

2006

Expressions 2004-2006

Amy Lamm

P.J. McRae

Bennett Jenkins

Laura Griffin

Jennifer Piatt

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2004 • 2006

non-profit student magazine

ex·press', *v.t.*; expressed, *pt.*, *pp.*; expressing, *ppr.* [ME. *expressen*; L. *expressus*, pp. of *exprimere*, to press or squeeze out.]

1. to put into words; represent by language; state.

2. to make known; reveal; show; as, his face *expressed* sorrow.

3. to picture, represent, or symbolize in music, art, etc.

4. to show by a sign; symbolize; signify; as, the sign + *expresses* addition.

5. to dispatch, forward, or send by express; as, to *express* a package.

6. *express oneself*; (a) to state one's thoughts; (b) to give expression to one's feelings, imagination, etc., especially in creative or artistic activity.

ex·press'i·ble, *a.* capable of being expressed.

ex·press'i·bly, *adv.* in an expressible manner.

ex·pres'sion (eks-presh'un), *n.* [L. *expressio* (-*onis*), a pressing out, an expression, from *expressus*, pp. of *exprimere*, to press out, express.]

1. a putting into words; a representing in language; a stating.

2. a picturing, representing, or symbolizing in art, music, etc.

3. a manner of expressing; especially, a meaningful and eloquent manner of speaking, singing, etc.; as, she reads with *expression*.

4. a particular word, phrase, or sentence; as, "catch cold" is an idiomatic *expression*.

5. a showing of feeling, character, etc.; as, laughter is often the *expression* of joy.

6. a look, intonation, sign, etc. that conveys meaning or feeling; as, there was a quizzical *expression* on his face.

7. a symbol or set of symbols expressing some algebraic fact, as a quantity or operation.

8. a showing by a symbol, sign, figures, etc.

ERRATUM

In the 2004-2006 issue of *Expressions* magazine, the short story "Buying Life" was attributed incorrectly to Amy Lamm. The author of this story, as well as "On the Corner After Midnight," is Diana Edwards.

The staff of *Expressions* magazine sincerely regrets this misattribution.

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8. a showing by a symbol, sign, figures, etc.

ex·pres'sion·äl, *a.* of or pertaining to expression; having the power of expression.

ex·pres'sion·izm, *n.* an early 20th-century movement in the arts, especially in drama, characterized by the nonobjective use of symbols, stereotyped characters, stylization, etc., to give objective expression to inner experience.

ex·pres'sion·ist, *a.* of or characterized by expressionism.

ex·pres'sion·ist, *n.* an expressionist artist, writer, etc.

ex·pres'sion·is'tic, *a.* same as *expressionistic*.

ex·pres'sion·is'tic·äl·ly, *adv.* in an expressionistic manner.

ex·pres'sion·less, *a.* lacking in expression.

ex·press'ive, *a.* 1. of or characterized by expression.

2. expressing; indicating; serving as a sign; as, a song *expressive* of joy.

3. full of expression; forcible; significant; as, an *expressive* nod.

ex·press'ive·ly, *adv.* in an expressive manner.

ex·press'ive·ness, *n.* the quality of being expressive; the power of expression or representation.

ex·press'ly, *adv.* 1. in an express manner; plainly; in direct terms.

2. on purpose; particularly; especially; as, I wrote for you *expressly*.

ex·press'män, *n.*; *pl.* **ex·press'men**, one of those who express letters, etc.

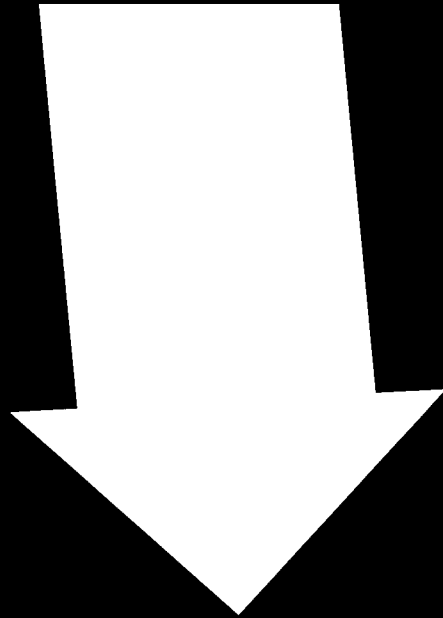
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Des Moines Area Community College

expressions₂₀₀₄
2006



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4



3 seconds
in my
head

Luke Jennett

3 SECONDS IN MY HEAD • Luke Jennett

10:14:28 –Physics class

So she asks me if I like people.

It's a strange thing to say, isn't it? I mean, this was just in polite conversation. You're not supposed to bring up philosophy during polite conversation. You're supposed to talk about the weather. I'm sorry, I didn't make the rules. I just follow them.

She's staring at me with those big doe eyes of hers, green circles around an endless black void, and I know in my gut she's waiting for an answer. The conversation has come to a screeching halt, and will not continue until she's sated with some form of response.

Now, of course, comes the question of whether or not to lie. On one hand, I could tell her the truth, and she'd be offended. On the other hand, I could lie to her, and she'd find out and be offended. I have to say I don't like my choices here.

But it's so much to consider, just for a simple yes-or-no question. I mean, what does she even mean? Do I like some people, or all people, or people who need people, or what? Because I can't honestly say I like all people, that's for certain. I can offhandedly list at least a dozen I would personally not have given access to life. Probably more. Come to think of it, even based on the small simulacrum of life that is my world, I would have to say that a good 43% of everyone who ever lived is or was a bad person, who, naturally, I don't like at all.

But, by those same numbers, I would have to assume that 57% of all people are essentially good, noble souls who enhance the lives of everyone near them, which is actually a fairly good majority when compared to recent political polls. If this were a governor's race, good people would win, if only by a slight margin.

However, I can't really reach a definitive answer based on these percentages, as, if they were taken as representing humanity as a whole that would mean that better than 20% of the world is named "John." Clearly, this is not so.

Maybe this is some kind of test. Maybe she's asking if I like her! Oh, that tricky little minx! But wait! If she is asking about herself exclusively, then she would assume that I would know that. I can't give her the wrong answer! If I say "Yes," she might think I'm moving too fast. If I say "No," she'll assume, for whatever reason, that I don't like her. I can't have that.

Well, wait. Can I? Does it really matter, cosmically speaking, if I ever see this girl again? I mean, she's cute, I suppose, and I have no real objection to her existence at the moment, which is a big plus. But, is she my intended? Is this meant to be? Are we destined to be married and have kids and secretly conduct adulterous affairs behind each other's backs? Jesus, I don't think I'm quite ready for that. It's a hell of a commitment, and after all, I just met her.

So, "no" is definitely an option. If I say no, she can't hold it against me. Wait, I've forgotten what the question was. Something about purple. Did I like purple? I don't know. I've honestly never given it much thought. I mean, don't get me wrong, purple definitely has its place in the visible spectrum,

and it's quite pretty in rainbows, but you wouldn't want your car to be purple, would you? Or your walls, unless you were that artist formerly known as Prince. Or a member of the Minnesota Vikings. And I'm neither of those, sadly. Wait, isn't Prince from Minnesota? Weird.

Maybe she's speaking metaphorically. Damn, I'm no good with abstracts. And what does purple mean, metaphorically, anyway? I know that "having the blues" means being depressed. And seeing red means anger. I suppose that if you mixed those two, you'd get purple. Do I like being angry and depressed? Not especially.

Although, sometimes being around someone can make you angry and depressed, and to avoid these things would mean being totally solitary, wouldn't it? And that would be no way to live your life. It's just a trade-off you have to make, IU think, when you put yourself in the company of others. "Purple" as she means it describes being subject to the emotions and thoughts of others. Did I like being exposed to these things?

Well, yes, I suppose sometimes it's good to be inside the objective vision of another person. They can tell you things about yourself, such as what mood you appear to be in, and whether or not you're on fire, and so forth. So that's good.

On the other hand, there is something to be said for total solitude. We must remember the words of Simon and, uh...Carbuncle, who were rocks. You know, metaphorically speaking. No people means no pain.

So I think, underneath it all, she's asking if I like people. Well, that just depends on the situation, doesn't it? Why did she ask such a vague question? And what was all the stuff about colors about? I can't say as I'm very pleased that she's tried to trick me like this. I don't think I like her.

But she's a person, isn't she? So does that mean that I don't like people? And anyway, simply because I don't like her strange way of speaking, does that mean I don't like her as a person? I mean, how am I supposed to even know at this point?

Oh, wait, she's starting to shift around in her chair. She wants an answer. Damn it, I haven't had enough time to think about it! On one hand I do, and on the other hand, I don't! What the hell does she expect from me? I can't put up with all this pressure!

It's best, I think, to just tell her something vague, and get as far away from her as I can right afterwards. God, I hate it when people talk to me. But does that mean I don't like people?

"Sometimes," I tell her.

10:14:31 – Physics class.

photography by

Maggie Gulling



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blind

Runner-up Best Overall Writer

Tim VanderKamp



BLIND • By: Tim VanderKamp

She's always there; just sitting there, and I wonder about it. What does she see sitting there every day? What does a woman think about that stares at cars going by hours at a time? I wonder, and want to look through her eyes. I'm blind you know. Because I have no vision. Not a creative bone in my body. I used to frequent art galleries and poetry readings. I would pretend to see, but I cannot.

Memorizing their language helped for a while until someone (usually a woman) wanted to listen. Not talk but listen. Armed with their intuition, I would be found out in a short period of time, and discarded as a prospective fellow artist. It's happened more than once.

I listen to them all because I cannot see. I stare at their works and read it aloud, but my eyes cannot see, and my mind cannot hear. It's foreign to me as French or Spanish. Yes even my mind's eye is blind and will not see. I close my eyes as writers spin tales and poets touch the very deepest places in the human soul, and yet grey screen is all that's there. My mind is like a television with no antenna, and it saddens me.

I don't consider myself unintelligent. I can remember stress equations, tolerance formula, and torque ratios. I often add feet, by tenths, in my head. Best in my class at Cal Poly. Mathematically I'm a genius. My work is everywhere: The Sports Coliseum downtown, the Hyatt Regency. They're all mine. Start to finish, my work.

Architecture came as natural to me as walking or eating. I remember the unveiling of the Sports Coliseum model. A young woman next to me stared in awe, and commented, "Art work, pure art work." Sitting here now I wished I had never heard that comment. She was probably an intern from college sent on a homework assignment to study new architecture. Whoever she was, she started a snowball of ego I believed had melted. Convinced of my own intelligence, I began calling myself an artist.

I wonder if she would think I was a genius. Sitting there watching the world go by. I find her rather attractive in a Mona Lisa sort of way. I like the way her hair bangs straight back over the white plastic chair she sits on. From my car I can't see her eyes but they must be brown. Blue would never do for her. Her sharp angular features lend a sort of athletic look to her plainness, but she could just as easily be anorexic or bulimic or some other "ic I've never heard of.

It doesn't matter though. She's one of them and I am not. Artists and geniuses are a poor match. We don't speak the same language. I believe they find me dull with my facts and statistics. I once tried to convince a glass blower that my architectural drawings were a work of art. He gave me that smug look they all possess and didn't bother to say what I already knew. It's not the same.

The difference lies in the caverns of the human soul to deep for me ever uncover, but she could, she's one of them. I can always tell. She has that unending thoughtful stare that sees beyond politics, money, fashion, and technology. She has it, and I openly stare at her everyday as I pass.

I almost stopped once, but why? I am an alien to her, and I'll never share her insight. I don't know why the passwords that unlocks the magic of their wandering, staccato, conversations. Yes I am an alien, and so I drive by every day just to see if she's still there; seeing beyond. Seeing what's really there.

The thought of speaking with her is often overwhelming, and I wonder if my athletic build alone could be enough to captivate her attention. I work out every day, and considered myself to be fairly good looking. Other women have found me attractive enough. They love running their fingers through my short curly hair, or staring into my hazel eyes, or at least that's what they say. Personally I believe it's my biceps and six figures income, but who knows? Intuition has never been one of my strengths.

I dated the cheerleading captain in college, and the homecoming queen back in high school, but never a woman like her. Not like Mona Lisa, sitting there in her short shorts and khaki tank top, watching the world go by. She intimidates me with her piercing gaze and I

often wonder if she's ever noticed me. Just seeing her makes me feel inferior, as if my soul lacks depth and my words lack weight, and therefore would be of no interest to her whatsoever.

Either way, she's not out there looking for men driving by in their BMWs. She's seeing the world "as it is." That's what artist types always say. It's no wonder so many of them commit suicide or go permanently insane. They delve into things and never find their way back, or so it seems to me. I can offer no other explanation for the inherent misery that always accompanies those with vision, and yet I am jealous for I am blind.

I remember the first time I saw her. Her modest, single story house sits halfway up a hill; a single flight of ancient concrete steps lead up to a tiny patch of grass from A sidewalk below. If you are coming down hill, you can see her entire yard and even the roof of her house. She was just sitting there in the middle of the yard.

10

It was mid-July. I was on my way to the beach. It was hot as hell, that's why I noticed her. Even from my air conditioned BMW I could see the sweat beads on her narrow forehead. I remember thinking it odd, but people are prone to oddness, and so I dismissed it as such.

That had been the extent of my thoughts until I passed the next day, and there she was. Just sitting there. Several days passed before my limited vision cleared enough for me to recognize her as one of them. Maybe it was the corduroy shorts, and Jesus sandals, or maybe the white T-shirt and pig tails. It could have been the cappuccino at 2:00 p.m. on a ninety degree day. No matter, there was, a constant reminder of day's gone by and all the things I've never seen.

I tried to scoff at it and pass it off, but it was there seething under the surface, wanting desperately to boil over. Jealousy; childish, unadulterated jealousy over things I've never seen or heard but know are there. How simple life could be without people like her. I'd never have known a world beyond my own perception existed had it not been for people like her discussing it at length. They cultivate their language in libraries and harvest it in coffee shops over lattes and cappuccino. Their strained talk of life overflows and spills over onto the sidewalks and streets in a harsh staccato rhythm. You can't mistake it for anything else. It sounds like the opening to River dance--da, dada, da, dada, da, dada, da-da d-da!

Throughout those days they looked upon me with what could have only been genuine compassion. How sorry for me they must have felt, knowing I was blind and would never be able to see. They were mysterious, powerful, intelligent, and carried it all so lightly. It baffles me to think about.

It was then that I met my first Mona Lisa. My senior year in high school I joined the drama club just to be near her. Gena Saunders was her name. She was president of the club and with her short curly hair, and perfect pale skin, she was destined to play Juliet in the spring play.

Being the most popular (and best looking) guy in our high school I was certain I would play Romeo. Just having me in her play was sure to draw numbers. That was my thinking during rehearsal and auditions. Visions of long nights rehearsing lines with Gena danced in my head. I envisioned finishing early one night and telling her about all my trophies from football and my scholarship to Cal Poly. I would impress her and I would have her.

Those visions died one afternoon as I read the director's cut. It was posted outside our auditorium. I still recall the anger over being cast as Tybalt. Gena had walked up behind me, looked at the cut and said flatly, "your reputation precedes you." I turned in time to see the smile playing at the corners of her mouth, as she walked away.

It didn't matter. I resigned my role as Tybalt halfway through rehearsal. I openly refused to practice my swordfish scene with the guy they cast as Romeo. Jeremy Stephens was the only male cheerleader in the history of our high school and was queer as a three dollar bill. I was a football player, and outright refused to be left alone with him. Images of soap on a rope hanging in my locker have been very happy about the location.

It was there that I began to realize how much I was missing. After three hours of silence, surrounded by drama on a greyhound bus, it occurred to me I had no idea what to say. These people spoke of Shakespeare, Hemingway, and some guy named Goethe. They chatted for hours, and occasionally threw a pity comment my way. It was very humbling. I couldn't hide my athleticism, or my 2.5 grade point average. For the first time, I was an outcast, one of general suspicion. It was a lonely trip.

By the third day in San Francisco I was walking Fisherman's Warf for lack of better things to do and happened to see Gena walk in to City park, alone. I took note of her natural leather book bag and the sag of her slim shoulder. I still recall how fragile she looked. Delicate, like a wild flower, as if a single

touch could wilt her. To one who knew her it was easy to overlook her fragile features for the strength and power of her spirit. She was nothing short of incredible.

I decided to follow her until I could think up some reason for being there. She stopped halfway through the park, near the gazebo, and took her place on a park bench. I remember waiting for her to take out a book, or magazine, or something, but her bag remained beside her in a heap. She just sat there watching, occasionally running her fingers through her short, curly hair. I was amazed. I waited in delusional anticipation for an artist to happen along with an easel to paint this magnificent moment. No artist arrived, and I never found a reason for being there.

Gena, like Mona, wasn't exceptionally beautiful, at least not in the Pamela Anderson sense. That is to say she wore no makeup, and I doubt she ever had a curling iron in her wild curly hair. But she was in fact beautiful and I was quite taken with her. I loved her. Madly in fact. I lay awake at night year later, still thinking about her.

She won a academic scholarship to some university in France. Theatre of the Arts or some such school for the special and artistic. The very best school in the world. I was happy for her, as if my happiness meant anything to her, or was ever an idea that penetrated her conscience, but I was happy nonetheless. Graduation was the last time I saw her.

It occurs to me that I've been sitting at the stop sign for some time. I'm embarrassed to look up and see Mona Lisa staring at me. Her gaze stirs something deep in my soul, and if I could find the words I would write a poem, or a song, or maybe even a romance novel about it, but no words will come. I stare back and think some day I should stop and tell Mona about Gena. She would see what I felt and maybe that would be enough. She could write a poem or a song and let me keep it. Mona's words for Gena's memory.

She watches me pass by and it me makes uneasy. I see compassion in her eyes. Be sorrow for my lack of vision or the look on my face that tells of the love lost, I'll never know. Those things are reserved for her and those like her. Whatever she sees, it is no doubt the truth. Truth she could easily convict me with, and it keeps me away.

How lonely she must be, sitting there. Seeing what's "really" there. I would feel sorry for her if I had any way of communicating with her, but we don't speak the same language, so I drive on. Besides I'm the one that needs feeling sorry for. I am trapped in a world of my own superficial limitations. A world of health clubs, golf courses, and other such entertainment for the blind.

I pull off on Country Club Boulevard, still thinking of her as I pull by clubs from the trunk of my BMW. Maybe I should just stop tomorrow. I think about all the excuses I could use for being there, and I would most definitely need an excuse. I thought for a moment about jogging by but that won't impress a woman like her. Soon my chance will have passed by just like with Gena Saunders. I feel her slipping through my fingers, and I am miserable. I know someday I'll drive by and she won't be out there any more. It's only a matter of time.

Where is the courage I display in so many other areas of my life? I played college football. I'm an architect, and an up and coming member of the better business bureau. I've dated models, and actresses, and yet I cannot make myself walk up an say high to this skinny little thing in her pig tails.

I slam my trunk shut and try to put her out of my mind. It's a nice sunny day and I refuse to spend it thinking about all of this. Either I will stop, or I won't. One of those two. I listen to my golf cleats clacking on the parking lot and it reminds me of the she way chatters endlessly. The way she would chatter if some pencil neck in bell bottoms were to walk up and say hello.

As I step inside the air conditioned club house, I hear the whirring of the espresso machine, and the clanging of stainless steel crème pitchers. They just recently opened a coffee bar in the clubhouse. We sit in our shorts, tans, and polo's, sipping espresso and latte. We mix it with talk of sports, politics, and corporate takeovers. It used to sadden me. I had, after all, spent time with the pioneers of mocha and camel latte. I guess I feel somewhere in between. Somewhere between knowing, and pretending, just like the rest of them.

It's all right though. I still love the smells, and the atmosphere. Every season, the members pay to have the décor refinished by the best interior designer in the country. It's a real cozy place and the board never fails to find the most beautiful women to tend bar, and hostess. It's worth the 10,000 dollars a year membership. I wonder if Mona Lisa would enjoy it.

