see where he was coming from.

Gary had his problems, but then again, I had problems of my own. I always

wanted to be more of a people person, or at the very least be not quite so... terrifying. But it was hard to be anything other than terrifying when you're commonly referred to as The Boogeyman, or Dream Eater, or Demon, or sometimes just oh shit. Some people called me oh shit when they didn't have time to get creative, and none of those names really mattered because they didn't fit me the way a name should. I lived under the bed, but I didn't want to be The Thing That Lived Under the Bed if that made any sense.

People didn't understand that my existence was horribly depressing as it was, and name-calling didn't alleviate the situation. Some people are accountants or doctors, the guy on the corner of 83rd and Sycamore baked cakes for a living, and I just so happened to eat dreams. I wasn't an abomination; I just had a public relations problem and a very specific diet.

So waiting for Gary to fall asleep sucked, but there wasn't time to creep out the window and flutter away to the underside of some other unassuming mattress. I could try Gary's parent's room to kill some time, but there wasn't anything nutritious there.

Once a person hits 30, 35, or Gawd like... 37, and officially becomes ancient, then they care about dreaming like they care about those twenty pounds they swore they were going to lose over the summer. They end up gaining four more, stop looking at the scale, and continue putting nacho cheese on Doritos because it's awesome and they don't give a shit anymore.

Young people don't just dream, they create fantasy. They dance through forests of whimsy willows and do battle with purple-people-eating dragons; they tiptoe across the sky and soar too close to the sun, because unlike Icarus they can never crash back to Earth. They're never afraid to dream big, so even if Gary Winworthy was an unfaithful asshole, at least he dreamed properly.

So when Gary dreamed, he really dreamed. He didn't make Sarah Moretti a blob of vanilla human flesh waiting to be fondled, he let her be a vibrant girl who crinkled her nose when she laughed and sometimes the laugh would end in hiccups and sometimes it wouldn't. And even though dream Gary was totally inept at flirting with girls, Sarah would kick at the dirt with her green Nike shoes with



the yellow shoelaces and look down and lock eyes with a passing caterpillar when he talked to her because she was blushing. And each and every detail was crisp and seamless like that in Gary's dream as if he had ordered everything specific at some fancy German car dealership. That's why I decided to wait, because even if Gary dreamed about something else, it would be crisp, delightful and shamefully delicious.

Gary's left arm began its involuntary herky-jerky twitch that meant that he was almost past the event horizon in the black hole that was sleep.

I waited for his last shuddering yawn that shook the bedframe, checked to make sure his

breathing was gentle, and then got ready to have dinner. I wondered if it was just me or if the majestic lion felt like such a jerk when he got ready to eat the zebra too.

It takes about an hour for a normal Gary (or anyone not named Gary for that matter) to go from a light sleep to a deep sleep that is the best for dreaming. It doesn't sound like a lot, but it's the difference between twirling your big toe in a pool and diving headfirst into the Mariana Trench; the best dreams aren't swimming at the surface, they're all the way down at the bottom of reality. I have to exercise patience; just like chefs don't rush their soufflés, I never rush Gary as he finds his way to that deep place in his mind where the sky was painted with shooting stars and shattered moons and

you could do battle with Purple-People-Eating Dragons.

There is nothing romantic about the process of jumping into the back of Gary Winworthy's skull, or anyone else's skull for that matter. You don't dodge around synapses and neurons as you home in on the cerebrum and gently lift the veil between the waking world and the dream world, hitching a ride on the Sandman's patented goodnight spell as you drift in. Want to know what a dream really feels like coming from the outside in? Stepping into a dream is exactly the same as

putting on a pair of jeans that are two sizes too small for you. It's too tight, too short, too painful, and you feel super-awkward when you do,

finally and triumphantly, squeeze into it.

Jamming into Gary's cranium was awkward as hell, which was usual. The skinny jean sensation was passing, but I, as always, felt sort of obligated to introduce myself to his subconscious on the way in. Gary's subconscious couldn't talk back of course, because (1) a subconscious can't talk and (2) that would be silly, but I imagined our conversations would go something like:

Me: "Good evening, Gary."

Gary's brain: "'Sup?"

