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Fiction Fix 02

Sarah Howard

April E. Fisher
University of North Florida

Danielle Dieger

Robert Orndorff

Thelma Young
University of North Florida

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Sarah Howard, April E. Fisher, Danielle Dieger, Robert Orndorff, Thelma Young, Gavin Lamert, Jeff Geloneck, Tim Gilmore, Melissa Gollegly, Shannon McLeish, and Robert Panaro



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April Fisher

Danielle Dreger

Robert Orndorff

Thelma Young

Gavin Lambert

Jeff Geloneck

Sarah Howard

Tim Gilmore

Melissa Gollegly

Shannon McLeish

Robert Panaro

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Fiction Fix

Publication Staff

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Editor-in-Chief

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President

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Editor

Robert Orndorff
Graphics

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To all lovers of fiction: Welcome!

Fiction Fix is celebrating its first birthday with the Second Injection. Although this publication is fully staffed by former and current students of the University of North Florida, the following eleven stories are penned by both Fiction Fix members and authors outside our staff. For the Third Injection, we hope to welcome an even more diverse blend of writers.

Our passion is to write. Our vision is to share this fiction with as many readers as possible. The First Injection was an experiment, a dream come true, a success. This time, we have a goal: to encourage literacy in the community and maybe (and I'm writing while holding my breath) nationally.

In the First Injection, I wrote about needing a "Fiction Fix" for my addiction. But what about those unfortunate souls who do not know the pangs of fiction withdrawal? These stories will make you laugh, mourn, think, and ache. They should be shared with more than just existing fiction lovers but people who still need a good introduction to this literary art.

I invite everyone who has not given fiction its full chance to pick this up and find a story that speaks to you. You might be surprised.

You might find yourself fixed.

Sarah Howard
Editor-in-Chief

Thank You. . .

. . . to the Fiction Fix staff (those listed above and all others)—because of our volunteer nature, there are fewer active members presently than the total number of members that have participated this year. All those who can claim to be a current or past member of Fiction Fix, your assistance is appreciated.

The professors at the University of North Florida who have taught the First Injection and will teach it or the Second Injection in the future have prolonged this publication's survival. Thank you Mark Ari, Joe Flowers, Pam Hnyla, and Eileen Maguire. You have also promoted a love for fiction to many students, quite an admirable task. All members of the English department at the University of North Florida deserve our thanks for their continued support. Thanks especially to Kathy Hassall and William Slaughter.

And finally, to Ari: you started this. Hopefully, you will never have to see its end. We are indebted to you for your lectures, advice, support, love, and (yes) discipline. You have not only served as an excellent faculty advisor, but you are the best friend a motley bunch of amateur writers could ever have.

Sincerely,
The Crew of Fiction Fix

A Revolution Against Her Skin

98

When Dolores turned ninety-eight, the gods visited her in a daydream and touched her all over. When she refocused on the concrete world, she started to hear things. She thought she had lost it.

When they started to appear she was rubbing her right shoe up her left leg, trying to rescue the knee-high before it bundled like an oversized sock. The first woman wandered in and smiled at her. Dolores thought this was about the oddest thing that had ever happened. The woman's eyes reflected a shine coming from Dolores's direction, but Dolores didn't see any bright lights in the room. She knew something strange was afoot when the woman stepped toward her and sat in the seat next to her, rather than the open seat next to it. There's something odd about a human who doesn't mind a human, so surely this woman must be a spirit or vision or angel.

Dolores was knitting a scarf, pretending to be sane and alone, when they started touching her. The passengers at gate D53, including Dolores, tried to convince themselves that elderly women couldn't have orgasms as Dolores shrieked in their public air. Surely she was in pain. Someone should help that woman, they thought and averted their eyes from other eyes. With no one looking at her except the translucent images of gods, Dolores started hearing things.

The thought wasn't Dolores's, but it was in her head and it was illegally thinking, *love me love me love me*. It seemed to stream in to Dolores from every outward point, as if she were the center and all thought was drawn to her, and it was thinking, *dying dying dying*.

Dolores had been on the plane for five minutes and twenty-eight seconds before she noticed the pulsing. There it was, everywhere, in the sobbing baby, the wrinkly old couple, the chubby brunette, bumping and thumping. Each one squeezed out forbidden words, words that Dolores wouldn't dare to think, *regret rape insanity*, beat beat beat. Each pulse broke something, she was sure of it, but what? All of the words Dolores had never let herself say or think were rushing about and attacking her. She thought she had lost it, but really.

60

This is the way the night goes, the night goes.

Dolores is certain the black isn't nothing. It is some strange substance not entirely good that can't harm her, or can it? She flicks the switch and scurries to bed thinking, "Jesus protect me, will protect me, will protect me," and then lunges under the covers as well as she can, considering her age.

Dolores stares into the black. Although she can feel nothing when her body parts are out in *it*, she's convinced it's a substance not wholly good. She tells herself to close her eyes, but when she does, she feels the dark close in and opens them, searching for changes in the space. Maybe it moves only when she doesn't watch.

With her eyes open she lets her mind wander a bit. She picks at her nails, making little clicky noises to various children's rhymes as she surveys the perimeters of her mind. It's the TV show from an hour before or the phone conversation, when there's a conversation to think of. It's the following of driving directions, just to keep in practice. It's the names of various birds in her neighborhood or the names of various people she may have to talk to. Sometimes, it's her mother. She remembers how confused she was at the big thuds coming from such a tiny body as the woman walked from one end of the house to the other. And always it's the click click and the children's rhymes.

Then she remembers that her eyes are still open and rather dry and that she's never been able to fall asleep like this, at least none of the previous days. The knot forms in her chest as she considers either the torture of open eyes or the torment of her whole body exposed to the substance. She thinks herself in circles and at some random point rolls herself feet first onto the ground, thanks the Lord it's there, and thinks, "Jesus protect me, will protect, will protect, will protect me," all the way to the Jesus-shaped night light, and His holy image divides the substance to the far corners of the room and the air becomes not wholly evil.

This is the way the night goes, click click, so late in the evening.

The night goes.

40

The girl swings and her lover pushes her. She's old. She's too old for swinging, but there she is, hands turning red from her clutch on the metal, legs out, then in, then out, hair jumping about, laugh silenced under the music. How silly this all is, Dolores thinks.

The sun above the girl shines and the eyes shine and the metal shines and the shining shines. Dolores tries not to like the shine. Dolores thinks she should be suspicious of it. She's suspiciously interested in the shine. The shine makes her blush. She thinks things that shine are revealing something they shouldn't. The shine should be withheld, she thinks, but secretly wishes she could shine, too. She stows the wish away, underneath. It hurts to look right at it, so she looks away. The man has a smile made for this. His voice is thunder, and the shine intensifies, so Dolores moves on.

Always there's a murder here. Or a robbery. Or other violations. This is no good, these things aren't considered. Consideration of consideration of these things isn't considered.

Dolores gives up on finding a new program and

switches to the cooking show on channel nine. There's nothing particularly bright or dark about cooking. It's a gray show. Dolores color-codes her world in brights, grays, darks. She avoids the extremes. Anything with an opposite can't be trusted. Bright, dark. Black, white, love, hate. It's best to stay in between these things. Big, small. Old, young. She does her best. Comedy, drama. To stay in between. Male, female.

The TV in front of her tells her to blend for five minutes. She hears silence underneath the woman's voice, so she turns up the kitchen TV. It tells her to mix blue and yellow to make green. The voices of the two women haven't yet covered the silence, so Dolores picks up another remote and turns on the radio in her bedroom. Classical music accompanies the women and Dolores tries to hear them all at once, filling every empty space in her mind.

She thinks, hears, smells, tastes, feels gray. Life is as she wants it. God has provided her with what she needs. Life is acceptable.

Dolores wonders what the opposite of TV is. She can't think of one. It has earned her trust.

Black, white, male, female, up, down. Weren't these all the same things? Colors, sexes, directions, words, descriptions. Dolores feels a little uncomfortable with this thought. It overtakes the noise in the room and wonders if finitude and infinity work like the other opposites. Belief and disbelief. Dolores becomes a nihilist and an anti-nihilist because aren't they the same thing anyway? Dolores realizes she's been considering things. She panics, she asks for forgiveness for her thoughts, she turns up the TV: "When the water's lukewarm, add the seasoning at a moderate speed. Not too much, not too little."

Gray.

Dolores stares into the eyes that it took from her. She started going to church so her mother would agree to watch it. She enjoys church; it's comforting. She has a Father, unlike this bastard-child. Dolores officially gives it to her mother the month after this one.

The church tells her, God is good. All the time, all the time.

22

Dolores slept too long this day. She wakes and the strange bright flecks in her sight make her think she must be emitting her own light. Her standing feels like falling, so she grabs along the wall as she walks to the living room couch where she makes a list of the things broken. All the noise makers in her life have been silenced. This worries her a bit because she's sure she hears something that shouldn't be there. It's less than a whisper, but when she makes out the word "love," she grabs her knees to her face and holds on. She releases at a knock and opens the door, smiling again.

Walter is a polite boy. They were married six months ago but hadn't found the time to combine their things in one living space. They decided that today's the day, what with her necessities being out of order; Dolores would change houses.

Moving is an enjoyable task. Things are planned neatly, and they're not upsetting or exciting. Walter whistles as he drives and Dolores hums along. The car is silent, except for the tune. Dolores focuses all her attention on his tune. She wants to impress him with her humming, wants him to think she's talented. Wants him to think she'll be a good wife.