I'm playing in a best shot tournament today for some charity. We do these things about three times a year, and every member is expected to attend. I can't remember which charity and try to recall it

v. t.; expressed, *pl.*, *pl.*
 E. *expressen*; L. *express*
 to press or squeeze out
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vely, adv. in an expres
ve-ness, n. the qualiti
 the power of expressio

y, adv. 1. in an exp
 in direct terms.
 ous purpose; particularly;
 for you *expressly*.

man, n.; pl. ex-press'
 you *expressly*.
man, n.; pl. ex-press'



illustration by
Anjanette Miner

before ordering a martini. It will give me a topic of conversation with the new bartender. Women love stuff like that in a man.

I stare at the pictures on the walls that line the clubhouse. We have pictures instead of art. Most members are blind, and having no reason to add insult to injury, they put up pictures with words at the bottom like DESIRE, ATTITUDE, TEAMWORK, and fifty other athletic words now attuned to corporate America. Words people like me can understand and gather around. Words Mona Lisa would never use to describe anything. I know I'll never see one with the word "ABGILITY" and a picture of Ronald Reagan. I laugh out loud at myself, draw a few unappreciative stares. I decide to skip the martini. Charity is Charity, and the least I can do is be sober if it happens to be a children's' charity.

I step out into the blinding sunlight, and haul my clubs around my shoulder. I take a deep breath to compose myself and head toward the crowd gathered at the first tee box. I hate social events like this. I hope I don't have to hug some kid with third degree burns for the local newspaper. It's not that I don't care, I just don't care much. Pouring my heart out on strangers hasn't been one of my favorite pastimes.

As I approach the tee box and the fifty people gathered around the registration desk. I see the chairman of the board speaking with my two golf partners and a woman, in a beige summer dress. Even from behind there is something familiar about her. Maybe it's her cute little ass.

The chairman sees me coming and say's, "Jeff, I'm glad you made it. (As if anyone would dare miss a charity even at the club.) There's someone I'd like you to meet."

As she turns, I recognize her instantly; I broke up with her over a year ago. Nice ass, but not too intelligent. Rachel was every bit as deep as-----ohhhhh-----say---the wading pool, at the Art Center! Just another Bally's junkie with blonde hair and blue eyes.

"Hello, Rachel. How are you?"

"You two have met before," chairman cuts in.

"Oh, yes me and Jeff go way back, don't we Jeff."

I believe she is a volunteer secretary, or treasurer, or some such shit for the children's hospital. I met her at this even two years ago. I did her on the hood of my BMW that night. I didn't' have much respect for her afterward, but she was good in bed, and on the hood. I stayed with her for almost a year. I left her the day she asked me to marry her.

"I wouldn't say way back, but we do go, don't we."

Rachel was gracious enough to disengage the moment and find other people to schmooze, but not before she got an additional donation of 2,000 dollars out of me. As I wrote her the check she had leaned up and hissed more than whispered, "You're getting off cheap, you son of a bitch!"

As the sun makes its way below the hills, and the caddy loads my clubs into the car I make a decision. Tomorrow if she's still out there I will stop. I will stop, walk right up to her and say hello. I'll confess all to her; how I'm obsessed, how I drive by to see her every day, I'll even tell her about Gena if she hasn't called the cops by then. I can't take another day of this. She's all I think about.

I lean forward, resting my head against the lip of my open trunk. I'm a madman. This is never going to work. It's never worked. She'll know what I am the instant she sees me. They always know. It's carved into my soul so deep, even I can't overlook it. I'm not one of them. I'm an above average guy. A statistic, an architect, a runner, a former athlete. Not even an athlete anymore, but a former athlete; washed up, and out to pasture. I reek of Mid-upper classy! Crushed leather interior, lightwood desk, latest greatest CAD program on my state of the art laptop. I'm a poster child for Ralph Lauren, and around Mona I'm sure to feel that thin. What will I say?

I slam the trunk of my car, take a deep breath and try to compose myself. She's not a goddess. I've dated women a hundred times better looking than she is, with a lot more money and prestige. I need to be calm, or at least confident. No woman wants a stammering, stuttering, spineless, wimp of a man coming on to them.

Maybe she already has a man tucked away somewhere inside her little place. A little wimpy, curly haired, philosophy major that wears corduroy bell bottoms, and shark teeth necklaces. They probably listen to Nine Inch Nails and smoke a bowl for breakfast. There seems to be connection between those with vision, and chemical peace of mind.

I start my car, and tear out of the parking lot, trying to talk sense to myself. I'll never know if I don't stop. I have to stop. I'm going to stop. Tomorrow, if she's still out there, I'll stop my car and introduce myself. I've done it a hundred times. This won't be any different.

I pull into my spot in the underground parking garage. Two thousand dollars a month for rent for a luxury condominium, and a parking place with matching number. You pay for the name, "Plaza". Pay out your ass, but that's the way with prestigious things. You pay for the picture you want to paint. There I go again, thinking I'm an artist; "painting my perfect life's picture."

I do love my condo though. I waited for a years to get it. It's not that they didn't have any others for sale; they just didn't have the one I wanted. I wanted a loft on the top three floors, facing the north toward the downtown skyline. I wanted to see the Sports Coliseum every night before I went to bed. It was worth the wait to stare every night at my own creation. It made me smile to know my signature stood right in the middle of downtown for everyone to see. From my balcony I stare at the street lights beginning to come on, and think about Mona.

I wonder what she's doing tonight, probably wearing a white tank top, with black Lycra slacks, and Doc Martin elevator shoes. She's undoubtedly thinking about the coffee shop and her gay friend, Joseph's invitation, to his boyfriend's poetry reading. Maybe she'll browse Barnes and Noble for new fiction before she goes. She'll tell Joseph all about the new author she's discovered, and the river dance will begin. Just from reading the book jacket. They're like that. They won't judge a book by the cover, but they will by the jacket.

They'll talk about life, about love, about serenity, about peaceful things. Joseph will comment about the rainbow parade, and the audacity of those "queens", to think marching in the streets would sway public opinion. Mona will openly disagree, and Joseph's boyfriend will shrug them off. It's all premeditated, elusive, and often heated discussion, but under it all is the depraved indifference of those who can afford to talk about nothing and everything at the same time. To them it doesn't really matter, and so one can openly disagree just to be disagreeing, and have no vested interest in that particular point of view, and yet carry on as though their mind cannot be changed. It's a beautiful game, but one must be born into it. Not everyone gets to play.

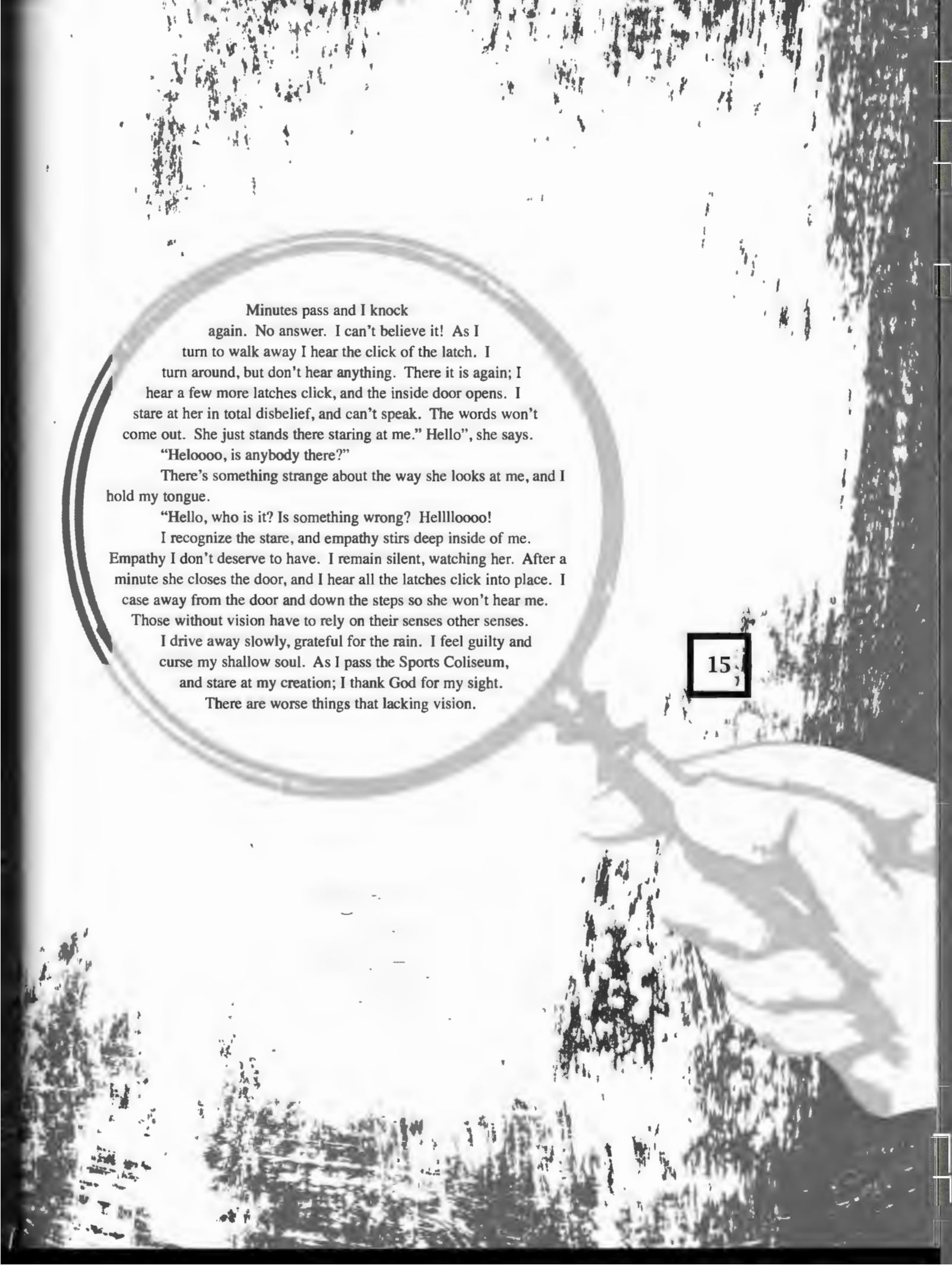
I gaze at the lights of downtown, and let my mind wander. I let her slip away once, and I won't do it again. Gena's gone, but Mona is still out there. Even if she's not sitting outside I'll go up and knock on her door. Who knows, maybe she'll find it romantic in a strange way if I just tell her the truth. That's the best policy, but I know that's not going to be the way.

I head for the shower, dropping clothes as I go. Tomorrow is another day and I'm going to need plenty of sleep.

As I pull my BMW out of the parking garage, I am a little relieved to see a torrential downpour in progress. The first rain in two months, and I'm grateful. I woke this morning with none of the conviction I had held last night. Before I had even brushed my teeth, my mind had made a hundred excuses why this was never going to work, and courage was nowhere to be found. As I pass her house on the way to the office I am relieved to see the empty plastic chair standing in a pool of water. It can wait another day. It's been this long.

Driving past Terricino's coffee shop, I see a couple come walking out casually into the downpour. Happiness radiates from their faces, even in the rain, and it saddens me. I pull my car off the road into a vacant parking lot and rest my face in my hands, rubbing my eyes. Today; it's got to be today. I can't stand this anymore.

I slam my car in gear, whip back out onto the street, and head straight to her house. I can see the white plastic chair from a block away and I can feel the knot in my stomach beginning to tighten. I'm going to do it. I'm at least going to walk up and say hello to her. She'll know I'm not like her, and she'll probably call the cops, but I don't care. I won't spend the rest of my life wondering. I pull up on the curb, step out into the rain and skip up her steps three at a time. I rap sharply on her screen door before I lose the courage and wait in the rain.



Minutes pass and I knock
again. No answer. I can't believe it! As I
turn to walk away I hear the click of the latch. I
turn around, but don't hear anything. There it is again; I
hear a few more latches click, and the inside door opens. I
stare at her in total disbelief, and can't speak. The words won't
come out. She just stands there staring at me." Hello", she says.
"Heloooo, is anybody there?"

There's something strange about the way she looks at me, and I
hold my tongue.

"Hello, who is it? Is something wrong? Helllloooo!

I recognize the stare, and empathy stirs deep inside of me.
Empathy I don't deserve to have. I remain silent, watching her. After a
minute she closes the door, and I hear all the latches click into place. I
cave away from the door and down the steps so she won't hear me.

Those without vision have to rely on their senses other senses.

I drive away slowly, grateful for the rain. I feel guilty and
curse my shallow soul. As I pass the Sports Coliseum,
and stare at my creation; I thank God for my sight.

There are worse things that lacking vision.

16



the champion

Best Overall Star
Jonathan Gold

"They'll be here soon, Uncle Mischa," said Ivan quietly. The small apartment was tense with stillness, like a violin string wound too hard. Boxes, cardboard, squat and ominous, were stacked neatly by the front door. The only thing indicating that the cozy Moscow apartment had ever been lived in were the two comfortable, well-worn leather chairs placed by an expensive, Finnish-made wooden chessboard. They had played, in a desultory way, after Ivan had arrived. He could have cried when he actually won the game. Ivan had to admit, though, the old man still had a certain presence. He was a large, gaunt figure, sitting there in his easy chair by the chessboard, with stooped shoulders and his impressively large head, crowned with a halo of mist-like white hair. Mischa Rostov looked at his favored nephew, and, for a moment, there was a gleam of the old Rostov, Rostov the Terrible, who, at 24, had laid low the chess champion of the world. Rostov, the youngest grandmaster ever. Rostov the Great

Just as quickly, it was gone. "You say they'll make me knock off cigarettes, Vanya?" he asked, his voice sounding like it had to fight its way out of his body, a half-resigned, half-angry smile on his gaunt face. The young man, tall and slim like his uncle, with the same handsome, Semitic features the old man had once had, smiled apologetically.

"I'm afraid so, Uncle Mischa," he replied, glancing once more at the boxes, harbingers of loss, by the door. Silence.

"And vodka?" Asked Mischa after a long pause. He'd lived so large for so long. Vanya thought it was a wonder that he was still alive. The family had noticed his mind fading, that prodigious cleverness and wit beginning to show signs of failure and disrepair. Mischa Rostov had insisted that he was just getting old, and had asked (well, demanded, actually) why he couldn't die as he had lived, why they all wanted him to go off to some dismal hospice just because he wasn't as fresh and clever as he was. But that wasn't all. It was far more. Some days Uncle Mischa couldn't remember his family, his children, his brothers and sister, or even the nephew he'd taught so much. Vanya's memory flickered back to the walks through Sokolniki Park, the way that Uncle Mischa had always told those silly jokes, smiled so brightly at the pretty young women (he'd had four wives, but few years of marriage), the games of speed chess played against the hustlers, how he'd learned the moves and the strategy of the great game, how Uncle Mischa had always won, no matter how brilliantly young Vanya played. The young man shook off such reminiscence.

"We already discussed it, Uncle Mischa. You know, don't you?"

The old man was silent again. His face betrayed an expression of deep concentration, like he'd had on stage during the championship match against Botvinnik.

"Yes, I will have to stop drinking. Wouldn't want my mind to go, eh Vanya?" he said, smiling that sad smile again.

He knows, thought Vanya. And that's the worst part. He knows he's lost it. And he knows he'll never have it back.

"Well, they'll probably have to keep you in a cage anyway, Uncle Mischa. "To keep you from the ladies there," Replied Vanya, trying to sound as if his smile and levity wasn't forced.

"No cage can hold me," said the old man, with that fearsome, roguish smile. My God, he's so coherent now, but in five minutes he might not even remember my name, thought Vanya despairingly. Five minutes. The words repeated over Andover in the young man's head, though he didn't know why. "You're going to have the most photographs of anyone in the place, Uncle. Who else has pictures of so many greats? You'll probably be kept busy signing autographs," he said, still trying to keep Mischa's spirits up.

Too late. The old man was looking placidly at nothing again. Oh, damn it, thought Vanya. He's gone again. "Uncle? Uncle?" he asked, but Mischa merely looked with polite curiosity at him, and started talking about a game he had once played to someone named Paul.

Vanya could have cried again. Such genius. So gone. He sat and listened to the rambling, trying to remember better times, when his Uncle Mischa had been really alive.

"Yes, I think the bishop sacrifice, unless the pawn is on h7, does work, doesn't it?..."

Joyous, exuberant, triumphant, clapping and cheering wildly in the theater after the last game against Botvinnik. "No, no, I only play the King's Indian when I know I don't have a very aggressive..."

Excited, pumped up, the first time he'd beaten one of the hustlers in the park, Uncle Mischa grinning and giving mock applause, the hustler looking impressed.

"Well, once I play Botvinnik in 1960, we'll see how..." He went on. And on. Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow for old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago... Wordsworth crept into Vanya's thoughts.

After several minutes, Vanya looked listlessly at his watch. Nearly time. He stood, feeling much older than his 25 years, and said, "It's time, Uncle Mischa. Let's get it packed up."

The old man gave no response. He'd gone silent in the last five or six seconds. Vanya reached out to pack up the beautifully made chess pieces.

It was as if someone had flipped a switch. A gnarled hand flashed out and caught his wrist. Vanya was stunned. If the old man got violent, thought he was being beset... And then he saw the eyes, and they were shining, full of anger, life, humor, and pride. "One more game, Vanya. Five minute blitz," he said, and he no longer sounded like something more dead than alive.

Five minutes. You fool, Vanya! What else could rouse him from such a stupor? Wordlessly, Vanya opened his pack, lying formlessly on the floor, retrieved an old wooden clock, and set it. He placed it on the table, hardly daring to hope.

The noise seemed ear-splitting after the restrained conversation. Vanya drawing white, played hard and fast, disbelieving, but... something told him it would be disrespectful not to play all out. The young man was a grandmaster now in his own right, and was widely accounted one of the rising stars of Soviet chess.

But he was being outplayed.

The clack of pieces hitting the board, hands hitting the clock, was all the noise in the room now. He'd never so thoroughly enjoyed a game in which he was being so thoroughly outplayed. Uncle Mischa had cramped his pieces, snatching the initiative with a brilliant sacrifice, just like he had done so often in the old days.

Then Vanya saw it, a brilliancy of his own, and a sure win if the old man missed one step. The young man played the move after a brief pause for thought, although both players had plenty of time left. Just one moment of weakness, one slip of the mind, he thought to himself, praying, but not the way he did in his other games.

Uncle Mischa didn't miss a beat. In fact, he didn't even look twice at the position before he made his move. They played through the sequence with desperate speed, as if afraid of what would happen if they slowed. They reached the critical move. And the old man fell. Vanya, his excitement gone, made his crushing move feeling hollow inside. He's really gone. I can't believe it.

And then the old man, grinning like a demon, reached out, snatched a rook off the board, plunked a bishop into its place, and said, quite cheerfully, "Checkmate!"

Vanya gasped with exultant shock. I guess I was wrong, he thought, delightedly.

The two chatted like old friends, having packed up the pieces and chairs and table, doing a thorough analysis of the game, until the mover came. They loaded in silence, although Uncle Mischa tried to help out, and

was forcibly stopped from doing so by his at once elated and dejected young nephew. Soon all was ready.

As he flagged a taxi, Vanya heard his uncle speak.

"You've turned into a brilliant player while I wasn't looking, Vanya. Stay with it, and you'll probably end up the best."

Another quotation sprang, unbidden, to the young man's lips. "Praise from Caesar!"

Mischa laughed. "Now you take better care of yourself than I did, all right?"

Tears formed in Vanya's eyes. "I will."

In the final moment of lucidity Vanya ever witnesses of him, Mikhail Rostov grinned again, swept his nephew into an impossibly strong bear hug, and said, "I'll see you in the park, Vanya!"