Me: "So, Gary, we've met before, but you probably don't remember, and it's totally ok that you don't. By the way, I don't suppose zebras like to think about lions. Anyway, well... I'm the thing that haunts your dreams. Ring any bells?"

Gary: "Huh? Sorry bruh, you say somethin' bout zebras?"

Me: "Ahh, yeah, don't focus on that it's just a stupid metaphor. I just wanted to know if you recognized me."

Gary: "Nah bruh, def drawing a blank. This gonna take long, I got shit to do."

Me: "No, I'm just... I'm just conflicted about some things."

Gary: "Sucks, dawg."

Me: "I wanted to say... I'm sorry that this is how our relationship works."

Gary: "Huh? No prob. Forget it."

Cool story. Aight, I gotta catch up with my girl, so I'mma leave you here. That cool? Adidas, bruh!"

Me: "It's 'adiós,' but whatever. Good luck with your Spanish, I guess."

With introductions done, I took the final plunge into the beach bum paradise that I had come to tenderly know as Gary's dream state. And then, well, I hit a wall, a Garyesque wall that wasn't supposed to be there and never was there before, a particularly peculiar event even for a creature whose entire existence is based on evaluating people's dreams on their caloric value. I don't believe that things happen all of a sudden, because they just don't. There's a buildup, progression, transgression, any of those types of words. Life-altering events don't happen because they're convenient, they happen because there was a series of events leading up to them. Or so I thought anyway, until I sort of hit this wall that should never have been there and got stuck in the humany bit of Gary that wasn't awake or asleep. I got a peak into everything that was Gary, just for a second. Maybe that wasn't the right way of saying it; it was more like I became Gary for just a second.

I became aware that I (or he) had three broken fingers on his right hand from college football and now they meandered about in stomach-turning directions. I knew that we (or shit, he) actually did use "bruh" as a substitute for pretty much every other pronoun, so kudos for getting that right I suppose. And I painfully realized that we (no, no, no, he, actually) did cheat on our girlfriend by going to bars and picking up freshman girls in a cherry red Mustang that our parents bought us while our girlfriend sat in her dorm room oblivious to it all and... and how we didn't break up with her because she let us have our way with her all the time and she would never break up with us because she had never had a boyfriend before and we felt horrible but took advantage of that anyway. How she was a perfectly acceptable weight but super self-conscious about it and was afraid no one would ever love her and we used that against her... and we, no, no, NO, Gary, definitely Gary ended his text messages with "Cya" and "Catchya later" instead of saying "I love you" or just being lazy and saying "I <3 U" or even just completely copping out and putting a lot of XOXOXOs. And we, Gawd, Gary never held the car door open for her anymore or took care of her when she was sick and hadn't even brushed the hair out of her eyes and told her she was beautiful one single time over the past three years and literally, figuratively, or whatever, one second of being Gary Winworthy was all it took to figure out that I CAN NOT STAND GARY WINWORTHY. Screw the zebra; I was eating guilt-free tonight.

I navigated my way through Gary's dream until I spotted the track where Sarah Moretti would be running sprints for Gary and made my way over. She was propelling herself forward effortlessly, strong arms slicing through the air, toned legs churning up loose bits of black-top and fashioning the same green Nike's with the yellow shoestrings that she always did. Coming around the fourth bend she hit her stride, bringing her knees up with every step as she convinced her weary muscles to give one more good boost so she could look sexy for, cue trumpet blare, Gary frickin Winworthy.

I wouldn't have felt bad just gobbling them both up right there and saying Adidas to the eternal joy that was Gary's dream. But I didn't. I reached for it, I certainly wanted to, but couldn't. That thing had done more than just show all the tidbits that made him a grade-A-jerkface, it let me in on all the other details that didn't make me mad as hell and think in runonsentences.

I knew for some reason how Gary believed his parents were probably going to get a divorce and, even though he was 21, it still scared the shit out of us, or him. How he had driven a homeless man around the block in the same cherry red Mustang before buying him a sandwich and the guy was so choked up he couldn't even say thanks, he just hugged us with both arms tight around the chest. It wasn't one of those fake hugs you give to your cousins so your mom won't tsk at you, either; it was a genuine embrace from a person who the rest of the world had classified as trash.

