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Des Moines Area Community College Creative Writing Contest 1976-99

Jeff Sheppard

Hai Mai

Joel Jameson

Joanne Davenport

Lenore MayBaum

See next page for additional authors

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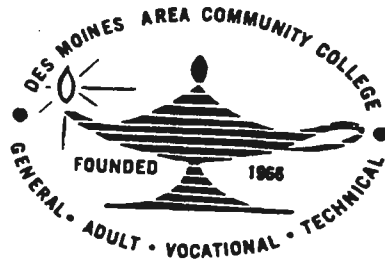
Authors

Jeff Sheppard, Hai Mai, Joel Jameson, Joanne Davenport, Lenore MayBaum, Musau WaKabongo, Daniel Florenzano, Rebecca Briggs, Zach Evens, and Jay Cue

Des Moines Area Community College

Creative Writing Contest

1976-99



Award-winning Works
for the Academic Year
1998-99

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[17]

The Mirror

By: Jeff Sheppard

There is a mirror of me
Living below me
Its reflection clean and clear
Too clear and reminds me
Of what I am
Bring back the carnival mirror
That distorted dissection
I've come to believe
The truth in a lie
A lie I love
Lies like a liquor
feeding my feeble ego
In truth there can be no ego
In truth there is no soul
Let me live my caricature
It's so much easier to be a lie
than to be a pathetic truth
The easy going anger
Surfaces like a whale
Swallows Jonas and smiles
I have to break the mirror
Before it breaks me

[2]

A Little Time Away

By: Jeff Sheppard

24

Greetings from the Netherworld

Where they burn dogs

And Frankenstein lives

The air is thick

Inhabitants thicker

And childishly deranged

Hello from down under

Away from societies gaze

Here giants eat razors

A mental stagnation

Psychotic pretension

(The paranoid-self)

Salutations from Hell

The lambs are led

By Sadistic shepherds

Morally superior

Physically overwhelming

- 2 -

[3]

Yet beaten by their minds

Goodbye from my soul

As the darkness comes

I want to go home

It's Quiet Here

By: Jeff Sheppard

24

It's quiet here

In morning

Sitting on a cold bottlecap

Forearms keeping my head aloft

from surgical steel

Criminals safely away

Realities sway

And I'm outside

It's quiet here

In mourning

Sitting on a cold bottlecap

Forearms keeping my head aloft

from surgical steel

Criminals safely away

Realities sway

And I'm outside

It's quiet here

[5]

Ends Uneventful

By: Jeff Sheppard

The gypsy is dying

Skin gone gray

Breath gone slim

No chance for regret

on a cold metal shelf

A flurry of thoughts

alone at the threshold

An adventurous life

ends uneventful

May his boots live on

and his cards predict

the second coming of hope

The gypsy is dying

one final gasp

and a rattle of fear

The gypsy is gone

24



[6]

MY FATHER

(Because entries will be judged anonymously, my true name is changed into an imaginative one in this story.)

On April 30, 1975, Communist North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam. After that day, all military officers, writers and poets of South Vietnam were put into prisons, which were called beautifully “ re-education camps” by the Communist-led government. Because my father was a writer, and I was a lieutenant of South Vietnam, both of us were forced to enter a re-education camp in Vietnam.

My father died in prison in 1977 at the age of seventy.

I always remember him because he is the person I love and respect most. His figure always appears lively in my mind.

Before being put into prison, my father was a big fat-legged person with a belly. His face was round and rosy. His two large brown eyes that bulged out at you from his rosy face gave a gentle impression. His hair was graying into the color of straw. He had a large forehead, a straight nose, and a wide mouth.

Although he was old, he had healthy pink cheeks. There was always a relieved, amused, and cheerful smile on his face and a thin mustache and a thick beard.

My father encouraged me a lot in my study. He gave me several books of fiction and told me to read them. Thanks to him I made good progress in opening my knowledge.

My father considered himself as a “middle-of-the-road” person. He told me not to evaluate any person to be absolutely right or wrong. According to him, every person has both his or her strengths and weaknesses. Nobody is perfect. Nothing is completely true. He asked me to take the story “How Do the Blind Describe an Elephant?” as a good example for me to live smoothly in society. The story is as follows:

One day, three blind persons were helped to examine an elephant by the feel. The first touched an ear of the elephant, the second touched its legs, and the third touched its tail. Then they argued with each other about the body of the elephant. The first, who had touched the ear, said that the elephant looked liked a paper fan. The second, who had touched the leg, said that the elephant looked liked a pillar. The third, who had touched the tail, said that the elephant looked like a broom. Each of them affirmed that his own description was true. No one agreed to give way to the others.

My father explained to me that, in reality, all of the three blind were wrong because each of them saw only one side of the truth, which was the body of the

elephant. The ear, the leg, and the tail were merely three organs of the elephant, not the whole elephant. The same is true with human beings in our society. How many times have we seen only one side of a fact, and we have concluded in a hurry that we have seen the complete fact just as the blind had done in this story?

One day, my father explained the Vietnamese poem “On Watch” to me at home. The poem talked about a soldier who was on a night watch in a remote area. In the poem there are the following lines:

I feel alone
There is nobody with me
Except the bright moon
The moon is flying down
The moon is lying on my gun nozzle

My father asked me if I saw something poetical in the image “The moon is lying on my gun nozzle.”

I answered immediately, “I see nothing poetical or interesting.” My father was very disappointed because I did not know anything about poetry. How stupid I was! Then he told me that the moon was romantically personified by the poet as a gentle friend of the soldier.

But the thing I remember most about my father is the cause of his tragic death in prison. He used to compare the former Republic of South Vietnam with a wild horse, which galloped everywhere and did not know the right direction to aim at, and the new Communists of North Vietnam with a blindfolded horse galloping in the race to cruelty and oppression. Because of his biting criticism, he was put in a locked room by the Communist head of the concentration camp. He was given only water, not food. The jailer asked him to write a statement to appreciate Communism, and he would give him food and release him from the locked room. But he refused to write the suggested statement. On the fifth day, he handed a note to the jailer, which said, "Communists! Are you human beings or wild animals? If you were human beings, why would you ill-treat me?" The following day, the Communists announced to the prisoners the death penalty of my father. They accused him of reactionary character. He was shot that night! Oh, how horrible!

"Beloved father! Although your penname was Wonderful Dan, your life ended tragically. Although you named me Lucky Dan, my life has a lot of misfortunes. 'Like father, like son' is right for our fate, isn't it? I am always your silly and stupid son, but never have I forgotten you."

[10]

I wrote this composition with a lot of emotions because it talked about my father, whom I love and respect most. Would you be so kind as to allow me to consider this composition as a joss stick burning on the tomb of my father, who died for the ideal of freedom, and my countrymen, who deceased with their heart-break in the Vietnam War?

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WHO WILL DIE TOMORROW?

(Because entries will be judged anonymously, my true name is changed into an imaginative one in this story.)

On April 30,1975, South Vietnam was invaded by Communist North Vietnam. After that day, all military officers of South Vietnam were put into prisons, which were called beautifully “ re-education camps” by the Communist-led government. Because I was a lieutenant of the old regime, I was forced to enter a re-education camp in South Vietnam. My terrible days began.

During the first week, the prisoners were asked to write down their whole individual history. The jailer ordered us to write everything about our life. He said, “ If we discover those who tell a lie or hide something, we will shoot them immediately.” So, we wrote all day long.

One midnight, I was called to present myself before the jailer at his office. A guard pointed his bayonet at me and asked me to go under his direction. The jailer was reading my individual history. No sooner did I greet him than he shouted furiously at me, “ Son of a bitch! A liar.” Then he stood up and slapped me on the face. I was staggered by the blow. My nose was bleeding. He continued, “ You’re Dan, right? You say you were a

teacher of Vietnamese literature. Why don't you say you were really a propagandist of American depraved culture? Replace immediately the word teacher with the word propagandist. Stupid!" Without waiting for my reply, he threw my individual history report to my bloody face and asked the guard to return me back to my cell.

Night after night, and always at midnight, I was called to present myself before the jailer. I was always slapped mercilessly at first. Then I was ordered to change some words in my report into the suggested ones. One time he asked me to write that I had been an orphan instead of having a father and a mother. He reasoned that a traitor like me should not have father or a mother. Another time he dictated a full sentence to me as follows, "My name is Dan. I am a traitor to my country. Now I have been educated by benevolent communists in the re-education camp. Thanks to the lenient policy I see the truth."

The last time was the most terrible. Not only was I slapped on the face by the jailer, but I was also beaten up by two other guards. I was struck repeatedly until I became unconscious. When I was conscious, the jailer asked me if I knew the reason of my being beaten. I told him I really did not realize it. He laughed grimly and said, "Stupid! When you refer to

President Ho Chi Minh in your report, you have to add ‘ the esteemed and beloved communist leader of Vietnamese people.’ Remember it well!”

Therefore, I could not sleep at night. I had to think of beautiful words and sentences to please the jailer. Although I was repressed cruelly every day, I did my best to be patient and to endure all indignities to survive. I used to say to myself, “ Dan, you have to try your best to survive. Your mother, your wife, and your children have been waiting for you at home. You have to live.”

However, I was never able to finish my individual history report because on the 40th day, I was sent to another re-education camp. During two years I was continuously transferred from prison to prison where I experienced a lot of atrocities and brutalities until the day I was sent to North Vietnam.

It was August 1978, at Tan Lap Re-education Camp, Vinh Phu province, North Vietnam. The prison was built in a valley surrounded by mountains and forests. There were only some scattered cottages of residents. Our camp consisted of about 700 military officers of South Vietnam and a dozen criminals of North Vietnam. During that time our ration was 90% cassava roots and 10% rice, which meant that we had cassava roots for nine continuous days and rice for only one day. Cassava

roots were edible, but they lacked essential nutrients. Most of us suffered from malnutrition. We used to have cassava together with salt and morning glories (a sort of edible vegetable) at lunch and dinner. We had only half a pound of meat each month. Even salt was not provided enough. We had to barter our clothes, watches, and gold rings for it with the criminals from the North. They would send our trinkets to their families to sell for money.

In reality, we were sentenced to hard labor, not to be educated as the beautiful phrase “ re-education camp” implied. We were laboring to breathe. At the end of each month, those who had worked badly would have decreased ration (normal rations were one pound of cassava roots or rice per day; decreased rations were thirteen ounces).

Because of malnutrition and hard labor, we were very weak and ill. For thirty-two days continuously, I still remember clearly, each day, one of us, or more, passed away. At the first deaths of our combatants of the same ideal, we were deeply sad. However, we were not surprised because we realized that severe malnutrition and sickness would finally lead to death. No other way! Day after day, not any day passed without one among us decreasing. What a terrible tragedy! There were always dozens of serious patients who were dying. We started guessing, “ WHO WILL DIE TOMORROW?”

Of course, I was participating in the guesses. Sometimes I guessed wrong, sometimes I guessed right.

I had two right guesses at least.

The first one was about the dead day of Captain Vo Minh Hoang. He was in the Navy. He had been living next to my home before we were sent to prison together. We were accidentally imprisoned in the same re-education camp. He had severe tuberculosis. He grew gradually weaker and weaker, awaiting his death. How tragic for a person it was when he knew that he was going to die and did not know what to do to prevent it!

Before his last day, he poured out his heart to me; “Never did I think that I would die here. If I had known this, I would have killed myself on April 30, 1975, so that my wife and children could have buried me.”

Ten months later, when his wife came to see him, it was announced to her that her husband had already died. Instead of seeing her husband, she was led to see his tomb. This was common; the Communists never informed the prisoner's death to his family.

My second right guess was about the death of Major Nguyen Van The. He and I had worked in the same 101 Intelligence Unit. He had cancer of the stomach. He used to vomit a lot of blood. He used to tell me his confidences; “I don't regret my death because I believe that I've chosen the

right way; that is fighting against Communism. I myself wanted to kill myself like Lieutenant Colonel Vu Dinh Duy, Chief of Intelligence Unit 101 in Dalat province, who shot himself right at the commandment post on the afternoon of April 30, 1975. But I am a Catholic, my religion forbids me to kill myself. So, I have to live and to die here.”

I said to myself, “ Communists can destroy my body, but never can they destroy my mind. I must do my best to survive to prove it.”

Thirty-two days passed heavily and gloomily with the death of thirty-six Vietnamese prisoners of war. Why did the deaths stop? What was the wonderful drug?