Ivan, years later, would recount this story to his wife, a beautiful woman named Ekaterina. She thought it incredible, until he showed her the clock, its hands frozen at the exact moment of the old man's final victory.

Illustration by

Ly-Lee F



press, v.t.,
 expr. [ME. *expr*
primere, to pres

1. to put into
 state.

2. to make le
 ace *expressed* so

3. to picture,
 music, art, etc.

4. to show by
 the sign + *expr*

5. to dispatch,
 s. to *express* a p

6. *express oneself*

b) to give expr
 nation, etc., esp
 ctivity.

press'ible, a.

press'ibly, ad

press'ion (eks
 -onis), a pressin

pressus, pp. of
 press.]

1. a putting i
 language; a stat

2. a picturing,
 n art, music, et

3. a manner
 meaningful and
 ing, etc.; as,

4. a particular
 s, "catch cold"

5. a showing e
 laughter is offer

6. a look, intor
 meaning or feel

expression on hi

7. a symbol o
 some algebraic
 ion.

8. a showing b

press'ion-ist, a

ion; having the

press'ion-ism,

movement in th
 characterized by

ools, stereotype
 o give objectiv
 nce.

press'ion-ist,

ressionism.

press'ion-ist,

writer, etc.

press'ion-is'tic

press'ion-is'tic

atic manner.

press'ion-less.

press'ive, a.

ression.

2. expressing;

s, a song *expr*

3. full of exp

s, an *expressive*

press'ive-ly, a

press'ive-ness

ressive; the po

ation.

press'ly, adv.

lainly; in direc

2. on purpose

wrote for you

press'man, n.

wrote for you

press'man, n.



on the
**corner after
midnight**

Runner-up Best Story
Dianne Edwards

Linda cried in her place at the table. Still folded, the newspaper drank the contents of Mike's upturned coffee cup. He'd gone to work, leaving conflict heavy in the air despite the clean summer sunshine streaming through the window.

Staring past the shafts of light into the back yard, Linda watched a Robin hop a step ahead of a suitor. She fluttered to a low branch of the big pine where their wings brushed for just a moment. Then he pursued again, and they flew from sight.

The bird wouldn't settle, but would instead wait for the strongest, the brightest, and the best nest builder. Had Linda's own choice of a mate been as wise? There hadn't been much time to ruminate between senior prom photos and the wedding album.

At the sound of running water in the upstairs bathroom, Linda moved to clean the table. Her hands brushed the soft rolls of her abdomen when she retied her robe across twenty extra pounds.

"Do you eat, Linda?" Mike said after each of them had already said too much. "Is that what you do while I'm out busting my hump?"

"You're calling me lazy? Who falls asleep in front of the TV every night before I'm even finished cleaning up after supper?"

"I didn't call you lazy. I called you fat. But if you want to open that can of worms, I'll be glad to count them."

Then the coffee spilled along with her tears, and Linda could no longer remember a time when Mike hadn't looked at her with disappointment.

"I just can't figure out what it is you do all day."

"Give my life to this family!" Linda sobbed.

"Don't pull out the Oscar performance! You can't to leave this place a mess and jet off to pat your big sister on the back. What about the back I'm breaking to provide for you?"

The trip to their hometown of Kessler, Kansas had been planned since Linda's sister, Karen, presented them with a paperback book and announced that she was no longer just a teacher at the high school they'd all attended, she was also a novelist. Initially, Mike was going to come along to the alumni awards. But that was before he'd had to trade his middle manager's tie for holey jeans and steel-toed boots.

"What do you suggest I do, Mike? Call up Karen and say, 'Sorry, my husband's being a jerk so we're not coming.' Because you said it was okay before...."

"So, now I'm a jerk?"

"Well, I'm fat, so who cares!"

Mike grabbed his lunch box from the kitchen counter.

"Where are you going?"

"Work, Linda. So you can live the life of Riley." Mike slammed the back door, stomped down the footpath, and revved the engine of their ten-year-old truck.

In their marriage as old as the truck they'd never finished an argument. Mike would attack, Linda would defend, she would cry, and he would run. It didn't matter where he went; to work, to mow, to change the oil in the car; the door was always closing on his back before anything was resolved. Linda was left to steep in her anger. She dreaded the moment Mike would return, all smiles, as if leaving Linda alone could actually cure her loneliness.

Linda bit her lip and mixed pancake batter. She was standing in front of the griddle, staring at the phone on the wall, when her daughter Mya entered the kitchen.

"Good morning, sunshine," Linda managed

The six-year-old grabbed the plate her mother offered. She was already dressed and had probably made her own bed as well.

"Do you want me to cut them up?"

"I can do it," Mya said, concentrating on drowning her cakes in syrup. "Oh, Mikey's hollering for you."

The girl had become so self-sufficient since attending kindergarten. Linda sighed and headed for the stairs.

Mikey was standing up in his crib. "Ama!" he called, smiling wide and bouncing.

"What a nice greeting."

He was big for ten months of age, built like his father, the former football captain. Linda tickled his pink cheeks and dressed him in a bright blue outfit. He had little interests in nursing, having already started to wean him in pursuit of "big boy" food. Linda wondered where she would

be when her babies were gone—or rather, where she would want to be. Would she be useless by the age of forty?

She dressed in her standard shorts and tee shirt, swept a brush through her chin-length hair, and returned to the main floor with Mikey in one arm and a load of laundry under the other. She filled her morning with housework, doing things she hadn't done in weeks, such as clean the blades of the ceiling fans. I'll show him, she thought. But a bored baby stuck in a wind-up swing and a six-year-old cooped up on a nice day compounded her resentment.

She wasn't supposed to worry about the dust or the bugs in the light fixtures or even the ring in the tub. Her job was to worry about the kids, the kids she'd squeezed out of her body, not the one she'd inherited from Mike's mother.

"Where are my socks, Linda?"

In the dryer or in the basket. I didn't fold the laundry yet because I taught Mya to whistle and made Mikey smile a dozen times.

"Where do you keep the extra toilet paper, Linda?"

"In the cabinet. Any logical person would look in the cabinet. Would you like me to wipe your ass too?"

Now Mikey was napping. Mya was turning her mind to mush in front of cartoons, and Linda was folding Mike's damn socks when she should have been sipping lemon iced tea on her sister's front porch. She shoved the laundry basket into the bedroom closet and grabbed a suitcase from the shelf.

By the time she closed the lid of the suitcase it was nearly four o'clock. Mike would be parking his backhoe and thinking about his dinner. Linda was certain he hadn't thought of her all day. The phone rang. She'd been waiting for that sound, and now it just seemed like an intrusion and she let it ring twice more before she answered it.

"Hey. You're still there."

Linda's eye narrowed at the sound of her husband's voice. "I had some cleaning to do."

He acknowledged her comment with a nervous chuckle. "Well, I can't talk long. I just want to let you know I have to pull in some OT tonight so you'll probably be gone before I get home." It sounded like a question. She could hear him shuffling his boots in the dirt.

"Where are we going?"

"Go to Karen's, he said through a sigh. "I suppose we could use a few days off from each other."

Linda squeezed the phone to her cheek. "That's funny, Mike. I recall saying just those words to you this morning before you exploded."

"Come on, Linda. I don't want to fight anymore."

"How convenient for you."

"Look, the boss is giving me the head's up. Call me when you get there."

"I'll call in the morning."

"But I'll be at work."

"You can check messages."

He took a deep breath and spoke softly. "Have a good time, Linda. Really."

Linda poked the "end" button and tossed the portable phone onto her pillow. She didn't even wait for the guilt to come from hanging up without a goodbye, she just moved to load the car. Finally, Linda sat with her hand on the ignition and stared into the rearview at her children in the back seat. Mikey was fidgety after having spent most of his day somehow confined. Mya was eager to see her Aunt Karen who spoiled her.

"Why aren't we going?" Myra urged. "I know we have everything."

Everything but a reason to stay, Linda thought, and she pulled out of the driveway.

Kessler was a nothing little town nestled against a curve in the Little Blue River. There was no industry, little commerce, no bridge, no rail stop; even the main highway had bypassed it before Linda was born. But it was familiar and comforting to her as her own heartbeat.

She remembered every nuance from her childhood. The rich, sandy soil in the garden was a decadent as playing in silk. The clear springs spilling into the creeks murmured a thousand secrets. She used to sit atop the rail fence imitating meadowlarks as they proclaimed the day while watching her father traverse the field in his tractor. On hot nights, barn owls would lull her to sleep through open windows with their questions.

Each season had its distinction. The fishy scent of the thawing river would be chased away by lilacs in the spring. Whole meadows of sunflowers gazed at the summer solar trek. Columns of combines marked the end of fall by leaving a wake of sweet smelling dust in the wheat fields.

In winter, strong oaks would become crystalline castles for her to imagine after.

The images replayed with fairy tales reverence in Linda's mind. In Kessler, she was more than her role and more than her name. In Kessler, Linda was home.

Their move to Iowa was never meant to be permanent. The year she and Mike both turned twenty-one, his parents packed off to a warmer climate, Mya was born, and Linda's mother passes away. Following the construction boon to Des Moines seemed like a grown up adventure. Like any great adventurer, Linda had expected to come home to tell her tales. Then Mike took an opportunity with an equipment distributor: more money, better benefits. He made management and they bought a house. There was no more talk of going back home for anything more than a long weekend.

The last trip had been made six months before. Snow frosted the scenery, but the roads were fine. Everything was postcard perfect, except for Mike's mood. He'd been fired a week after Thanksgiving and wore his worry like a suit of titanium armor.

On Christmas Eve, she and Mike took a walk through the north pasture just like they used to do as high school sweethearts. The whole world was silver under the heavy moon. Only the sound of their breathing disturbed the crisp night when they stopped to lean against the fence row.

Linda nuzzled close. "I should have brought a blanket." She stretched up to kiss his neck but Mike pulled away.

"It's freezing cold out here."

"You wouldn't have worried about that ten years ago."

"We can't afford to get sick now."

Linda took a step to let some space between them.

"That's what poor people do," she joked. "They skip the dinner and movie and go straight for the sex."

"Then they end up with a ton of kids they can't afford."

A bolt of panic seared her chest. Suddenly self-conscious, she yanked her snug coat down over her stretch-marked hips. "What do you mean by that?"

"I didn't mean anything by it. Let's just be quiet. Maybe we'll see a deer or something."

Linda stood silent but her head was screaming. Did he wish they didn't have Mikey so that she could go to work?

"You know," Mike finally said. "There haven't been cattle in this pasture since your dad passed. It butts up against the access road. I wonder what a developer might pay for it."

"That doesn't matter. It's not for sale."

"I was just wondering aloud."

"You can quit wondering because I'd never sell it."

Mike faced her. "What little cash rent you get from the fields helps us out some, but this could be a real gold mine."

"It belongs to Karen too..."

Mike kicked a rut into the snow. "Ah, hell, Linda. It's just a patch of dirt and rocks and creek beds. You could put ten or so big fancy houses up in here."

"It's not a patch of dirt, it's my meadow, and I don't want it turned into some kind of pseudo suburbia. Who'd buy a house clear out here anyway?"

"Double-incomers with cell phones and SUV's who can afford the commute. You've seen it happen over to Ballard and Dawson, and up around Des Moines."

"I'VE SEEN IT. Cookie cutter monstrosities slapped up against the view. And those people who supposedly want the quiet country life can't live without their take out and video stores. Next thing would be a strip mall at the end of our lane."

"Well, I like Nowheresville."

"And do what?"

"Oh, for goodness sake, Mike, it's easy to be middle class anywhere. This is where we grew up. Our kids could grow up here too."

"Sure. Maybe they could learn to get drunk at field parties, tip cows, and joyride in stolen cars like their mother."

Gut shot, Linda turned back to the path and stumbled toward the house. Mike's heavy step crunched along behind her.

"I'm sorry, Linda, but you act like Kessler is some kind of Nirvana and you treat this farm like a shrine."

"It could be a haven."

"That isn't real. I worked my ass off for that company just to get booted because the boss's son graduated from college. That's the real world."

"They offered you another position." Linda's tears burned like brands against her frozen cheeks." In the goddamned warehouse forking pallets! Every day I'm out there looking, and every day I'm reminded that I don't have some piece of paper that says I'm good enough for management."

"You say that like it's my fault you didn't go to school."

"No. I'm saying five years of experience is better than a college degree any day. But it's also not reality."

"So quit trying and go back to Ludwig."

"I can't go back now. Construction is filthy shit work."

"Well, it ain't bad paying shit work."

"Fuck you, Linda! You don't know what it's like to breathe diesel and listen to hydraulics all day."

They walked the last several yards to the porch in icy silence. Linda got there first. She blocked the door and whirled to face him.

"You won't get your old job back, no matter how inept the boss's son is. So calls Ludwig, get back in your rig, and go dig yourself a hole!"

Once inside the house, they stripped their coats, hauled out the few trinkets Santa could afford, and Mike went to bed. Linda spent the remainder of the night crying in her old attic hiding place. After the sullen drive back to Iowa, Mike returned to construction. The bills got paid, but their relationship was in serious deficit.

"I'm hungry," Mya complained from the back seat. "And I think Mikey made a stinker."

Linda turned off the air conditioner and rolled the windows down in agreement. After crossing the Nebraska state line she pulled into the parking lot of a fast food restaurant. She considered getting the meal to go after a restroom break, and then she saw Mya gazing at the glassed-in-play area and decided to find a seat.

Too anxious to savor her food, Mya took a few bites and rushed off to climb, crawl, and slide. Linda nursed Mikey, and then fed him fries and small bits of her chicken sandwich. Even the distractions couldn't block the noise of her thoughts.

"You know I need you," Karen had pleaded.

Linda knew it was a lie. The book was a big deal in Kessler and Karen was a celebrity, even if she did use a pen name and the local library would only carry her romance novel if the artist's rendering of the characters was covered by a label. In the end, Linda knew she would be there, clapping wildly and choking on inadequacy.

Their parents, Deloris and Bob Cotter, had been ancient by the standards of their peers. They'd married late, had Karen and Linda surprised them eight years later. By the time Karen was off to college, they were retirement age—as if farmers could retire.

It was a calm, steady life by Linda's recollection. Chores followed the change of seasons. Each evening, after helping her mother in the kitchen, Linda looked forward to her father's stories of his Navy tour during World War II, of his first new car, of the great uncle rumored to have been a moon-shine runner. Bob would adjust his thick, black-framed glasses, scratch his stubbly chin, and use his walnut pipe to lend pause for effect. Karen was like Bob, good-humored and quick of wit.

Linda couldn't even tell a proper joke. She favored the cheery, domestic Deloris. Unassuming and deferential, the woman was most at home in the kitchen. Linda learned to feel, rather than measure, her way through a recipe. The necessity created by lean winters led to invention.

Karen was the model student, gifted teacher, and consummate wordsmith. Linda dreamed of winning blue ribbons at the state fair and going to culinary school to be trained for more than slinging hash at the corner diner. Or maybe she would open that diner and paint her name on the sign.

In the middle of tenth grade, Linda stopped dreaming. Bob died of a heart attack that January while haying cattle in the north pasture. Linda was the one who found him, still inside the idling tractor with the cows trying to nibble the huge, round bale off the fork attachment.

Linda recalled that dark time as she played pat-a-cake with Mikey and tried to catch a glimpse of Mya, who'd made a quick friend in the ball pit. She smiled away a tear remembering her mother's wording.

"The time my baby got lost on the wrong path."

Sixteen and angry was not a great combination. Linda perceived her parents as selfish for

starting a family so late. She resented her father for being dead as much as she longed for the sight of his pipe overalls and the smell of his pipe tobacco.

She sneaked out nights to meet her friends down by the river; learned to drink cheap wine, smoke cigarettes, and explore adulthood with her boyfriend in the back seat of a rusted Ford. She'd done well to banish the boy's name from her vocabulary, but couldn't forget the handcuffs and book-in number she'd worn because of him.

After the courts and the fines, a beleaguered Deloris sent Linda a hundred miles away to live with a younger cousin of Bob's until she straightened out. It didn't take long, less than a year, before she tired of being somewhere in the middle of eight mouths to feed. Deloris welcomed her back on her seventeenth birthday with a rich cake and a giant hug. Linda never strayed from the path again.

Then Karen returned home to teach. The love the three women shared filled every nook of the house; from the narrow creaking stairs to the warped wood floors in the kitchen where they laughed, cried, and ate anything but light. They never realized that time was borrowed. Linda graduated with honors, married a 'good boy', but in the end, she was still just a little girl with two dead parents.

Mya finally returned to the table and Linda realized they'd been there for over an hour. She quickly gathered their things, anxious to put the last 300 miles under her tires.

"Are we almost there?" Mya asked.

"Just a few more hours," Linda answered, securing Mikey's car seat.

"Hours?"

"It won't seem so long if you sleep."

The children did fall asleep soon after they traveled from interstate to state highway. Linda turned off the radio and settled into the familiar rhythm of the road. Her thoughts spun between Kessler and her suburban home. She imagined Mike sleeping in his easy chair with a half-consumed frozen dinner on the end table; her sister, still awake, would be writing in the study that had once been her bedroom.

Karen had always known what to say, what to do, whom she wanted to be when she grew up. Of course she would lament that she had no man, no children, but Linda suspected she could conjure them up with words on paper whenever she wished.

Linda had a real family. She could hold them, touch them, and feel them in every corner of her house. But nothing was like it was in the beginning. Mike was perfect, polite and steady. His parents owned the farm implement business and he did well in school and sports. She'd always suspected he asked her to Homecoming on a dare because of reputation. But by prom, they knew it was forever.

After they were married, she used to pack his lunch with love noted and heart-shaped chocolate chunk cookies. He would suddenly call a sitter and spirit her away for an evening. It all seemed like some enchanted fable, rising up through the fog of memory, just out of reach, just like her childhood. Now she was in an altered reality full of fights and bills, double the children, double the work. Somehow she'd lost the cookie recipe, and Mike would sooner break her spirit than spirit her away.

Linda rolled down her window, allowing the questions she feared to be sucked into the night. Who am I? What do I want? How will I be remembered?

Towns, with their speed limits and stop signs, had been a rarity. Now Linda was traveling a gauntlet of farming communities with less than ten miles between each. The decelerations made for tedious driving.

Ballard was in sight. Just six miles from Kessler, Linda knew its streets just as well. It had always been larger, with a grocery store and a bowling alley. Now it had doubled in size, having become a bedroom community to Topeka, which was eighty miles southeast.

Thirsty, Linda shook the paper cup from the restaurant. Even the ice was gone. She new The Last Stop was open until midnight. The clock in the dashboard read 11:56 p.m.

Linda caught sight of a police car following her from the grain elevators. She struggled to keep the speedometer below thirty miles-per-hour, remembering from experience that the county sheriff and his boys were notorious for their disdain of speeders with out-of-state plates. Finally, she pulled into the still bright parking lot and her rear-escort continued slowly down the main street.

It seemed foolish to stop, but Linda needed one more delay, one more moment to think about why she had come and what she wanted to return home to. As she reached into her purse to

dig out a five-dollar bill, she could see the clerk was still behind the counter. She glanced at her clock again. Maybe it was fast. What was it her mother used to say?

"Don't get caught on the corner after midnight. No good will come of it."

"Mommy?" came Mya's soft voice from the back seat.

"Are we there?"

"I want to come." Mya had already unfastened her seat belt.

"I won't be long, honey..."

"Please."

Linda sighed, pulled her keys and stepped into the warm night.

"What about Mikey?" Mya asked when Linda helped her from the car.

Her son's face was serene, washed soft in the neon glow from the store.

"He's busy dreaming. Come on."

"Can I have some candy?"

"Not this late." Mya's hand felt tiny in her grasp.

"I could save it for after breakfast."

Linda smiled down at her daughter as they entered.