I knew that our girlfriend's name was

Cynthia and we loved the way that name sounded every time we said it, and we used to brush her hair out of her eyes and tell her how beautiful she was and that we loved her and loved her and loved her some more, but our West Coast vocabulary didn't allow us to express it any more poetically than that, so we just kissed her until we were both laughing so hard... but things changed... and... and...

I couldn't do this anymore.

Was this happening? It was one thing for the lion to feel conflicted, but it was another to actually let the zebra go. I looked at him and there we were, or he was or whatever, flirting away in vain, and I didn't want to hurt him even in the skim milk kind of way I thought bad dreams hurt, or no, I take that back, in the slow slice across the gut that opens you up that real bad dreams hurt a person. You can't eat and eat without paying a bill eventually, and the more I took, the less of Gary was left behind for Gary to hold onto. I didn't want to be defined by the misery that I was causing.

So I left, just turned away and left. But the hunger was so bad, so overpowering, so intoxicating, that I couldn't pull myself out. I looked for something defined in the surreal way things in dreams are defined that could nourish me and noticed the Mustang parked next to an oblong hippo covered in blue war paint (it made perfect sense if you were there), grazing near a super-sized bonsai tree. I settled in next to the car and allowed myself to relapse. Feeding on a dream is a horrible and primal thing. It's not natural and the human body tries to reject it, but I'm a carnivore and it can't.

I started with the cherry red hood and drained it of everything that it was. The color, the texture, the way the sun baked off it on hot, sticky August days. All gone. There's a monochrome wrinkled piece of steel left behind, those are the scraps, the bits too gristly to enjoy. Then it was on to the engine block, where I feasted on the raw muscle of the old V8 engine, then the spark plug, then the radiator, then the fuel injector.

Everything turned to ash and rusted steel because I was feasting and felt powerful and young again, as young as something that wasn't alive could feel anyway. All I wanted was to drain this place dry and leave Gary with a pile of left-behinds and nightmares. He'd get over it, it would be one bad night's sleep and he'd be fine. Sarah Moretti would be fine, the car would be fine, everyone would be FINE. FINE. FINE... But they wouldn't. Everything wouldn't be fine. Maybe he gets over it this time and the next, maybe even the time after that, but it always catches up. Two weeks, a month, a year? How much nourishment can one person provide before they break down, before they realize that every night a little piece of them dies? So they stop sleeping, they stop eating and socializing, and take pills out of little orange vials until they can't dream anymore.

My hands were wrapped around the bonsai tree, I was strangling it, watching it wither under my touch, feeding off it. I was killing something that was alive, even if it was only alive here, it was a living thing and I was choking it, feasting on it. I was exactly the monster I didn't think I

was. I wasn't typecast, I was born for this role and now I was going to be sick.

Taking a breath I saw that the hippo with his fearsome blue war paint was gone, not that I blamed him, and that Sarah was watching me. Technically Gary and Sarah were both watching me, but all I would remember later is the expression on her make-believe face. Gary's mouth was hanging open in terror, but Sarah ... Sarah was just standing there, smiling and blushing. Her eyes were wide and watery from raw, unrestricted fear, but she was still just smiling and blushing because that's the only thing her face was allowed to do in Gary's dream. She couldn't scream, or even struggle if I forced myself on her, because she had to keep that perfectly adorable, slightly sultry smile on her face. She was terrified she was going to die, her make-believe life coming to a definitive end, but wasn't allowed by the strange physics at work in dreams to do anything to preserve them. I realized that a silly college girl Gary dreamed up out of nothing was human enough to be scared of me, to be sickened by me . . . so I fled into the part of Gary's mind where made-up girls with perfect porcelain smiles couldn't watch me.

I eventually found my way back into the waking world, left Gary and his yet unopened copy of *An Introductory Approach to College Spanish* behind and ran for a long time. I huddled next to raspy boilers, hung under overpasses and bunched myself into the shadowy spaces at the back of cubicle drawers. I didn't eat anything and I didn't want to be with anyone, as if anyone ever wanted to be

with me anyway. I knew that eventually the hunger would win, that I would starve until I couldn't stand the emptiness and then the animal would take control and I would come to my senses with my hands wrapped around something living again. The hunger always won in the end, the game was seeing how long it took.