Their house has a short driveway and a tiny flower box in the front. Walter's allergic to animal hair, but they could get a fish. Dolores wants to think she'll be a good wife; he'll be a good husband. She puts her pillow and comforter on the couch. She's not comfortable with sleeping in the

bedroom yet. Walter doesn't protest.

They discuss politics and religion. These are things Dolores doesn't mind talking about. They're safe, despite the fact that everybody makes a big fuss over them, they're safe. She knows they guard her from the really dangerous subjects. People think she's talking seriously, think they're talking seriously, when they discuss politics and religion. But Dolores knows these things can't harm her.

"People get so uptight," Walter says.

"Arguing over religion is like arguing over the weather. Just look outside," Dolores says.

"If I'm hot when you're cold, what's the big deal? If I say it's hot, and you say it's cold, aren't we both right?"

"God is good," Dolores says. "All the time," Dolores says, "God is good."

Walter turns on the radio and sits on the right side of the couch.

They live together separately for six months before Walter starts finding ways to touch her. He peeks through the doorway as she undresses and dresses and he brushes specks of dust off of her chest, and he smooths the make-up on her face, and this alarms her, but she says nothing. This night he convinces her she shouldn't sleep on the couch, and the next night he stays awake convincing himself if you're married, it isn't rape.

5

Although she's only five, Dolores knows people think her Daddy is strange. When he walks, he always looks about to jump. When he talks, his tongue is like a dog and peanut butter. When he looks, he overlooks. He's a glazy man, he's a hazy mind. He flips and dips his tongue when he talks. He creeps in a heap when he walks. His belt, his hands, his mouth, his legs. Watch out for these things, she knows, and she is five. People think he's strange; she thinks he's Daddy.

Dolores hides under the covers at night. Jesus is on

until the substance enters at night. He goes when the dark comes. The dark comes, so she squeezes her eyes shut and there's the closing in, then there's the closing in, in, in, it always closes in. Its tongue is like a slimy dog and maggoty peanut butter.

4

Today's Sunday. Sunday means church for the saints, the good people, the heaven-bound. Dolores pinches her four year old knees. She traces her thumb along line after line of skin. She wobbles her body back and forth in the pew. She crosses her eyes and looks at the tip of her nose. She folds her fingers together and looks at the patterns she created while the man with the booming voice boom boom booms about the room. Dolores sits cross-legged on the pew and looks cross-eyed at the blonde curls pulled taut between her fingers. She focuses her eyes on the hair, then refocuses to the boom man, hair, boom man, hair. A clunk on the back of her head tells her she should be listening to the good word, whatever that is, so she stares forward and dreams she's a puppy and can dig in the ground and chew on things. She suppresses giggles, she secretly grins, she counts to four.

Dolores and her dad walk hand in hand out of church. Dolores takes two strides to his one and occasionally skips or hops. She listens to the people talk and is upset when she hears an old woman calling her father strange. There's a shine in her eye and she yells, "Well I love my Daddy, and I hope you die!" He grabs her with one arm and jump-runs through the doorway and into the woods. He throws her against a tree and his tongue is a fish.

"The hell is wrong wit you?" he's saying. "Don't you know things like that ought naught be spoke? Ahm gonn teach you, ahm gonn." Dolores expects him to come after her, so she grabs her knees, but he doesn't. Instead, he grabs dirt and sticks and throws them at her. He grabs stones and pine cones and throws them at her. Her words

are in her head, and she can't stop them. Her blood is on her skin, and it won't wipe clean. Her body's beat is loud and fast and she vomits the forbidden words. She wants to eat it all, to shove the mess back inside where it's hidden from the world and him and herself.

When he stops throwing and she stops bleeding, she takes the words "love" and "die" and locks them underneath. She tucks them behind her skin. She hides them in her blood. She hides them from herself within herself, all over herself. She finds new forbidden words and continues to shove them under her skin. She worries she'll run out of space but continues to stuff. She stuffs words and feelings and faces and experiences. She shuts herself tight, her elastic skin stretching to accommodate new naughty things.

No more. No more love, death. No more danger.

98

Dolores thought she had lost it. On the airplane, a woman who touches her whispers "Do it" into her ear. Soon they are all whispering things. Into her face, they say, "Bleed," "Shine," "Love." Dolores holds back. She clutches the sides of chairs as she, head first, stumbles into the bathroom. She looks sideways at the old woman in the mirror, knitting hooks in hand, and forces the tiny objects into her ears. Her mind goes blurry and she sees blood on her hands and it looks like shiny love. Soon it's all over the mirror in sticky handprints and all over the counter and walls. It pulses in her veins, it pounds against her skin, it begs and pleads. She can suppress the revolution no more, so she holds her breath and smashes her head on the mirror and smashes her face against the broken mirror. It spouts from her, it gushes and pours. It is blood, tears. It is warm illegal thought bursting into the open air. It is forbidden secret private parts. It is withheld passion sex frenzy. It is attack violence menstruation baby. It is swinging smiling shiny girl. It is four year old vomit giggles hiding. It is

twiggy frail arms substance heavy fuming. It is puppy-chewing dirt-digging bloody blood. It is happiness and confusion. It is weakness. It is. And it is everywhere. She tries to look away, but it is everywhere. It is in her eyelids and under the toilet seat and between her legs, it is wrapped around her tongue and gurgling in her throat and she flees from the room covered with Dolores into faces that cry out and look away, into new walls and into carpet. It is shining. It is shining. It is shining. It is stunning. She always loved shining. A reflection. It is stunning. She watches it soak the carpet around her. She watches her soak the carpet around her. She is shining. She always loved.

Dolores had thought that she had lost it, but she knew, really. Really, she knew, and slowly became all shine.

Stalking Mr. Right

You meet him in a nightclub or maybe in a bar or perhaps at your best friend's boyfriend's party. Even though it is dark, the first things you notice are his teeth: big and white. Chances are his teeth are not naturally that pristine. He's a bleacher.

He asks over the noise: "What's your name?"

You consider lying but tell him the truth: "Helen."

He holds out his hand and you tentatively shake it: "Mike." He asks you: "What do you do, Helen?"

You consider lying, but sarcasm sounds just as good: "Mostly men but sometimes horses if I'm feeling wild."

He laughs and you decide you like his laugh enough to sleep with him. He says he works in construction or maybe in pharmaceuticals. You don't really remember what he said because you were staring at his teeth.

You talk with him for an hour, mostly bullshit. He brings you drinks and tucks your hair behind your ear. You like the way his fingers feel against your skin, so you ask him if he wants to come over to your apartment for a cup of coffee.

The car ride to your place is awkward and silent, and you spend it looking at the leather seats and expensive stereo. Construction or pharmaceutical business must be booming.

As soon as your apartment door closes he is kissing your neck and running his fingers through your hair. You have sex on both the living room floor and the kitchen table before making it into your bed.

The following morning he brings you coffee in bed.

He doesn't wait three days to call; instead, he phones the following evening. He asks you over for dinner. He's even better in the kitchen than he is in the bedroom. All

throughout the meal he tells you stories about growing up on a farm and working for an advertising agency. (His father works in construction and his brother is a pharmacist.) You tell him stories about how the students in your kindergarten class call you “Ms. Hellion” instead of “Ms. Helen” and about the time you “accidentally” walked out of a department store wearing new black leather boots.

On your third date you go bowling, and he winds up with a score over 200. He says: “I was on the bowling team in high school.”

You score 78 and say: “I once had sex in a bowling alley.”

That night after sex you talk about former relationships. He is divorced and his ex-wife took the dog. Your last boyfriend was a firefighter who forgot to feed your goldfish.

You tell your friends about him: “It’s the best sex of my life.”

You tell your mom about him: “I hear wedding bells.”

You tell your hairdresser about him: “He’s the one.”

One night after you think he has fallen asleep you whisper, “I love you.” He whispers back, “I love you, too.”

After dating for three months, you take him to your cousin’s wedding. He tells you that you are the most beautiful woman to wear peach chiffon and that you really don’t look like “a bloated hooker.” While he waltzes with your grandmother, your mother whispers in your ear, “Better catch that damn bouquet.”

After he drops you off at home that night, he says that he is too tired to come in and spoon. He promises to call tomorrow.

The phone doesn’t ring for four days. “I’ve been busy with work,” he says once you finally call him.

You don’t see him until the following week. He hardly returns your calls. He agrees to meet you at a little Italian restaurant where he tells you it’s not working anymore. He

swears he's not seeing anyone else, but he can't devote energy to the relationship anymore because he's swamped with work. When you ask, "Is it me?" he shakes his head no.

His eyes fill with tears as he says, "Just work, sweetheart. Look, Helen, I'm sorry. I can't be the man you deserve. I have to go." He leaves you with the bill and you cry into your baked ziti.

You stay home sick from work for a week, alternately sobbing in your bed, asking yourself where it went wrong, and sitting on the couch eating pints of ice cream and drinking his leftover beer while staring at the blank TV screen.

Despite the ice cream and beer you lost five pounds.

You stop showering.

You find a shirt and a pair of boxers of his in your hamper and you wear them around the house because they make you feel close to him. You buy the expensive cologne he wears so you can still smell him on your sheets. You begin to smell like sour milk.

You drive by his house twice a day to check for his car and for any strange cars in his driveway. If his car is still there, that's a good sign. It means he isn't screwing anyone else yet. At night you drive by slow enough to see the living room window light up blue from the TV. You consider crawling through the bushes and peeking into his windows but are too chicken to leave the confines of your car.

You call him from different pay phones around town. When he answers, you hang up. You call when he's not home so you can listen to his answering machine because you miss his voice. After the thirty-seventh call he answers, "Helen, I know it's you. Stop calling." You quickly hang up.