"You can pick out something for after lunch."

The clerk looked up sharply. He was young, far from clean-shaven with his nose ring and colorful hair to match the tie-dyed shirt showing beneath his white frock.

Imagine, she thought. A skateboarder in a town with three sidewalks.

"We're closed." His voice crackled with youth and cigarettes.

"We just want a drink," she smiled.

"I've already locked the register."

"But you didn't lock the door." She paused. "Come on, I'll pay you cash. Keep the change."

"Look Lady, I said we're closed. So just go!"

As Linda tried to think of a response, she caught an impression. The boy stood rigid, knuckles bloodless against the counter. Crystal beads of sweat magnified the acne on his forehead. His eyes darted away, and then implored her. The realization of what he wanted to say chilled her soul.

Linda's persuasive smile faded and she started to back through the door. Mya pulled against her.

"You said I could have some candy."

"No Mya!" Linda fairly shouted.

Her daughter broke free, rushing toward the confections. The clerk yelled for her to stay away and lunged. Cigarettes and gum scattered to the floor. Mya slipped, then a thunderclap and the young man sprawled, still reaching, white smock changing to red.

Two men emerged by the time Linda got to Mya, one with a shotgun from behind the counter, another from somewhere in back of the store. He was screaming, "What the hell did you do?"

Linda circled an arm around her daughter and tried to run. Mya shrieked, gaze frozen on the dead boy hanging halfway over the counter, blood pooling under his long fingers. Then the second man—she now saw he carried a hand gun—hailed her away from the door.

"Let me go!" she repeated.

He pressed his lips to her ear. "Relax. It's okay." Even he didn't sound convinced.

The shooter-- tall, skinny, blonde, with tattoos of dragons and tigers leaping out from stark bare arms-- jumped over a clear section of the counter and swaggered toward them. Linda recoiled, but could find no solace in the tense embrace of her captor.

Without a word, the blonde reached out and ripped Linda's keys from her hand. She'd forgotten she had them. She and Mya were released violently and they fell together.

No! She thought, and then repeated the word aloud. "Mikey!"

Linda leaped up and bolted toward the men. The butt of the shotgun greeted her stomach and she hit the floor again. Through double vision she watched the men pass into the night.

She wailed Mikey's name in multitude, a siren warning doom, until she realized her voice was competing with another siren from outside. The police cruiser screeched into the parking lot.

The men rushed back through the door and locked it. A few seconds later, Linda and Mya huddled together under a rain of expletives as their captors struggled with the back door. The gray surface was dented, and a nicked keyhole mocked them from above the grimy, stainless steel handle. The blonde kicked at it, grunting with rage and exertion. Finally, he hurried back toward the front of the store.

The second man, shorter and darker than his companion, turned and gestured with his gun. It was a .22 revolver like the one her father had had. They followed the direction of the barrel into a small stockroom. She sat on an empty milk crate and Mya crawled around behind her.

He had a big chest and fleshy arms. His straight black hair fell into his eyes as he paced. Suddenly, Linda remembered high school, the wild crowd, counting stars down by the river in a haze of heavy metal and pot smoke. Then she spoke his name.

"Jason."

He stopped and stared. Finally, he pushed the gun into his back waistband and knelt in front of Linda, grasping her shoulders gently.

"Don't let on to Chris that you know me. That would be bad. Do you understand?"

"You didn't come here to kill somebody," she stammered.

"No, Linda. That wasn't supposed to happen."

His eyes were the same color she remembered, like the furrows in one of her father's newly-plowed fields. She breathed deep under his gaze until her tears subsided. Mya calmed as well, but refused to look at Jason.

"I need you out here, man!"

Jason stood and backed toward the door. "Just sit tight."

He'd spoken those words to her before. "Sit tight," he'd said, then kissed her. But he failed to return before Linda was caught, smoking cigarettes and listening to the radio in the car Jason and stolen.

"Do you know that bad man?"

Linda blinked away the past. "Not anymore, baby."

"I should have stayed with Mikey."

Pulling Mya into her lap, Linda began to sway. Was Mikey safe? Or was he still alone, possibly awake, possibly crying and abandoned.

"If you hadn't come in...if I hadn't stopped at all...None of that matters now."

Linda knew her words were true, but the guilt sat on her chest until she could barely breathe.

The bare bulb above her was dim and the overhead lights in the front of the store had been turned off. There was only the glow from the coolers and intermittent flashes of red on the wall from the police lights outside. Linda could hear staccato rhythm of orders barked through a bullhorn outside, but not the words. Chris and Jason were engaged in a blame fest. She felt relatively certain that Jason would not harm them—but a dozen years was too long to be too sure about someone. And Chris—Chris had just killed a man.

Nothing seemed useful in the room. There were boxes of merchandise, a few cleaning supplies, and a sour mop bucket. Smocks hung from a set of crooked coat hooks above a rickety step stool with an ashtray on top.

Mya stiffened and Linda looked up to see the men in the doorway. Jason stood behind his companion, staring at the floor. Chris had eyes of steel. Small and gray, they showed no softness, only anger—or a hard pain. He spoke in proclamation.

"You belong to me now. You don't make a move. You don't make a sound. And I won't make you dead." He slapped a claw on Jason's shoulder. "This man with the gun will make sure you behave. Understand?"

It was new fear that enveloped her. Before, when Linda was afraid, there had always been someone to whom she could pass control. Even Mike was always there, even when they fought. Now there was no one to dry her tears or create an egress. Linda was unaccustomed to standing alone. A phone rang out front and Christ turned to go. "Sounds like Huckleberry out there has finished reading his procedures manual."

The weight of Mya in her lap reminded Linda that she wasn't alone. "Please let my daughter go. You don't need both of us."

Jason paled and Chris stepped backward, rewinding his actions before he faced her.

"What did I just say?"

"This is too much for a little girl. I'll do anything you want if you will let her go."

Chris moved close, closer still, and bent down so that his nose nearly brushed hers. She couldn't look into his frosty eyes, focusing instead on his teeth; slightly crooked with nicotine stains striped between them. The stench of beer on his breath made her squirm.

"She is precious. Isn't she?"

His hand snaked toward Mya, and Linda slapped it away. "Don't you touch her!"

He swiped Linda across the face. Her daughter's finger digging into the small of her back kept her conscious.

"Maybe we don't need both of you," Chris continued. "But she is so sweet, so very valuable. If I decide to bargain anyone away, it will be you."

He raised his hand again and Linda flinched. Instead of another blow, he caressed her reddened cheek. "You are right about one thing. You will do anything I want."

Chris turned, stopping next to Jason. "Don't be afraid to spend your bullets, man." He laughed all the way down the hall.

Linda's face hurt. How many blows could she sustain before she could no longer protect Mya? She promised herself that it wouldn't come to that.

Linda rocked with her daughter. Maybe if she closed her eyes tight enough she could imagine they were somewhere else. She saw herself next to her father on the tractor, baking cookies with her mother, staying up late gossiping with her sister, causing trouble with Jason, singing songs with Mya, nursing Mikey, fighting with Mike, making love with Mike. The pictures swirled in her mind without conjuring a solid image. She couldn't find her way home.

"You okay, Linda?" Jason's voice flowed like the river, cool and inviting.

She opened her eyes. "For now."

Jason slid down the doorframe to sit with his arms across his knees. "Just do your best to keep out of his way."

"What are you doing with a guy like that?"

"Chris and I go way back."

"You used to choose your friends more wisely."

Jason learned his head to see down the hallway. "I'm sorry about this, Linda."

"Sorry it's happened? Or just sorry it's me?"

Jason looked at her. "Don't ask questions you don't really want the answers to."

Those were the only kind of questions that Linda had, even for herself. Did Mike hate her or did he hate his new job? Did she marry him to create a family because hers was gone? Did she have her children young because she was afraid of dying before they were grown? She kissed her daughter's forehead and was relieved to find Mya asleep.

Jason got up, walked to the coat hooks and took down the smocks.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"Making up a place for her to lie down so you won't have to hold her all night."

All morning, she thought. All morning. She wondered how much time had passed. Fifteen minutes? Twenty minutes? How long would it take for state police to arrive from Topeka? Cops with nicer cars, bigger guns, and a plan.

Jason stepped aside as Linda laid Mya on the floor. Shaking her arms, she returned to the crate.

"She was getting heavy."

"I guess I won't be needing these." He dug into his pocket and came out with her keys.

He turned them over, looking at the photograph on the chain. "I heard you got married," he said as he gave them to her. "Is that Mike Snyder?"

Linda nodded and stroked the picture. It had been taken when their smiles were easier.

"Figures."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I guess you went from the worst of the worst to the best of the best." He shrugged. "I'm sorry I said anything."

She focused on Jason. He was picking at the frayed strings around the hole in the knee of his jeans. He hadn't really left her all those years ago. Instead, while she "sat tight", he was arrested for another offense and sent to juvenile hall until his eighteenth birthday. Linda never mentioned his involvement in her troubles but waited for him to say something on his own. He never came to her rescue. Years later, she found a note from him among her mother's things. It was a construction paper card with a stick figure on the front. Inside it read "Miss you. Stay cool." She didn't save it.

Jason spoke. "We met here in Ballard. Remember? You were with that girl with all the hair?"

"Rita"

"That's right. My friend and I gave you a ride home from the bowling alley." He looked at her and smiled. "That was a good night."

The memory was a lightning strike. Excited by the attention from the upperclassmen with reputations and eager to impress them, she and Rita had stolen chocolate bars from this very store. They tossed them to the boys through the bathroom window.

Linda wondered if the window was still there. Nails in the frame had prevented it from opening much more than a foot. It had to be enough.

Jason stood and stretched. "I need a cigarette and I don't want to smoke around the girl so I'm going out to talk to Chris."

Linda sat very still. Did he remember too?

"You be good while I'm gone."

She forced a smile. "Bring me back something to drink?"

"Sure."

Linda moved quickly to rouse Mya. "Wake up, honey. Don't talk."

She steadied her daughter with one arm and grabbed the milk crate with the other hand. The bathroom was straight across the hall. She could see Jason's arm as he lifted and lowered his cigarette. Chris was leaning against the counter where the boy had been. She wondered if he'd bothered to clean up the blood.

The bathroom door was made of light, hollow wood with a common doorknob and inset lock. It wouldn't withstand much force. Still confused, Mya leaned against the wall and watched Linda stand on the crate under the window.

The frame had been painted shut at one point, but someone had already sliced the enamel and raised the sash to thwart summer's heat. The nails were still there. Ten inches of clearance, no more than that. The screen was new and yielded little.

"I don't have to potty," Mya whined.

"That's not why we're here."

She was clawing at the nylon now, prying the edges with her fingernails. Finally, she remembered her keys and banged the points into the screen until it was ripped from the frame. Linda scrambled down from her perch. Kneeling before Mya, she took a last look at the photograph, and then tucked her keys into the pocket of the girl's shorts.

"I'm going to lift you up and you'll crawl through the window feet first. Okay?"

"What if I fall?"

Tears brimmed Linda's eyes. "You'll fall outside."

Mya grasped Linda's wet cheeks. "What about you, Mommy?"

"I'll be right behind you."

Linda struggled to keep control. She had minutes, maybe only seconds in which to let go—she'd thought she would have years. She picked Mya up and stood again on the crate, lifting the girl to her shoulder. Just a little sack full of smiles that fit elbow to elbow when she was born; now she was a squirming forty-seven pounds. She was also lean. She had to fit.

"Put your feet through the window."

The girl slid easily out to her waist, but her arms were wrapped around Linda's neck.

"Where the hell is she?" It was Chris.

"My daughter had to use the restroom," she called toward the door, and then turned her attention back to Mya. "Hurry up. Let go and I'll drop you down."

"I don't want to leave you!"

The door was being kicked but the lock held.

"Damn it, Mya. Drop!"

The girl's fingers tangled in her mother's hair, scratching at the back of her neck as Linda tried to force her through the window.

"Open this goddamned door! You can't hide from me."

Linda saw a shadow move outside.

"Mommy! Something's grabbing me!"

A young man's voice said, "I'm a deputy."

"He's a good guy, I promise. You go with him and take care of Mikey. Please, baby. Go!"

"You promised you would come too!"

Using the force of her sobs, she shoved her daughter through the opening. Mya's hands disappeared last, still gripping clumps of her mother's hair.

"I love you!" Linda screamed as the bathroom door burst open.

Chris leaped across the space between them; his green dragon tattoo breathed purple flames at her chin when he dragged her from her perch. His hands connected with her cheek again, this time as a fist, and Linda fell through the doorway into Jason's arms.

"That's right, friend. Hold her for me."

Chris prepared to punch Linda again. Jason pulled her backward and knocked the blow away.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving our asses!" Jason yelled. "Everything's screwed up and I'm not going to let you screw it up anymore. She's all we've got now. This is all we've got!"

Chris stood still within his rage. Linda thought he might shatter from the intensity. Finally, he turned and marched back up front. Jason released Linda and pulled his gun. Cautiously, he went into the bathroom to close and lock the bathroom window.

"You stay here—I mean it," he said when he emerged through the damaged door. Then Jason went to Chris.

There was no choice for Linda but to comply. She returned to the storeroom and sat with her back against the wall in the place where Mya had been. Chris and Jason slung angry words at each other, the phone rang incessantly, but it all seemed to belong to some other place. Linda imagined Mya and Mikey safe in the backseat of the Sheriff's car, waiting for Karen to come and collect them. Perhaps they were even cuddling a stuffed animal; the kind cops carry to comfort motherless children.

Her head pulsed with a dull ache. Gingerly, she touched the skin below her left eye. It felt like a heated pillow. Who would pack Mike's lunch on Monday and walk Mya to school? Who would steady Mikey in his first steps? A tear escaped as she closed her eyes. For once, she thought of home as the place where she planted flowers and mowed the grass. The place where she made fresh lemonade and splashed with the children in the wading pool. The place where she sewed Halloween costumes and hung wallpaper. The place where the bed was covered with the antique quilt beneath which her children were created. The home she and Mike built was the one she would be remembered in.

In time, the screaming match ended, the phone stopped ringing, and Linda opened her eyes to await her fate. A somber Jason appeared in the doorway, holding two bottles of pop—a cherry Coke for her, a Mountain Dew for himself. He sat on the floor in front of her.

In that lifetime before, when they had been bad boy and corrupted girl, he would screw up his face and chug his favorite drink "Mad Dog." He remembered too because he stuck out his tongue and crossed his eyes. To Linda, he looked more like a frightened puppy that had just peed on the carpet.

"Where's your buddy?"

"Trying to convince them he let her go."

Linda rolled her eyes and pressed the pop bottle to her face. "That is so messed up."

"Everything is messed up. What the hell were you thinking, anyway? He might have killed you."

"I thought...My kids are safe. Nothing else matters."

"It matters to me." He took a deep drink and wiped his mouth with a forearm.

Linda remembered kissing those lips—insistent, sloppy, nothing like Mike who'd touch was so gentle it was as if he was surprised to be allowed to. How long it had been since she had truly kissed her husband? Six months? Eight? One or the other of them was always turning a cheek. Now all she wanted was to taste every inch of Mike's face until his stubble rubbed her raw. Jason shifted, then pulled the gun from his waistband and laid it on the floor. It was a nine-shot, just like her dad's.

"I've thought about you a lot, Linda. It's kept me going." She opened her Coke, "That's wonderful. My memory has kept an armed robber in business."

Jason's eyes narrowed on her. She didn't remember him being able to look so cold.

"Is that what you think? We came here to rip off this place?"

"Didn't you?"

His anger diminished and he shook his head. "I thought you were the one person in the world who gave me more credit than I deserve."

Linda leaned forward a bit, speaking softly. "Then why am I about to die before my time?"

He slapped a hand to the floor between them. "Don't say things like that. It's not an option. It's not!"

Linda looked away and drank, slowly swishing the sweet fizz in her mouth. One more on the list of things she would miss.

"We came here for a car," Jason finally said. "That's all..."

"A car thief. Even better."

"No, Linda. I don't jack cars or knock over convenience stores. I rob banks—or did." Jason ran a hand through his hair as if his words weren't making sense to him. "I made a friend in juvie. His name was Adam. After we got out we moved in with his brother, Chris, and started chopping cars."

"So the psycho is this friend's brother."

"Adam was more like my brother. We had everything in common. We had fun together."

"Dismantling stolen cars..."

"There was always somebody ready to buy, and insurance companies picked up the tab for the poor saps dumb enough to make it easy for us. It was a pretty good living. Adam and I were tinkering with a stock car in our down time. Chris, he was our idea man, and one day he had this notion to quit the nickel and dime shit and go for the big score."

"Banks you mean."

Jason lit a cigarette and continued. "We started small. Took a quick tour through some nothing little towns in Nebraska. Got pretty brave." He was talking faster now. "Finally, we went up to Holton. That's no big city either, but a lot of money moves through since the casinos. We hit 'em on delivery day and made off with nearly eighty grand. We were smart too. Didn't spend it. Just went back to business as usual."

"You say that like you're proud."

Jason took a deep drag and blew his answer out with the smoke. "A lot of guys get to bragging and throwing dollars around like dice. That's how they get caught. We weren't going to get caught. Instead, we took almost a year planning to fish a bigger pond—Kansas City."

Jason's mood shifted. He watched the smoke curl away as if it were a memory. "I was crowd control while the guys filled up. It was perfect, Linda. Only we didn't figure on an off-duty cop wearing his piece. He bided his time, too. Waited for just the right moment, then Bang!" Jason mashed the cigarette butt into the floor and snarled. "Chris caught a bullet in the leg; Adam was shot in the back. I just tossed my gun and laid down like a good little boy to watch my best friend die."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that." She meant it.

Jason stood and walked across the room, peeking up front once, then again. "I keep going over it in my mind." He faced her. "I should have seen it coming. If only that guy hadn't been in the bank, Adam would still be alive."

"Ten years? It must have been an early release."

"Yeah, well, prison is a special kind of hell. It don't matter how long you're there, every day you've gotta' dig down real deep to find something to get you through it."

"What did you find?"

"You." Jason leaned against the doorframe and peered down the hall. He didn't look at her as he spoke. "It was bad, Linda. I could never tell you just how bad. You were the only sweet thing I could hold onto in a world full of bitter. I planned to start over when I got out, go straight as they say, but Chris was waiting for me when I walked through the gates."

"Why did you go with him?"

"He needs me. We were never linked to the other banks and we never talked. Adam and I hid the money together and Chris don't know where it is."

"So what? You could have told him, drawn him a map. Don't lie to me now, Jason."

Linda took one deep breath, then another. It was no longer death she feared but how much suffering she would have to endure before it came.

"She been any more trouble?" Christ asked as he pushed past Jason.

Jason flushed gray, fists clenched powerless at his sides. "Quiet as a mouse."

Chris's steely eyes focused on Linda. He offered her his hand. "Get up."

Linda stood up on her own.

"What's the plan?" Jason asked, rooted to his spot.

Chris grabbed Linda's arm. She didn't intend to struggle, but her feet wouldn't move. He jerked her toward him.

Jason stood in the way. "Where are you taking her?"

"They want to see she's all right so I'm going to show them she's all right."

Jason stepped aside to avoid being stepped on, then followed.

"I can handle this on my own."

Linda looked back. Jason stared, constantly running his hands through his hair, then he ducked back into the stockroom.

"Did you finally get your whistle wet?"

Linda wished he would walk faster or else not hold her so close. "The drink was fine."

"If you get hungry there's plenty to eat out here. I had some of those new chips that faggy guy is always hawking on the TV."

They passed the counter. The spot where the clerk had been was covered with a large plastic ad banner. The register was open and empty. So were two six packs of beer. The stuff that was spilled earlier crunched beneath her feet. Chris steered her toward the door and Linda's eyes traveled up and down the frame. Could it be easy as twisting the lock above the handle and rushing out? She was so close. But he positioned himself behind her and grasped her wrists tightly so that her arms were crossed in front of her body. His breath was in her ear as he ducked his head behind hers.