There was no wonderful drug. Neither was it a miracle! It was only the timely arrival of invaluable food of the POW's families from South Vietnam.

Whenever I recall my days in prison, my heart throbs with emotion. I always say to myself, “ How fortunate you were to survive in prison!” And I always bear in mind the lesson I learned from my prison days: “ In any trial you must keep your strength of mind and spirit to survive.” With both my life experience and learning spirit, I hope that I will have a better life in the United States, the land of opportunities.

Should I Murder Him?



After five hours of hard labor, the prisoners of war gathered in the lecture-hall to receive their lunch, which was only half a pound of plain boiled corn with neither meat nor fish. There was not even salt. But luckily, everyone was delivered some boiled vegetable and a bowl of water from it along with their corn. We looked at each other, sighing. No one said a word of complaint, because we had been used to this ration for two months since the day we were put into this education-camp. There were only thirty minutes reserved for lunch. Then we had to continue our hard labor. Therefore, all of us had to finish our lunch as quickly as possible in order to have some minutes of rest. But the corn we had was too hard to be eaten fast. We had to chew it again and again like cattle grazing on grass. It was not eating corn, but grazing corn. What a pity for those who had a toothache! They resigned themselves to look at it.

Suddenly there was a terrible explosion. No sooner did we regain our calm than other explosions were heard continuously. The Communist

guards around the camp shouted, "The ammunition dump is exploding! Lie down!" Varieties of shells were exploding at the same time. All of us lay at full length on the ground. Bowls and food were thrown down everywhere. Prayers were said around me. Some covered their heads with china bowls, some others with their sandals, and some even with empty hands! When people were frightened, they could do such silly things.

The explosion of the different kinds of shells was heard continuously. After dozens of minutes, we regained our calm, changing our lying position. We lay on our back to look up. An extraordinary sight was seen in mid-air: Unexploded shells were traveling upward to hover a moment as if they liked their newfound freedom before falling to earth again. What a beautiful horror! Several whole shells fell safely on the ground like rocks. Even a Tow rocket, a US effective anti-tank attack weapon, was seen coming down and bouncing up again like a ball. If it had exploded, many of us would have died.

Suddenly, a terrible clanging was heard right above our head. Dust flew down, spreading everywhere. An 81mm shell had torn through the corrugated roof above us, with its pointed head aiming at us, but its trunk still stuck in the air above. Death was threatening us. I had to leave this place as fast as possible. I remembered that on my left there was a small

well about twenty feet from where I was lying. If I ran to the well and climbed down it, I would be safe.

As soon as the explosion slackened, I stood up and rushed to the well. There were steps rumbling behind me. At the well, I climbed down quickly by straddling, putting one foot on the right step and the other foot on the left step of the well. Each step was a small hole dug into either side of the well to help a worker climb up and down. The well was about twenty feet deep with water about ten feet deep. I stopped when I reached the water and looked up. What an uneasy surprise! The person who stood above me was not a prisoner but a Communist guard. He held a rifle in his right hand. Panic-stricken, I asked, 'Cadre,' do you follow to watch me?"

The guard, who was about only twenty years old, answered, "No, don't worry. I am not following you at all. I am only finding a place to hide from the explosions." And he began to climb down the way I had. With a thumping heart, I kept silent. In the well, the explosion had become muffled. I said to myself, "I should pull this Communist guard and press him down in the water. No one can discover this murder. Every Communist is an enemy of the Vietnamese people. Killing a Communist is a 'must-do' act. I should not waste this rare opportunity."

I touched the right shoe of the Communist with my two hands. I was

going to pull him down with my utmost force. Unexpectedly, he asked me, “Where does your family live?” Startling at his question, I answered quickly, “Saigon, oh, it is called Ho Chi Minh City now.” The Communist continued calmly, “My mother told me that I have an uncle living in this city. He went to South Vietnam right after the Geneva Agreement that divided the country into two parts. Recently I have gone in vain to look for him.”

“Where does your uncle live? What is his address?” I asked.

He answered, “It has been said that he has been living in District 4, and he is the director of an import-export company.”

I smiled, saying, “Not knowing his address, how can you find him?”

I gave him a cigarette. He was pleased to receive it, and to my surprise, he asked me to offer him two more.

Seeing that he was innocent and honest, I felt pity for him.

His face was weather-beaten but could not cover the innocence and simplicity of a country youth coming from North Vietnam.

In the well, he told me his story:

His name was Duc (Happiness). He was only seventeen years old, and he had joined the Communist army infiltrating South Vietnam only six months before. Two years before that, his father and he had been forced to

labor as battlefield workers. The reason was that his father's oldest son was caught and executed by the Communists while he was attempting to flee to South Vietnam to find freedom. Right after that day, his father—a teacher of politics at a college, and he—a 10th grade student, were condemned as reactionaries. Both of them were punished to be battlefield workers. They were not allowed to wear weapons like soldiers. Their duty was carrying ammunition and doing hard and dangerous work such as clearing forests and mines. In other words, battlefield workers were the same as prisoners. Later, because of heavy casualties in battles, the Communists had to allow him to join their army to infiltrate South Vietnam. The day before his departure, his mother had handed him a photograph of his uncle taken together with his father, and she told him to find his uncle to ask for help.

Ah, the situation of this young Communist was not different from mine. He was considered a reactionary, and I, an enemy.

He poured out his confidences, “We are like blinded-folded horses. We know nothing but running forward. Before we came to Saigon, we had been told that people in South Vietnam were too poor to afford food and clothes. But when we arrived here, we saw the contrary. All they said was only lies.”

Sincerely, I asked him, "You aren't worried they will know what you have said, are you?"

He smiled, answering, "How can they know? I only pour my confidences to those whom I trust."

Seeing the fashionable watch, a Japanese Seiko, he wore on his wrist, I was surprised and asked, "What a nice watch! You have just bought it, haven't you?"

He replied, "I bartered it with the gold ring that my mother had given me before I infiltrated South Vietnam. I like it very much. I used to wish to have a beautiful watch. In North Vietnam, there are no Japanese watches. There are only ugly Russian watches. Because of this Japanese watch, I was criticized fiercely by my officers. They said that I still had a deep longing for the material products of capitalists. I don't know when they will confiscate it and punish me!"

"There is no other way, I think." I answered sadly.

The explosions decreased. Duc said, "I have to climb up, but you can remain here as long as you want. Climb up only when you hear the gathering whistle."

I was moved, saying, "Thank you a lot. It is still dangerous now. Stay here some more minutes to be safer."

He replied, "It's time for me to go up. Otherwise, my officer will criticize me. Thank you again for your cigarettes."

Duc was climbing up to the surface. He emerged carefully. I also climbed up. Seeing him leaving the hiding place, my heart was immensely melancholic. Was there a communication between us, the communication between two persons who had lost freedom in different ways?

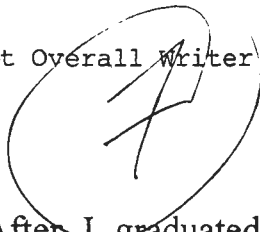
All of a sudden, a shell fell down and exploded. Duc shouted, " Help! Help! I am hit!" Without thinking, I climbed up quickly from the well and rushed to him. He was writhing with pain. His hand was pressing his right hip that was bleeding heavily. I hurriedly tore the sleeve of my shirt and tied the wound. He stammered, " Save me!"

I carried him on my back, running to the dispensary, about two hundred feet away. Blood from the wounded hip kept on flowing, wetting my body. Duc said in a withering voice, " Take the photograph from the back pocket of my trousers and search for my uncle." Then he fainted.

Those were Duc's last words. They have sounded in my mind until now. Were they the hopeless words of a person or a generation?

Two men were in the photograph: one was Duc's father, and the other was his uncle. On the back of the picture there were only four words in pencil: "Brothers are like limbs."

I have been obsessed by this idea. I often ask myself, "When brothers cannot live near each other as they want, how can they live happily?"



A NICE LIAR

After I graduated from the Faculty of Letters in Saigon City, in Vietnam, in 1970, I was appointed by the Ministry of Education to teach Vietnamese literature in a high school in the suburbs. I was very happy because a teaching career was my dream.

It was about twenty miles from my house to school. It took me about thirty minutes to go there by motorcycle. Before entering my school, I used to drink a cup of coffee at a coffee shop after I had had breakfast at home.

The girl who served me coffee was very nice and beautiful. I fell in love with her at first sight. She had a round face with high cheekbones and a rather flat nose. She had wavy blonde hair and a fair complexion. Her eyes were large, and she had a pleasant smile. We often chatted with each other when there were no customers in the shop. I knew that she had graduated from high school two years before, and now she was taking a course of making clothes in a vocational school. She wanted to be a dressmaker.

After three months I realized that I really loved the girl, and she loved me too. We loved each other, and we wanted to live together for life. One day she told me that she was born in the “Dog Year,” and she asked me what “animal year” I was born in. I answered her immediately that I was born in the “Cock Year.” In reality, I was born in the “Tiger Year.”

I told the lie because I knew that if I had told the truth, she wouldn't have married me. (The Vietnamese are very superstitious. They believe that those who were born in the "Dog Year" shouldn't marry those who were born in the "Tiger Year." If they do marry each other, misfortunes will happen to their marriage. On the contrary, if a woman born in the "Dog Year" marries a man born in the "Cock Year," the couple will have a happy marriage. Therefore, I had to tell the lie about my "animal year" to make sure that the girl I loved would agree to marry me.

The girl I mentioned above is my wife now. Whenever she asks me about that lie, I always answer as follows, "I had to tell you that lie because I loved you and wanted to marry you. Now, don't worry about it any longer. The 'dog' has been living happily with the really nice 'tiger', hasn't it?"

My wife usually smiles and replies, "What a nice liar you are!"



Bozeman Pass

I have been driving truck for about 18 years. During the winter of 1987, I drove team with my friend, Dave, who was a very good driver, having quite a bit more experience than I. The man we worked for had acquired a steady run hauling powdered milk to Seattle from Minnesota, and bringing apples back to Chicago. The runs had a pretty tight schedule, which is why we were driving as a team operation. On one of the runs west, during the dead of winter, we had a pretty good scare in the mountains as we were crossing Montana.

The route we had chosen was Interstate 90, as it is nearly the most direct route and by far the best maintained route through that part of the country in the wintertime. The weather was good, although it was very cold. We had been listening to weather reports and had checked with other drivers to hopefully avoid any bad roads. Conditions can change rapidly, as we found out later, but as we were driving along that night Dave and I were confident that all was well.

Billings had been our last stop for coffee and we were both tired. Dave had started driving when we left Billings. I was in the bunk, trying to get to sleep. It is very hard to sleep in one of those trucks when the truck is moving, no matter how much you trust the other driver's abilities. Even though it was after midnight, I was still awake.

Dave had driven about one hundred miles and was climbing Bozeman Pass, which has an elevation of about 4800 feet above sea level. Our load was heavy and the gross weight of the vehicle and the load reached 79,900 pounds. The tractor had a 400 horsepower Cummins engine, which at the time was a powerful one. I can't recall the rear-end gear ratio, but it had a thirteen speed transmission. Back then, it was a powerful truck. Even with that, Dave topped the grade at about ten miles an hour.

Bozeman Pass is not a real steep, curvy pass. It is a long straight gradual grade with a right curve at the bottom.

Dave started down the other side. We had gone perhaps half a mile when I felt the truck sway to the left. I felt a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach and sat up to see what was going on. This truck was a double bunk conventional, and from where I was sitting behind Dave, I could look in the mirror on the driver's side. The tractor was in the right hand lane and the trailer was sliding into left lane. When I looked at the back of Dave's head, he was staring into the mirror also.

Then Dave blurted an expletive and shouted, "Joel I think we're going to jackknife, we're on black ice".

I replied, " Yeah, I see that. What are you going to do?"

Dave answered, "I'll try to pull it straight and hope I don't run out of gears before I get to the bottom."

I asked, " what about that curve at the bottom?"

To which Dave stated, "We'll have to worry about that when we get there."

Dave is a great big man and a capable driver. I have seen him get into sticky situations many times and never get excited. This time, however, I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was scared. I was terrified and was praying to the good Lord to make Dave a better driver and get us down to the bottom in one piece.