You continue to call.

He changes his number.

You stop eating altogether.

You fill the pages of your diary with hateful things to tell him when you see him next, and then you rip them up.

You tell your friends: "He's an asshole."

You tell your mom: "Don't worry, it wasn't that serious."

You tell your hairdresser: "I think he's gay."

Your friends beg you to go out and start dating again. It takes all of your energy to put on clean clothes and lipstick, but you go out, so they stop bugging you. You swear you're over him, so they leave you alone. Secretly you hope to run into him in a restaurant or bar so he will see how glamorous you look with your protruding hipbones and beg you to take him back.

You never run into him again. Weeks or maybe months later a mutual friend mentions that he got a promotion and moved to New York.

One day you stop thinking about him and almost forget his name.

You meet him in a nightclub or maybe in a bar or perhaps at your best friend's boyfriend's party. You can tell by his suspenders that he must be a lawyer or a banker.

Over the noise he asks you: "What's your name?"

You consider lying but tell the truth: "Helen."

He holds out his hand and you tentatively shake it: "Roger."

Blue in Green

She says no one ever takes her to the carousel. She says the beautiful thing spins round and round on the corner of Merrill and Westmont. That the colors—they collide like melted crayons, explode like candy rainbows.

And yet I know for a fact the thing is a rusted fire hazard of spinning children who scream all day long as the gravity shifts in their small bellies. I say this and then she says that she too has a small belly. She says children see the world in a blur of primary colors. Mostly greens and blues. Like our eyes, she says. Like mine and like hers and they too could combine. Mine are blue and hers are green. It is Sunday morning; we are heading North toward her mother's. This has nothing to do with carousels.

We stop beneath the traffic light. I pass the white line just a foot. I inhale. She looks across at me for a second. She has this way of staring through people as though we are all made of glass and she is the glass blower. I told her this once and she did not understand if it was a compliment or an insult.

“Blue and green makes a mess,” I say, savvy to the subject. I grin, but she hesitates. She adjusts her thin shoulder under the strap of the seat belt. Sometimes I think the wind can break her. The light changes to green and I go. We turn left and there the carousel rotates past in the opposite direction. The steel disk relic is orange and mostly empty and not worth a quarter to ride, let alone three dollars.

“That’s a pack of cigarettes, honey,” I say.

“We should quit today anyway.”

And I know we are going to ride it. I know this. Not riding would be like stopping the rain. So we park the car in the gravel lot in front of a grass field of porta-potties,

picnic tables, and open iron grills. Above the foul chemical smell, the leafy breeze of October is alive in the air. I catch a sniff and some old images pass. Some things distant, some things all new and unexplored, with strange people unfamiliar, in a place I've never been.

A toothless, cigar-smelling man takes our money. He smiles at her. I've grown used to this kind of thing, but still I could hit him in the nose and feel better about it. I try not to look as his eyes follow her. Perhaps I haven't grown used to anything yet.

"These horses look terrible," I say.

"They need fresh paint, that's all."

I can see her years from now, owning this mechanical wretch—fixing and loving it and never giving up on it. Her fingers gently brush the plastic manes as she passes them. There is the way her fingers linger on things, as though they either gather some part of what she touches or gives apart of herself away. A million years ago I was by myself, looking for a job, going to bars with friends, and dreaming of a better life than middle class and solitude.

With their mouths wide open, the horses look like they were turned to plaster mid-scream.

"It's a glue factory amusement park," I say, and she laughs.

Cars pass on the cobblestone street as the mechanical pulley starts with a squeak. We find two horses and climb into the curves of plastic saddle. The vibraphone melody winds into the air. Above our heads, the speakers crackle and spin, dangled by duct tape. And it's odd to be here suddenly. In motion, in a circle, on the edge of an intersection with the girl I love. Odd because these are the scenes you never plan out, yet always find yourself drawn towards. The red and green lights blink and spin with us like an audience of Christmas elves. Through the intersection, the cars pass us by. The life of a small town heading to work, returning home, buying things and dreaming and raising families. The world spins in many

directions at once. What doesn't burr, I wonder? And who wants to stay in one place anyway? Why not spin on a street corner with children and horses?

We ride. The world is loud and distorted. A small boy laughs behind us.

The striped poles rise and fall between our fingers. The metal floor tilts. I see the toothless man duck behind the generator with a beer can.

A new line forms with parents and their eager children. The trees blur to green, the sky to blue. She waits to say it. For a moment she is exactly like these horses: petrified in some spinning moment. We are outside time, eternal in our three-dollar fate.

"When blue combines with green, I promise not to forget this," she says.

And then all she does is touch the bare skin of my forearm. Leaving a part of herself and forever gathering a part of me.

Old Blacky

Sweet-smelling women in brightly flowered dresses moved in synchronized motion in Minnie's kitchen. With one oven and one stove top between them, they created collard greens, potato salad, corn bread, baked beans, macaroni and cheese, gravy and rice, sweet potato pie, and four-layer cakes with coconut on top—all in preparation for Minnie's 100th birthday celebration.

Aunt Louise pushed her third sweet potato pie into the oven while Sister Grace fussed about the filling looking too wet. "You always did make your pies a bit too moist for my taste," mumbled Sister Grace, never missing a beat as she passed the butter to Cousin Carol and took the mixer from Aunt Bessie Mae.

"Ah, hush up, gal!" replied Louise. Her big arms jiggled when she closed the oven door. "If you were a better cook, maybe that man of yours would still be around. And if *my pies* are too moist for *your taste*, then maybe you shouldn't sample such *large slices*. *Maybe* you should switch to Cousin Carol's coconut cake."

Even their laughter had a rhythm to it, like a Sunday morning choir. Sister Grace and Deena were the only two in the kitchen not laughing. Grace rested one hand on her hip and added a fat pinch of sugar to her cornbread batter. Deena swatted flies from her torn vinyl stool and wondered what all the commotion was about. After all, it was her birthday, too—her thirteenth, but no one seemed to notice. Rocking back and forth on the uneven stool, Deena stared out the screen door into the backyard where the men laughed and drank cold beer. They danced to the music on the static-filled radio, and they barbecued steaks, chicken, pork ribs, beef ribs, hamburgers, hot dogs and turkey necks.

Deena left the kitchen unnoticed and wandered upstairs to Minnie's bedroom. It smelled of yellowed books, old clothes, and wasted time, even with the windows wide open. From the second story window she watched her cousins play ring-around-the-rosy around the oak tree in Minnie's front yard. She walked over to Minnie's dresser and was careful not to disturb its contents, mostly old photographs in hand-carved frames. Deena noticed an old black and white picture of Minnie and her sister Odessa when they were little. In the picture they were standing beneath the oak tree; they both wore tattered dresses and no shoes. Odessa had one of her fists clenched as if she were holding something precious in that hand.

Nestled behind that photograph was a shiny black rock about the size of a penny and perfect for Deena's hopscotch games. She picked up the rock. It had an odd shape, flat on the bottom, with thin white streaks running through it. "If only she would talk," Deena whispered. Minnie had barely uttered a word in nearly 90 years, not since her sister Odessa died. Sometimes Deena heard her family speaking in hushed tones about Minnie and Odessa, but no one took the time to explain how Odessa died. She slipped the rock into the front pocket of her blue jean overalls and ran back downstairs, two steps at a time.

The screen door slammed shut behind Deena as she stepped onto the front porch. Minnie sat on the porch in her rocker with a hand-knitted blanket spread over her lap. It was brown, yellow, and white. She didn't notice Deena. Her cloudy eyes stared at the children playing ring-around-the-rosy beneath the oak tree. Deena sat down on the porch. She took the rock out of her pocket and tossed it in the air over and over again. The last time she missed it. The rock landed at Minnie's feet, breaking the silence.

"Every Saturday, my sister Odessa and me played hopscotch in the dirt lot next to Mr. Robinson's store. He had the only grocery store in Ellisville, Mississippi. The only one for colored folk that is. And every Saturday after

we tired ourselves out jumping from square to square, we walked over to the little store to spend the penny Papa gave us for doing our weekly chores.”

Deena’s eyes grew wide and her mouth fell open. Minnie was talking! She wanted to go get a grownup, but her feet wouldn’t move. Minnie rocked in her chair, never taking her eyes off the shiny black rock.

“Mr. Robinson stood watch over everything in that store, especially the candy. He stood watch over us, too, always following us with his mean blue eyes over the top of his glasses from the minute we entered the store. Odessa and me would walk back and forth in our dusty bare feet and scan the shelves for anything new.” Minnie was quiet again. She stroked her blanket with her thin, black, wrinkled hands. “You could get everything from pickled pig feet to perfume in that store, but we always ended up spending our penny on the same thing every Saturday. A strawberry candy stick and a piece of bubble gum.” Minnie rocked faster in her chair.

“One Saturday, Odessa and me had a fight in the dirt. She said I didn’t win because my foot touched the line in the number 9 square when I bent down to pick up Old Blacky. Who ever won the most games at the end of the day got to hold onto Old Blacky until the next Saturday. Well, we were tied 5 games apiece and I could tell by the look in Odessa’s eyes that she was about to try to steal Old Blacky, so I dove to the ground and grabbed the rock. This just happened to be the one day in Odessa’s entire life she decided to wear shoes, and she got so excited trying to get that rock, she stepped on my knuckles with her black plastic boots.”

Minnie rubbed her knuckles on her left hand and rocked even faster in her chair. She was still looking at Old Blacky.