Why had things changed? It hadn't been like this before, and there was a lot of "before." Thinking about it, it was kind of weird picturing my own immortality, all the years, nights, and dreams mashed together so I couldn't pick out what's what anymore. Immortality officially sucked, I had never done anything meaningful and never had the inclination to, because tomorrow was always going to roll around regardless of what I did. I wondered if I had ever had these feelings before. Maybe, maybe not. You forget a lot of stuff over an eternity.

So I was moody and bitchy for quite a while. Feeding when I couldn't help it, hitting the wall that was never supposed to be there every time, and feeling like the lowest order of scum afterwards. A young,

single mom parked under an overpass trying to get some sleep before starting another shift . . . Sucked dry. A little boy, fast asleep who still believed that being Batman was an appropriate career choice . . . Gobbled up. On and on I went up the coast, skittering from dark place to dark place, until another particularly peculiar event took place, particularly peculiar even for a creature like me who

values your dreams based on their caloric value. I don't believe in miracles, but I do believe in cosmic accidents, and I found myself in the middle of such a thing when I a met a girl somewhere between Fresno and spit nowhere who was just a little bit different than I expected her to be. It was kinda like kicking over a rock and finding a little piece of the sky hiding underneath.

Her name was Amy Tibbert, she was seventeen, delightfully British and in love with Justin Bieber because he was the Greatest. Thing. Ever. I knew all those things because I crept my way into the back of her head one night, starving, and got stuck in the humany bit that exists in-between being



awake and asleep on my way in.

I knew Amy was mostly blind and couldn't speak, that her dad moved her from London to California, because they have a hospital built especially for treating kids with the kind of illness she had, that her mom had to wipe her face with a cool washrag to calm her down after a nightmare (and she suffered from those frequently, with no assistance from me) and that she was horribly afraid of anything creepy and or crawly, but couldn't tell anyone about it.

In London she had had a stuffed yeti she secretly named Harold who - in addition to being a handsome and fetching yeti - was also a professional bug squasher. He got lost in one of the moves from here to there, and being unable to relay the importance of her lost and forlorn Harold, was forced to live a life devoid of his yeti antics. Sure, she had a room full of bright and wonderful things and an autographed everything from Justin Bieber, because celebrities were always good about coming to visit sick children, but no protector from all the creepy and crawly things that live only to terrorize adolescent girls.

Oh, and she was also, without question, the greatest, most exciting, most spectacular I DON'T EVEN KNOW what to call her I had ever known. Her dreams were so vivid that you could taste the purples and blues. You could feel the cold water in the roaring rivers her mind conjured without even bringing it to your lips. And after just a little bit of time I found I wasn't hungry anymore and I didn't need to eat. Her dreams had such a purpose and soul that I felt alive just by being a part of them. I started spending

every night cushioned in Amy's cerebellum because hunger didn't exist there.

The rules that I had been forced to live by since the beginning of I-don't-even-know-when weren't applicable in Amy's world. I could survive without feeding, live without hurting, coexist with someone for the very first time. Maybe it was because she was sick, maybe it was because I was sick and she was the cure, or maybe it was just because she was Amy. I didn't care because I had a home, a home in the strange sense that the odd space between a seventeen-year-old girl's cars can be called a home.

The only problem was a slight spider infestation. By that I mean there were giant white-haired spiders that terrified Amy and made her squirm and make strange noises with her out-of-order vocal cords that brought her mother rushing in with the cool washrag that she thought helped, but didn't really. Her mom just didn't understand that Harold was a professional bug squasher, and he was somewhere back in their little London apartment without a job to do. I knew about Harold, a memo received in passing while being stuck in that oh-so-strange human bit somewhere between being awake and being asleep.

I felt obligated to assist her. She was my roommate, my chemotherapy, my new everything. Now, I can't add to someone's dream, but I can do more than just drain away all the good. I can't create something from nothing, that's up to the dreamer, but I can change myself around a bit if I need to. Not when I'm feeding, of course, but I don't need to do that anymore, and I can look like whatever I

want. Adaptive camouflage is what a guy in a bowtie said on a nature channel once. I think that only applies to chameleons, but we're going to go with that to keep things simple.

I went back to that stuck-in-the-humanity bit place one more time and let Amy remember everything about Harold for me. I adjusted myself accordingly, and in I went as a handsome, fetching yeti. Amy got to ride on my back and braid my hair and I got to squash spiders, professionally. She'd ask me questions because you don't need vocal chords to talk in a dream and I'd try to answer. We didn't have deep conversations, but it was nice to be able to just talk.