As we came down the mountain, Dave kept steady power on the throttle shifting into a higher gear every time the engine revved out. By the time we neared the curve toward the bottom, I looked at the speedometer and it showed 80 miles an hour, which was about as fast as that truck would go. The engine was almost revved out, turning over about 2000 times per minute screaming with a deep throated guttural whine. It seemed as though the pistons might fly out through the hood. Dave had a death grip on the wheel and said something about hoping for a fast death, but I was too busy praying and didn't hear what all he said. It had seemed as though hours had passed since we had started down the grade. The sky must have been overcast as it was very dark, and about all we could see were the white center line markers going by in a blur.

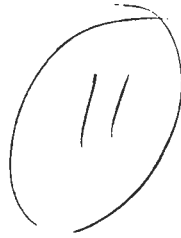
Just before we got to the curve, Dave hollered, "I think I can see some gravel on the right shoulder so that's where I'm going to take the curve at." He still had his foot down on the throttle and was pulling the trailer. He got over to the right of the road and off onto the shoulder with nine of the eighteen wheels on the gravel. The sound of the gravel grinding into the tires was somewhat reassuring. We went flying around the curve and the traction we got from the gravel kept us on the road. Right after that curve, the road leveled out so Dave could back out of the throttle and allow the truck to slow down.

Black ice is very hard to see at night and we weren't sure whether or not the road was still slick. Because we couldn't tell the condition of the road and because we were scared stiff, we slowed down to approximately 20 miles per hour. At that time, it occurred to us that there was no other traffic out there that night which should have been a good indication for us to have pulled over at the top of the hill and not have driven down there. We discussed what we should do next and knowing that there was a big truck stop a few miles down the road at Belgrade, decided to quit for the night and let the sun come up.

After we got through the curve and slowed down, I breathed a sigh of relief and didn't think much more about it until we got to the truck stop. We didn't go in, we just sat in the cab and didn't say a word to each other for what seemed like hours. The more that I thought about what happened, the more nervous I got. I pictured the two of us lying at the bottom of a ravine somewhere back there in a twisted mangled wreck, dead, or worse, still alive and on fire, unable to get out. I got so nervous and shaky, I couldn't even smoke. It felt about ninety five degrees in there, so I went for a walk to calm down. By now it was the middle of the night and there was not a soul to be found in the dimly lit parking lot, so I could walk around without running into anybody. After about an hour, I went back and talked to Dave for awhile, but I don't think I got any sleep that night. We realized how lucky we were and that perhaps we should remember this incident the next time we get in too big a rush, even though this had caught us by surprise. I remember thanking Dave for doing such a good job of driving.

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Eleven years have gone by, and I don't see much of Dave anymore. As far as I know, he is still driving and does just fine. As for myself, I've always remembered that incident and have considered it when making a decision in the winter time as to whether or not I should continue on my way or wait until morning. I have become much more cautious since that night .



AUNT JESSIE

Though I had been told of her disfigurement, my first glimpse of her was, nonetheless, startling. Skin covered her right eye, pulled together and sewn shut as if in a perpetual wink. Her left eye was wide open, bold, as if to compensate for having to do the work of two. She sat in a wheelchair, slumped slightly to the left, as if to tell the world that she wasn't ashamed of the right side of her body: It was what she was, take it or leave it, thank you very much. She was small of stature, not even five feet two inches tall, and couldn't have weighed one hundred pounds.

The voice that projected from that frail body startled me. Loud, forceful commanding, it didn't take long to realize that the mind of this diminutive woman was in no way impaired. "So, you are to be my great-niece-in-law," she said. "Thought Donald would never pick one who pleased him." As she looked me over, top to bottom, left to right, I thought that it would take much more to please her than it would her beloved great-nephew, my fiancée, Donald.

"So this is Aunt Jessie," I said to myself. "Well, well, well. If a journey begins with a single step, I'd better begin walking on this road." I said aloud, "Hello, Jessie. I'm delighted to meet you." I bent to hug her, and placed a soft kiss on her leathery right cheek.

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“Don’t waste any effort on that side,” she barked, “can’t feel a damned thing since my operation!” I mentally chastised myself for being so insensitive, then leaned over and repeated my actions on her left side. “Good girl,” she said. “Most young people wouldn’t have bothered with an encore. Come, my dear, and help me outside. We’ll chat while we sit in the garden.”

Don had instructed me on the best way to assist Aunt Jessie. “Just extend your right arm and let her guide your actions,” he said. “She has a certain way of clutching you that helps her to maintain her balance when she walks.” Thanking him in my mind, I leaned toward her, extended my right arm, and stayed in that position while she shook her head and chuckled.

“I see that you have been coached,” she said. “Bravo.” She placed her left hand on my forearm, pulled herself to a standing position, then took a minute to arrange her clothing. We made our way, slowly and carefully, to the door, down the steps, then to the chairs that were arranged facing each other in the shade of her garden. I returned to the house to pour two glasses of iced tea, then joined her again.

“Oh, my,” she sighed, “I do love a brisk Spring day. I’m on the sunny side of 90 and, at my age, one never knows how many more days we will live to enjoy. So your senses are heightened, your appreciation for small things is enhanced, and you tell it like it is because you’ve grown tired of the banter and the games that people play with each other. Now, my dear, what would you like to know about me? Be honest, because my turn is next, and I certainly will be.”

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“Where does your strength come from? I know you’ve had two brain surgeries to remove tumors, and are in constant pain. Yet, you continue to manage two farm operations, provide a home for your husband, and serve as matriarch of your family. How do you do it?”

As I talked, her keen eye assessed me. “She doesn’t miss much,” I told myself. But my initial uneasiness was fading, and there was so much I wanted to know about this woman.

“I was born in a two room house, just a few miles west of here,” she began. “My Mother died when I was eight years old, leaving Dad with five kids to raise. My sister and I took care of the house while the boys joined Dad in the field every day. Donald’s daddy was the youngest - just two years old when Mama died. He grew up standing behind daddy on the tractor; his playpen was the field behind the house.”

“When I was in Jr. High, I met my first husband. We married as soon as I graduated, then moved to Chicago to work as maid and butler for a rich family there. We saved every penny, then, after five years we returned here and bought our farm. We worked side by side in the fields, but times were hard and we lost that farm.”

“Where was your first farm located?” I asked.

“Right where it is today,” she chuckled. “We returned to Chicago, worked for the same family again, and after only three years returned home and bought our farm back. But this time we were smarter. In addition to farming crops, we started a turkey farm that became the biggest and most profitable in the region. After a few more years had

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passed, we bought our second farm, and I still have both of them today. Would you like to visit the first one, the one that owns a piece of my heart?"

"Oh, yes," I answered, already standing and preparing to assist her to the car. "Yes, I would."

We drove to her farm, and found that Donald was there with Jessie's husband, Roy. I have seen 'femme fatales' in my day, but never before in the guise of a ninety-plus year old woman. As Roy walked to the car to open her door, Aunt Jessie took on a different persona. Coy, flirty, using that one good eye to its greatest advantage, she visibly made her husband feel like the most important person in her world.

After introducing us, she told me that she and Roy had been married for over fifty years to their first spouses, then each was widowed. They had known each other for years, were even distantly related, and decided to marry when they were seventy-three years old. Being the same age, she said, each should know their own mind by then. Roy assisted her to the house, and my heart was warmed by the love and devotion I saw demonstrated by them.

I walked into the house behind them and was transported back to the 1950's. Everything in the house was as it was when Jessie lived there with her first husband. Her knickknacks lined the shelves in the kitchen, the avocado green shag carpet in the living room bore the weight of an overstuffed sofa and chair, and the rotary dial telephone rested on a 1950's era table. Roy left us to talk after kissing Jessie's hand and patting her shoulder.

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“I can come back here and remember,” she told me. “I’ve never had children, but I think a Mother must feel as I do when her children have grown and left home. You get on with your own life, but the years that were spent raising them will forever be in your heart. This farm is my child. I planted every flower and bush that you see. I nurtured the fruit trees as they grew, much as a Mother nurtures her child. And I enjoyed the fruit that this land bore, still do to this day.”

“See that circular drive in front of the brick building?” she asked as she pointed out the window. “The building housed the turkeys, and every morning my first husband would escort me to our car, which was parked in front of the house, and drive us to the turkey building. Now, I know it’s only a short distance, and we could have easily walked it in those days, but this was our date. And every evening, when we’d finished our work for the day, he’d escort me back to the car and drive us home. Neither of us was sociable, and even if we were we’d have been too tired to mix company, so we made our own world.”

As she talked about her life at this farm, and about her first husband, I began to understand her magic. She was able to take a mundane chore and turn it into an adventure, was able to make a man feel like a provider and protector, was able to work side by side on the most difficult tasks, while remaining feminine and even fragile appearing. A man would want to protect her, I thought to myself, but I knew this woman could provide her own protection.

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“My dizzy spells started not long after I married Roy,” she continued. “Here I was, seventy-three years old and a new bride, facing one of the greatest trials of my life. The first surgery wasn’t entirely successful, because they couldn’t remove all of the tumor. That’s the one that took my right side of life. A few years later, they attempted a second surgery, but by then I’d learned to make do with my disfigurement. Roy never seemed to mind, bless his heart. Bear in mind, though,” she said with a wink, “that he’s as old as I am and his sight isn’t what it used to be.”

“So, here in my special place, I become that young girl again. The one I still am in my mind. Aging is a blessing and a curse. But, if you can strike a balance between who you are inside and what your body portrays on the outside, you will find the key to happiness. That, my dear, is how it is done.”

Tears glistened in my eyes as Aunt Jessie finished her story. Sitting in her house, with the cadence of her voice lulling me, I was enveloped by the warmth of the past. I received a gift that day, a wonderful gift of history, and promise, and hope. A gift that I would carry in my heart always.

One Writer's Surrealism

Lenore Maybaum
10 [37]

I am here.

I am here in this moment. I wait for nothing-- no one lives but me. I run like the spring's breath through naked trees. I live in your chest-- thrusting-- screaming to be released like wild fire through the crowds of zombies. I live like free-verse poetry, like cigarette smoke trailing through a dark, velvet coffee house, like the solo-tenor sax piercing every man and woman's soul with each bellow, every sweet-sympathetic tone-- screaming for some concrete identity.

I write like your watery memories of that hazy stranger, of that one mind you couldn't crack, of that one lifestyle you never understood but always felt drawn to.

I rest in the sky, sleep with the stars and shine like an opaque harvest moon. I'll cast light in on every corner of your denial, every pocket of pain. I sleep beside you, and you look like an angel.

I know how alone you are, and I know that emptiness; unrelenting and persecuting. I know how your mind creates chaos for your hands, and how broken every thought you have has become. This is why I write. This is why we live. This is why we kill ourselves a little bit more everyday. This is why we breed art-- and no single expression could ever come close to encompassing such human diversity, such angst, such passion, such life.

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Musau Walk a con
[38]

In a Dream

I returned from work exhausted.

I stretched out on the couch to listen to the international news.

Red Cross volunteers dumped dead bodies in one mass grave.

They all died from mud slide.

My mind saw the bodies as sardines.

My eyes slowly closed.

I am in a large factory room.

The room is decorated with pink and bleu ribbons.

Or is this a maternity ward?

I am helping mothers feed their babies.

They all have twin babies. We are all happy and apprehensive.

We want the babies to nurse on demand. they need to grow quickly.

We need to replenish the earth.

I wake up those mothers who are neglecting their duty of nursing the babies.

How dare they forget that the earth needs to be replenished.

I order warm milk, eggs, toast and fresh fruits for them.

The mothers need to have plenty of milk to nurse the babies.

Such a loss, we need to replenish the earth.

I heard a loud ringing of a telephone.

I reached out to answer it.

I was still stretched out on the couch, my heart pounding.

They had no warning! They all died from mud slide



Everybody loves soccer in my country. Lots of money goes beyond the soccer activities in Brazil. It is a big deal down there.

Businessmen, housekeepers, lawyers, bankers, secretaries, thieves, -there is no one left out-, because soccer is a passion for everyone over there. On normal Sunday, when the big classic games are, 70 thousand people crowd the stadiums, and over 120 million watch the games on TV, that is impressed. Soccer is really a fever in Brazil.

When we have soccer games, the whole day is changed just because of it. On a soccer game day, a person that goes out in the city that the game is being held will find a lot of traffic, mad people running around, good people with their families trying to do something fun and drink their ice-creams in peace. Also you will find people trying to park the cars of the fans on any places available on the streets, and charging lots of money for it. People selling tickets for the double the price, can also be found.

I used to go in the stadiums, and I used to sit at the same place almost every time. Within ten to fifteen minutes my friend Blue would come with a whole trail full of beer on his hands, screaming to everybody that could hear him. "Beer, beer. Hey come on you, your team is winning, take one." Or he would say, "Hey if your team is losing, drink a beer and have some fun."