There were only two police vehicles outside, no S.W.A.T. vans or reinforcements. Hadn't it been an hour yet? Maybe Mike was right above her loose grip on reality. Heroic rescues were for the movies.

A search light exploded in her face. Linda squeezed her eyes shut and twisted her head in a feeble attempt to shade her vision. Chris let go of one of her wrists.

"Give them a little wave." He was nuzzling the back of her neck and pressing his hips against her backside. "I said wave."

Linda raised her arm and moved it back and forth in front of her face. It was forever before the light went out. As soon as it did Chris dragged her backwards into an aisle. He spun her to face him and then pushed her against the shelving. A can of something fell and rolled past her foot. She blinked away orange and gold spots and prayed for her voice. There was no scream and no fight as his hands moved over her body and his tongue slimed its way along her neck and face. Chris put his mouth close to hers. Linda squeezed her lips together.

"Don't worry, baby. You're not my type."

Her voice returned with a vengeance. "You've made your point, now get off of me!"

Chris laughed, giggled really, and stepped back. "All right, little bunny. Hop on back to

your hole. I'm done with you for now."

Linda ran before he could change his mind. Jason jumped up to greet her but she retreated to a corner.

"What happened?"

Linda slapped Jason's hand away. "End this now. Kill me. Release me. I don't care!"

Jason approached her slower and this time she allowed him to wrap her up against his chest.

"It will be over soon. Chris will see things get worked out."

Linda broke away from his embrace and traded her tears for anger. "That man will be the death of us all. I can't even believe you're with him."

Jason rubbed his fingers against his eyes and made a growling noise "I just wanted a little of the money. Just enough to get a start. The car broke down a few miles back."

"You're a mechanic, Jason."

"Well some things you can't fix without tools and a lift, Linda. I told Chris people don't lock things up around here, that we'd likely find something with the keys in it. But he wanted a beer. Too bad the clerk rides a bicycle to work. We were ready to leave when you showed up and all hell broke loose."

"It's not my fault what happened to that boy."

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to say it to mean it. Don't you hear yourself telling me that nothing is your fault?"

"Well, little miss prom queen married to the football captain, why don't you tell me what was I supposed to do with my life."

Linda leaned against the wall and shook her head. "Jason, high school is not the real world. Of course, you're still stuck there, pining away for a sixteen-year old girlfriend following the 'bad' crowd like some sheep, never taking a lick of responsibility for anything."

Jason rushed toward her and planted his hands on the wall above her shoulders. He hurled his words into face.

"Don't you talk to me about reality. Reality is the sound of lockdown in a federal penitentiary. Reality is the smell of three hundred men behind concrete and steel. Reality is the fear that keeps you sleeping with both eyes open wondering if you pissed somebody off in the lunchroom, or if you'll be the next target of a gang, or that old Zeke in the next bunk is missing his girlfriend. That's reality, Linda!"

His air supply spent, Jason sucked in a deep breath and sank to the floor. Linda knelt with him.

"You know what it was like for me," he said softly, grasping her hands. "My real daddy doing time the day I was born, and my drunk whore of a momma, bringing home uncles and stepfathers so they could beat me—or worse. Nobody out there expects me to be anywhere else. Nobody expects me to be doing anything else. Why do you?"

"Why didn't you just come home?"

"To what?"

Linda cupped a hand to his cheek. "To me, okay? If nothing else you could have come home to me. You could have been a garage mechanic. You could have built that racecar you were always talking about, and drove at the track every Friday night. And I would have cheered you on. Because I loved you."

He stared at her for a moment, and then gripped her in a fierce embrace. "I want all that now! Please tell me I can have it now."

The mother in her wanted to kiss Jason, to tell him yes, just so he would smile again. But the lover in her wanted the ditch-digger in Des Moines with a short temper and a good heart. It was Mike she wept for. Mike she wanted to hold. Mike she wished she could say goodbye to.

Linda sat back from the embrace and stroked Jason's forehead. "I've moved forward."

Chris's voice spewed forth from the doorway. "What the hell is this?"

Jason jumped to his feet and stood in front of Linda. "It's not what you think, man."

"Bullshit. You planned this. Dragged me out here to the middle of nowhere to meet up with the little woman and roll me for my share."

"You know me better than that."

Chris took a couple of steps forward. Linda stood and backed as far away from the men as possible.

"I've seen how you treat your friends, Jason. Remember my dead brother? Maybe that was all part of the plan too."

"Damn it, Chris. Listen to me. I'm from here. You'd have to figure that we might see somebody I know. She's nothing to me, I swear."

"Then why didn't you say something before?"

"I knew you'd get all postal like you are right now."

The two were toe to toe, but Chris stood a head taller than Jason.

"All right then, friend. If she's nobody like you say, then you won't mind if I do this."

Chris pushed past Jason, grabbed Linda, and slammed her face into the wall. A thousand stars went super nova and she dropped.

"You don't have to prove anything! Jason screamed as he stood by.

"Nope, but you do."

He kicked Linda in the side, and then pulled her back to her feet by her hair. She sobbed, trying to shield her face.

Jason grabbed Chris's free arm. "We still need her to get out of here."

"You idiot!" The cavalry has arrived. They say they'll be busting in here by and by and I don't plan to give if I can't get."

He shoved Jason across the room. Then another punch to Linda's face burst her nose into a fountain. Chris's arms and legs were a windmill to her body. She curled as tight as possible on the floor.

Jason hurled himself at Chris, dragging him toward the exit in a headlock.

"You weak little boy!" Chris snarled. "I should have shot you when you came out of prison like I wanted to."

To Linda, the men's struggle shimmered in the disturbance like a reflection in a pool. Chris managed an elbow to Jason's ribs and then lunged at him. They were no longer speaking, just growling. They stood again, swinging out of sight down the hallway. Linda was left alone with her pain.

The sound of the fight became distant until a strange silence engulfed her. She felt as if she were liquid seeping into the concrete. Sinking, sinking, past all the things that could have been, all the things she couldn't see before. A catering business or her own little bake shop, freeing Mike to go back to school or buy his own rig so he could dig holes on his own terms.

Get up. Get up or all is lost.

The repetition of the voice in her head solidified her and she opened her eyes. One arm, then the other reached out. Her hand brushed against something cold and hard. The gun, it was Jason's gun. Linda raised her head. A long string of brick red goo attached her to the floor. She swiped it away and came to her knees. The pull of gravity made her dizzy and the throbbing in her face seemed to pulse inside her brain. Eventually, she stood, then walked out, leaning on the wall.

She couldn't hear anything. Was she now deaf? When she reached the end of the hall she saw them in front of the coolers. Chris was sitting on Jason's back, his dragon arm coiled around his neck.

Linda moved unsteadily toward them, stopping when her feet touched Jason's legs. He wasn't kicking. He wasn't moving at all. She remembered her father's target lessons. She used to picked cans off straw bales under his tutelage. She could almost hear his voice.

"Now don't yank the trigger like a privy chain."

Calmly, Linda pointed the gun at Chris's head and squeezed gently. Just a click. No bang. Where was the bang? She worked the trigger a second time, then a third. She pulled and pulled but the scene remained the same. Maybe she wasn't really there at all. Maybe she was dreaming.

Jason made a noise.

"Die you bastard," Chris muttered.

Linda turned the revolver in her hand to grip the barrel, raised it, and brought it down on the back of Chris's head. The blow laid a dark streak across his blonde scalp. He let go of Jason and fell to his back, face pruned in pain. His animal eyes focused on her and he roared.

Linda stumbled backward and dropped the gun. He wasn't out. She hadn't knocked him out. Her hands ran along the shelves, searching for something to defend herself with. Bags of chips, boxes of crackers.

He rushed toward her, a linebacker going for the sack. She remembered seeing Mike take hits on the field. Duck if you see it coming, duck and cover the ball. Linda dove and Chris tackled two liters of pop. The bottles toppled and he fell across her legs. Something snapped in her knee

but she bent it anyway. Kicking and clawing out from under him, she preferred to die standing. Linda wasn't retreating as she backed down the next aisle, just choosing her own spot.

"Where you going, bunny? Can't hide from the fox."

"Fox are clever, asshole. You're just a junkyard mutt."

Chris grinned. "Bow wow."

When Linda ran out of aisle she stood to wait, savoring each breath as Chris approached. Just a few more steps.

Suddenly a shadow leaped out and swept Chris past her. It was Jason. He dragged Chris at a full run until they hit the coolers. The thick glass shattered from the blow and the two sprawled together against frozen burritos and triangle sandwiches. Linda held her breath until Jason removed himself from the pile and stumbled away. He fell back against the wall.

Refrigerated air from the broken cooler chilled her when she passed Chris. The shorted lights flickered across his bloodied face. Dead.

"Oh, God, you're hurt."

"So are you."

"I mean you're really hurt. Your wrist."

He looked with her to see the gash down the center of his right forearm.

She pressed his arm to his chest. "Hold it up, tight. Are you in pain?"

"I'm used to pain. It reminds me I'm still living."

But there were so many other things, too. Paying bills, lying next to a familiar body, playing babies.

"Let's go."

Jason shook his head. "I can't go to prison, Linda."

"It will be all right. I'll tell them what you did for me."

"You know I wouldn't have done a damn thing for anybody but you."

Linda put a hand to his cheek, stroked his forehead. He felt so cold. "What I know is that you reminded me about the window purpose. And the gun, Jason. No bullets? There weren't any bullets at the bank either, were there?"

Jason didn't have to answer. "I want you to have the money, Linda," he finally said. "You know where to look."

She stared into his eyes, those chocolate eyes. "That old junk car half buried in the creek bed. Our place."

Linda smiled, and then shook her head. "It's not mine to take, Jason."

I knew you'd say that. You're too good. You were always too good."

Linda pressed her lips to Jason's cheek. "That's for showing me the man I always knew you could be."

Jason quivered and she tasted the salt from his tears. He breathed deep.

"You still smell like wildflowers after a rain."

"Please," Linda whispered. "I won't go without you."

They rose together and leaned against each other toward the door.

"You'd better get behind me," Linda said as she released the lock.

Jason complied and they stepped out. The air, tinged with oil and gasoline, was fresh with freedom. Vehicles blocked her view of the street. Police were everywhere, dressed in blue, dressed in black, and Linda's heart lurched at the sight of so many guns pointed in their direction. She started to move forward, but Jason's left arm around her waist gently held her still. That's when she noticed he had his gun. Blood streamed from the tip of his elbows when he raised the barrel to her temple.

"What are you doing?"

"Don't look back, Linda. Don't you ever look back."

He slung her toward the asphalt and jumped off the curb. Her screams could not be heard over the sound of the guns.

EATING DISORDERED • Amy Lamm
Best Poem

So thin your flesh
Rots, reeking, stinking
Like the dying fire
Inside you that echos
Your physical chaos which
Screams "No, please...
No..." as it dies
With the last glowing ember –
Your body cries out
In pain and despair,
Humiliation and self hatred
Constantly twitch inside
Your decaying muscles.
You hide within yourself
All you need to
Change your world
You just can't see it
Cuz you're staring
Down a vast, endless
Empty, starving nightmare

DREAM MATTER • Elinda Peterson
Runner-up Best Poem

In this dream
Madness drips
(In paisley circles
On my lips)
Aqueous
Gelling thoughts
Like sprawling babies
Still untaught
Are
Melting
Seething
Breathe, Recede
Mystic people
Veiled in black
Starless skies and
Rayless suns
Drifters at the
Nighttime feast
Inside my mind
They kill the beast

WHAT? WHAT? WHAT? WHAT? WHAT? WHAT?

come from? over here or over there?

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Kelly Bittner
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Program 2005

your path

Des Moines Area Community College

which way

are you going

expressions
a non-profit student magazine

2004-2006

expressions

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HERE
ARE
YOU

which way did

2006
2004

you come from? over here or over there?

START
FINISH

WHERE?
RIGHT
WHICH WAY?

LEFT

there is
NO
wrong way!

WHERE
ANY

express yourself

Expressions
non-profit
student
magazine

over here or over there?



The following pages (volume two) are presented here in manner that allows continuous reading by users.

In hard copy, the pages for volume two are flipped upside down and begin from the "back" cover.



2004 • 2006

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ex·press', *v.t.*; expressed, *pt., pp.*; expressing *ppr.* [ME. *expressen*; L. *expressus*, pp. of *exprimere*, to press or squeeze out.]

1. to put into words; represent by language state.
2. to make known; reveal; show; as, his face *expressed* sorrow.
3. to picture, represent, or symbolize in music, art, etc.
4. to show by a sign; symbolize; signify; as, the sign + *expresses* addition.
5. to dispatch, forward, or send by express as, to *express* a package.
6. *express oneself*; (a) to state one's thoughts (b) to give expression to one's feelings, imagination, etc., especially in creative or artistic activity.

ex·press'i·ble, *a.* capable of being expressed.

ex·press'i·bly, *adv.* in an expressible manner.

ex·pres'sion (eks-presh'un), *n.* [L. *expressio* (-onis), a pressing out, an expression, from *expressus*, pp. of *exprimere*, to press out, express.]

1. a putting into words; a representing in language; a stating.
2. a picturing, representing, or symbolizing in art, music, etc.
3. a manner of expressing; especially, meaningful and eloquent manner of speaking singing, etc.; as, she reads with *expression*.
4. a particular word, phrase, or sentence as, "catch cold" is an idiomatic *expression*.
5. a showing of feeling, character, etc.; as, laughter is often the *expression* of joy.
6. a look, intonation, sign, etc. that convey meaning or feeling; as, there was a quizzical *expression* on his face.
7. a symbol or set of symbols expressing some algebraic fact, as a quantity or operation.
8. a showing by a symbol, sign, figures, etc.

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7. a symbol or set of symbols expressing some algebraic fact, as a quantity or operation.

8. a showing by a symbol, sign, figures, etc.

ex-press'ion-ál, *a.* of or pertaining to expression; having the power of expression.

ex-press'ion-ism, *n.* an early 20th-century movement in the arts, especially in drama, characterized by the nonobjective use of symbols, stereotyped characters, stylization, etc., to give objective expression to inner experience.

ex-press'ion-ist, *a.* of or characterized by expressionism.

ex-press'ion-ist, *n.* an expressionist artist, writer, etc.

ex-press'ion-is'tic, *a.* same as *expressionist*

ex-press'ion-is'tic-ál-ly, *adv.* in an expressionistic manner.

ex-press'ion-less, *a.* lacking in expression.

ex-press'ive, *a.* 1. of or characterized by expression.

2. expressing; indicating; serving as a sign; as, a song *expressive* of joy.

3. full of expression; forcible; significant; as, an *expressive* nod.

ex-press'ive-ly, *adv.* in an expressive manner

ex-press'ive-ness, *n.* the quality of being expressive; the power of expression or representation.

ex-press'ly, *adv.* 1. in an express manner; plainly; in direct terms.

2. on purpose; particularly; especially; as, I wrote for you *expressly*.

ex-press'mán, *n.*; *pl.* **ex-press'men**, one who

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Des Moines Area Community College

expressions²⁰⁰⁴₂₀₀₆



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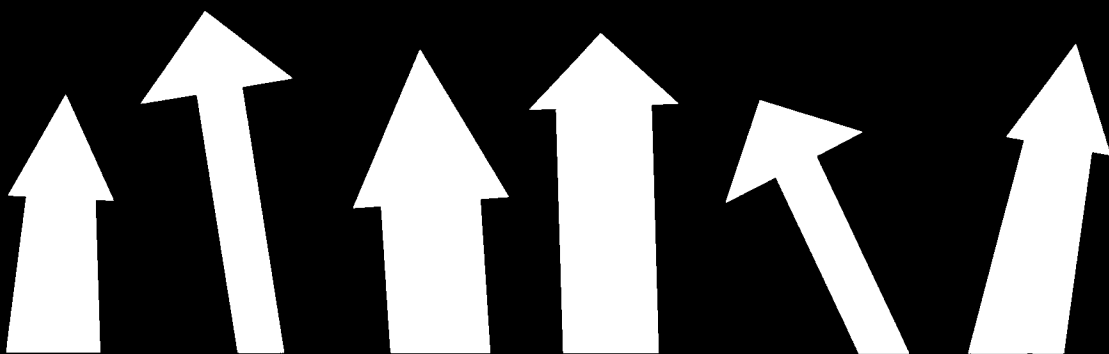
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the
dayshe
left

Amy Lamm

THE DAY SHE LEFT • Amy Lamm

It was a brisk October morning the day she left him. She had pulled her scarf over her head and tucked it gently around her neck to keep out the cold. She was coming back from her morning walk with the dog. The wind slapped her rosy cheeks harshly, further punishing her bruised face. Her brown Steve Madden boots clunked heavily over the cold sidewalk. The boots and the scarf were two of about a hundred “I’m sorry” gifts he had given her throughout their five-year relationship; two too many pathetic store bought apologies. The only thing she was sorry about was the fact that it had taken her five years to finally kick him in the ass with her Steve Maddens. He wasn’t very happy about that. He owned her, and he wouldn’t let her go without a fight.

She had decided the previous night that the next day would be her last with him. The last time he would yell at her for not having dinner ready, the last time he would bruise her eye for coming home ten minutes late. No more flowers two hours after he broke her rib for the fifth time that month. No more pain. No more Jason.

Rachel was decided. She had gone so long without it, without a feeling. She felt dead inside, empty. There was a vacancy in her eyes that seemed to go on forever. Her once bright green eyes had faded to ash with every swelling punch from Jason’s fist. He stole five years of her life and last night he stole her dignity. He stole soul and he stole something else, something she could never get back.

The minute she walked in the door Jason was up to his same routine, “Where have you been?”

Rachel shrugged it off and continued through the door.

“Answer me,” He ordered.

“I walk the dog every morning, Jay.” Rachel tried to sound calm; she always had to walk on eggshells around him.

Jason went to work that day without a fight but Rachel couldn’t concentrate. The preceding night’s events played over in her mind like a recurring nightmare she just couldn’t shake. She weighed them carefully in her mind as the hours passed. Finally, she decided to run an errand. When she returned, Jason would be home. She had only a few hours left to enjoy the serene atmosphere and complete solitude of her quiet home. She always treasured her time alone, away from Jason.

It was around nine o’ clock when he finally arrived. A tough day at the office, Jason had stopped off at a local bar after work. He smelled of cheap whores and whiskey. A musky, dirty odor accompanied him as well, a disgusting sticky-sweaty smell that reeked of sex. But Rachel dared not to accuse him of anything. He stormed in the kitchen wanting a beer. When he found the refrigerator empty he stormed into a fit of rage. Jason started throwing everything in sight, deaf to Rachel’s fearful screams.

Jason rushed behind her and grabbed Rachel by her ponytail and proceeded to drag her down the short hallway to their bedroom. Once inside he threw her on the bed and started ripping at her blouse. Tiny white buttons flew everywhere from her pink cotton shirt. Soon enough, Rachel was terrified and trembling naked on the bed. Jason lorded over her like a great beast.

As he held her down, the only way he could stifle her screams was to beat his enormous fists across her pale face. All around

Rachel's once sparkling green eyes, she could feel the redness and swelling pumping beneath her skin. She fought and struggled in vain as his huge body came down on her. With one hand around her neck Jason fumbled with his own belt and zipper. Rachel gagged in repulsion as he pulled himself out of the green jockeys. Her stomach churned in disgust and her mouth filled with saliva as if she were on the verge of vomiting. She gathered the wetness with her tongue and spit on her attacker. He grabbed her soft vulnerable breast and squeezed hard as he cursed her for the fluid running down his cheek. It took Jason several thrusts to force himself up her. Trembling and frightened Rachel tried with all her might to drift away, to disassociate herself from the searing pain that streamed into her.