"What colour is the sky?"

"Usually blue."

Like I said, simple, but perfect.

It turned out a lot of things starting changing when the hunger went away. I felt myself getting older and assumed that one day I would die. I didn't have to wait under Amy's bed for her to go to sleep; I could nestle in the back of her mind and rest until she needed Harold to squash bugs for her. And I guess I was... happy, something I didn't think that The Thing Under the Bed was allowed to be.

Every morning, before Amy started her get-better therapy with Dr. Green, I left her a note, and in that tiny moment after you wake up but before you're really awake and you can still remember all the strange things you dreamed about, I imagined that she read it to herself. It wasn't anything poetic, just something that I thought needed to be said:

Dear Amy,

It was my esteemed pleasure to serve as your handsome and fetching yeti last night. I look forward to our next adventure

*Sincerely yours,
The Thing Under the Bed*

“Family Decisions”

Ann Voight

I pull into the empty parking lot and look at my watch. I still have ten minutes before I need to go inside—just enough time to call my sister.

“Why am I doing this again?”

“Because it’ll be good for you and your future. And it’s something you need to do.”

“Are you sure I’m ready for this?”

“Of course you are,” she pauses for a moment, waiting for me to agree with her, “Why? Don’t you think you’re ready?”

“Does what I think even matter? The whole family has already decided for me. Mother said she would kill herself if I didn’t.”

“It’s Mother. You know how she gets about the family image. ‘If it is tawdry in any way. . .’”

“Don’t air it out in public.’ I know. It’s practically the family motto. I just don’t know if I can do this. It seems . . .”

“Just go in there. It’s not like it’s hard. It’ll be fine. You’ll be fine.”

“But . . .”

“For the love of Christ,” my sister mutters, “Quit stalling. The more you stress about this, the worse it’s going to be.”

“How would you even know? It’s not like this has ever happened to you. You have no idea how I’m feeling. You’re Lucy, Patron Saint of Being Perfect. You can do no wrong.”

“That’s not true! Just the other week I—”

“Please. You turned in the wrong lab assignment.”

“Well, yes. But—”

“It was the next week’s assignment.”

“It was still the wrong one. I could have been deducted ten percent off of my grade because of that mistake.”

“Whatever. If that’s the worst thing you’ve ever done, I’m pretty sure you’re still winning. I’m sure as hell not. Even if I wasn’t already the family screw-up, this would shoot me straight to the top of the list.”

I stop to think about how different I

want my life to be and what it will be if I go through with this appointment.

"Besides, it's not like what they have planned for me is much better—finish at Winchester Prep, go to one of the Ivy League universities, then it's on to law school so I can marry well, move to Greenwich and raise 2.5 kids and a dog. Ugh."

"C'mon, Ellie, think about it. It was just a stupid, one-time mistake. Everyone makes mistakes. You're barely sixteen years old. You shouldn't be punished your whole life for a teeny, tiny error in judgment. You were young and in love, and you didn't know any better. That's got to mean something, right?"

"But why is it a punishment? It's not like I killed anyone. And nice try with the optimism. It's not going to work, though. It's not going to make me get in there any faster."

"Ellie, you know what will happen to you if you don't go," she said, her voice quieting to a whisper, "What Father said he would do to you. No one wants that."

For once I had to agree with her. Our father is a very intimidating man. According to him, an honorable person never would deliberately mislead or renege. His current threat: If I didn't take care of this, he would do it his way AND cut me off emotionally and financially from the family. He actually said "If you don't do this, it's probably best if you didn't return home." It makes someone really question what they want and if it's worth doing in the end.

"I know. I don't know what I would do without you. I can't imagine never

seeing anyone again, being completely on my own. What would I do to get by? It's not like I have any helpful talents."

"You know what I would do if I were you. I would have been inside by now."

"I know. I just can't help feeling like it would be an even bigger mistake to go through with this. That if I do this, it means I'm a horrible person."

"You are not a horrible person. You have your whole life to think about. This really is for the best."

"Why is it for the best? That's all anyone ever says. Why can't you trust me to make my own decision? I know it was my fault this happened, but I should get a chance to try and fix things my way, right?"