“When I saw the blood on my knuckles, I got scared and ran to Mr. Robinson’s store with Odessa right on my heels. We asked him if I could wash up so mama and papa

wouldn't find out and he told me to use the sink in the back room. He made Odessa stay out front with him. Just as I was washing away the last of the blood, I heard Odessa scream. My hands were still wet, but I ran to the front of the store where I found her standing with a broken soda pop bottle in her hand. Mr. Robinson was lying on the floor next to the counter, bleeding from his head.

"For a minute, we both stood in silence until I noticed blood dripping from Odessa's hand onto the floor. I looked at Mr. Robinson again. I knew he was dead. I started to scream, but Odessa put her bloody hand over my mouth. She was scared, too, I could see it in her eyes. I took her hand away from my mouth and I said, 'I think he dead, Odessa. I think you done killed a white man.' "

Deena folded her arms tight across her chest. She was rocking too, back and forth, to the same rhythm as Minnie's chair. Minnie never took her eyes off Old Blacky.

"We ran as fast as our feet would carry us from that store, never looking back, never saying a word. We ran until we had no more breath, and we finally stopped in a clearing in the woods when Odessa tripped over a stump and fell down. There in the woods, she told me how Mr. Robinson had lifted her dress and tried to touch her where she peed. She was talking so fast all her words ran together and she was hard to understand. She said she told him to stop but he kept grabbing her, touching her. He got his hands in her panties and touched her there. That's when Odessa grabbed the soda bottle from the shelf and hit him on the head with it. Mr. Robinson bumped his head on the corner of the countertop when he fell. And that's when Odessa screamed."

Minnie wasn't rocking anymore. She sat still in her chair. Deena wanted to ask Minnie what happened next, but instead she waited for Minnie to start remembering again.

"We sneaked in the house and upstairs without Mama and Papa seeing us. I rinsed Odessa's hand in cold water and wrapped it with an old dress of mine. After a while the

bleeding stopped. I was plaiting Odessa's hair to calm her down, when I remembered I left Old Blacky on the sink in the back of Mr. Robinson's store. Everybody in Ellisville knew Odessa and me played hopscotch with Old Blacky. Mama called us down for dinner, and I overheard her tell Aunt Lula that Mr. Robinson was found dead in his store. Murdered. She said every white man in the county was on the look-out for his killer and when they found the nigger who did it, they promised to make him pay. Both Odessa and me kept our free hands hidden beneath the dinner table while we ate that night—me to hide the sores on my knuckles, Odessa to hide the hand that killed Mr. Robinson.

“Night came, but we didn't sleep at all. We decided we would tell Mama and Papa what had happened in the morning, before we left for Sunday school. We were on our way downstairs for breakfast the next morning when we heard the knock at the front door. I started to sweat when I saw the sheriff and his men. Odessa started to cry. The sheriff found Old Blacky on the sink in the backroom of Mr. Robinson's store.

"Odessa tried to run back upstairs, but the sheriff grabbed her by her foot and dragged her back down. 'She's thirteen years old! She's thirteen years old!' Mama yelled, but those crackers didn't care. The sheriff's men held Mama and Papa back. They made Odessa and me tell them over and over again what happened, but they didn't believe us. The sheriff put Old Blacky in Odessa's hand and told her if she didn't tell the truth he would hang her right then and there. And that's exactly what he did. Right there at that oak tree. Odessa was still holding Old Blacky when papa cut her down from that tree.”

The screen door opened and Deena looked up. Cousin Carol was holding a birthday cake with so many candles she thought it would catch on fire. The children stopped playing their games beneath the tree and ran over to stand on the steps behind Deena. Then everyone started to sing, “Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy

Birthday Minnie and Deena! Happy Birthday to you!" Everyone clapped and Deena blew out the candles. They all piled back into the house to begin the birthday feast, leaving Minnie and Deena outside. It was quiet on the porch again.

Deena picked up Old Blacky. She placed the rock in the palm of Minnie's hand, "Happy Birthday, Minnie. Old Blacky is yours. You won it fair and square."

Minnie squeezed her fist around Old Blacky and closed her eyes tight. "Thank you Odessa," she said.

Male Senior Citizen Seeks Roommate(s).

No Smokers. No Pets. No Sickos.

There were three of us. Then two. Now it's just me. I'm all alone, too old to regroup. I just don't have the energy. In their places there are things now. Activities. I've had to keep myself busy. If you don't stay busy, you die.

I go on walks. Two a day. In the morning I walk down the street to the museum and stare at all the other old things. I do that for about an hour. I know the place by heart. I know all the paintings as well as I know the things on my own walls. I know all the faces of the people who work there as well as I know my own. Then, in the late afternoon, before dinner, I walk to the park and watch the children play. When you're old, like me, you can do that. You can watch children without anyone thinking you're some kind of creep.

Herald went first. It wasn't exactly a surprise. He ate like a pig. Plus he smoked a pack a day and liked to nip scotch in the evenings. He was seventy-five years old to the day. He didn't wake up. His heart gave up sometime between midnight and 3 am. It was kind of sad. But mostly I was bothered because he left me with Virgil.

After my afternoon walk, I go home and throw something in the microwave, something healthy. Usually it's one of those tv dinners made for dieting women. Chicken ala something-or-another and steamed vegetables with a little square of something mushy with crust around the edges for dessert. A real culinary treat.

I always go to bed at eight. Eight on the nose every night. Herald and I used to stay up until nine or ten playing poker—five card draw, stud, and other games—while he

sipped scotch and I slowly drank a glass of prune juice. Now I go to bed at eight on the dot every night.

After Herald passed, it was just me and Virgil. I was worried that I wouldn't have the time or the energy to care for Virgil the way he deserved. When Herald was alive, we shared the responsibility. He fed Virgil in the morning and I fed him at night, and Herald always cleaned his water once a month. How was I going to do all that myself? I'm a busy man for my age. Besides, Virgil wasn't even technically mine. He came with Herald. They were a package deal. When Herald moved in, he brought Virgil with him.

In between my walks, the bulk of the day, I try to do small, productive things. It's important to have something to show someone when the day is done. Even if there is no one to show it to. It's important to be productive. If you're not productive, if you're stagnant, you die.

So I do little things because I don't have the energy for big things. On the way back from my morning walk I get the newspaper so that when I get home I can do the crossword and read the classifieds. I read only the classifieds because it is the only thing worth reading for fifty cents. It's the only place in the whole paper where everyday you can find real people communicating with each other.

When Herald called, I asked him, do you smoke? and he said no. I asked him, do you have any pets? and he said no. So I said fine, you can move in. I wasn't getting any other calls about the ad, and he sounded decent enough over the phone. You don't really have to worry about old folks being murderers or sickos, so I wasn't that concerned. When he showed up he was holding in one hand a bowl with tiny blue rocks on the bottom and a single purple fish rocking in the water above them. In the other hand he was holding a lit cigarette.

Katherine, my wife, had been gone for five years, and I was tired of being alone. I still missed her, but it was time

to move on. A person has to move on. You can't live in the past. A person who lives in the past is not living. And if you're not living, there's only one thing you're doing. So one day when I was reading the classifieds, I did it. I bought an ad: male senior citizen seeking roommate(s). no smokers. no pets. no sickos. Call Bill: ###-####.

About a month after Herald passed, Virgil started acting strange. He wasn't himself. His swimming patterns became erratic, and one morning I came down to the living room to find Virgil flapping around in a puddle on the floor. I dropped him back in, and he floated motionless for a few seconds and then slowly started wiggling around in his aquarium.

After reading the classifieds, I eat one egg over medium and a piece of dry toast. It's about all I can stomach so early.

I've always been good with my hands. I can fix anything. One time, trying to keep me busy on a day off, Katherine handed me a blender she said had been broken for years. "Do you think you can fix it?" she said. "Of course!" I said. I took it back to my work shed and took the whole thing apart and then put it back together. When I plugged it in, it worked. To this day I don't know what I did to fix it, but I did. I guess I just have a knack with broken things.

I spend about two hours a day in my shed, making noise and banging around. I try to find something that needs fixing, something small and manageable, something not too heavy that I can get my hands around. If there is nothing, I create something. I always clean up after myself when I am done, and I always have something to show for my time there, even if it is just an escutcheon refastened to a couch cushion.

A week went by and I found Virgil on the floor again. This time he barely recovered. He was looking bad, and I got the feeling, absurd as it may sound, that he was doing it on purpose. Suicide or something. I didn't know what to do

because I had never had a fish before, and Herald was not around to consult with. Three days later I found Virgil belly up floating on top of the water. I think he had quit eating. It was so strange. I was inordinately sad. Though I cannot say that Virgil's death was a surprise, it filled me with grief more than anything had in a very long time.

After I'm done cleaning up in the shed, I eat lunch and do various things—clean up around the house, take out the garbage, watch a small amount of television, listen to talk radio—until it is time for my late afternoon walk.

It's hard being the only one left. It's hard being here when everyone else is gone. I've outlived everyone in this house. But one day I'll die, and there'll be no one left to keep things going. To fix things when they break. I shouldn't think about such morbid things. But I do from time to time.

When it is time for me to leave, I do a thorough walk through the house. I start upstairs and work my way down. I check all the bedrooms and bathrooms to make sure everything is clean and where it should be. I make sure there are no dirty dishes in the kitchen sink, and as I walk to the front door, through the living room, I feel the silence of the house and am acutely aware of myself in it. Outside, I lock the door.

Sorrow, Not Fear

Sorrow, not fear. Too late I know the truth. My father's eyes were haunted by sorrow yet to come, not by the fears of his past.