Just as Rachel could count on Jason falling fast asleep after he was satisfied, she knew she could count on the revolver still being in the vegetable drawer of the refrigerator. She could barely walk to the kitchen; a pain between her legs that was still bleeding kept her from walking upright. Just as she had loaded and cocked her piece, Jason came stumbling in for a beer. He found the refrigerator as empty as the last time he looked for a beer. However, when one is in a rage, one hardly stops to consider the obvious.

He stopped suddenly and rushed to Rachel; he held his face mere inches from hers. She gagged at the stench of stale alcohol. He breathed down her throat, his expression twisted in a raging stare. He was so intent on letting her have it; he was oblivious to the gun in her hand.

She fired once into his foot. He screamed out in pain and drew his hand back as if to strike her, but stopped short when she pointed the pistol square in his face.

"Give it back!" She had a wild look in her eye and he could tell she was serious. Trying to ignore the pain in his foot, Jason stared up at her in bewilderment.

"What?!" He cried out in pain.

"You held me down forced yourself in me while punching my bloodied face over and over, and you have the nerve to ask what I want?! Give it back you son of a bitch." She stared deep into his eyes and asked again. "Do you know what I want?"

All he said was, "Baby, I love you."

She knew better. Not one tear came from his eyes, his pathetic imploring yet unrepentant eyes.

She shrieked at him, "Give me back the five years of pain, five years of blood, sweat and tears I wasted on you."

When she found that he was speechless, she cocked the hammer of her .45 and attempted to steady her violently shaking hands. "Wrong!" she screamed.

"Please, don't do this, Rachel!" He pleaded with her.

Tears and sweat streamed down her face creating black eyeliner traces of pain. He wasn't near tears. Like a cold soul-less beast he looked up at her from down on his knees, his eyes blank and distant, and said, "What do you want from me?"

"My soul," she replied and pulled the trigger.

photograph by

Anjanette Miner



expressen; L. *express*
 press or squeeze o
 into words; represe
 make known; reveal
 ssed sorrow.
 cture, represent, o
 etc.
 w by a sign; symbol
expresses addition
 patch, forward, or s
 ess a package.
oneself; (a) to state
 e expression to one'
 c., especially in cre
 le, *a.* capable of be
 ly, *adv.* in an expre
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 f expression; forc
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adv. 1. in an e
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 rpose; particularly
 r you *expressly*.
 an, *n.*; *pl.* ex-press
 , you *expressly*.
 an, *n.*; *pl.* ex-press

8

buying life

Runner-up Best Overall Writer

Amy Lamm



BUYING LIFE • Amy Lamm

Peas roll, especially when harvested fresh, frozen with care, and steamed just enough to be firm but not mushy. Isabel always cooked them right and she grew them herself in their tiny backyard.

The yard had been more patches of weeds than grass when she was transplanted from the 300 acre farm of her parents to the square block houses on square lots just off center from the heart of the city. But she had dug and planted that first year, and planted again when her husband mowed it off. The following year she used ready mix concrete and plastic gallon ice cream tubs to mark the territory. The peas Isabel chased across the worn linoleum now were from the fourth season.

A plate lay broken at the base of the wall. The biggest chunk still leaned against it. Her eyes followed the dripping, brown stain four feet up to the splat on the fruit-patterned wallpaper. Pieces of noodle still clung there in some deranged, Picasso-esque portrait. One meaty eye shedding gravy tears. A chunk peeled off and landed on Isabel's wrist. She flicked it away and emptied her palm of the peas she'd gathered.

"Peas roll!" she shrieked and leapt to her feet. "Goddammit Barry, they roll and you can never find them all!"

She felt stupid calling out to no one. Barry was gone, having left his dissatisfaction on the wall and in the bruise beginning to tighten in her left side just below her ribs. Isabel found a cloth, swiped at her useless tears and began to clean the mess more efficiently. She was done within an hour and it wasn't yet dark. She grabbed a pop from the refrigerator and retreated to the living room.

Isabel held the cold can against her torso and wondered where Barry was. She hoped he was eating at the corner diner or at fast food row four blocks over and one up. Please not a bar, she prayed. But he'd taken the car and that left too many options. He was obviously up for what he often called a "working man's dinner." Too tired to chew? Drink your supper.

Finally she opened her drink. The whooshing spritz of fizz was so inviting, a beckoning hiss. "Come inside. Sweet, Good, Reward." Maybe Barry's cans whisper too, she thought. Or bottles, frosty mugs, glasses clinking merrily full of ice. Who was whispering to him this evening?

Rum, thick and sweet to kindle a fire below his belly? Shiver me timbers and bed the wench! Tequila, with its seedy taunt? You don't need no stinking wife! Or would it be just beer? Knock 'em back and knock her down. We'll all have a good laugh in the morning. It didn't matter what they said, he'd come home to say the same old thing. "I'm sorry, babe. You know I can't stand leftovers."

The doorbell was broken so it took a few raps inside the screen door before Isabel realized she was being called upon. She wanted to sit still and ignore it but the loneliness that had settled in her chest willed her to stand and walk. "Good evening, ma'am" the girl said. "I'm with the Inner City Youth Challenge Ministries. A purchase of just one magazine will keep me and others like me off the streets."

The woman was young, black, and big in a pleasing sort of way: forward breasts rolling over folding belly into soft, wide hips. She had an overt air of sexualized confidence as if to say, "You gotta earn your ticket for this ride."

Even after four years in the city, Isabel's stomach fluttered a little when faced with someone different: someone not white, not quiet, not content to just fade into the background, into a role. She was ashamed of her involuntary reaction and at the same time envious of the way the young woman's skin, her size, her attitude commanded attention. Isabel could scream on a regular basis and never be noticed.

The girl didn't seem nervous at all, not like Isabel would be upon entering a stranger's home. She let herself to the couch and started talking. "My name is Chiandra and I used to live in the back of a Impala until Youth Challenge changed my life; gave me a job, gave a purpose, made me somebody. "

Isabel sat down beside her, somehow comforted by the way the girl's weight dipped the cushion, made her the center, a gravitational tug.

"I don't really want any magazine," Isabel said quietly.

Chiandra shifted and pulled a brochure out of her notebook. "I walk the streets now, day after day, not begging or stealing for my food, but working for it."

Isabel got up. "It was hot today for the season. I can get you something to drink."

She didn't wait for an answer but went to the kitchen and returned with another can of pop. Chiandra accepted it as Isabel sat again, but put it right down on the coffee table and fanned the brochure open across both their laps. "I can see you're good with guests. Maybe you'd like House and Home, or this publication by that TV lady who's always cooking. I like Better Homes and Garden myself because they put in a little about everything from furniture to fried chicken."

"We don't have a lot of people over very often."

"Oh, you should. You have a nice home. I'd like to have a little place of my own someday. That's why I'm here right now." Chiandra licked her lips and reached over to open her pop. She took a long swallow, set it back down on the coaster and started talking again. "I really like that statue over there."

Isabel followed her gaze to the wrought-iron owl perched on the television. It was Barry's. Well everything she could see from her position was Barry's, but the owl was his favorite. He'd won it at a flea market in some exhibition like ax-throwing or fly casting or some other outdoorsy thing like that. She didn't really know. That was back when he went to places like that and there had been some other woman at his side.

"It's not really a statue," She told Chiandra. "It's a votive candle holder. When you light it, the flame glows through the cutouts and makes patterns on the wall."

Isabel shrugged. She got a queasy feeling that perhaps she was being patronized. "It's really my husband's owl." She said lamely, eyes cast unseeing to the brochure.

She thought of Barry then for the first time since the girl had come, wondered what he would say if he walked in just then. What he would do after he made her leave.

"You're married then. Well, I was going to show you Bride but I suppose I should turn this over and let you see Parenting Magazine and Highlights for Children." In a fanfare of swinging arm and crinkling paper, Chiandra flipped the brochure end over end. More tiny squares with tiny pictures of grinning models and actors and prices printed in red under them. "Over 50% off the cover price!"

Isabel scooted away a bit and began to pick at a thread on her jeans under cover of the brochure. "I don't have any children." She'd almost had one, but... Had it been leftovers that night too? No, it was the garden and the concrete pylons, and it ended in the emergency room.

Chiandra folded the brochure and tucked it back inside her notebook. She looked square into Isabel's almost gray eyes with her own walnut brown and asked, "What is it you like to do? Do you have any hobbies?"

Isabel forgot about Barry and whether he was coming home and searched her mind for a good answer. Chiandra wanted to know what she liked. "I grow a garden," she said. It was almost a peep. "And I used to knit."

"My grandmother knitted. That's just a wonderful thing. You'd like this magazine and Better Homes and Gardens like I said before." Chiandra began writing on a form on the front of the notebook.

Isabel smiled. "I once thought I might like taking pictures, even though I don't have a camera anymore." More writing. "I do like to cook and I should entertain more. Do you have that one magazine, I used to subscribe to it... Taste of Home?"

Chiandra found it on her list and put a check mark next to it. "It's here. They're all here."

She stood up and Isabel stood with her, feeling as if she'd passed some kind of test. Chiandra liked her. She liked her home, liked her hospitality, and she liked

everything Isabel enjoyed. She was suddenly aware that she was breathing deeply and the rise and fall of her rib cage didn't even hurt her bruised side.

Chiandra finished writing. "With all the discounts that Inner City Youth Challenge Ministries is able to get for you today you've saved fifty-seven dollars and I am authorized to give you a free subscription to LIFE Magazine. Since you like taking pictures so much I figured that'd be one you'd want."

Isabel still smiled, but everything sank behind her teeth; sank and tightened and swelled until she could barely breathe anymore at all. "I didn't really buy anything."

"You sat right here and told me what you wanted. Now like I said, I saved you fifty-seven and your bill, payable now by cash or check, only comes to eighty-four dollars. All I need is your mailing address and you'll start getting your fist issues in four to six weeks, depending."

Isabel back away bit. Chiandra's presence seemed more intimidating than appealing. She thought again of Barry and her eyes darted on the door. "I can't pay you anything. I don't really want the magazines."

Chiandra scowled. "Why'd you ask me in if you didn't want to buy anything? I could've been to the whole block in the time I took jawing with you. Another one like you and I'll be back on the streets."

"I'm sorry. I really am. I just... I liked visiting with you..." Isabel wanted to cry. She wasn't making sense. It didn't make any sense. "I don't want to you live in a car, but I can't buy any magazines. I don't have any money."

The girl softened a bit. "Everybody has some money. Even I carry five dollars on me wherever I go, just in case. Don't you have a change purse or a coin jar or something?"

"I really don't. I don't even have a checkbook. You have to believe me. My husband has the money. I don't need any money. I am just here, in here or in my garden."

Chiandra didn't look Isabel in the eyes this time. This time she looked her over from the toes of her worn socks and frayed pant legs to her thin, brown hair pulled into a sloppy pigtail. "I'll tell you what I'll do. Forget LIFE. I'm going to give you a gift subscription. You can send your mother Taste of Home. How's that sound?"

Isabel bit her lip and moved her up and down. "But I want LIFE."

"Okay, but it'll cost you that owl. I've taken a shine to it."

"Oh." Barry would notice, in the way he always noticed when she'd been up to something. He'd probably even notice if she didn't give away the owl. "Sure, I guess so," she heard herself say.

"You have a car?"

"No. I mean, yes. My husband has it just now." Isabel let Chiandra place the notebook and pen in her hands.

"You know, you can walk to the bus depot from her. It's three blocks from Parker, two streets over. You know where it is?"

Isabel nodded again. Her eyes stung and she blinked in time with the motion of her head.

Chiandra pointed to the blank spaces on the bottom of the order form clipped to the notebook. "You write down the address where you want the magazine sent."

In shaking script she wrote her name and her mother's address. Chiandra took back the notebook and scooped up the owl on her way to the door. Isabel held it open and the women stood looking at each other under the porch light.

"This is going to go real good in my living room," Chiandra finally said. "But I think it's worth more than a magazine. I'll give you the difference."

Isabel let her press bills into her palm. She didn't look at it, but knew it was more than five dollars. She watched Chiandra stride confidently down the sidewalk, notebook under one arm, owl gripped firmly in the other hand. At the end of the block she got into a car that was out of place on Isabel's street, shiny and clean under the street lights, free of rust, and not an impala. After the taillights disappeared Isabel went back inside to find some comfortable shoes.

12



**something
wicked**

P.J McRae

It has come to my attention that I have no reason to be in this place. All I would have to do is sit in my house, turn on the TV, drink a few beers, and then I would forget all about it. Yet now that I'm here I feel stuck. I wait and wait, but still my body refuses to move. I glance around, it is somewhat dark, with a few candles lit near the front and the light coming in from the stained glass windows is dim at best. The ceiling is so high, its arches are wooden and faded and I know that there has to be dozens of cobwebs engulfing them. I laugh at this, not out loud of course, but to me, it's funny that a place of such high esteem would be left to such improper cleaning practices. But still this place instills great fear in me, it's whole structure and magnitude overwhelms me, every dark corner seems to jump out at me and I wonder what medieval creature of god might be waiting there to pounce on the non-believer.

I sink down in the pew, glancing every which way, with hopes to catch my invisible enemies before they can drag me into the impending darkness. This is of course ridiculous to think, but why not? Maybe they are after me, I haven't stepped foot in a church in over twenty years and I don't they look too kindly on the sheep who wander from the flock. I think, I'm not sure, but there was a story that I had heard when I was very young. No matter.

There still are things to fear within this place, I remember the nuns, their dark robes towering above me, with a ruler in each hand. They would stare at the pictures I would be drawing as opposed to the lesson I should be reading. I would feel the sting for days. The school nurse and I had become quite acquainted by the time I graduated. The nuns seemed to be every where when I was little, and always in pairs, they would walk the halls with their rulers and would smack the kids taking too long at the water fountain or running a little late to class; I remember. A scowl crosses my face as I sit in my pew, but I won. Oh yes, now the nuns are shut up in convents, far away from rulers and little boy's hands.

But still I sit here, all that memory floods back to me, I glance again to check on the shadows, they still glare at me, their shape growing larger with each passing minute, as if getting ready to swallow me whole, I sink even deeper into my pew pulling my coat collar around my neck.

Where is the priest! I want to yell, but once again my vocal cords are riddled with fear as if the slightest noise will unleash god's wrath upon me. I look toward his little office, a light shows through the crack at the bottom of the door, illuminating a small bit of alter. But what do I care? I don't want to talk to him all that much anyway, I remember the priests. They were less frequent than the nuns, but were a hundred times more damaging than any ruler. I would have to sit across from them in their office looking over the miles of wooden desk they all had. I could see the various religious artifacts that gave the desk a foreboding symmetry and he would open his bible, quoting scripture to me as he would stand and point at me to get the message across. The priest would pace and gaze out the window all the while telling me about the unimaginable horrors

that await me in hell if I didn't change my ways. Then he would send me back out to the nuns who, with their rulers in hand, would beat the word of the lord into my head; yeah I remember the priests.

It has grown late since I first sat down, the sun was low in the sky and shown through the back of the church, the shadows I fear so much are somewhat smaller now, but a greater threat is illuminated at the front of the church. There it is; the reason I was always in a state of fear while at a church. It hangs almost decoratively, but it stands for far more than simple Feng Sui. Its unblinking eyes watch my every movement, it's head hangs low. It looms over me, it casts no shadow, but forces light into my current darkness. I try to look away, but I know that it is still looking at me, burning through to my very soul. I muster some strength and think, my king! Ha! And I look at it some more, what kind of king is killed by his own people, but I catch site of the crown on the top of its head, and quickly right myself, remembering what I was told about god and how he could read my every thought. This thing that hangs at the front of the church, is just a symbol, I think to myself, I shouldn't fear it. But I do regardless; this symbol has outlasted generations and would surely outlast me; the symbol of a man who continues to shake his finger at me from two thousand years ago. It was no different than the very real priest pointing his finger at me promising hell.

It scares me, this thing that has lasted so long. The shadows have once again come back, as if hearing my mocking of their lord. I sink as far down into the pew as I could and glanced back at the arches. They are dark; the shadows of this place long since swallowed them. The darkness is closing in, I begin to sweat, and I glance around nervously. I am looking for escape, but everywhere I turn, blocked by some unimaginable horror. I think of hell and the nuns and the priests, all of them glaring at me from within the darkness, what a cruel joke to have trapped me here, their voices are as clear day; "you're going to hell!" they told me. I tremble violently as the shadow creeps closer and closer. Leave me! I want to scream at them let me leave this nightmare! But I am paralyzed, unable to protect myself or move out the way. The sun is saying it's last goodbye and I am unable to see any light except on ITs face as it looks at me with a mournful expression. Stop it! Stop looking at me! I think, let me go in peace.

In the darkness I see no light, hear no voices, there are no priests or nuns, and no hell forever burning me. Only the crack of light from the parish priest's office as it reflects how silly I am being. The hour has grown quite late and I cannot wait much longer. I glance only briefly at the shadow, it's face so close to mine, it doesn't attack or swallow me, but it's intentions are quite clear; whether or not I would return was not it's concern for it had gotten it's point across. I walk carefully toward the back of the church, I glance over my shoulder just to make sure, I feel the eyes, but they aren't a threat, just a symbol in the darkness.

photograph by

Kelly Bittner



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16



incomplete

Best Overall Story

Bennett Jenkins

Delmont saw God. He knew it was God because he was light and pure- he was perfect. Delmont floated towards what he knew was heaven, weightless and more carefree than he could ever remember. Delmont could feel the warmth all round him, getting warmer, and he felt loved. Behind him, he heard a voice. "Damn it! Time of death, 3:14 am." Doctor Roth sighed. She took her gloves off as she walked out of the room to find a seat. She sat down heavily, exhausted from what had been the longest day in recent history for her. An orderly came up and said "I'm sorry, Elizabeth," but she just waved the orderly on. She was sick of people. She was sick of what people could do, what she was forced to see the results of everyday. Elizabeth Roth was sick of the society that bred the people who could do this.

Delmont Green woke up in complete darkness. He didn't know what had happened or where he was, but it felt different somehow. He looked around and couldn't see anything, briefly panicked. He sat upright and felt a tingle that continued until he was on his feet. He tentatively waved his hand in front of him to get his bearings, and couldn't feel anything more than the pins and needles that seemed to be concentrated every few feet along his body. He walked forward slowly, all senses on edge. He lifted his foot forward and came down, but his foot had nothing gain purchase on, and inertia claimed another victim. He spilled forward and light blinded him. He lost track of where he was. When he next became aware, he was sitting on the floor of what looked very clinical. There were tables, surgical tool tables lined up on a cold tile floor against the blue wall. It smelled like a mix of bleach, latex, and cleaning fluids. A clock read 9:10. Across the room, which still seemed very much too bright, was a man hovering over a table, who was involved in something. He had a mask over his mouth, a blue paper hat, and a blue smock. Delmont stood up slowly, very carefully, and edged toward the man. He noticed the man was holding what looked like a scalpel, and was about to cut into the as yet unseen man on the table. Delmont lost consciousness when he saw the man cut apart the cadaver's sternum. When he woke up next it was 9:45 and the man who was dissecting the dead had laid most of his organs on surgical tables. A shiver ran up Delmont's spine and he bolted towards the door. When he tried to shove the door open, he stumbled through the door, and the door didn't move. Delmont didn't understand, so he fell back on what had helped him in the past. He crouched and crossed himself repeatedly. After five minutes he took a very deep breath, and tentatively put his hand against a wall. It went through, tears welled in his eyes as the truth manifested itself into his head. He was dead; he curled into a fetal position and cried.

Elizabeth Roth woke up at 10:30 to a screaming alarm clock and an angry phone. She slapped the alarm clock quiet and picked up the bedside the phone, mumbling "Yeah, yes. I'll be there in 30 minutes." She collected herself and did her condensed morning rituals. A quick shower and toasted bagel later, she left for the hospital.