"It doesn't matter whose way it is, this is fixing it. Besides, you have no life experience. You're a child. You don't know how to take care of yourself. You need to consider your future options and how much more limited your options will be if you don't go through with this. And is now really the best time to be having second thoughts?"

"I've always had second thoughts. This is the first time I've been able to express them. No one would listen to me before—"

"Well, you need to make up your mind quick. The appointment's in five minutes."

She's right. No more time for second-guessing myself. I need to make a decision. The right decision. God, it scares me knowing what I decide during the next few minutes will take my life down one of two very different paths.

"Luce, do you think I can do this?"

"You're stronger than you think you are. You can get through this."

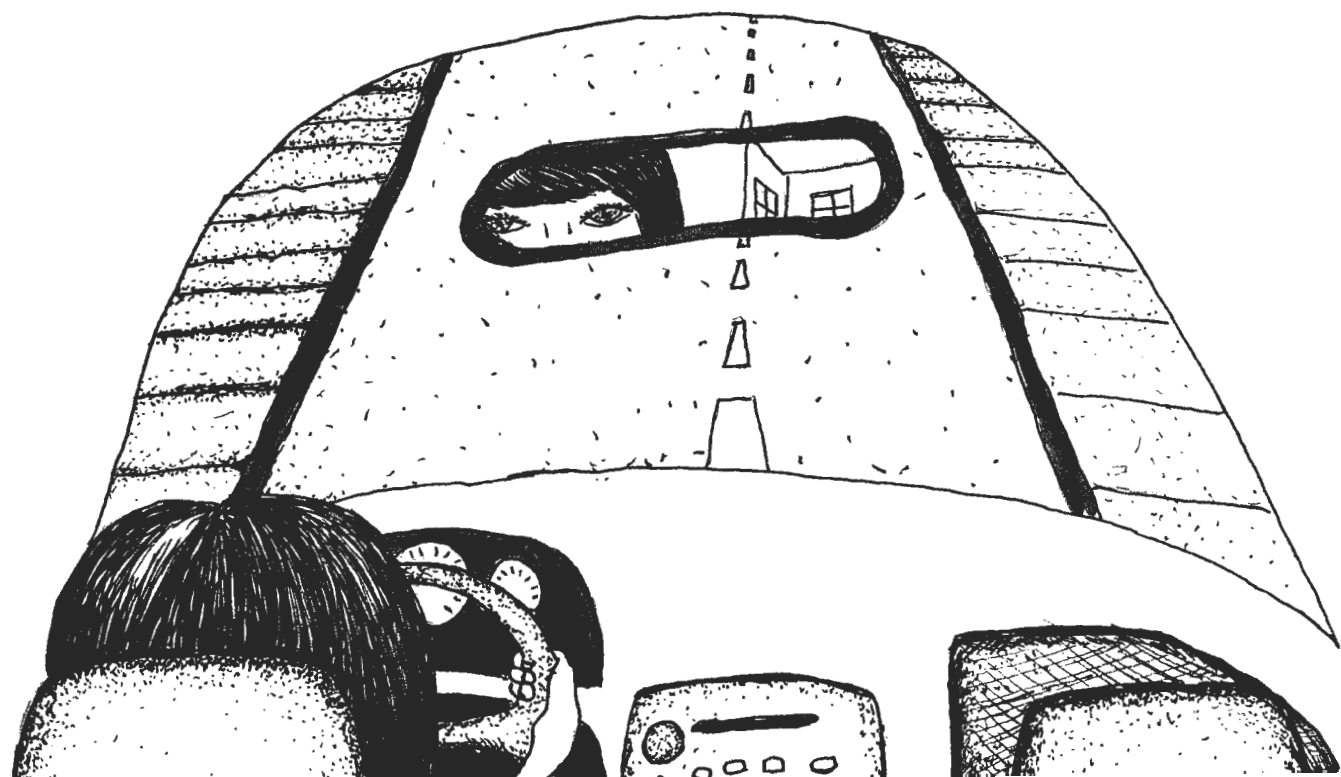
That little bit of encouragement was all I needed to make up my mind.