I lie now, with blood running in rivulets away from my wounds and know too late the wisdom in his eyes. Around me the battle rages, creating a chorus of screams and a symphony of clashing metal. Distracted from my reflections by the frenzied feasting of hordes of winged insects, I am pulled back into the presence of pain, back into the hell of the living. No clouds dot the sky to challenge the heat of the summer sun. No trees shade the field on which I lay dying. A whirl of wind carries the stench of rot and emptied bowels and flings a fresh covering of dust into the cracks that score my lips. I long for a skin of wine and struggle to turn over, trembling with fatigue.

Sorrow, not fear. My father's eyes blink once and turn to the herald, chasing him out of our home. I refuse to look again into those eyes as I lift my shield and fumble with my sword belt. I am ashamed of his cowardice, of his refusal to bless my leaving.

I awake with my head pillowed on the cooling, sticky thigh of another fallen warrior. My belly is numb. The pain there has receded. I attempt to inspect the rest of my ruined body, but my arms refuse to support my decision to move. Frustrated, I turn my head to study the man—no, the boy—whose leg comforts my head. He wears no armor or kilt and carries no emblem decrying who owned his allegiance. There are calluses on his upturned hand, and though his

skin is gray with the pallor of death, it is clear that when alive, he was deeply tanned. He is much like me, I realize, a farmer's son who imagined himself a hero of war. Together we lay, no longer burdened with the immature dreams of youth.

Sorrow, not fear. I stumble out of the house and smile nervously at the herald, unable to hide my doubts from him. Behind me I hear my father scoff and mumble about the loss of a generation.

"His words will change. When we reclaim what was lost, his words will be filled with praise." The herald emboldens me, and I cast aside my trepidation.

My father was a survivor of an earlier war, when our people lost our lands. Can he not see that I go to fight for him, for his honor?

A horse thunders by, and I force my eyes to open despite the crust trying to seal them shut. For a moment I am blinded; the sun has moved only a little and its intensity overwhelms my dilated pupils. When again I can see, I realize that I am facing back the way I have come. Sloping gently down before me is the ground I helped to win. The tips of the toppled wheat are painted with blood, and the field has become a dirty canvas awash in hues of gold and crimson. At the bottom of the hillock is the tree line from which I joined the charge, certain of the glory this battle would bring to me. Though a league distant, I see the vibrant green topping the pines ... and I see the details of the dead scattered before them. Without a sound many had dropped, pierced by arrows announcing the start of the battle, and I was shoved forward to fight before I could cry out in horror. I thought at first their deaths were meaningless, but now I know they help define my father's sorrow. Among the dead were village leaders, husbands, and fathers to many children. Lives wasted by un-aimed arrows, in a battle over a rocky field they never would have

worked.

“Folly. Prideful sin,” I rasp, announcing my newly learned wisdom through a throat raw from screaming and thirst. “Rest easy, my brothers.”

I will join them soon, and together we will ask God for his mercy. How could He refuse us? We are a rabble of sheep led to the slaughter.

I sputter a cough, sending flecks of pink spittle onto my chin.

Sorrow, not fear. My siblings, too young to seek glory, escort me from our village to the crossroads where the rest of the army has gathered. They are singing and laughing, proud of the soldier in their family. They compliment me on my bearing and on the quality of my sword. It is father's sword, I tell them. Mother gave it to me when father refused to pull it from hiding. I will give it a name, I say, when father's failure is purged from its history.

Agony. A hundred blood clots tear open as a warrior trips and falls onto me. He fights desperately to ensure he does not stay down forever. Every movement, every dodge, feint, and thrust he makes elicits a garbled scream from me. Oddly, I remain awake, my senses sharper than they have been since my father's sword, and my innocence, were shattered. The torture ends with the thunk of a battle-axe. The man shudders once, and I feel the warmth of blood or urine flowing down my legs. My breathing is labored; each breath shallow and quick, drawing in too little air. A frothy mass of bubbles fills my mouth, and I feel the scraping of my lungs against my ribs.

Sorrow, not fear. As I walk, I remember the playful sparring I used to do with my father. Dead branches served as swords, and our shields were woven out of reeds. Father proclaimed himself the better swordsman but admitted I had greater constitution and stamina. I laughed, knowing

he meant I stood up to his gentle beatings and returned for more. I pretended to battle for my life, and he allowed it, confident I would never know the reality of war. We were a defeated people, defended by our conquerors. We needn't fight for the land; we need only to sow it.

There are no sticks on this battlefield, and no laughter. The man's bulk slides off of my chest but still his body is draped over mine. His sweat and his hair and his filth are abhorrent, and I wish him gone.

"Mind you my view," I gurgle, "I cannot see what we have reaped."

I am amazed when the dead man sits up and falls away. I blink in disbelief until I realize he was thrown aside by someone still living. Shadows cross my face, blocking the sun; unfamiliar eyes devoid of emotion stare at me through the gloom. For a moment I have an unimpeded view down the slope. My vision blurs, but I recall the hundreds of dead ...and know fully the loss we have suffered.

* * *

"Look at his eyes."

I look down at my face and into my eyes.

"Such sorrow in them, for someone so young."

I turn to agree with whoever has spoken, to tell him I have my father's eyes.

"He's looking back across the field. We won —he should be happy...proud."

The survivors dismiss my grief, failing to see a lost generation.

They shuffle away, prodding the bodies they pass. My ordeal is over. I am free from pain, the heat of the sun, and the smell of the dead.

My father suffers now, not me. Ghosts of his sorrow drift through his eyes.

Tell him I understand.

Stranded

I sit at the kitchen table and read my anthropology book while Jim and Kelly scream at each other in their bedroom. I try not to listen but can't help it when Kelly shrieks, "Sex!" and commences with high-pitched sobbing. Philip heads straight for their door—stops to smile at me—and walks right in. I hold my breath and let it out when they finally shut up for their son's sake.

I never should've moved in. Jim practically begged me, though. He was such a nervous wreck when Philip was born. I think he just wanted another woman to make up for his lack of parenting skills. Like I was such a great choice—nine years younger and only six months out of high school. But it was convenient at the time; they have a low-rent apartment near the university. They started out as better roommates than the usual party animals. I tried *that* my first semester.

Their door opens. Two pairs of feet tread the carpet, one taking three or four quick steps for every stride of the other. Philip rounds the corner first. He is followed by Kelly and her stifled sobs. I do my best to look like I don't notice by staring at the same paragraph I've been trying to read this past half hour. Who am I fooling? Philip's the only blissfully ignorant one here.

"My mommy and my daddy—they were yelling."

Well, maybe not.

Kelly flinches. She opens the fridge and makes a lot of noise.

"Hey, handsome," I say to my nephew.

"Why you call me handsome?"

"Because you are."

Kelly sniffs loudly.

"Why don't we play with blocks?" I ask.

Philip's big, brown eyes light up, and he grins. He has five of those containers—you know, the ones that have the huge blocks that little kids can't swallow. I promise to build a tower, but dinner is ready before we finish.

We all sit around the small, circular table and direct our attention at Philip. He's pleased to have an audience and tells us all about his future success at architecture.

"My tower—it gonna to be a hun' red feet tall."

"Uh-huh," Kelly acknowledges.

"Mommy, can you and Daddy help me build it?"

"Uh. . ."

"Sorry, bud," Jim says. "I'm workin'."

"Why?"

"I have to."

"Okaaay. Aunt Vanessa, will you help me?"

"Time to go," Jim announces. He works for a CPA and claims to have a phobia about working around people—thinks they're looking over his shoulder or something. He usually goes back at night. He pushes his plate away, his food hardly touched, kisses Philip on the forehead, and leaves.

Kelly releases a long sigh and slumps in her chair.

"Wha's wrong, Mommy?"

"I'm tired, baby."

"You should go to bed."

"Maybe I will."

After brushing his teeth and getting him into his pajamas, Kelly asks if I would mind watching him while she takes a bath. After only ten minutes, though, she's out of the bath and on the phone in their room, attempting to speak softly so I won't hear. It's usually her brother Tyler, but if he's not home, it's her mom. She talks to me, too, but that's only when Philip's not around.

She's on the phone for an hour. When she comes back, Philip's ready for bed. So am I.

I've had a hard time sleeping lately, but tonight I'm out. Funny how I can enjoy something so much while I'm

unconscious. Anyway, I'm interrupted around two o'clock by a whimper near my head.

The tiny, sexless voice is foreign when I'm between sleeping and waking, but then I realize it's Philip. He hasn't wet himself, isn't thirsty. He wants his mommy and daddy, but neither of them has answered his cries. When I pick him up, and he sobs onto my shoulder, squeezing so tight, I feel guilty. Why didn't I hear him?

I have a hard time getting anything intelligible out of him, but after he's calmed down a little, he says monsters are in his room. I wonder how he found the courage to climb out of bed.

"Come on, I'll get your mommy."

I wish I could say it with more conviction. Usually, I hear him first because my room's closer. But when he comes to get me, it's not because they didn't hear him but because he looked, and they weren't there.

I carry him through the dark apartment. His parents' door is open, and I pat the bed with my free hand. Not only is it empty, but the coverlet isn't even turned down. It's just me—a twenty-one year old girl who makes an awkward nanny—and my frightened three year old nephew.

I wouldn't mind so much if Jim and Kelly suddenly found passion and went to a hotel, but I know they didn't. Jim's most likely still at work, and Kelly probably went bar hopping again. When she finds Philip in my bed in the morning, she'll feel horrible about leaving, but not until then. And what if she's too hung over to wake up? That happened once, and I had to take him to a midterm.

Philip usually sleeps once he's sure I won't leave, but tonight that's not enough. He clings to me while I try Kelly's cell phone. No answer. I call Jim's.