Delmont was angry. He'd been having flashbacks since he woke up, images of his girlfriend tied up and of four men with knives. They were walking home from a late movie in the wrong neighborhood. A gang of four came up to them, and Delmont pushed Lisa behind him. The lead man, a capable looking Latin thug, came up

in overalls and flannel shirt with only the top button fastened.

"You look like you're doing pretty good, ese. Why don't you share the wealth, improve black and brown relations?" the lead man said.

After that was a blank spot. The next thing he remembered was waking up briefly as he was being wheeled to the emergency room, and caught a glimpse of the strong Hispanic face of the doctor. He passed out shortly after. He remembered that face now as he wandered the hospital looking for his girlfriend. Delmont and the doctor's paths crossed right outside of her locker room. Delmont started asking her if she knew anything about his girlfriend, where she was and if he could anything to help. The doctor didn't stop, so he grabbed her shoulder.

The hair on the back of Elizabeth's neck stood on edge as she thought she felt a hand on her shoulder. She stopped and turned around, but no one was there.

She turned around and he again asked his question, but she just shook her head and continued on her way while he was midway through it. He stood dejected, shoulders down, wondering what he could do now. A thought occurred to him, when he put his hand on her shoulder, she turned-he made contact. He sat down in a nearby chair, put his head in his hands, and thought.

Why was he here? There must be a reason he didn't get to the end of his tunnel. He asked himself this question over and over, thinking of what he might have left to do here. He wondered where his girlfriend was, how she was doing, how he was going to find out. He sat for another 5 minutes mulling over his thoughts before he decided that persistence was the only method he could use, and searched the hospital for his girlfriend.

A voice screeched over the PA. "Dr. Roth, Dr. Elizabeth to the E.R." She sighed as she made her way to the emergency room. As she walked through the door, an orderly briefed her. "Male, Hispanic, early 20's. The patient suffered a gunshot wound that pierced his lung last night. He was stable until about ten minutes ago- he went into cardiac arrest."

While he walked the hospital, Delmont saw tragedy like he never imagined. The cold tile floor held mass-produced metal chairs with families of patients' sitting in them. A little girl asked a somber, crying woman if daddy was going to be all right. Rows of chairs were set up with people in them- bleeding people. He saw a mother holding her dying son's hand. He

illustration by

Audie Mobley



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Illustration by

Laura Leland

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passed a doctor asking a man if he should pull the plug on his father. Walking by the E.R he heard screams of pain, muffled by steel doors but echoed on the cold tile. Delmont shivered, more of last night came back to him. He remembered telling Lisa to run, and her hesitating. One of the assailants rushed and hit him with something hard he couldn't see, and he was out. When he came to he was in what looked like an abandoned warehouse, tied up in a chair next his girl.

"So you think you can run, huh? Can't run from the 18th street gang. You fucked up, ese, you owe me now, good thing your woman looks like she can pay me back."

He walked over and stroked Lisa's chin softly. She was paralyzed with fear. He slapped her and she struggled at her ties.

"Yeah, I think she can pay me back in full."

Delmont screamed at him and tried to break free, but all that did was make them gag him with a rag that was on the floor. The leader told the others to work Delmont over while he had some fun. He ripped Lisa's clothes off and threw her on the floor. He penetrated her as Lisa called out his name. Delmont could no longer hear anything, and his vision was blurry, but still they hit him. He stopped feeling the pain after a while, he wasn't sure, but he thought there were flashing blue and red lights through a window. The leader screamed something, and the three other men rushed out. He took out a knife and stabbed Delmont in the chest before he left. He felt the blood dripping down his chest, pooling near his pants, and then he felt no more. A crying baby snapped him out of his reverie. Ahead were newborns. A couple was crying for joy while looking at their daughter. Delmont sighed. He passed by the children's ward and stopped.

"Lisbef!"

Dr. Roth smiled as she came up to what she liked to think of as her in-hospital adoption, Monet.

"Hey Monet!" she said with a smile and a wave.

Monet was an AIDS baby who shook the HIV antibodies at around 11 months. Her mother was too destitute, too sick, or too addicted to care for her, so she dropped her off at the hospital. Monet was about 3 and half, and hadn't developed many of the problems other children in the ward do, though she was diabetic. Many of the doctors and nurses at the hospital came to the pediatric AIDS ward during their break to spend time with whichever child was "Theirs". "How're you doing today?" Dr. Roth asked.

"Good, I drew a picture. It's for you!" Monet thrust a piece of paper into Elizabeth's hand.

"Awww, that's wonderful, Monet!"

This was the reason she stayed at the hospital. She was more attached to Monet than she had been to anyone she could remember.

"It's my new Fwend!" exclaimed Monet.

Dr. Roth furrowed her brow.

"Who's that?"

She ran towards the doors. Elizabeth almost jumped up and ran after her, worrying that Monet was in danger. Monet stopped at the door however, and motioned as if she were holding someone's hand. Elizabeth relaxed.

The little girl ran up to Delmont and said hello.

"You can see me? And hear me?"

"Of course." Monet rolled her eyes.

"What's your name?" she asked.

Delmont was stunned. He fumbled out his name, and she held out her hand. She interrogated him about why he was there, and he answered as best he was able. They reached the doctor. He looked at her name badge.

"This is Lisbef, She takes care of me, she's my best friend."

Dr. Roth smiled and held out her hand.

"And what's your friend's name, Monet?"

"He's Delmont." She furrowed her brow again. The name seemed so familiar to her, but she dismissed it almost instantly.

"Lisbef helps people like you."

"People like me?" asked Delmont.

"Yeah, sick people."

"Who's sick, Monet?" asked Dr. Roth.

"Delmont," said Monet.

"He's sick in here," Monet motioned to her heart.

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's too angry. It's making him not right."

Delmont suddenly remembered what he was doing there. He excused himself and told Monet he'd be back, and headed toward the morgue.

"Where'd your friend go?" Elizabeth asked.

"Dunno. Can we play with blocks now?"

Elizabeth sighed.

"Alright."

Together they built a house with the blocks.

Delmont needed to see if his girlfriend was in the morgue. He made his way back and walked through the door, seeing another body on the table. He had to look twice before he realized who it was. His attacker was dead, he saw a man kneeling next to him- the same man. He hadn't seen Delmont yet, and was quietly praying to himself.

"Estoy apesadumbrado para todo. Testoy apesadumbrado que lastimo a gnete,

apeadumbrada yo tome una vida. Estoy apesadumbrado que el dios; guarda por favor mi caja fuerte de la madre y de la hearman. No deje por favor lo que lo lastime. Dejeme por favor tener perdon. Estoy apesadumbrado para todo mal que hice durante mi vida." I'm sorry for everything. I'm sorry I hurt people, sorry I took a life, I'm sorry God; please keep my mother and sister safe. Please don't let what I did hurt them. Please let me have forgiveness. I'm sorry for everything wrong I did during my life.

Delmont stopped for a moment. He thought about everything he could do, what actions he could take. He could come from behind and strangle the man, he could ignore him and look for his girlfriend, or he could talk to him. He wasn't ready for the last yet, and instead avoided his gaze and searched for Lisa among the bodies. He didn't find her. Delmont searched out Monet.

"Where's Lisa Richardson?" Monet asked while still playing with blocks.

Elizabeth was a bit shocked, but maintained her composure.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Fo' Delmont. He wants to know where his fwend is."

Dr. Roth was suddenly concerned.

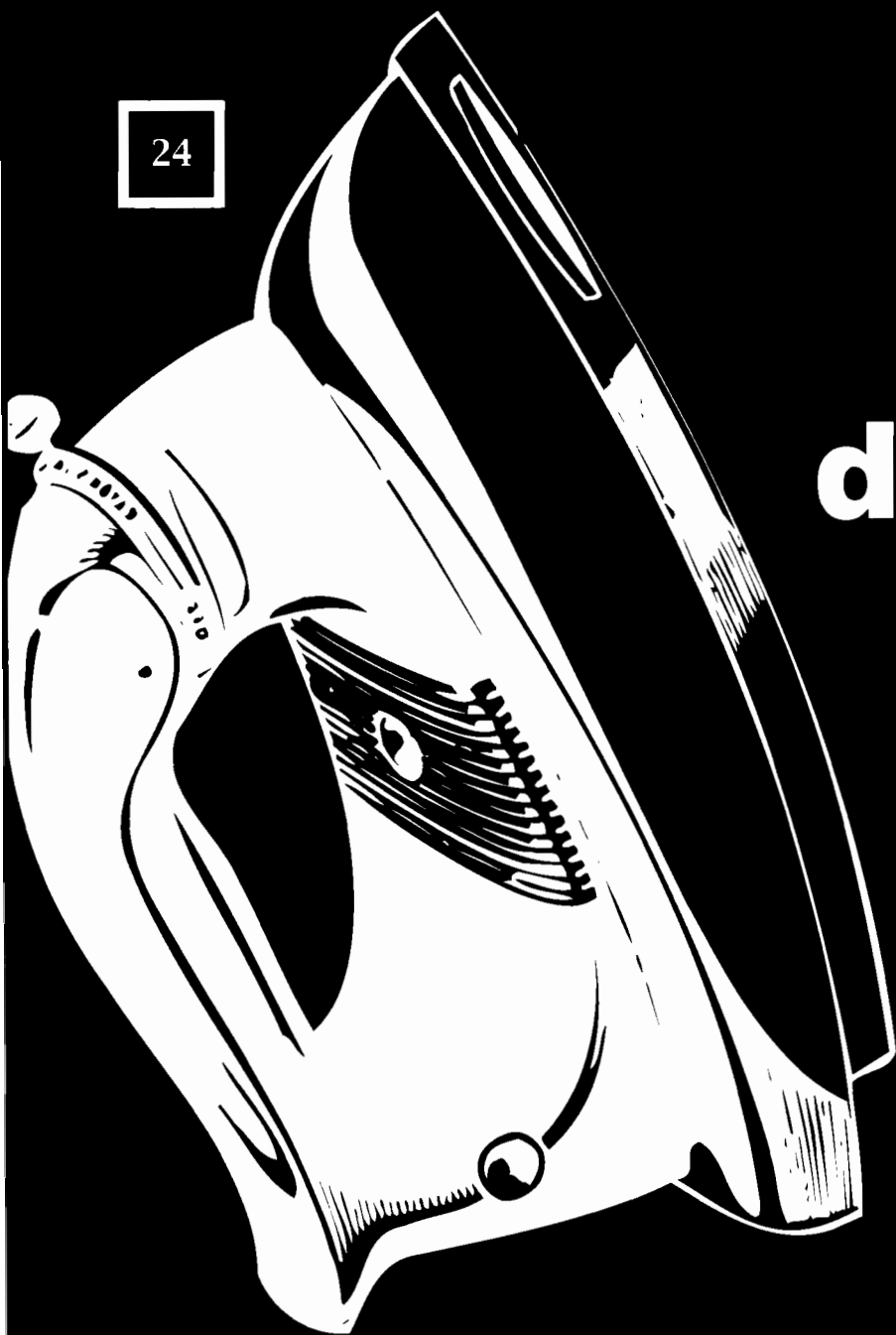
"Monet, come with me."

They went down to reception and she asked for Lisa's room. Monet ran to the room number the receptionist just gave, and Elizabeth chased after her.

"He's getting better!" Monet exclaimed.

He realized he was. He was slowly accepting what had happened, and that his assailants didn't deserve to die. It erupted from him; a red light beamed from his chest and got wider and wider until it encompassed him. The light surrounded him and gradually faded to black. The darkness shaped itself into a tunnel and déjà vu struck him. He found himself floating towards a light, looked back and saw Monet waving, and he returned the wave. This time, nothing held him back.

24



domestic

Runner-up Best Overall Story

P.J. McRae

DOMESTIC • P.J. McRae

Standing in our backyard looking upward I could see the countless stars shining, distant light bulbs flickering in an endless hallway. Their glow somewhat hindered by the city lights off in the distance. I looked down at the grass; it was dead from years of neglect, patches of dirt spotting the area. The light from our living room cast my shadow on to the side of the shed. The shadow seemed so large compared to me, almost big as my dad. I pulled a cigarette from my pocket and lit it; I inhaled deeply and let the smoke out in a huge cloud, the flashing lights in the distance were reflected through the haze. They were coming. I sat down on the stoop to wait and I wondered to myself how this could have happened, and then it came to me.

I learned a lot of things when I was younger; my dad was the best teacher in the world. I learned that stoves are hot and that they cause pain, especially when your hand is held on it for almost a minute. I learned that leather, in belt form, is much like a whip, and this also hurts. I learned you can't breathe when someone's arm or hands are wrapped around your neck and your whole world turns black. All of this was valuable information and my father had been more than willing to teach me.

When I was fifteen I had come home late from school one day and found my father sitting in the den. This was unusual for two reasons, my father normally has to work until six, and even if he wasn't working, he'd at least be at the bar until nine.

"BOY!" he yelled, "Grab me another beer!"

"Sure pop!" I yelled back, obviously unable to escape without notice. I found my sister sitting in the kitchen; she was reading a textbook and doing some homework, her hand rubbing the right side of her face.

"He lost his job today." She said quietly, barely above whisper, "Hey, after you get him a beer, go see if mom needs anything."

She looked at me. She'd been crying and the side of her face near her scar was a bright red despite the dark tint of her skin.

"All right." I said and grabbed a Budweiser from the fridge.

I walked out to the den and handed my father the beer. He was a large man, all of six foot five, and lean everywhere except his gut which was slightly showing from under his gray shirt. His eyes were red from constant drinking and his blonde hair was tussled and falling into his eyes. He almost blended with the den. It's peeling paint on the walls and the water stains that crawled from the floor like snakes to an unsuspecting rodent. My father's grey chair cracking at the edge, the stuffing peeking out of the sides barely contained the girth of my father. The carpet was once white, but was fused with dirt and stains from children's playing. The TV stood on a small tray, with wheels so that we could move it to any room in the house, dust collected on the screen. The chattering black and white faces danced from scene to scene, all to entertain my father.

My father looked at me briefly, his forest green eyes meeting mine for only a second, they used to be such strong eyes. He drank large gulps and little bits of the liquid dribbled down his chin. I looked at him for a moment, how could the man who once played football with me in the back yard have become this pathetic waste? The man who once stood proudly with looking at the sky. Had he really become this thing that couldn't even sit upright in a chair?

"What the hell are you still doing here?!" He yelled at me, breaking me from my thoughts. "Can't you see I'm busy?!"

He looked at me with his best drunken/annoyed face and turned his attention back to the TV. He was watching some new episode of the *Honeymooners*, but he wasn't laughing. His hearty laugh that used to roar like thunder, never again would it be heard.

"Sorry sir." I said and slinked out of the room.

I went back to the kitchen and filled a glass with water. I went down to the end of the hall where my parent's bedroom was. There were bloody tissues

all over the floor next to where my mother was laying. I set the glass on the nightstand and picked up the tissues and threw them in the trash.

"Do you need anything?" I asked, my mother didn't answer, but reached for the glass of water and took a sip. She barely lifted her face from the pillow, her dark hair ratted and stringy, it used to be like that of a wild horse, long and black. She never wore it up and her smile was always showing, but that was when I was younger.

My mother had fled EL Salvador during the civil war about fifteen years ago; she left with her two-year-old daughter, my sister. The father of her child had either abandoned her or was killed in the war; I don't think she ever really knew which. When she came to this state she had no money and spoke only broken English, she couldn't get a job anywhere except as a seamstress in a small factory. She barely made any money at all and she lived in a small apartment on the lower east side. She met a man, he was a good man at the time, and he worked for a shipping company and was able to support her and her child. I never knew how they met. They married and nine months later they had a son. Soon though this man started drinking after work with his friends, and he was no longer a good man all the time, but my mother was not able to support herself, let alone two children, without him. So she stayed and was forever the doting wife. My mother learned to cope by repressing her emotions and hiding behind a plain exterior that no one ever questioned. This was another lesson my father taught all too well. My mother learned that if you just take it, it will be over and you can go back to quietly waiting for salvation. Hard lessons learned indeed. Two years later, when I was seventeen, I had just gotten home from school. My father was working down at the stockyard and would probably be at the bar until late, it was payday after all. I threw my book bag down and turned on the TV, I was watching some afternoon cartoons, some Mickey Mouse. I got hungry and went to the kitchen for a snack. I was startled to find my mother sitting in one of the chairs. The table held a full cup of tea that had long since cooled and there were half opened envelopes scattered across the scarred wooden top. The window over the sink was holding the late afternoon sun in place and it shined over my mother,

giving her an ambient glow. A broom sat in the corner, but the floor still had a layer of dust that must have been a few months old. I glanced at my mom; her eyes were staring toward the den, her eyelids hanging just above her pupils. Her eyes were the deepest brown I had ever known, just like my sister's; they were like dark pools with no bottom.

"Hey mom." I said and went about finding a snack; "Do we have any food?"

She didn't answer, so I kept looking through our pantry. There were old, unused boxes of cereal, cans of vegetables with the labels long since faded. Nothing in the pantry really looked edible. I glanced over at the counter. At least it wasn't as neglected as the floor. When I was little my mom would have plates of snacks for my sister and I when we got home from school. I grabbed an apple from the counter and started to head back to the den.

"I think we'll have meatloaf for dinner tonight." She said, her accent still beautiful after all these years, she used to speak Spanish to me all the time, even though I never understood it, "and mash potatoes." But I wasn't really sure whether or not she was actually talking to me.

"Sure mom, whatever you want." I said and headed to the den.

"Sean!" she yelled.

"Yeah mom, I'm right here."

I was getting annoyed.

"Oh, I didn't even see you." She said as if startled by my presence, "How was school? Did you get home alright?"

"Uh, yeah mom, I'm here aren't I?"

"Si, sorry." She said softly, "Will you tell your sister that we're having meatloaf for dinner?"

"Sure mom." I said softly, "I'll tell her."

I walked down the hall to the second door on the left, right next to the closet and across the hall from mine. I went to knock, but caught myself and opened the door. The room was a dark shade of pink with blotches of purple; the dresser was crammed with notebooks and few scattered pictures. The floor was bare except a small red carpet square next to the bed. The bed was in the corner. It had a light pink comforter and three white pillows near the headboard. I sat down near the edge by the pillows. I grabbed the teddy bear that I had given her on her fourteenth birthday, 'I luv u' was embroidered on the stomach. I looked at it and sighed.

When I was five years old, my sister was eight and it was a Tuesday night, maybe around nine. This was one of the many patches of time that my father would be on a constant drinking binge when I was younger. He was always in and out being drunk. My father had just gotten home from the bar. He stumbled through the back door and plopped himself into the armchair near the corner of the den. My mother was in the wash room ironing clothes and my sister and I were playing house with her dolls in the kitchen. We were laughing and making quite a ruckus because hadn't yet known that our father was home. He stumbled into the kitchen and we immediately stopped playing.

"What the fuck are you doing with those dolls?" He growled as he stared at me.

"Playing house daddy." My sister said.

"Yeah." I agreed

"Oh, you want to play house huh?" my father said, getting angry, "you want to be a little pussy girl? Is that what you want?!" He grabbed me by the arm, "Fine, I'll show you how girls play house!"

He pulled me into the laundry room and my mother backed away from the ironing board and creped towards the corner of the room. My father pressed my head onto the board and lifted the iron, he pressed it hard against my ear, it burned so much, the pain was indescribable, and I screamed and screamed. Then my mother ran up and hit him on the back cursing in Spanish, my father pushed her back and she fell to the floor.

"Daddy no! Let him go!" my sister screamed and she went for his arm.

Startled, my father swung around and hit my sister in the side of the face with the iron, she went down screaming, and I will never forget the sound. I passed out right after that and woke up the next day in my bed with a bandage over my ear. At breakfast that morning my sister had a bandage on her right cheek.