Blue is a funny fat guy around his 45 years old, very tall, with red tired eyes from working for so many years selling beers in stadiums. Blue is black and his skin shines when the sunlight touch it, that is why he has a nickname Blue.

Blue seems to love his profession, but as most of people in Brazil do, including the richest ones, he sometimes gets a little said and complain about the money, and then he says, "Man, I have the blues!"

I will never forget his blue hat, that I could see when he was very far away from me, five or six roes below or above me. That was funny because I could see just his hat moving up and down, and I already knew that there was Blue, the beer man.

Before the soccer games start, everybody knows who is going to play, and who is going to be out. They know scores of the last games, and what's going to happen if the team loses, such as, the players who will be fired, or the ones who will stay for the next game, or season.

When I think about going to a soccer game, Blue automatically comes to my mind, because for me, he is a legend of the stadiums. There are no soccer games that I have been to since I was ten years old, where Blue has not been working, screaming with his powerful loud voice, and wearing his blue hat.

After every child is born in my country, he receives a soccer ball. Soccer in my country is like basketball in the US. Everywhere, there is somebody playing and enjoying it. For people to play soccer in Brazil, they do not need be rich, or smart, or poor, nothing else matters, they just need like to play. Blue once said that soccer is very popular in all countries of third world. He said that the USA is starting to appreciate soccer, because in the last four years it has been getting really big over here, especially between kids.

Blue also said that the last World Cup was really important for the US soccer, and he thought that maybe he could come here one day, and sell beers for the Americans

soccer fans in the stadium. He said, “ Dan, Quieres una cervejita, ha, ha ,ha,”(Do you want a beer) and he laughed like a maniac. Blue was fun but very poor guy and he did not know how to speak a word in English, so he said in a Port-Spanish, that is a mix, between Spanish and Portuguese.

On July 1994, when the USA held the World Cup, Colombia had one those best teams of the competition. The Colombian team lost a important game, and they were eliminated from the competition. Escobar, one those Colombian players, was well eliminated from the competition, but also he was eliminated from the planet.

Yes, if you guessed that he got killed, you were right. For mistake Escobar made a goal against his own team. The ball was being crossed from the corner of the field to a forward player from the other team that was playing against Colombia, I do not remember now who was the team. Escobar, that was a defender from the Colombian team tried to intercept the ball, but for mistake, the ball touched him and it went right to the goal. Escobar got killed for the Colombian Mafia after a week he had regressed to his country. That was an shame for the soccer fans.

I remember once when my team was playing the finals in 1991 for the Brazilian championship tournament. The game was going to be on Sunday at five p.m. Two weeks before all tickets were sold out. Everybody had their own opinions about who was going to win. They were all waiting for the game to be over, so they could enjoy the taste of the victory with the players. They wanted to drink everything that they could hold, spending every nickel on beers, of course, buying beers from Blue.

I woke up that Sunday, and the day was just amazing. The sun was shining and the sky was completely blue. I was feeling the adrenaline, and I was listening to the rumors about the game very carefully, because every detail could change the way of the teams were going to play. I ate my lunch and my friends picked me up around noon. Then we went to the game.

To get in the stadium, the public had to wait in a long 3-block line. The police was very angry because the “crowd was messing around the entrance rather than politely waiting in line”. We got inside Murumbi stadium, and I got a little scared because I had never been there and it was going to be my first time. I relaxed after got my seat, and I remind that Blue was going to show up in couple minutes.

The game started, and after the second half, the score was still even. I and more than hundred and ten thousand people in the stadium, -the number is correct-, were really desperate. This was the first time that our team had been at the finals since the club was born in 1910. We had nineteen minutes left when one of my team’s players made the goal. It was the most powerful sensation that I have ever had. I can remember like it was a minutes ago. It was like a nuclear bomb, thousands people jumping around and crying, rich people with poor people together, hugging each other, toothless people smiling as if they were the happiest human beings in the earth, people in good clothes and ties jumping like kids, and me.

I really do not remember what kinds of things I did that brief time, but I guess it was one the most important moments of my life.

After the game the streets were completely full. Nobody was talking about the next day—Monday. I thought that was going to be a holiday on Monday and I am sure that for a lot of people there was!

I will never forget that game, because that day was the last time I saw Blue. He was smiling the whitest smile that I had ever seen, and wearing his blue hat.

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Rebecca Bria
[44]

SWEET RELEASE

Cecil was standing in the doorway of his new apartment, admiring his handiwork when John came bounding up the stairs with his ever-present portable Walkman attached to the waist of his pants. Although no cords attached the device to any earphones, the man sang along to the invisible music, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“What you want, baby I got it. What you want, baby I got it.” Repeating the same verse, over and over, in sync with his footsteps as he crossed the landing, John stopped short when he saw Cecil.

“Hey there new neighbor!” The grin that spread across John’s face when he was happy or excited, which was most of the time, surfaced even larger this time. Cecil wasn’t quite sure why, but the man had taken an instant liking to him the moment they met three weeks ago. “Whatcha doin’ there?”

Deciding that it would take too much to explain to the man, who was so much more like a little boy, just exactly what he had been doing with his afternoon, Cecil said, “Just cleaning up a little, that’s all.”

This, John understood. He bobbed his head up and down in acknowledgment, the silly grin locked in place.

Cecil’s first encounter with John (or John-John, as he called himself) had been just a few weeks earlier as he juggled groceries from one arm to another while trying to unlock his front door. When he heard the door across the hall slowly creak open, Cecil turned around and found himself staring into the bluest eyes he had ever seen. As he came to know John over the next couple of weeks, Cecil discovered that it was John’s eyes which gave away most everything. When you looked into those eyes for more than just a moment however, you could also see a sort of blankness there, like John was constantly trying hard to remember something but was coming up empty. The fact that John was

retarded probably made most people write him off as unintelligent, but he was far from that. Calmly, while watching Cecil struggle with his keys, he had asked him why he didn't just set them on the floor while he opened his door.

"Yeah," Cecil said. "I guess I could do that, couldn't I?" So, placing the bags on the floor, he opened the door effortlessly, thanking John for his suggestion.

"No problem." was John's reply. That was John's favorite saying, Cecil had discovered. Everything was "No problem!" Cecil wished life *were* that simple.

In truth, Cecil really had been cleaning up his place this afternoon. Rearranging his few pieces of furniture, putting up shelves, and wrestling with shelf paper was how he had spent his day so far. His next project was to do some shopping. His shelf-paper project had made him realize his food supply was down to about nothing, so he decided to make the market his next stop.

Putting away his cleaning supplies under the sink in the bathroom, he straightened and caught his reflection in the mirror. Not bad, he thought. No wrinkles, no gray hairs - yet, anyway. The white T-shirt he was wearing only made his form more pronounced and he was glad he had spent much of his spare time in the gym the last three years. Flexing his biceps and jutting out his chest, he smiled broadly into the mirror. Yeah, whatever, Superman, he thought to himself, then laughed at his own joke. Shutting off the bathroom light, he left the room.

John had long ago lost interest in Cecil and as he was leaving, he paused at the open door across the hall observing the man as he sat motionless on the floor in front of his small television watching Captain Kirk issue orders to his crew.

"See ya later, John-John. Need anything from the store?" The question went unanswered, but Cecil wasn't surprised; John usually tuned out everything when Star Trek was on.

Walking the few blocks to the store, Cecil reflected on how far he had come in these last couple of weeks. Although the last three years had seemed to go by so slowly,

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it felt as though it was just yesterday that he had stood in front of Judge Weaver in the Polk County courtroom and listened to the dreadful sound of his future being taken away from him through Judge Weaver's words.

"Since the jury finds you, Cecil Andrew Barnes, guilty of burglary in the first degree, I have no choice but to sentence you to five years in the Anamosa State Reformatory. I trust, Mr. Barnes, that you realize how smart you were not to carry a weapon, like your friend, but since you were present, I must reprimand you in a manner accordingly. Bailiffs, please take Mr. Barnes back to his cell."

Even though today was Saturday, the Fourth of July, and one of the hotter ones Cecil could remember, he shivered a little in spite of the heat. Every time he thought about how he spent the last three years (three years, forty-one days, and six hours, to be exact), he tensed slightly, as though his freedom were only a dream. He kept thinking that, at any moment, the local police would come with the handcuffs to take him back to prison, saying his parole had been a mistake. He knew that kind of thinking was irrational, but he still couldn't believe he was free. Free to do whatever he liked, whenever he liked. Today he should really be appreciating his independence, particularly this year, and he was. Besides, he thought to himself, the local cops wouldn't know of him. In fact, nobody in Cambridge, Iowa knew of him, except John, and John didn't know of Cecil's past. Not that Cecil thought it would matter to John, he just decided it wasn't necessary to tell him; anyway, he'd probably forget it as John's memory wasn't his strong point.

There wasn't much of a breeze stirring this lazy afternoon, and Cecil appreciated the fact the the air conditioning was going full force as he entered through the automatic doors of Harry's, the local supermarket. Cambridge was barely large enough to warrant a market, and you could tell by the silence and several layers of dust that had settled on a display of plastic picnic table cloths by the front door that the citizens of Cambridge normally did all of their bulk shopping elsewhere, probably in one of the larger towns just

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a few miles away. It was cozy, however; the fact that the town was a small one was one of the main reasons he had come here in the first place.

Grabbing a cart, he headed down the frozen food aisle. Maybe, in addition to the other classes he had signed up for this fall at the community college in Ankeny, he would enroll in a cooking class too. Frozen pizza was fast becoming a staple, along with string cheese and TV dinners.

Twenty-nine years old, he thought. Twenty-nine, with no career, no wife, no kids, and no pride. The last time he had bought groceries had been his first time and he spent almost an hour in the store, trying to come up with something creative to have for supper that night. He almost wished he hadn't made the effort later as he sat down to a plate of mushy spaghetti noodles and burnt garlic bread. Hopefully, he thought, time and patience would remedy his distraught culinary situation.

Growing up with his grandparents, he had never lacked for attention. Hot meals, warm clothes and lots of love were lavished on him at an early age almost as if they had been trying to make up for the death of his parents when he was just three years old. His grandmother died of cancer eleven years ago and his grandfather had followed soon after. Since he was already eighteen, he bypassed the thought of foster homes and moved in with Lila, his girlfriend at the time. He and Lila had attended high school together in Des Moines and she announced her plans to split from her parents home as soon as graduation was over. Her invitation was a relief to Cecil; his grandparents had been greatly in debt and when they passed, there were several creditors, including the mortgage company who were preying like vultures on the few items of value that remained. Cecil had grabbed his meager belongings and left the house just as the Realtor showed up to pound the "for sale" sign in the front yard. Not turning back, Cecil took the first bus to the other side of town, showing up on Lila's doorstep and announcing his intentions.

She had been thrilled to see him and had even turned him on to some of her new friends. At first, he thought them distasteful and what they did with their spare time

dangerous and just plain stupid, but at least he felt had a family again and, as time went by, he never even thought twice about joining them on their escapades.

Eventually, it was Lila's brother, Ralph, who came to introduce Cecil to the world of convenience store theft. After a while, it became second nature to walk into a store late at night and leave with a couple hundred dollars in cash. Most of the time, the clerks were too scared out of their wits to do anything and for a long time, they never got caught. There were a few minor brushes with the law, but none so important as that last time, when Cecil thought they really were just stopping at the Quik Mart for beer and snacks. Ralph obviously had other ideas that time. He brought along his prized possession, a silver plated Colt .45 and when the clerk decided to protest Ralph's request for the cash out of the register, he showed it to her with much pleasure.

"Give me the money, sweetheart, or I'll blow you're pretty little brains out."

Cecil knew better than to say anything, he had been with Ralph a too many times on occasions such as these, however; Ralph had never brought along the gun. Not quite sure what to say, he remained silent, and when the brave clerk picked up the phone, in spite of the gun pointed at her forehead, he beat feet out to Ralph's van, and waited while he collected the cash.

Hopping in the van, Ralph assured him the clerk was okay, but would have a serious bump on her head when she woke up. She must not have stayed out for too long, however; the cops ran them down two blocks from the store and they had the right to remain silent from that point on.