"Hello."

"Jim. Hi. Your son can't sleep. Kelly's gone."

His only response is a defeated sigh.

"Jim. . . Jim, I've got school tomorrow. I can't deal with this."

I wonder if he hung up. I listen for his breath, some movement, other voices, anything. I hear nothing, then: “Can’t you just sit with him for a while?”

“Tried that.”

“Hhh. . . If I finish what I’m doing right now, I’ll be caught up enough so I can stay home with him all day.”

“Come on, Jim. Please.”

Philip starts whimpering.

“Fine I’ll be there in half an hour.”

I’m so tired, and dammit, I was sleeping so well. And it doesn’t matter what I do, Philip can’t get comfortable. We suffer together until Jim arrives.

It’s longer than half an hour, but I don’t nag. I hand my nephew over and go back to my room. It takes awhile to get to sleep. I don’t hear Jim or Philip talking, don’t hear Kelly come home. I toss and turn and eventually. . . fall. . .

After class on Friday, I go to the gym. Kelly has a break at two, and we usually swim a few laps together. I’m early but don’t have to wait long. She strides out of the locker room in a black one piece. It kills me how attractive she is. Granted, she is a personal trainer, but she also has a kid, and she’s eleven years older than me.

When she gets closer, though, I see that Kelly’s not at her best, hiding under a pancake of foundation, eye makeup too heavy. She usually ridicules women who come to the gym made up, thinks it’s stupid to be vain while exercising, but I understand what she’s trying to hide—dark circles under bloodshot eyes, hollows in her cheeks because she hasn’t been eating properly.

She starts with water calisthenics, saying nothing. I try to break the silence, want to convince her that I don’t hate her because of last night.

“Hey, remember that Jack Feagle guy? From channel six? Yeah, apparently he’s fallen back on his skills as a guest speaker for early American history because he talked to my class today.”

“Fallen back? Was he fired?”

“You didn’t know?”

“I guess I haven’t watched much TV lately.”

“Oh yeah, he thought he was off the air one day and made out with the other anchor. Every person watching the news saw them. Including his wife—”

Kelly turns away and bites her lip.

Whoops. My ice breaker wasn’t as great as I thought.
“Uh, sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She’s quiet for another few seconds, and this time I let her collect her thoughts without my help. She eventually says, “I don’t know what to do.” This is how it always starts. I’ve learned not to make suggestions. “Plan B failed.”

I’m not quite sure what plan A was, but I do know that the latest upset is about them having another kid. Their problems really started back when she got pregnant with Philip. She told me everything a few months ago. As much as I wanted to plug my ears—the last thing I want to hear about is my brother’s sex life—she needed someone to listen. I don’t think she ever considered I’d be uncomfortable.

They’ve been an item since high school. Jim graduated a couple years after Kelly and joined her at college in North Carolina. When she came here to get her master’s, Jim gave up his degree to follow her and became her brother Tyler’s roommate. Tyler graduated a year or so later, moved away, and Kelly moved in with Jim. After six or seven years of being a couple but living separately, there was suddenly all this uninhibited passion.

They got married and thought having a kid was the thing to do. What they didn’t realize was that they couldn’t just have sex anytime or anywhere with a baby around. But that was just the start.

“He won’t talk to me,” she says. “And when he does, he yells.”

Yeah, I’ve heard. I think a lot of it comes down to Jim

being too immature to be a dad. Fortunately, this time I don't say what's on my mind.

"I knew having another baby was a bad idea, but I just wanted to talk about it. I thought. . ." Her bottom lip quivers. She takes a deep breath and slowly regains composure. "I thought we could deal with it together. But he goes to work, and I go out. It's not a bad thing."

Going out, no. But abandoning your kid in the middle of the night. . .

She looks at me, sees my unspoken criticism. I'm really bad at poker.

"Oh God, Vanessa.. Say something."

"You're the mom, Kelly. I shouldn't be the one to comfort Philip when he has a bad dream. I love him, but—"

"Well, I have another idea, and it may not be a bad one."

"What's that?"

She doesn't answer immediately, and I wonder if she's going to tell me I have to find my own place. "I've been talking to Tyler—"

"I know."

I didn't think it was possible, but she looks even more depressed. "I'm sorry—"

"It's okay, Kelly. Go on."

"Okay, well, he has a friend who does marriage counseling, like before couples get married. He and his wife would be willing to meet with us for a weekend, maybe go camping, hiking, just get away and talk. . . If we can make it till next Saturday, I'll take Philip to my parents'—"

"I'll watch him. It's not a problem."

Her eyes fill, and I realize this is the first gesture of kindness she's been given since—Jeez, I haven't offered to cook at all this semester.

"You're the big sister I never had." With this line, I feel like I'm starring in the sappiest chick flick ever. She bursts into tears right in front of her clients, and my trembling

hands cover my own reddening face.

It's a long week, and they both stay home every night, which makes it feel even longer. They don't talk to each other at all, as far as I can tell, until Thursday. Jim comes home early while Kelly is spilling her guts to one of her relatives.

"Who's she talking to?"

I look up from the latest neglected textbook, surprised he's asking or cares. "Kelly?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. She's been on the phone ever since I got here."

His face is instantly the color of a tomato; it's the first time he's shown his anger in front of me.

"Always talking to someone else."

"It's because you're *always* at work."

"Oh, come on, Vanessa. Don't pull that on me."

"Pull what? So you've been home every night this week. Big deal." I've tried to be invisible, mind my own business, but this is ridiculous.

"You know why I changed jobs."

"Yeah. So you can work longer hours, stay out late, and make us even more suspicious."

I'd feel better if he would just roll his eyes, but instead I see his balled fists and white knuckles. How does it feel to be fighting with the two main women in his life? I can't ask. I'm too mad at him for screwing up his marriage and mad at myself for not being able to help.

"I'm trying," he growls through gritted teeth. "I'm really trying."

"Yeah," I say, standing, "well, you're telling the wrong person." I escape to my room before he can say anything else.

At dinner, it's much the same as it's been every other night, except this time I'm uncomfortable for myself as well as them. Kelly doesn't know what happened because

neither one of us told her, but she keeps squinting at me, suspecting. Philip, as usual, is filling the silence with the details of his day.

“And Aaron—he goin’ to the park on Saturday. Can I go, too, Mommy?”

“Uh. . . I don’t know about this Saturday. Aunt Vanessa might be watching you.”

“Aunt Vanessa, can we—”

Jim drops his fork. “Vanessa might be watching him?”

“You haven’t told him?” I ask.

“Apparently not,” he answers.

“I thought we might go out of town this weekend,” Kelly whispers.

Jim stands, eyes blank and staring at nothing.

“Don’t go, Daddy,” Philip begs. “Play with me.”

Jim looks at us, looks at his son, looks down. He leaves the table but doesn’t go to work. He still won’t have anything to do with me, but by Saturday, Kelly has somehow convinced him to go. He’s at the door, holding a backpack and avoiding eye contact with both of us. Kelly is crying. If this doesn’t work, she thinks there won’t be any more straws to grasp.

“Thanks for watching Phil,” Jim mutters. He forces his head up so our eyes meet, then lowers it and walks out.

“Tyler knows we’re leaving,” Kelly says. “He said to call if—”

“I know, I know.” I give her a push and close the door before she can change her mind.

Philip is already dragging the blocks out of his room. Before finishing today’s project, a train station, he asks when we’re going to eat supper.

“Supper? Philip, it’s two o’clock. You’ve got a while.”

“Uncle Tyler would let me eat.”

It’s always someone else who would let him do the thing I won’t allow, part of every kid’s evil plan to make you feel so guilty you just give in.

“Well, Uncle Tyler’s not here, so I guess you’ll have to

wait.”

“Uncle Tyler loves me.”

“I love you, Philip.”

“Nuh-uh.”

Oh God. If he starts crying. . .

He does—those artificial tears children use to get their way.

“Philip, if you’re going to do this, you can go to your room. And forget about the blocks.”

He’s bawling, now. I guide him to his room, shut the door too loudly, and wait. He doesn’t stop for five minutes, and I wonder if it’s just dinner that’s getting to him.

I let Philip dial Tyler’s number and hold the receiver. “Hi, Uncle Tyler,” he says and sniffs. He sits in silence for several seconds then hands the phone to me.

Tyler lives an hour away and visits once a month. He hasn’t come over in a while, though, and I suddenly need to vent, my excuse being that Philip misses him. When he arrives, we go to the kitchen and leave Philip with his blocks.

“Thanks for coming over.” I want to make sure he knows I’m just getting a few things off my chest. Tyler’s always been nice to me, but I’m uncomfortably aware that he’s of the opposite sex. He definitely shares the good-looks genes with Kelly, so that’s not the problem. It’s just that he’s been a part of the family so long, I feel like he’s another brother. “Philip just needed to see someone who wasn’t in the middle of all this.”

“I’ll stay with him tonight, if you like.”

I was hoping he’d go home after dinner, but I guess that’s rather inhospitable of me.

“Well, I guess. But I won’t be much fun. I’ve got a lot of homework.”

We have dinner at the normal time, Philip doesn’t cry anymore, and tonight I’m the one who takes a leisurely bath. If this is how families are supposed to be, maybe it’s not so bad. When I come out of the bathroom, Philip has

fallen asleep. Tyler hasn't put him to bed yet, in case I wanted to say good night. I shake my head, and he stands. Our nephew doesn't wake as he's carried to his room. I tiptoe behind them and watch Tyler tuck the blankets around him.

"You're good with kids," I whisper. "You should be the one living here."