Fast forward to when my sister and I were in junior high. This is when my sister learned that boys don't like girls with scars on their faces and that other girls will say nasty things about you when they don't think you can hear. My sister learned that people stare and whisper, or point and laugh. My

sister wasn't popular or outgoing anymore; she had a few friends, but never a boyfriend. I would see her during the day; her long black hair doing it's best to hide her flaw. I would smile and wave, maybe give her a hug every once in awhile, but she never smiled anymore. I watched her disappear into a crowd only to come out alone afterward. I watched her die inside. I remember this asshole came up to me once and asked if he could have my sister's number because he heard she'd be a good pity fuck. He laughed up to the point I slammed his face into a locker and beat him within an inch of his life; he didn't eat solid foods for a week. But my father made sure I learned the kid's pain after I was suspended from school.

Jump back to the day my father lost his job and he was sitting in the den drinking his life away. After I gave my mom the glass of water I went into the kitchen. I walked over to my sister. I put my hands on her shoulders and stared to rub them. She cringed in pain at first, bust soon relaxed and laid her head on the table.

"Thanks sweetie." She said in her soft, beautiful voice.

"She's ok" I said, "I think she'll sleep it off."

I stopped rubbing her shoulders and sat in the chair across from her.

"She's not ok." My sister said, "None of us are." Her eyes looked at mine; she brushed the hair that had fallen into my eyes. "Things are only going to get worse; he'll be drinking non-stop until he finds another job."

"Yeah, I know." I said as I looked toward the den, "We'll just have to wait it out."

express, *v.t.*; expressed, *ppr.* [ME. *expressen*; L. *primere*, to press or squeeze.]

1. to put into words; restate.

2. to make known; reface *expressed* sorrow.

3. to picture, represent music, art, etc.

4. to show by a sign; see the sign + *expresses* added.

5. to dispatch, forward as. to *express* a package.

6. *express oneself*; (a) to (b) to give expression to intonation, etc., especially in activity.

expressible, *a.* capable of being expressed.

expressibly, *adv.* in an expressible manner.

expression (eks-presh'yun) (-onis), a pressing out, as *pressus*, *pp.* of *exprime* [press.]

1. a putting into words; language; a stating.

2. a picturing, representing in art, music, etc.

3. a manner of expressing; meaningful and eloquent singing, etc.; as, she read with *expression*.

4. a particular word, phrase, as, "catch cold" is an idiom.

5. a showing of feeling; as, *expression* of laughter is often the *expression*.

6. a look, intonation, smile, meaning or feeling; as, *expression* on his face.

7. a symbol or set of symbols representing some algebraic fact, as $x^2 + 2x + 1$.

8. a showing by a symbol.

expressional, *a.* of or pertaining to expression; having the power of expression.

expressionism, *n.* an artistic movement in the arts, characterized by the nonobjective, stereotyped characters, to give objective expression.

expressionist, *a.* of or pertaining to expressionism.

expressionist, *n.* an expressionist writer, etc.

expressionistic, *a.* same as expressionist.

expressionistically, *adv.* in an expressionistic manner.

expressionless, *a.* lacking expression.

expressive, *a.* 1. of or pertaining to expression.

2. expressing; indicative of; as, a song *expressive* of joy.

3. full of expression; as, an *expressive* nod.

expressively, *adv.* in an expressive manner.

expressiveness, *n.* the quality of being expressive; the power of expression.

expressly, *adv.* 1. in a plain manner; in direct terms.

2. on purpose; particularly. I wrote for you *expressly*.

expressman, *n.*; *pl.* *expressmen*.

expressman, *n.*; *pl.* *expressmen*.

photograph by

Jared Annear



"I sick of waiting it out, having to go through this every time something happens to him. it's bullshit." She said still whispering. "I don't want to have walk with you to the hospital at three in the morning or stroke mom's hair while she spitting up blood."

"I know, but what do you want me to do?" I asked. "He'd sooner kill me than change his ways."

My sister looked at me for while, not saying anything. I tried not to meet her eyes, but couldn't help myself. She put her hand on mine.

"Please don't say that, I don't know what I would do without you." She said, tears forming in her eyes. "This stupid place would fall apart if you were gone."

"Maybe we should leave." I said, "I can get a job somewhere and we could start over."

"What about mom? We can't leave her here you know she won't leave him."

"Why not?" I asked looking hard into her eyes.

"She's still in love with the man he once was." My sister said, tears dropping down the sides of her face, "I think we all are, he was a good man once."

"Yeah I know." I said quietly.

My father used to throw the best birthday parties-cakes, clowns, magic you name it, we probably had it at some point, somehow he was always able to surprise us. Everyone was so happy on those days, but they were long gone.

"Well, he should be able to find a job soon, then we can try to move on, figure something out." I said forcing a smile.

"I hope you're right." And with that she got up and kissed me on the top of my head. She walked down the hall to her room, looked back and tried to force a smile, but couldn't. She went into her room and shut the door.

"Goodnight sis." I called, but got no reply.

Later that night I was in my room doing some homework. It must have been around eleven. I was just about to turn in when I heard my parent's bedroom door slam and my father grumbling something under his breath, he walked past my door, but he stopped. I creped closer to my door and peeked

out the crack. He faced my sister's room and began banging on the door.

"GO AWAY!" I heard my sister yelling.

"Open this fucking door!!" my father yelled back and continued banging on the door.

"NO!" she screamed.

My father didn't answer he swung his shoulder against the door and popped it right open. I could hear sister's screams, but they were soon muffled. I heard thumping coming from the darkness. I crawled back away from my door and leaned back against my bed. I crawled back away from my door and leaned back against my bed. I put my hands over my ears, but didn't do any good. I squeezed my eyes shut so hard that tears began to form and run down my face.

The sounds penetrated the room like music in the distance, repeating over and over again to the same beat. After a little while there was silence and my father left the room and walked out to the den. I went to check on my sister but she had locked herself in her bathroom. I put my hand on the door and tapped lightly, but I got no reply.

"It'll be alright." I whispered, "Every thing will be okay in the morning."

I couldn't hear my sister inside the bathroom, I walked back to my room, shut the door, and drifted into a troubled sleep.

That night my sister learned that sex is painful; she learned that screams couldn't be heard through the palm of someone's hand. Later on that night she learned that razors are sharp and that wrists bleed.

I awoke the next morning to my mother's screams; my father was long gone by then. I walked into my sister's room and saw my mother holding my sister in her arms. My sister had long cuts gong up her arms and there was still blood dripping out of the wounds. I backed out of the room slowly, trying to fight the tears. I walked out to our back yard and lit a cigarette. I began sobbing quietly in between drags from my smoke. I sat outside smoking cigarette after cigarette for almost an hour until the paramedics arrived.

After my mom found my sister that morning I think she died inside. She was never the same; every part of her was dead now. She rarely talked or even looked at anything specific. She never again acknowledged my father's presence and he pretty much left her alone. I don't think she ever knew exactly what happened, but maybe in her heart she did. I don't know for sure. She slowly faded into the background, leaving my father and me to fend for ourselves. I learned a lot of things during this time. My father came home that night and pulled me out of bed. He dragged me to the back yard and

threw me to the ground. He kicked me in the side and I curled into a ball.

"Why?!" he screamed at me, "Why do you do this to me?!"

He wasn't drunk and tears were streaming down his face as he kicked me repeatedly in my side.

"Why do you do these things?!" he was sobbing now, "They hurt so much, I can't take it anymore!"

He fell to his knees and slamming his fists into my back; I lay there not knowing what was going on other than me being hit.

"It's so easy for you to just stop." His voice quieting, "Please just stop."

He stopped hitting me and put his arms around me, still crying, his tears penetrating my shirt. I had no choice. I put arms around him and squeezed. It was the best hug my father ever gave me. He stood up and walked slowly back inside, not glancing back. I stayed in the yard for a while and watched the stars over head. The bruises on my side were already starting to form, but the cool night air was comforting.

After the funeral my father sobered up for while. Things were almost getting back to the good times we used to have when I was young. My father and I would play basketball and watch football games on TV. He would even be home to greet me after school sometimes. We would talk sports and bullshit about how school was going. He would laugh and joke with me. He even apologized for things he had done in the past. He broke down and cried once. I naively forgave him, but at the time I was glad to have my old father back. I wanted that to last, but my father couldn't resist the drink, and after a while he started again.

I set my sister's bear down and went back out to the den to finish watching my cartoons. That night at dinner, mother was sleeping in her room and I made a sandwich for dinner. This was a typical meal in my house; my mother no longer cooked anything, even when said she would. I ate my sandwich and watched TV until around eight, and then I retired to my bedroom to do some homework. I heard my father stumble through the door around midnight and switched off my light. I crawled into my bed and drifted to sleep as my father bumped around in the kitchen. I dreamt of my sister and how happy she must be now.

The day before I was sitting on my stoop watching the flashing lights come for me I had been watching TV in the den for most of the night; it was late, maybe twelve-thirty. My father stumbled through the door and nearly lost his balance. I got up and started making my way to my room.

"Where are you goin'?" He slurred in my direction.

"To bed pop." I said and continued on to bed.

"No you're not, you're gonna' come with me, I got a present for ya'." He said and pulled a handgun from under his jacket. He pointed at me and it sort of wavered in the air. I took a few steps back.

"Don't worry, I ain't gonna' shoot." He said and then motioned for me to follow him outside.

Reluctantly I followed and we stepped out into the back yard. He had set some bottles on top of our broken down Dodge.

"Shoot the bottles."

He said and handed me the gun.

"Pop, it's getting too late to be shootin' off a gun, we'll wake the whole neighborhood."

"Just fucking do it!" He yelled.

I took my aim and fired, the bang was the loudest thing I had ever heard. I had never fired a gun before and it kind of threw me off balance. I rubbed what was left of my ear. The bullet had missed its mark, but it blew through the windshield to our old car.

"You call that shootin'?" my father asked, "Take another shot and this time you better hit something."

I braced myself a little better this time. I took aim; BANG! One of the bottles exploded in hail of glass. I smiled to myself. One of the windows next door lit up. "Pop, we're waking the neighbors; let's just call it a night."

"Not until I get my shot." He said and took the gun away from me.

My father took aim and fired another bang. My father had missed and he lost his balance falling backward to the ground. I couldn't stop myself, as I busted out laughing. My father stood up, towering over me. There was swift movement with gun in hand, it hit my forehead and I went down like a stone. Darkness fell over me.

Go back before my mother and sister came to this country, back way before I was born. There is a young man at the peak of his high school football career, see him blow out his knee and lose all his

scholarships. He is now forced to stay in his stupid town and work at a dead end job. His life is ruined he thinks, he will never amount anything. His parents are dead; his sisters have moved to bigger cities, he is left alone to finish life a broken man. He meets a woman, he falls in love with her, but she leaves him for another man. He starts to drink. He then meets a young Hispanic woman and her young child, he takes care of them. For a while he quits drinking and isn't angry anymore.

He and his wife have a son. His name is Sean. They are a family and they live happily for a while. The man starts drinking again. The man hits his wife and her daughter. He is angry again; he hits his son when the

boy gets older. The man hates his life. The man wants to die, but can't bring himself to leave them. He is conflicted and takes it out on his family.

It is routine now. He learned a lot those few years.

I woke up I don't how much later. I wrinkled my brow and blood started pouring down my face. My father had long since gone inside. I grabbed a towel from inside the kitchen, careful not to make a sound. I started my walk toward the hospital. My sister used to make this walk with me. She'd

hold my hand and tell me it would be all right. I could almost hear her voice. I reached the hospital about twenty minutes later.

"Hey Sean, what is it this time?" the doctor asked as he examined my wound.

"A little midnight basketball, I slipped and hit my head." I said not meeting his eyes, "There must have been some loose gravel or something."

"If you say so, well, this doesn't look too bad. I'll give you some stitches and you can be on your way." The doctor said and he proceeded to give me eight stitches. I made the walk home. I didn't sleep but I did find the gun.

Now go to twenty minutes before I stood on my stoop watching the flashing lights. I had come home and my father was sitting in the den. I walked into the kitchen

and saw my mother sitting there, one of her eyes was a deep shade of blue.

"MOM?" I asked.

She said nothing I walked past her and then into my room, I pulled the gun from under my bed. I took it into my sister's room and I sat down on the bed.

"Bye sis, Hope to see you soon." I whispered.

I went back out to the den. I walked over and stood in front of my father.

"What the fuck are you doing, get the hell out of the way!" He shouted at me. I didn't say a word, just pulled out the gun and shot my father in the face. His head jerked back with ashocked, but dead, expression was on his face. His brains were splattered all over the back wall, the red of the blood penetrating the once white wall. My teacher was dead, his arms lifeless and hanging over the sides of the chair, his hands open palm. The beer he was holding dropped to the floor and splashed the surrounding area. His body slipped slightly out of the chair and almost gave out completely. The sounds of the TV were barking in the background, but I could barely hear them. How could I not help but feel satisfied.

My mother stood near the kitchen, her expression blank. She wasn't looking at anything; no emotion or shock crossed her face.

"Show me you care." I demanded. I walked over to her. "Tell me you know what's going on!"

She stared blankly head, her long nightgown reflected brightly from the light, it was white like a cloud and contrasted my mother's dark skin beautifully. Her long dark hair hung limply at the sides of her face.

"Please just show me you're still alive!" I was starting to cry.

She still didn't move. I put my arms around her and pressed the gun against her side.

"Please." I pleaded, but she said nothing. I pulled the trigger.

I had put my mother in her bed, but left my father where he was. I sat on the stoop and smoked my cigarette. The stars seemed brighter when I was

little; the whole family in the back yard looking up, my father pointing out the constellations. My sister and I laughing, chasing fireflies in the late evening. The cookouts and the picnics all lost now.

I looked out into the distance, the lights were right out front, I heard several men running up through the front door. They were walking through the den. I heard them come toward the back door. They yelled at me to turn around, I did. Put your hands up they yelled, I did. They rushed over and searched me. They put cuffs on me and led me to the car. They shut the door and I was alone inside. I watched as the coroner wheeled out the bodies of my parents. I sat in that car for what seemed like hours.

The man down at the station said I would need a good lawyer if I hoped to not get the chair. I wasn't worried; all the evidence in my defense was on my body. I sat in a cell to await my trial, the lawyer said I might have a good case, but he wasn't sure. I didn't care, I just don't want to die I told him. "We'll see." He said.

I sat in my cell staring at the walls. Maybe it was time to go; I had lost everyone I had ever loved. Maybe death is the only answer now. My sister knew it, she saw that there was no other way out after that night my father busted her door open. She took the only way out that she was left. My mother knew it too, but she just retreated into her own little world, detached. But I released her from her pain, I did what she couldn't, take her life. My father might have even known it, the way he drank he would have been dead in ten years. I guess I just sped up the process. But where does that leave me? Do I need release? Hesitation has been my way of life since I was young. I might as well die, I guess, no one I know will be able to help me now. Death might be the answer. Well, I'm not sure, but I sure don't know where I'd go.



illustration by

Audie Mobley

v.t.; expressed,
E. *expressen*; L.
to press or squeeze
out into words; re
make known; re
pressed sorrow.
picture, represe
art, etc.
show by a sign; st
+ *expresses* add
dispatch, forward
press a package.
express oneself; (a) to
give expression to
etc., especially
ble, a. capable
bly, adv. in an
on (eks-presh'v
a pressing out, at
pp. of *express*
putting into word
e; a stating.
picturing, repres
music, etc.
manner of expr
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etc.; as, she read
articular word,
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or feeling; as,
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objective expres
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ism.
on-lat, n. an
etc.
on-la'tic, a. sar
on-la'tic-ál-ly, a
mner.
on-less, a. lack
ve, a. 1. of or
pressing; indicati
g *expressive* of)
of expression;
expressive nod.
ve-ly, adv. in an
ve-ness, n. the
; the power of ex
y, adv. 1. in
in direct terms.
purpose; particu
for you *expressly*
mán, n.; pl. ex
by you exp
mán n. ál ex.

press', *v.t.*; expressed
 or. [ME. *expressen*; L.
primere, to press or squ
 1. to put into words; r
 ate.
 2. to make known;
 ce *expressed* sorrow.
 3. to picture, repres
 asic, art, etc.
 4. to show by a sign; s
 e sign + *expresses* ad
 5. to dispatch, forward
 to *express* a package
 6. *express oneself*; (a) to
 to give expression to
 ation, etc., especially
 tivity.

press'ible, *a.* capable
press'ibly, *adv.* in an
pression (eks-presh'
nis), a pressing out, a
essus, pp. of *exprim*
ess.]

1. a putting into wor
 nguage; a stating.
 2. a picturing, repres
 art, music, etc.
 3. a manner of exp
 eaningful and eloquen
 ging, etc.; as, she rea
 4. a particular word,
 "catch cold" is an id
 5. a showing of feelin
 ighter is often the *ex*
 6. a look, intonation,
 eaning or feeling; as,
pression on his face.
 7. a symbol or set of
 me algebraic fact, as
 n.

8. a showing by a sym
pression-äl, *a.* of or
 n; having the power
pression-ism, *n.* an
 ovement in the arts,
 aracterized by the no
 ls, stereotyped chara
 give objective expre
 ce.

pression-ist, *a.* of or
 essionism.
pression-ist, *n.* an
 iter, etc.
pression-is'tic, *a.* sa
pression-is'tic-äl-ly,
 ic manner.

pression-less, *a.* lack
pressive, *a.* 1. of or
 ession.
 2. expressing; indicat
 a song *expressive* of
 3. full of expression;
 an *expressive* nod.

press'ively, *adv.* in a
press'iveness, *n.* the
 ressive; the power of e
 ion.

press'ly, *adv.* 1. in
 ainly; in direct terms
 2. on purpose; partic
 wrote for you *express*
press'män, *n.*; *pl.* *ex*
 wrote for you *express*

photograph by
Brandon Glenn



NEW KID IN SCHOOL • Laura Griffin
Best Poem

Standing alone
At the entrance
Pine petrified.
A breeze blows
Yet keeps me standing.
Mocking birds,
Answering calls of others,
Pay me no heed.
They walk with noses in the air.
Long abundant snake grass
Snicker behind me.
The sun,
Warm and smiling when I arrived,
Now hides behind a paper mountain
On an oak desk.
A stream
Whispers to me,
In a language I can't comprehend,
I step
Into the shaded room,
All goes silent.

SECRETS • Jennifer Piatt
Runner-up Best Poem

The whispers of the trees
Tell the secrets that I wish to keep
They lean toward the wind
Hoping to pass along the message
I wither and hide from it all
Inside of you, I am safe
Daring young child
Spitting yellow from tongue
Grab the words as they flow from my pen
Grab my hand and we'll ride along
A look in the mirror
Reminds me of who I really am
Tainted, sweet fool
With flowers from ear to ear

THE BEST POEM YOU'VE EVER READ • Josh Beck
Honorable Mention

This is the best poem you've ever read.
If you need me to, I'll repeat what I just said.
This is the best poem you've ever read.
Across the globe, this poem will be widespread.
Since it is the best poem you've ever read.
My poem's so good you'll eat it up with bread.
It's the best tasting poem you've ever read.
This will be the first poem that isn't a dread.
Because it's the best poem you've ever read.
No one will read Shakespeare, they'll read this instead.
'Cuz it's the best poem you've ever read.
This poem will always be stuck in your head.
But you won't care; it's the best poem you've ever read.
There will be world peace and every mouth will be fed.
After all, it's the best poem you've ever read.
Maybe, I'll meet a model and then we will wed.
I'll be famous for writing the best poem you've ever read.
Then I'll get sick of the fame, become a recluse, and call myself Jed.
But I'll always be known for writing the best poem you've ever read.
However, like all great art, it won't be any good until I'm dead.
But then it will be the best poem you've ever read.
I wanted to start this poem tonight, but I have to go to bed.
So you'll have to wait to read the best poem you've ever read.