Done with the frozen foods and his reminiscing, Cecil pushed his cart slowly down the dairy aisle, selecting milk, cheese and other items to get him through the next few weeks. He hadn't yet had time to get his hair cut (that had been the last thing on his mind in prison), and he absently ran his fingers through his ponytail as he stood, contemplating the choice of bacon or sausage for tomorrow's breakfast. To hell with it, he thought, I'll just get-

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“Shit!” He muttered to himself as he pulled down a package of sausage that must have been holding the entire display on the rack. The rest of the rectangle-shaped packages quickly came down and he vaguely heard a woman’s laugh as his arms flailed this way and that, trying to catch some before they hit the floor. He knew how funny he must have looked, dancing around the freezer case grabbing at the sausages, but his anger rose anyway as he turned to see who was laughing at him.

“Here, let me help.” The woman in question left her cart and bent down to retrieve the rectangle-shaped boxes that had made it to the floor.

“Thanks.” Cecil kept his head down and his reply short as he reached for the packages she had collected. He was embarrassed at having his mishap observed by someone else, but especially a woman. There hadn’t been many of them in prison, unless you counted Helen, the brutal nurse who took pleasure in everyone else’s pain.

But when he finally looked up, sensing that the woman was waiting for visual acknowledgment, he saw that this “someone else” wasn’t just anyone. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. More beautiful, even, than Lila, who he thought he’d never get over losing after he went to jail. This woman was petite, and her long blond hair hung in soft waves over her small shoulders. In spite of her small stature, her presence seemed to fill the aisle, as though she was comfortable here, and her eyes sparkled as she flashed a smile that was at once genuine and mischievous. Whether she was grinning at his escapade, or just being friendly, Cecil couldn’t tell.

He placed the last of the packages on the shelf and as he turned back to her, she stuck out her hand.

“Hi! I’m Amanda.”

Cecil took her hand. “You work here?”

“Not anymore, but I should. I’m here often enough.” she laughed, and Cecil noticed when she did so, her nose wrinkled and her entire face became animated, as though she was really amused by the situation, and not just being polite.

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“What’s your name?” She made no attempt to move on and since Cecil hadn’t had contact like this with the opposite sex for a long time, he decided to play along and answer her question.

“Andrew Barnes,” he nodded. “Nice to meet you.” Now why’d I’d do that, he thought to himself. Why’d I give her my middle name? He knew the answer to that question as soon as he said his given name out loud in his head. That’s why.

“Nice to meet you, too.” she smiled again and Cecil (Andrew now) thought once more about how her smile just lit up her entire face. It was the dimple, he decided. She had only one, on the right side of her upper lip, and the indent became very pronounced when she laughed. He found himself staring at that spot beside her mouth, wanting to touch her there, to trace the smooth line of her jaw all the way down her neck-

“I’m sorry, what was that?” He realized she had been speaking to him and tried to corral his concentration onto their conversation.

“I said, you must be new in town,” she repeated.

“And how would you know that?” Trying to keep up with the exchange, Cecil wondered to himself why he was still so flustered. Before prison, he’d had no trouble relating to pretty girls. Something about this one was throwing him off balance, however, and although at first he figured it to be because he hadn’t been around anyone of the opposite sex for awhile, part of him knew that wasn’t so. This gal was special.

“‘Cause there’s not many people around here that I don’t know.”

Cecil guessed her age to be around twenty-five, and knew that if she had grown up here, then that was probably true.

“Yep.” She answered his unspoken question. “Born and raised right here in good old Cambridge. Actually, I wanted nothing more than to just get out right after graduation, and I did, but after I went to college, I came back and opened my own business. Big towns just aren’t my style. You can take the girl out of the country, and all that.” she laughed.

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“So,” Cecil said, trying to prolong this conversation, “what kind of business do you own?”

“Well, I’ve named it Amanda’s Hair Emporium, but that sounds kinda stupid. I’m thinkin’ of simplifying it, like Amanda’s, or something like that. What do you think?”

Cecil couldn’t believe that she was asking his opinion and thought again about the citizens of Cambridge. He’d moved here straight from Anamosa, instead of going back to Des Moines, and it was a nice little town, if you liked that sort of thing. Cecil decided he did, since it seemed most of his troubles had started when he moved in with Lila in the heart of the capitol city, making her friends his as well. He’d stayed here in Cambridge quite a bit as a little boy, spending much of his summers with his Aunt Ruth, who had died shortly after his incarceration. Aunt Ruth had never known of his criminal history; incredibly, she had never seen the small piece in the Des Moines Register about his sentencing and the last time he had talked to her over the phone had been during his first month in jail while awaiting his trial. Nonchalant and evasive when she asked why he never came to see her anymore, he sent excuses along with his love, promising to visit as soon as possible. She was gone soon after that, and that was how he had come to have enough money to live on his own after prison. The only reason he found out about her passing was because her lawyer, Jim something-or-other, had been kind enough to locate him to let him know. When he then told Cecil that he was on the receiving end of a large sum of money, left to him by his Aunt, his only thought was not of the money, but the fact that he wouldn’t be able to attend her funeral. At the time, the money had meant nothing to him. He appreciated her generosity now, however. It had come in handy when he rented the apartment, and also when he signed up for the courses at the college.

“I think that would be a fine name,” he said finally. “Kinda catchy even. Amanda’s. Hmm.” He pretended to mull it over and as he did so, she spoke once again.

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“Well, I gotta run. We’re having a barbecue out at my folks’ place. I was supposed to make potato salad, but since I put it off, I’m going to have to buy it from the deli instead. Good thing Harry doesn’t believe in holidays!”

“Well, again, nice to meet you, Amanda. Maybe I’ll stop by sometime soon to get these locks chopped off. I guess I’ve been procrastinating, too.”

On impulse, it seemed, she stepped up to him and reached up to touch one of the dark strands that had escaped the elastic band.

“You have nice hair, Andrew. I don’t think we should cut that.” She stepped back suddenly, perhaps noticing for the first time the way his green eyes followed her every move. He saw her face flush and realized that she was embarrassed by her gesture.

“Sorry,” she said. “I don’t usually get so personal with strangers. but you’re a nice guy. I can tell that much, at least. Hey - you have anything to do today? If you want, you can come with me to the barbecue. That is,” she added, “if you don’t have other plans.”

Her embarrassment apparently gone, the smile returned, brighter than ever.

Taken aback by her sudden offer, a refusal immediately sprang to Cecil’s lips. When he could think of no viable excuse, however, he decided to accept.

“Sure, why not? I don’t know anyone yet, so I guess I’m free.”

“Great!” She replied. “Let me just grab that potato salad and we can go from here, take my car. I can bring you back to yours later.”

Now it was Cecil’s turn to be embarrassed. “Uh, I don’t have a car. I walked.”

“Oh,” looking perplexed, like she was considering something, she finally said, “No problem. I’ll take you home to drop off your groceries and we can go from there.”

She had a solution for everything, it seemed, and after paying for his things, he watched from the sidewalk as she pulled her car closer to the front door. Soon, they had dropped off his groceries and were on their way to Amanda’s parents place just outside of town.

On the drive there, Cecil shook his head in silent amusement at this woman. She was very trusting, maybe too much so. He should have just refused; when she found out about his past, she'd probably never want to see him again. For some reason however, he wanted to follow this thing, see where it led. Besides, he admitted to himself, he was lonely. He didn't miss the noise of the prison, not at all, but he missed human contact, with ordinary people.

His only other real friend, besides John now, had been made when he was in prison, but it wasn't one of the other inmates. He had instructed his Aunt Ruth's lawyer, Jim something-or-other, whose office was in Ames, to sell his aunt's house and set up a savings account for him in the First State Bank of Cambridge. That was the moment he knew, that when he was released, he would forget about Des Moines, and settle down for a while in the small town. Jim was a nice old guy, ready for retirement, but he stuck with Cecil through his last year of prison, and agreed whole-heartedly with Cecil's suggestion that he not let on to anyone at the bank that he was currently unavailable due to his incarceration. Jim handled Cecil's business expertly and had returned all of his calls in a prompt and very courteous manner. Cecil was not used to this kind of treatment; his friends certainly couldn't have been labeled "courteous" and none of the inmates were close to friendly, so the day Cecil left prison, he took the bus to Ames to see the man whose voice he had heard countless times over the phone but had yet had a chance to meet.

Jim had sent a book of checks to Cecil, to be given to him upon his release, and the first check he wrote, (minus the one he wrote for a steak dinner and the one for his bus trip to Ames), was to Jim, as a display of his gratitude for all of the things he had done for him in the past year. He was too embarrassed to ask the man's last name (he kept forgetting it), so he wrote it only to "Jim", and left it with the secretary on the way out. He knew Jim wouldn't accept any additional compensation if it was given straight to him, but Cecil had nothing else to offer, so he said his thanks the only way he knew how.

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“Whoa,” Cecil said, taking in the number of cars that were parked haphazardly all over the large front lawn. “I thought you said this was a family barbecue.”

“It is,” she said simply, and hopped out of the car.

As it turned out, it was mainly Amanda’s family, and quite a large one at that. Brothers, sister, husbands, wives, all were present with children and not one seemed put out that Amanda had brought along a friend. In fact, he thought to himself, a lot of these people probably don’t even know I’m here.

He found out differently, however, as more and more people came up to introduce themselves. Amanda’s sister-in-law, Becky, commented on the “hunk” she had brought to dinner and Josephine, her older sister, agreed.

“Where did you pick him up? Don’t tell me you found that in the supermarket!”

Amanda blushed. “Well, actually-”

“You didn’t!” Becky hooted. “Amanda Rae Collins! Just *when* did you meet him?”

Amanda’s face became even more crimson. “About an hour ago.”

“Amanda Rae!” This time it was her mother, who came over just in time to hear the girls’ conversation.

“Mom! He’s really nice. *And* he’s new to town. Aren’t you the one who’s always telling me to make newcomers feel more welcome?” She glanced over to where Andrew sat, engrossed in conversation with her father, but not so much that he didn’t catch her stare and threw up a hand to wave at her. He’d seemed uncomfortable at first, but had since loosened up, and Amanda was glad to see him enjoying himself. She waved back.

“I meant when it concerns your business,” her mother was saying. “I didn’t mean you had to go pick up all of the eligible bachelors that move into town.”

“How do you know he’s a bachelor, mom?” Amanda giggled and her mother turned around, swatting her backside her with a spatula.

“Ouch,” she complained, half-heartedly.

“Serves you right, Mandy. And he’d better be a bachelor. You won’t get no business by being known as a home-wrecker.”

Amanda laughed at the worried look on her mom’s face. “I’m not a home-wrecker, mama, and you know it. Besides, he’s not wearing a wedding ring, so I didn’t feel the need to ask him about it.”

It was obvious Judy Collins couldn’t find a suitable reply for her daughter, as she just shook her head and smiled as she went back to the business of setting up lunch.

Barbecued chicken, hamburgers, coleslaw, corn on the cob, baked beans, chocolate cake - Andrew (as he now referred to himself) had not seen so much food since the last Thanksgiving before being sent away, which he had spent with his aunt right here in Cambridge. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, celebrating their time together, and Andrew felt like a fraud. When he’d first arrived, he had been overwhelmed by the commotion. A group of men sat around a big old-fashioned wash tub, which was filled with beer and soda. Amanda steered him in that direction, thinking he’d probably feel most comfortable with the men. What he really wanted, however, was to be alone with her. He wanted to ask her questions about her life, find out who she was and what she was all about. But after introductions were made, he stayed with the men and ended up having a pretty good time. He hadn’t been out of the game for so long that he couldn’t keep up a fairly good conversation about current issues, whether it was movies or sports, (thank God for newspapers), and at one point, he found himself in a good-natured argument over who was going to make it to the Series this year. Amanda’s father had finally relented, agreeing with Andrew that the Braves were, in fact, having a pretty good year.

In spite of having such a good time, Andrew still felt like a farce. These people knew nothing at all about him; that he was, in fact, just a small time hood with no family of his own to do these kinds of things with. He felt guilty for his betrayal, but at the same

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time, the selfish part of him wanted to just sit back and enjoy this feeling of family and put off the revealing of his past forever.

By dusk, as people were beginning to gather up leftovers and children, Andrew decided it was time to head home. He'd was glad he had paid attention on the drive out here, noting the way home, so walking would be no big deal. If he could get away with it, that was. He'd spotted Amanda eyeing him a number of times as he sat and chatted with her numerous relatives, but so far, he hadn't had a minute alone with her. He'd prefer to stay and find out more about Amanda, but he thought of the deception he had created by letting her think he was just an average guy, and decided against it. He should have said something sooner.