He smiles and is about to say something when the phone rings. I wait for Philip's waking cries, but he's gone. It's Kelly.

"Hey, Philip's already in bed."

"Oh is he? That's okay. I guess I'll talk to him tomorrow. Well, I hope he was okay. Tell him I called. And guess what? We kind of had our first talk, and Jim and I are going for a walk. I think. . . I think he's going to open up to me. Cross your fingers."

I don't have a chance to tell her Tyler's here; she's too excited to chat and hangs up.

"Things might be getting better," I say, then worry that I might have jinxed the whole thing. "I probably won't stay here too much longer."

"Why not?"

I shrug. "If it's going to work for them, they need to change some things, and I don't need to be in the way."

"Well, there's always an extra room at my place."

I hope he's joking, but he's peering at me like he wants an answer. Maybe now's a good time to start my research paper that's due in eight weeks. I make it look like I'm studying furiously for a couple hours then get a "headache" from too much reading. I thank him for coming over, tell him he can have the master bedroom, and go to bed. There, I was nice but not nice enough for him to think I'm interested. I pull out my anthropology book and eventually hear the door close from the other end of the apartment.

The phone rings again around midnight. I'm halfway out of bed, but apparently, Tyler got it. No one knows he's here, so the call's probably not for him. I hope it isn't

important, that he just doesn't want to wake me. But I have this feeling. . . so I wait. Twenty minutes pass, and then there's a soft tap on my door.

"Yeah."

It swings open. Tyler doesn't look like the grown man who gingerly laid Philip in his bed hours ago. His face is very pale, his tall figure slumped. He's too lean in his boxers and t-shirt.

"What happened?"

"It's Jim. They were. . . walking, and these guys. . ." He drops onto my bed, almost falls off. "They said she's gonna be okay, but she's in shock. He. . . I think they walked into a drug deal or something. He was—" Tyler looks at me with realization and stops. "He saved her, Vanessa, but they're not sure if he'll make it."

"What?" I'm surprised at my own self-control. Instead of a scream, my voice is a squeak. I scramble out of bed to call Kelly, but he grasps for my arm, his grip weak.

"Tyler. . . ? Tyler, please, tell me what happened."

"I ca—I can't. . ."

"Please."

He shakes his head. "Jim. . ."

"Yes? Jim. Oh, please."

"Jim—he. . . was. . ." He takes a deep breath and chokes.

I bite my lip and try to be patient.

"Jim and K-Kelly were wuh-wuh-wuh—"

"Walking?"

He nods. "He walked right into a-a drug deal. . . He was trying to turn around, but Kelly didn't see and kept going. They shot—they shot—"

"Oh God!" I run for the door. He pulls me back, stronger this time.

"No, Vanessa! Don't!"

"I gotta get Philip! I gotta go!"

"Vanessa." He won't let me go. "I talked to my parents. They're on their way to see him. Yours should be calling

any minute. But they don't want to tell Philip."

"It's his *dad*, Tyler."

"*Vanessa*." He grabs my other arm and shakes me. "He was shot in the face. He's not conscious. Philip couldn't talk to him, wouldn't recognize him. Do you want him to remember Jim like that?"

"Remember!" Philip is so young, would his father even be a memory? I swat at him with my textbook and run into the hall. Tyler is right behind me, probably to steer me away from Philip, but I'll spare my nephew my rage. He won't hear a thing if I'm in the master bedroom.

I slam their door, but it hits Tyler, and he enters anyway. The room is almost dead. The bed doesn't look like it's been used in a week, and the picture of Jim that used to be on Kelly's lamp table is gone. There's an empty spot on the wall where their wedding picture once hung. Being in their depersonalized bedroom only makes it worse. I hurl my anthropology book at the far wall.

"Hey!"

"Ahh!"

"*Vanessa*!"

Tyler tries to shake me again, but the phone rings. He dashes to it before I even have a chance. He waves me away and faces the opposite direction. I stand as close to him as possible and hear my mom crying on the other end.

"Mom!"

"Shh!" He puts a hand on my shoulder and pushes until I sit on the bed, shows me his back again.

I try to yell, but my voice cracks. I don't even know what I'm trying to say. I hold my head in my hands and wail, my cries so high at times, they're not even audible. When I hear the handset being replaced, I spring up, yank the phone from him, and throw it in the same direction as the book. It's a weak attempt and barely dents the sheetrock.

"*Vanessa*." His voice is softer.

I peer at him through my tears. "What?"

“They’re catching the next flight. She said to stay with Philip. After they go to the hospital, they’ll come here and let us go. Come on, we’ve got to pull it together for him.” If two people had pulled it together for him before, none of this would have happened.

He tries to help me up, but I push him away and stomp gracelessly into the living room.

“Vanessa.”

If he says my name one more time. . . Can’t he just leave me alone? I give him a dirty look, and he backs away, hands up, palms out.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to be rough.”

“Sure.”

He walks back to their room. I don’t know how he can stand to be in there, but at least he’s not bothering me. I pace in front of the TV, trying to occupy my mind with schoolwork, but start to think about Jim again. And Kelly. And Philip. I tiptoe to my nephew’s door, slowly open it, and peer in. It’s too dark to see him, but I imagine how peaceful he is right now. There aren’t any monsters tonight. I think about going in, picking him up, holding him. I take one step.

Tyler’s hand is on my shoulder, and I almost scream. He pulls me back and closes the door. “It’s okay.” He opens his arms, and I accept his embrace. After I pull away, he tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear. It feels nice.

“No, Tyler. Philip. . .”

“You need to get some sleep before your parents get here.”

“I can’t.”

His hand drops, but I want it back. I step toward him and rest my head on his shoulder. Tyler picks me up, and I don’t stop him. He carries me to my room, lays me in my bed. Then he goes to the door and shuts it.

He climbs in next to me, pushes the strap of my pajama top away from my shoulder, kisses me there. He continues up to my ear and whispers, “Please, say it’s okay.”

“Okay.”

To let him know I’m sure, I push his boxers off, run my hand up his back and under his shirt. He fumbles with the drawstring of my pajama pants, his mouth all over mine. I’m getting ready to help him, but he finally conquers the knot and gets his fingers under the elastic, dragging everything off in one tug. Then he pushes at my top, panting, and it almost rips as he yanks upward. I pull his shirt over his head and throw it away. He flattens himself against me, and I brace myself for a rough landing, but now he’s more relaxed, every inch of flesh contoured to mine.

I try to forget everything except his gentle caresses and soft kisses. He’s barely pushed into me when I start to cry. It turns this slow introduction into a passion—makes us cling harder, makes our groping fingers and kisses intense again.

Our open mouths finally disconnect. I lay panting against my pillow, and he rests his head on my chest. His body turns to jelly. I think he whispers thank you, but I can’t say anything.

I open my eyes, immediately remember, and the evidence is in the warm, naked body pressed against my own. I also sense another presence. My eyes slowly adjust, and there’s a hint of moonlight coming through my open door. And the silhouette of a scared little boy who can’t find his mommy.

“Philip?”

The blanket slips; cold air reminds me I’m naked, too. I feel around for any article of clothing, lean down and sweep the floor with my fingers. There’s a shirt, probably Tyler’s. I pull it on and hear the familiar whimper.

“Come here.”

Tyler wakes and gropes for me. Then he feels the shirt and sits up. “Is Philip here?” he whispers too loudly.

“Uncle Tyler, where are you?”

Tyler recoils. He, too, reaches blindly for clothes. His

hands bounce off me several times. “Jesus Christ! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

God, I wish he’d stay, wish we could be Philip’s loving parents for one night. I try to grab his arm, but he trips off the bed and scrambles out of my room, apologizing the whole way.

“Where’d he go?”

“Guess he had to use the bathroom.” My breath hitches; there’s an invisible knife in my sternum.

Philip throws his arms around my neck and squeezes. “You didn’t hear me crying, Aunt Vanessa, but I still love you.”

Esperanto Echo

Everything was reducible to itself infinitely. There was no bottom, no solid core. So the question of what the thing part of anything was, if it was endlessly divisible, drove him fucking nuts.

If you went within, you would have to go within within, and within within within. You couldn't stop fucking pushing it. You had to go beyond each level. You had to go beyond beyond. You had to go beyond beyond beyond beyond beyond beyond beyond beyond.

He once knew this woman who wrote a whole page of everything being a means to a means to a means to a means to a means.

But he figured that also meant that everything was an end in itself, and he could rest in that. Both ways of looking at it were true. It just depended on your current energy level.

He sat on the bench at the bus stop thinking, "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose."

He turned to the pretty and professionally dressed woman next to him and said, "A bus stop is a bus stop is a bus stop is a bus stop."

She smiled at him nervously.

"Conversely," he said to her, "a bus stop's just a fucking bus stop."

He wasn't sitting at the bus stop because he was going to catch a bus. He was there because he liked to be with the people who were. He liked to feel like he was going wherever they were going, doing whatever they were doing, worrying about whatever they were worrying about, distracted by and distracted from whatever they were distracted by and distracted from, in love with whomever

and whatever they were in love with. Because who the hell did they think they were anyway? Who granted them a charter? Who the hell stood them up straight, looked deep into their eyes, and with bona fide bullshit authority, told them, “You are you are you are you are you are you are you are you”? And did this same authority figure then turn right around to Jerry sitting at the bus stop and finish the sentence, “and not him and not him and not him and not him and not him”?

Hardly.

So Jerry sat there and watched one group of bus riders leave and another arrive. He thought maybe he should go with them, not following any one individual, but as a group. Maybe he'd walk into an office building, report to work, be someone and something they were all supposed to be. Maybe he'd end up fixing someone's plumbing or air conditioning. Maybe he'd end up a street preacher. *Are you a sinnah or are you a winnah?* Or maybe he'd even be converted.