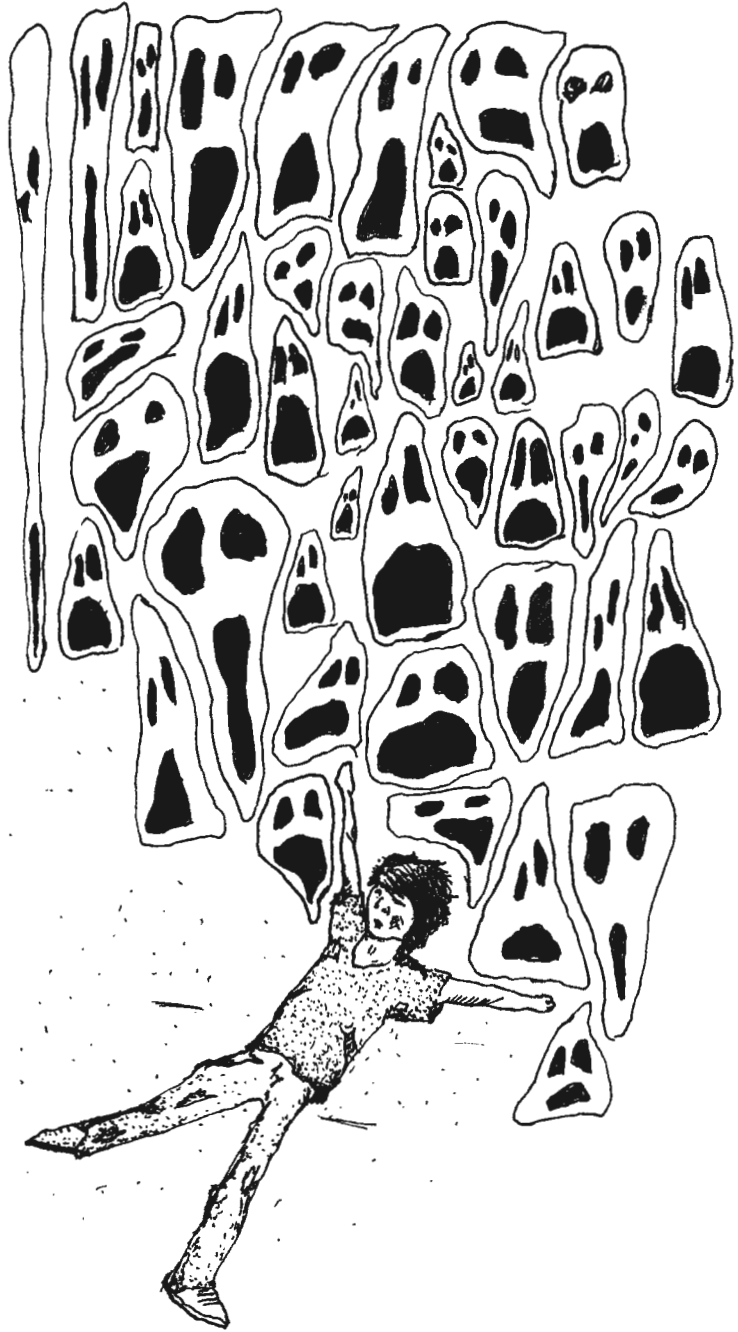
"I don't know if I'm ready, but I think I want this."

"Good. Call me when you're through with your appointment. I love you, Ellie."

"Bye, Lucy. I love you too."

I still have two more minutes. I say a quick prayer and start my car. For the first time in my life, I'm ready to be the adult. I know what I am doing is completely insane and potentially an even bigger mistake, but it doesn't matter. I am choosing the outcome for my life, my future. I put the car in drive and don't look back.





“The End”

Brianna Brawley

The townspeople were angry,
Hurt, exhausted.
They gathered around with
Pitchforks and torches for
A boy, my age, who killed their kin.
They waited for the tarp to be pulled.
And stood back,
Just in case.

Either way, they were
Going to kill him.
By death, or by life.
When they caught him,
He was bleeding out.

Jeans: bloodstained.
Sweater: bloodstained.
Shoes, shirt, face, neck:
Bloodstained.

Life, stained with blood—
Shattered into a million
Pieces by an explosion
That he set upon Boston.
Thirst, hunger, exhaustion,
Caught.



DMACC

Non-Profit Student Magazine