He had watched her during dinner, fascinated with the way she spoke. When she told the story of "Maude", a stubborn customer who insisted her natural color was blond (even though Amanda had tried to show her the black roots in the mirror), she used her whole body to convey the humor of the situation and this sent much laughter rippling through the three picnic tables that had been lined up in a row. He was mesmerized by the way she looked directly at someone when she asked them a question or the way she emphasized words when she was trying to get across an important part of a story. He was captivated by the way she held her little nephew, cooing him to sleep after the toddler had been fed his share of dinner. But most of all, he was fascinated by her ability to engross everyone around her with her hearty laugh and ready smile. It was obviously no secret that she was the baby of the family; everyone knew it and accepted it, her siblings treated her much like they would their own children. And her willingness to accept him, as he was now, without any thought to who he might have been, was what made him fall in love with her after only a few short hours in her company.

As he was trying to figure out a way to escape, so that he could try and deal with the complicated feelings going around in his heart and in his head, he felt a tap on his shoulder and suddenly she was there, her now-familiar smile already in place.

"I think if we don't get out now, mom's gonna make us stay and help clean up."

"Shouldn't we do that anyway?" Although he wanted to leave, go back to his apartment and sort out his thoughts, he was reluctant to part company when he saw her again.

"Nah. They'll take care of it. The don't let me do much, anyway. They treat me like one of the kids, although I'm almost twenty-five. I think I'm spoiled, actually."

"So I gathered." He dodged her fist as she swung a playful punch at his arm and added, "I think your family is pretty great."

She hopped up on the brick retaining wall that separated the patio from a multitude of red and yellow flowers. "Oh yeah? What about your family? Why didn't you go home for the holiday?"

"My parents are dead. Besides, I need to be in town so I can start looking for a job as soon as possible."

"Oh," she said. "I'm sorry about your parents. Me and my big mouth, I guess."

"Don't worry about it," he said quickly. "They died when I was young. That's how I knew of Cambridge." He stopped and plucked a dead leaf off one of the plants behind her. "I used to stay with my aunt quite a bit when I was younger. Come to think of it, I'm surprised I didn't see you around then."

"Well, if you were here in the summer, you wouldn't have. I spent a lot of my time then at a camp in Boone, about an hour away from here. First as a guest, then later I became a counselor. I guess that's why I'm such a people person."

"That you are," he replied.

Looking at her for a moment longer, he was not surprised to find that he wanted to kiss her. That he had, in fact, wanted to do that for a very long time.

Turning away, he mumbled, "Well, should we go?"

"Home?" As he nodded, she shook her head. "What about the fireworks? It's not the Fourth of July without those. Come on, I'll show ya what I mean."

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They said their good-byes and instead of heading straight back to town, which was where Andrew assumed they'd find a spot to watch the fireworks, Amanda drove down a series of gravel roads, turning right here, left there, until Andrew was well and truly lost. Turning left once again, she neared an old wooden bridge and brought the car to a halt. Shutting off the engine, she sat back in her seat and turned to Andrew.

"Well, here we are."

"I don't mean to be a party-pooper, but wouldn't it be better to watch the fireworks somewhere in town, like the city park or something?"

Amanda looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"How are we supposed to see the-"

"Oh!" Amanda interrupted. "You mean you thought the fireworks were going to be in Cambridge, right? No, I guess we're just too small of a town for that. We don't have fireworks on the Fourth - usually, we all just go into Nevada, about ten miles from here. They have a big celebration. That's about where we are now, as a matter of fact."

"Well, you got me lost, I'll tell ya that much."

Amanda laughed. "Sorry."

Getting out of the car, Amanda walked onto the rickety wooden structure and instructed Andrew as to where the best place to watch would be.

"We used to come out here a lot when we were kids. A whole bunch of us. That was when we were too old to be seen with the parents and too young to drink beer and party with the adults." Ducking under the rail, she carefully stepped down onto the cement platform that encased the girthing which held the bridge above water. Andrew stepped just as cautiously down beside her and they stood for a moment in silence. Andrew never thought he'd ever appreciate the stillness of the night as much as he did now.

Reluctant to interrupt the tranquillity of the moment, Andrew (he liked thinking of himself as Andrew now - it reminded him of her when he did) used this time to decide

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whether or not to tell her about his past. He could throw in some of the good stuff, like how he had won that medal when he was eight for rescuing a sackful of puppies that someone without a heart had thrown into the river, or how he graduated second in his class from his high school. But after graduation, he would have nothing good to tell her. Because it all went downhill from there.

“Amanda-”

“Andrew-”

They spoke in unison and Amanda giggled. “You first.”

“No.” Bowing grandly, mindful of keeping his balance on the ledge, he gestured with his hand. “Proceed.”

She giggled again. “Well, I guess I just wanted to thank you for a great day. It almost seems as though I’ve known you for my whole life and I’m really glad you like my family. I think they liked you too. Did you have a good time?” He nodded and she went on. “I’m glad. You know, I don’t date much - there’s not exactly a big selection in this town - and I don’t want you to think me too forward, but-”

Andrew stopped her chatter by covering her mouth with his own. He couldn’t help himself. He’d been thinking about doing this pretty much most of the afternoon and by waiting too long to actually do it, the intensity of the kiss, along with his feelings, was overwhelming. At first he was a little nervous, it had been so long. But after a few seconds of exploring, tasting her lips, he had to contain himself from throwing her back up on the bridge so he could take her then and there. He knew she’d probably let him - the way she kissed him in response showed her eagerness as well. He thought again of the situation she had put herself in. How could she allow herself to trust him so fully?

The kiss tapered off, but not the tightening in his groin. Since it had been such a long time, he had to restrain himself from going too far, too fast. Amanda didn’t deserve that.

He backed away uncomfortably, his erection straining against his jeans. He was glad it was dark, although he knew she must have felt it while she leaned up against him for the duration of the kiss.

“Wow,” he said.

“Yeah.”

The kiss was erotic, there was no doubt about that, but Andrew felt many more emotions when he kissed her - none of which he'd ever felt with Lila, or any other woman, for that matter. None of the other women he'd dated previously had turned him on during sex as much as Amanda had with just one kiss.

Amanda reached behind him and, with one quick movement, pulled the elastic band out of his hair. “I like that,” she said as his long dark hair fell free around his face.

“I gotta tell you something,” he blurted suddenly. Willing himself to start talking, knowing he'd have to go on, he said, “I'm..., well I just got outta, uh... Amanda, I just moved here from...shit!” This was harder than he thought. He'd never had the chance to tell anyone about what he'd done and he wasn't sure how to start. He was torn between running from her to avoid telling her the truth and confessing to her his past sins and begging for her forgiveness.

It didn't matter what he wanted, though, because she took it from there.

“Let me guess. You just got out of prison, right?”

At first he thought she was trying to joke around, but then her smile faded away, and she looked at him knowingly. He stared back at her, dumbfounded, mouth agape.

“Close your mouth, you look silly!” She hopped back up onto the bridge and he followed, not sure now what was going on.

“Of course I knew, do you think I'm stupid? I work in a hair salon, for Chrissake! There's not a lot I *don't* know, Cecil.”

He swung his head around sharply at the use of his given name and she laughed at the confused look on his face.

“Just because you don’t want people knowing about you doesn’t mean that they don’t.” She paused. “You know who was in my chair the other day? I think you know him - his name is Jim Stanford.”

Andrew’s look of confusion deepened, then was replaced by one of incredulousness. “Lawyer Jim?”

Amanda nodded slowly. “Yep.”

“But how...why-”

“He does business with a lot of folks in this town, since we don’t have any lawyers in residence here. Oh, and he also happens to be my uncle, so he stops by for a haircut whenever he’s in town. On the house, of course.”

Andrew was having a hard time comprehending this whole situation. Almost angrily, he said, “So you knew the whole time who I was and you never-”

“Wait a minute, hold on a minute. I didn’t know the *entire* time. And don’t go thinkin’ he told the entire town about ya, either. Jim likes you, Andrew. Or Cecil, or whoever you are. He thinks you’re a nice guy who just got caught up in a bad situation.”

Looking down, she watched her fingers fiddle with the elastic band she still held in her hands. “He told me about you way before he knew you intended on moving here. I honestly didn’t know who you were when we first met, but when you told me you lived her in town, I kinda figured, since, like I said, I know just about everyone else.”

Andrew didn’t know what to say and he was glad for the interruption as the first of the fireworks appeared magically overhead. They watched in silence as the show went on, each in their own world, but thinking of the other.

When the last of the brightly colored lights left the sky, he turned to her.

“Some show,” he said softly. She murmured her agreement.

“You know, Amanda,” he began, “I’m not gonna tell ya about how prison changed my life, or anything like that. Or about how much better a person I am now that I’ve realize the “error of my ways”. But I do want you to know that a lot of what I’ve

done, and a lot of what happened, well, I've really been trying to put that all behind me. Do you understand?" He turned her around so they were face to face.

Nodding, she turned back around and leaned close to him, her back snuggled firmly into his broad chest. Softly, she said, "Let's not worry about that right now, Cecil-Andrew. I know Jim, and he's right. You are a nice guy."

Andrew had his own doubts about that one, but he held her for a long time as they stood on the bridge listening to the sounds of the night and the creek rushing by down below.

When she finally dropped him off at his apartment, she had already made him an appointment to get his hair trimmed the following Monday

"Just the ends," she said, contemplating. "I think you really are a wild spirit, Cecil-Andrew. We'll just have to find you something to get wild about."

And as she drove off, he slowly climbed the steps to his front door, and knew that he already had.

12

Zach Evans
[63]

Paintball Wars

When a group of my friends wanted me to play a new game with them, I was a tad skeptical to say the least. I didn't know very much about paintball at the time, so I wasn't sure what to expect. The game that we were going to play was called capture the flag; the object is to take the other team's flag while protecting your own. We drove out to a patch of woods behind one of my friends' house, and began the game. We loaded our guns, filled the tanks on our guns with CO2, and then proceeded to walk to opposite ends of the field. I was informed that we weren't playing any special type of game, just shoot the other guys before they shoot you. I found a guy to stick next to, Tyler Vinchattle, and the two of us headed off into the forest.

As I snuck through the underbrush, gun in hand, I suddenly heard a small noise to my left. I dropped to the ground, proceeding to crawl on hands and knees closer to the sound. My heart was pounding a mile a minute; I kept crawling, trying to minimize the amount of noise I was making. All of a sudden, something whizzed over my head. I ducked behind a tree to see who was shooting at me. I searched the underbrush for a short time, desperately trying to locate the aggressor. Finally seeing my target, I took aim and pulled the trigger. My shot went straight and true, it slammed into my opponent, splattering paint all over his chest.

"I'm hit!" He yelled, making sure that I knew. I smiled and proceeded to crawl through the underbrush. The exhilarating smell of fear filled my nostrils, as ears and eyes strained for any sign of movement. I crept up a hill, when all of a sudden the brush ended and the top of the hill came into sight. I spotted the flag about 250 yards ahead of me, as well as two members of the opposite team guarding it. I dropped to the dirt like a bag of

rocks, praying that I hadn't been spotted. When they made no movement towards me, I slowly brought the barrel of my gun around and aimed carefully. My first shot went wide of the mark, and they both started violently, wondering where the shooting was coming from. My second shot found its mark, hitting one the defender right in the mask.

"Ouch! Hey, I'm hit, don't shoot!" He hollered, ducking as to avoid being hit again. The second defender fired fast and furiously, splattering the ground around me with multi-colored paint. I rolled to the right; sweat is started to seep into my eyes behind my mask. I fire wildly, missing the mark by a good two feet. As paintball after paintball whizzed by me, I finally bore down to get one good shot. As my finger tightened around the trigger, my mask suddenly exploded into many different colors. The shock from being hit pulled the trigger, and my paintball exploded upon my target, showering paint everywhere. I stood up, flailing wildly to show that I was hit. The defender stood up as well, and pulled his mask off.

"Nice shot, Evans," he remarks, as we headed back to the home base. On the way back to the truck, we shared war stories, recounting the glories of the past couple of hours. We met our friends there, and headed into town for a well-deserved Cherry Coke. Tomorrow, different heroes will rise up, different titans will fall from the ranks. The game, however, isn't about winning and losing. The game is about the exhilaration of the chase, the thrill of the perfect shot, and the joy of trading stories with your friends afterwards.

Paintball: I love this game.

12

The Detasseling Experience

Detasseling, the detachment of the tassel from a piece of corn, is a necessary and important part in the growing corn in Iowa. The first step in the process sometimes involves sending a machine called a roller through the field to pull a majority of the tassels. The roller gets between 50% and 90% of the tassels off of the corn. Then, whoever owns the field sends a crew of detasselers through the field to get the remainder of the tassels. To get the maximum benefit from having no tassels left on the female rows, the detasseling crew may only miss one in five thousand plants, which is an extremely small margin of error. The detasselers leave the tassels on the male rows, so that the male pollen pollinates the plants. If the females pollinate themselves, the yield is much smaller. What the detasselers go through, though, to make sure every last tassel is gone is where the story begins.

When I detasseled corn last summer, I had heard all of the horror stories about detasseling. The sad thing about the experience, though, is that many of those horror stories are true. I usually woke up at 5:30 a.m., got dressed, chowed down, and got ready to go to work. Around six, the bus showed up, and I and about twenty other detasselers crowded on. The bus ride to the field is generally quiet; the amount of energy required to open your mouth is more than I wanted to use. Once I arrived at the field, the first grumble echoed through the lines. The field gave off a dank, musty smell, and the depressing view of corn as far as the eye could see. Many of the detasselers, myself included, started to put on rain gear. The amount of dew hanging on the corn was phenomenal; walking for a hundred yards in the corn you would drench the detasseler. Another must were gloves and shades; the gloves protected your hands from the leaves of

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corn, which can be as sharp as stiletto knives. The shades were needed to protect your eyes from the whipping leaves as well. Push through the corn can be a dangerous business, a blade might swing back and hit the eye. A direct hit to the eyes not only cause excruciating pain, but can temporarily blind someone for up to an hour.

The average row of corn is about a half-mile long, which doesn't seem too overly long to the average person. A half-mile can drag on forever, though, when detassellers are proceeding at a snail's pace to ensure every tassel is pulled. After the first two rounds, the crew stops to take a break. It's usually about 10:30 now, and most of the detassellers are pulling off their rain gear since most of the dew has evaporated. I was usually dog tired by now, and we were only about halfway done at best. So I pulled my gloves on, grabbed my shades, and headed back in.

By about 3 p.m., we usually called it quits for the day, and head back home. The ride home is a mix of laughter and silence, as the joy of finishing a hard day's work is combined with the feeling of being so tired yawning hurts. I stumble into the house, get something to drink, and then collapse onto the sofa. After watching a few hours of TV, I head to bed, trying to scrape together enough sleep to get up the next morning.

It isn't the first day that got me, or the second, or the third. The fourth day, however, my tired body simply couldn't take it anymore. I dragged myself through the rows of corn, never thinking I would have enough strength to take that next step. You could hear the hysterical laughter all over the field, as fatigue and hopelessness did their dirty work. All of a sudden, I was jolted back to reality by a hissing sound passing right by my left ear. The sound was all too familiar; tassels, after having been pulled, are the right shape to serve as deadly missiles. I loaded up and fired back, scoring a direct hit. Before

too long, the entire field was a battlefield. People who seemed too tired to do anything before found a new vigor, as their very life was at stake. The tassel war rejuvenated the crew, and allowed us to finish the day. I got home, and announced that I was taking tomorrow off. I then proceeded to fall into bed for a much needed 14 hours of blissful sleep.

Detasseling may sound like a form of medieval torture, but in reality it is a good way for teenagers to make a significant amount of money in a short period of time during the summer. I also see my detasseling experience as a "coming of age" for me; the mental toughness I learned out in the fields has changed my outlook on life. The next time you drive by a seemingly peaceful field of corn, remember the blood, sweat, and tears that have been sacrificed to make it so serene.

Σαχνη Εξ
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The Laser

I remember when I was a kid, some of my friends and I would play a game of sandlot football in the lot behind the hardware store. I remember some of the guys who used to play there... John Jackson, Tom Redman, Paul Youngclass. But the one I remember the best was little Jimmy Thompson, better known to us as "The Laser." Jimmy was the fastest kid you had ever tried to lay eyes on. I say tried because he was always moving, and it was hard, if not impossible, to keep up with him. When we played football in one of the back lots behind my house, he would always be the wide receiver, and no one could keep up with him. But the problem was, Jimmy couldn't catch. He tried and tried, but he just couldn't seem to catch the ball! But that all changed on the day of the city-wide "5 on 5" scrub football tournament. My friends and I signed up, and expectations were high as we got ready for our first game.

"Hey Thompson!" Paul yelled. "How many TD's are you going to catch today?"

The usual snickering proceeded, and Jimmy frowned.

"Yeah, laugh it up, boys," Jimmy smiled. "I'll show you guys yet. I've got more than one trick up my sleeve."

"Sure...", Tom continued, "you could have it slip off your fingers or bounce it off your head!"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll show you guys. Just you wait." Jimmy trotted back into formation to get ready to start up practice again.

We won the first two games with the greatest of ease; since the gang played together all of the time, we rolled through the first and second rounds like a well-oiled

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machine. Neither team gave us any problems. Jimmy still hadn't caught a pass, though, and the knowing smiles passed between us became bigger every game. After barely winning our third game to proceed to the finals, the mood was grim as we checked the scoreboard to see who we would be playing in the finals.

"North Kensington. Great." John hung his head and let out a long sigh.

"Come on guys, they aren't unbeatable," I said, trying to spark some hope into them. "We just have to play tough!"

"Hey, Zach, get real." Paul also looked depressed. "Those guys are bigger, faster, and stronger than any of us. We don't have a prayer."

The day of the title game rolled around, and we were feeling even more nervous than we had before. The North Kensington team walked onto the field, and I was sure I felt the ground shake. Each of those guys looked ten feet tall; I was imagining our bloody corpses being hauled off the field at half-time. I grabbed a drink of water and headed out onto the field.

In the title game, we played the first one to five points, with a touchdown counting as one point. We were tied 4-4, and we were on our last try for a touchdown. We would have to try a "Hail-Mary" pass, which means that you after you throw the football up for grabs, you pray someone on your team catches the ball. If we didn't score this time, we were done for. So I dropped back, let the guys get down there, and then threw the ball as hard as I could. All of our players and all of their players jumped for the ball, and the ball was tipped back up into the air. The ball seemed to go into slow motion; I felt the seconds tick by as the football just seemed to float there. When the ball finally dropped neatly into

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Jimmy's hands, eyes closed and his arms outstretched, I let out a yell that would wake the dead. Everyone on our team mobbed Jimmy, as we celebrated his first (and last) catch.

From that day on, Jimmy wasn't known as "The Laser" anymore. Now his nickname was "Sticky-Fingers Thompson." "Sticky-Fingers" didn't catch another ball for as long as I knew him, but I'll never forget that catch he made. Determination and perseverance make championships, but a little luck now and then never hurt either.

“Though no one has ever been able to translate the Bible from its own lengthy and confusing dialect into one meaning everyone can interpret, millions have been fascinated with our Lord. He is a Lord of healing, of divine strength, and of spiritual power. He has always, and will always be the one true leader of our faith.”

“Wow,” whispered Stacy to herself at the end of the sermon. She’d never been to a religious service quite like this one before. Actually, she’d never been to a service outside of her own religious affiliation before. She was fairly devoted and never missed a Sunday, but this weekend she decided to heed the advice of her friend Nicole and join her in experiencing a different form of faith.

Stacy was glad she did. She had never experienced a sermon that hit so close to home before. Her usual minister just preached about how the Bible related directly to how she should act...very boring. But here it was as if she could feel the speaker’s words being absorbed into her.

Nicole had told Stacy about how her new affiliation of Christianity was slowly dying out due to the lack of support in their community. Nicole then felt it was her job to recruit people to follow her and worship the way she did. Stacy had agreed to give it a try, which had brought her to Nicole’s church this Sunday. Stacy was bought. After such a powerful service, how could she decide any other way but to become a member of this faith?

As the two girls were beginning to exit the church with the rest of the members, an old woman who had still not risen from where she was sitting caught Stacy’s eye. It seemed as though the woman was praying. Her head was bowed, and periodically she would look up at the big heavy wooden cross mounted on the front wall of the church. This woman began to fascinate Stacy.

“Nicole,” she inquired, “who’s that old woman, and why isn’t she leaving with the rest of us?”

“I asked my mom that same question a long time ago,” Nicole answered. “That woman’s been staying after church to pray every Sunday for as long as I can remember. My mom said the same thing. I’ve never seen her with anyone else. She just sits there alone and prays.”

“She must be incredibly devoted or something,” Stacy added. She couldn’t seem to draw her eyes away from the old woman. For some reason, it didn’t set right with her that after all of the church’s followers had left after such a powerful service, that this one woman could still sit there and feel the need to pray. ‘What on earth could she be praying about?’ Stacy wondered.

“Let’s go,” Nicole ordered, breaking Stacy’s stare. “I want to get out of here before the church across the street lets out. I can’t stand to listen to them discuss their sick religion to each other. They are so clueless about how God really works. People like them are totally lost, there’s no hope in trying to convert them.”

“I tell you what,” Stacy said, once again fixed in the old woman, “you go ahead. I’ll walk to your house. I want to explore the church some more. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Suit yourself, but the bus is leaving.” With that, Nicole dug her car keys out of her coat pocket and headed out the door.

Stacy, now left alone with the old woman, slowly crept over and sat next to her. The old woman looked up with a sweet grandmotherly smile. It was as if she had been expecting Stacy to sit.

“Hello, dear,” the old woman greeted. Though she looked very old, she had an adolescent shine to her that entrapped Stacy’s attention.

“Hi,” Stacy replied, “I noticed you praying by yourself and wondered if there was something you needed help praying for?”

Immediately Stacy felt her face turn bright red. She couldn’t believe she had asked such a personal question. But just as her guilt was reaching its peak, the old woman answered her.

“My dear, I’m praying for our faith.”

“Our faith?” Stacy asked. She always thought faith was the reason for prayer.

“Yes, our faith,” the old woman began to explain. “Too many people use our beliefs as a weapon, a dagger. They embark in religious warfare. They don’t understand, however, that faith is not a spear. It’s not a dictatorship, nor a competition. Rather it’s a fulfilling joy. A love buried deep inside whose ora of light grows throughout your body, soothing and tingling until bursting into a divine path between you and your savior. It’s a spiritual power to exist inside one’s self. It’s not to pick sides or build walls. Beliefs are simply meant to allow one to become overwhelmingly at peace with one’s relationship with God. For



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those who stray and forget, I pray every week. Not that they may see how fulfilling my faith is, but so they can discover an intensity and power of their own.”

The old woman stood up and placed her hand on Stacy’s shoulder. “Don’t fret, dear. Everyone gets lost sometimes. It makes being found worth much more.”

Stacy sat there in deep thought while the old woman crept out of the church. Stacy slowly emerged to her feet and stood there staring blankly at the heavy wooden cross hanging on the wall at the front of the church.

13

Day One
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Director Knows Best

The stage had sort of a homely presence to it. Nothing fantastic, rather the quaint aging features the stage at my old high school had possessed. Of course, this one was much bigger. I could tell the experience here would be quite similar to that which I was accustomed. The actors were already huddled into two groups in the front row of the auditorium. The veterans to the theatre department were gabbing on one side, and my fellow newcomers were uncomfortably fidgeting amongst themselves on the other side. I have always had a bit of arrogance to me, and wanted to look nothing like a rookie, so with my school bag flung prominently over my right shoulder, I strutted from the back of the auditorium down the incline to where those who had performed for the school before were standing.

As I had expected, I was not even noticed. There has always been a stereotype among most of the populace that actors are, for the most part, full of themselves. It occurred to me that in this particular case, there was something to that presumption.

Regardless of the atmosphere, I was not about to let a gaggle of gossips phase me. I had come to try out for the college play, and being only a freshman, I was aware of the level of competition I was surrounded by. However, I've never been one to be flustered easily. I sat in one of the folded seats, which made up the spectator's section, and skimmed through the lines I was scheduled to perform in less than half an hour. They were pretty ordinary. Although we were trying out for a play, which was to be performed by one of the state's most prominent colleges, I guess they didn't want to make it too painful for us.

Though I was trying to focus on my lines, I couldn't help but overhearing some of the acting veterans' discussion.

"Have you seen the play we're going to perform this fall?" an arrogant, stocky actress asked, "It is totally psycho. The crowd is going to be scared out of the theatre. Of course, the witch is back again this year, so who knows if it will even be worth performing."

"Man, I can't believe the school keeps her around," one of the male performers added. "I could've directed better in high school. If she's not driving away talent with her beastly attitude, she's screwing with the stage manager's mind. If she acts like she did last year, our play is going to be worthless again."

After a moment's silence, a voice from the back of the group added, "After the way Carl walked out on her two days before performance night last year, I didn't think she'd ever come back. It was nearly impossible for her to replace the lead role." The whole group shared a sadistic laugh.

Just as the laugh died out, the dreaded director entered from back stage. She was around thirty years old, not an unpleasant looking woman, and certainly didn't look the type to be as cruel as the actors had mentioned. She had a slight arrogance to her, not overpowering, but definitely authoritative. When she began to speak, the theatre was attentive.

"I can see there are many more bodies here this fall than there were for our spring try-outs. This is not what I was expecting. Oh well, I guess there is just going to have to be more disappointments because I have chosen a play with only three male roles, and two female rolls. I can see there are about seventeen of you. I don't want to be biased, but I will be honest. Those of you trying out for the first time have much less of a chance of making the cast because I have never seen you in an acting situation. Experience tells me to go with those whom I know will do well. This doesn't mean you will necessarily get a part, however. There's always a chance; it's just not a very big one. We will begin shortly."

With that, she left the stage from where she came. The group of experienced actors began to bad-mouth her even worse than before. I glanced around the auditorium and saw a large group of the newcomers reluctantly leaving the theatre. It was obvious the little speech had an effect on them. Chuckling, I returned to skimming my lines.

The try-outs ran very smoothly. I saw some extremely talented actors and actresses, and some that should have walked out along with the rookies. I have always had a great respect for those who try out, even if they fail to make the cast. It takes a lot of guts to, first of all, get in front of complete strangers who would like nothing better than to see you fall on your face, and, second of all, to be torn apart continuously by the director. I was quickly beginning to adapt to the surrounding 'I hate my director' atmosphere.

After all was said and done, amazingly enough I received a part. Even more amazing, it was the lead role. I would be lying if I told you I wasn't totally petrified when the first practice rolled around. The play was indeed a dramatic one. I had played many serious roles, and played them very well I might add. So I felt I was practically a pro. Unfortunately, the director did not share my opinion. I have never seen a

woman throw so many nasty words at an actor. But wanting to continue my position as the lead, I absorbed every one of them. Some hurt.

There were numerous cases, throughout the next few weeks, where she and I would compete in violent stare-offs, usually ending in some insult to my acting ability. I was well aware of the fact that I was not the director, but even an amateur like myself would question some of her techniques. It seemed to me that she had never been associated with the stage at all in her career. I even went as far as to be convinced that she had never acted a day in her life.

The rage inside me built up stronger and stronger practice after practice, every hour I spent in the same room as this beastly woman. Over and over I wanted nothing more than to tell her where to go for once. I wanted to tell her what I thought of her ability and the way she had insulted mine.

I had been confining my anger for so long, that one night I popped the cork and let it all spray out right in her direction. The blast of foul words and blunt rage filled the auditorium. My anger spilled from row to row until the entire room was silent, jaws lingering towards the floor. I don't recall everything I said, but I do remember the parts that left the biggest dents in the poor director's ego. During my unspeakable act of rage, I said one phrase that to this day I have been unable to erase from my memory.

"If you never remember anything about me as your rotting memory evaporates with your lack of talent, remember this. As much as you accuse me of being worthless and unworthy, you could only wish to have the smallest fraction of as much talent as I do. Then maybe you'd be only slightly tolerable, and people wouldn't hate you so much. You learn to act before you tell me to."

While the rest of the cast was trying to evaluate the ignorance I had just displayed, the director slowly stood up, and quietly told me to meet her in her office after a short break. She then disappeared up the incline, and through the back of the auditorium.

Needless to say, I was scared. It was obvious my acting career at this college was over. I was now contemplating whether I would come out of the director's office alive. I felt the uneasiness of the rest of the cast trying to pretend none of this had happened. I didn't blame them. I wished the same thing.

I crept to her door and knocked quietly. With a tremble in her voice, she told me to enter. She was sitting at her desk. Her back was to me, but I could tell she was crying. I had never felt worse in my entire life. It was as if I had just taken everything away from her. She sounded empty, broken. I wanted to

speak. I wanted to tell her I was sorry and that she'd never have to see me again, but instead I felt myself begin to tear up.

She turned to me. She was holding two objects, a knife in one hand, and a piece of paper in the other. I was petrified. I could feel myself creeping towards the door.

“Stop.” She said. Her voice was as pale as her face. “This is not for you. I was so angry with myself that I was considering ridding myself from you. I should never have taken this job. For the past few years, I’ve been told I was in over my head. I didn’t want to believe anyone, though. I am sorry for how I treated you.” She began to sob. “I even wrote this note for you. But as much as I wanted to, I couldn’t do it. I’m so scared.”

I was petrified. I had no business being a part of this. I was way too young to have such an experience. I wanted to console her. I wanted to run and get the police. I wanted her to put down the knife. She must have seen the terror in my face. She put down the knife and the note and rose from her chair. Wiping her eyes, she forced a weak smile and walked out, leaving me alone in her office.

I stared blankly at the knife, and slowly crept to it. I was more, however, drawn to the note. I went for it only to realize the knife was plastic. I quickly opened the note and read it.

I can act, too, you know. I give my actors orders to make them better. You remember that!

I felt one inch tall. It was rather a humbling feeling. I returned to the stage to see the director back to her old self, as if nothing had happened. ‘That witch,’ I thought. I had never respected anyone more.

'Little Liz'

13

I'll never forget my first love. I'm glad I didn't try to change her. Some people are just better left the way they are. Don't get me wrong, there was absolutely nothing wrong with her. She was extremely eye appealing. Unfortunately, her physical appearance was what kept us together as long as we were, which wasn't long to begin with.

I met her at a birthday banquet for one of my most prestigious clients. It took us only seconds to fall in love. Actually, it was more like lust. I've learned not to believe in love at first sight; it only leads to disaster. Disaster is exactly what our eventual marriage turned into. I really don't blame her for leaving me, though. After all, there would eventually be another woman in my life.

I've never been one to be tight with money. I often travel to homeless shelters and offer to help out families who just can't seem to get their lives going. In fact, being too generous is what cost me my marriage. No matter how hard I tried; I just couldn't get my newlywed wife to understand why I felt the need to give. I guess I should have expected divorce papers after I gave away the Lincoln I had given her, but I felt so sorry for a family of six I found crowded in a small pick-up. The poor children's faces, smudged with tears that had recently been wiped away to prevent from freezing, gleamed when they entered their new car. The smiles were enough to warm even the coldest nights. Looking back, I now believe losing my marriage was worth seeing those children regain a speck of hope. My wife and I weren't right for each other, anyway.

Walking home from court after the settlement, I realized what kind of fate had been thrust upon me. I now had the freedom to become whomever I wanted. As awkward as it sounds, that walk home was one of the happiest I had ever had.

With no marriage tying me down, I now had even more time to spend at the shelter. This is when 'little Liz' and I officially met. Visiting with a factory worker who'd been recently laid off due to his lack of seniority, I glanced at the front entrance of the shelter and found something that caught my eye. A small girl was waiting patiently by the front door. Her small red mittens were dangling from the sleeves of her

faded pink winter coat. Her stained sweat pants were covered to the knees by two shiny new snow boots, and her dull brown hair was put clumsily into a shoulder length braid.

I assumed she was waiting for her mom to pick her up, and abandoning the conversation with the ex-factory worker, I tiptoed over to the angelic little girl. Leaning over her shoulder, I whispered suspiciously in her ear.

“Are you waiting for your husband to pick you up?” I asked jokingly. Slightly startled, she turned around and presented me with the most innocently paralyzing smile I had ever seen.

“No way,” she replied, “my mom would never let me get hitched.”

I enjoyed a hearty laugh, and looked to see the grit of poverty etched around two big brown eyes that melted my chest, and found their way right to my heart.

“Well, then,” I continued, “who, may I ask, has the honor of your patience?”

“My mom told me to wait here. She didn’t feel good and went to the store to get medicine. She wanted to go to the doctor, but she doesn’t have very much money because she bought me some new snow boots and is saving some money for new mittens for me for Christmas. I have holes in these right here and need new ones. I usually wait over in that corner over there, but I heard this guy say to another guy that some man with a whole bunch of money was coming to give people some. I wanted to see him first and give him a big hug and see if he can help my mom go to the doctor.”

I smiled when I realized the ‘man with a whole bunch of money’ was I. I was impressed with her intelligence. It was obvious by the cleanliness of her hair and skin that she was very well taken care of.

“I have a secret for you,” I replied, “but first you have to tell me your name.”

“My name is Elizabeth, I’m nine years old and I love secrets. Will you tell me your secret please sir?”

I leaned over, put my mouth up to her ear, and confessed that I was the man who was known to give out money. I could tell she was a little cautious about believing me, so to earn her trust I let her take a glance at the bills hidden inside the lining of my jacket.

Immediately, she snatched my sleeves and wrapped her arms around me. I’d never felt as needed as I did right at that moment. I agreed to take Elizabeth to find her mother, and leaving a message of where

she was going in case Liz's mom returned we hopped into my Buick and darted through uptown Chicago to the pharmacy.

I remember what happened next as vividly as the exact moment I experienced it. Ambulances surrounded the entrance of the pharmacy. Wide eyed and confused, Elizabeth peered out of the passenger side window.

"Let's go find Mom," she suggested. She'll tell us what's happening."

After backing into a nearby parking space, we left the car. Liz began at a fast pace, but as she got closer, it was evident she became more scared. Her walk soon became a run, and before I knew it, I was chasing her to the spot where her mother's lifeless body was lying. A terrified scream left her sobbing face and slashed its way through every part of my body until exploding directly inside my soul. Silent, I knew right away why Liz was screaming. Tears began to form, and then streaked down my face one after another.

Elizabeth's tight grasp around my now fragile body snapped me from my trance, and my arms instinctively embraced her, trying to stop her from shaking.

The funeral was even harder for Liz than her mother's sudden departure. I took the liberty of making all of the arrangements since Elizabeth's mother had no living relatives or friends. The burial consisted of Liz, myself, and a few who were at the scene.

For several days following her mother's death, Elizabeth stayed at my home. Christmas was only a few weeks away, and I stupidly attempted to relieve her of all of her still existing pain by offering to buy her whatever she desired. Just as the guilt from such a petty suggestion began to settle within my stomach, 'little Liz's' eyes sparkled for the first time in nearly two weeks. She exposed a huge smile. My heart melted. Excitement overwhelmed her, and she jumped into my arms.

"Would it be okay if we bought a bunch of toys for other poor kids instead?" Her smile diminished slightly. "My mom told me that no matter how poor we were, we should always help poorer people."

Overwhelmed by the request, I replied blissfully, "Yes, absolutely."

In the days leading to Christmas Eve, 'little Liz' and I bounced from store to store filling shopping cart after shopping cart with as many toys as our four arms could carry. Each day we went from shelter to

shelter, and to every children's hospital in Chicago, distributing toys to all sorts of poor and homeless children. By the time December 24 was upon us, Elizabeth was the most popular girl in the city. Everyone was happy, except for Liz.

Elizabeth began complaining about back pains late on Christmas Eve. Christmas came and went, and my 'little Liz' just couldn't seem to shake her pains. Days later, I finally took her to the best pediatric doctor in town. After transferring us to the hospital, I met with Elizabeth's doctor. He was the same doctor who had pronounced Elizabeth's mother dead on that cold painful evening a little over a month ago. He explained to me that Elizabeth had a genetic disease, the same that took her mother's life. It came as a shock to me. I nearly broke down right in front of the doctor. Thanking him, I returned to where Liz was lying.

Three more days passed. Each day I spent trying to comfort my sick little friend. It took every bit of energy I had not to show my hurt in front of her.

On January 2, I paid my last visit to the little girl. She was partially awake, and through all of the pain, she presented me with a small smile. I kissed her forehead and placed my face next to hers for one last hug. In the seconds following, I felt her last whispering breath upon the moistness of my now tear stricken face. I had lost my 'little Liz' forever.

I had her buried next to her mother. As I watched her casket being lowered into the ground, I was joined by what seemed like every child in Chicago. I pictured Elizabeth with her mother, granting every angel above me the same little smile that melted right through my chest and found its way right into my heart.