If you were employed, you probably shouldn't have a job more than three weeks, he figured, so in ten years, you'd have filled over 180 different roles, and later you could celebrate your silver work anniversary with having worked more than 4,400 jobs. If you had to be employed, that would be the way to do it.

He had just enough change for the bus, so he got on. There were 43 people sitting down, facing the same way, pretending to be alone, pretending these were only living bodies they sat next to. There were 43 people sitting together in identical fashion, moving through space in a long steel body on wheels.

And then he couldn't take it. What reason did strangers need to speak to each other? What was the use of decorum and small talk, if not to buffer one person's presence from another's with some pretence of connection?

He turned to the bearded man in the white shirt and tie next to him and asked, “Who are you?”

“What?”

“Who are you?” Jerry repeated.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

He eyed Jerry suspiciously for a moment and said, “Name’s Henry.”

Henry? Name’s Henry? What kind of response was this? “What’s Henry?” Jerry asked him.

“What?”

“I asked you who you were and you said your name’s Henry. You’re not Henry. Your *name* is. I want to know who you are. You’ve been divorced twice, right? And you hate your work, but since there’s nothing you really don’t dislike, you can’t imagine anything else. And not only that, but you don’t even really know how much you hate. You’re so bitter, but your bitterness toward everything else only touches yourself. That’s why you’re so lonely. That’s why you’ve been impotent for four years. That’s why—”

Henry grabbed Jerry’s ear, and it felt like he was about to twist it off. “Listen, you prick, I don’t know what you think you’re doing. Did my ex-wife put you up to this little joke?”

The man had Jerry’s head down almost in his lap now, and Jerry wheezed, “Can you let go of me?”

He let him go, and Jerry said, “I just want to get to know people. You’re not Henry. Henry’s not here.”

The bus was stopping. Jerry walked briskly past the new passengers and got off. He had no idea what street he was on, but it didn’t matter.

What he wanted to do now was find somebody to fall in love with.

The forty-five year old woman in her car at the stoplight, who had been arrested for stealing jewelry from the department store last week, who drank herself to sleep most nights, who lived alone, wishing she had been a better mother—she seemed like a good candidate.

The obese woman who obsequiously thanked her corporate supervisors for their every breath, who went home and ate and ate and ate and ate to destroy all the structure and stricture, to fuck all the goddam niceness she embodied all day—she seemed like a good candidate.

The woman in the dirt patina, the wide brimmed hat, and the long skirt, who pulled her briefcase behind her twenty-four hours a day, talking to herself about legal decisions—she seemed like a good candidate.

The Indian girl with the nose ring and the black pants and white tee-shirt and the overflow of thick black hair, speaking in an English accent about how stupid Americans are—she seemed like a good candidate.

They were all locked in. They were all locked away, behind behind, and from from from from from. The whole city was entirely barren. Nobody occupied it. The people were depeopled, sole, unable to reach and bring. They could only project their own personal depopulations onto all the depeopled people around them.

Jerry stopped an old man with a cane, holding him gently with both hands just above the elbow. He was slightly aware of the desperation apparent on his face.

He said, “Listen, everybody is not you! The world is not your world! Stop projecting!”

Even as he said this, he knew he was projecting, projecting outward in concentric circles, projecting projections of projections of projections, projecting projections from way within within, pushing infinitely outward from infinitely inward. There was nothing in either direction. Every outward led out of itself, and every inward led within itself.

The old man was afraid of him. But Jerry couldn’t help asking him, “Are you as lonely as I am? Am I as lonely as you are? How can we be lonely if we’re not really here?” He thought the old man was a good candidate to fall in love with too, but he let him go.

Everything around him echoed, everything he heard, saw, smelled. Everything he did echoed. His letting go of the old man let the old man go and let him go and let him go and let him go and let him go.

There had been times when the outward and the inward were not so far apart, times when he wasn't pushing someone away with his projecting while that someone pushed him away with projecting. There had been a handful of times. They were miraculous moments. Now and then they recalled themselves. Not *every* now and then, but occasionally. He'd been a strange old man from the day he was born, but once or twice, but once or twice, he'd felt quite at rest and at home with himself in someone else and that someone else in him.

The wholly unique individual would be indecipherable, he thought. Jerry, on the other hand, had always wanted to be everyone at once, but this involved its own cryptic ciphers. He was an Esperanto solipsist. Why should everyone not be everyone else? Why should everyone not feel quite at rest and at home with themselves in everyone else and everyone else in them?

He sat at a bus stop beside an eight year old boy who could think about nothing but the girl at school with the big hair. He was in love with her hair, but sometimes she'd put her hair back, and it always shocked him how big her ears were. But he loved her anyway. He loved her so much he could hardly say one word to her, and because he could hardly say one word to her, he loved her.

Jerry told the boy, "A bus stop is a bus stop is a bus stop is a bus stop."

"Conversely," the boy said to Jerry, "a bus stop's just a fucking bus stop."

Curtains

There's something to be said about virgins. When I was in high school there was a group of us. We were the popular girls, the bitches. We hated everyone and sometimes each other and never had sex. No one knew, and if they did, they called us sluts anyway.

Andy was an almost-virgin. She was fucked once in the eight grade but was stoned and doesn't remember. Shawn, the fucker, smoked her out and kept trying to take her pants off. She said no for a few hours but then gave up and he slipped it in. She bled a little and left town the next day to visit her grandparents in Ohio. When she came back at the end of the summer we went to the mall, all of us, all the virgins. We bought overalls and jean skirts and Nikes. We never talked about that night.

Jen and Brooke were cheerleaders. They made the team before freshman year. This set them up for life/high school. Jen had never even kissed a guy. She'd say it's hard being cool because it's not like you can just go out and kiss someone because what if you suck and then everyone knows you suck? I'd say, Jen, what people think at this school doesn't matter anyway because they're all losers. I hadn't kissed anyone either, but I'd never tell her that. Brooke was fingered a few times and gave a blowjob once. She was the only one of us to ever have a dick in her mouth. She never told us what it was like though.

When we were sophomores we got boyfriends that went to different schools. This explained almost everything. They were big and played football. We talked about them to each other at lunch. I don't remember ever making them up; it was like they were always there. The other kids at

school would walk by, listen in on what we were saying. We always gave them something to hear.

There were a group of girls who came by our lunch table every once in a while. They were cool and rebellious and had plenty of sex. They wore Doc Martens and smoked cigarettes in the bathroom. We admired them. They were a different kind of popular. Brooke lived next door to one of them. The girl lived in a huge house with a dog and five cars parked outside. Every day the girl's mom would yell at her to change her clothes, take off that damn lipstick. Her dad owned a dry cleaning company and was always out of town. We never told anyone she was rich. I think that's why they liked us.

On a Tuesday the girls sat at our lunch table.

Brooke: What's up guys?

Girl wearing Fugazi t-shirt: Not much. We're going to the beach tomorrow for lunch if you want to come.

Andy: Why?

Girl wearing Fugazi t-shirt: Why the beach or why come?

Andy: Both.

Girl wearing black and white striped tights: To get away from this hell. We're gonna drive down the beach, past Bethune, and smoke. Just chill out.

Jen: I have a test fifth period.

Everyone else decided to go. I went, too. It's the only time we ever hung out. We snuck off the school grounds during lunch and drove away. We were in an old VW van. It was orange on the outside with paisley green curtains keeping us in. There was them and us. They seemed different, though. They took off their shirts to show their skinny white bodies in black bikini tops. There were no back seats, so we were all just sitting on the floor, scattered and low. Brooke's neighbor lit up a joint and passed it to me. She barely even hit it. I thanked her and wondered why we didn't wear bathing suits.

We were all stoned when we got to the beach. Someone

opened the door, and we followed the smoke out. Two of the bikini girls ran toward the water. I squinted, my hand raised over my eyes so I could watch. They were racing and dove right into the blue. Andy looked at me, and I told her no before she asked. Brooke gave in, and they ran with all of their clothes on. They both stopped right before the water, tilting forward and then hopping back. I knew what they were feeling, contemplating. They stayed there for a little while; then Andy pointed her toe into the water. She looked at Brooke. They slowly made their way. After each step, they stopped to look at one another to decide if they should go on. Andy shook her arms out to her side and laughed. The bikini girls waved at them to join. After a while, they did.

Brooke's neighbor sat down beside me on the warm sand. She lit up another joint, and we passed it back and forth without talking. I started laughing at the four girls in the water. I smiled for a while, and the neighbor did, too. We started talking about guys and sex and school. It's all fucking bullshit, she said. High school is such a joke and everyone is lost. They're trying not to fucking drown out there. She paused to let me speak, but I didn't know what to say. When I finally did I told her that I agreed, that everyone is acting because they're scared of who they might really be. It's like a bad movie that we'll never totally forget. She looked at me and laughed because she was making fun of her friends who aren't good swimmers. She seemed older to me, more wise. I looked at her, watched her hair blow back with the wind. She seemed so free, and I wanted that. I leaned into her, shaking, and I kissed her. I don't know why. It was soft and I immediately wished I hadn't done it. I looked back at the water and saw hands and heads and splashing. She said my name for the first time. I looked at her, and we kissed again, with tongue this time. Her mouth was warm and I wished I wasn't stoned. Her hand kept my hair from falling in my face. I loved kissing her. We stopped, and she lit the joint up

again. We passed it back and forth without talking until she said, You know, you're the first person I've ever kissed. I laughed and said, First girl, you mean. She said no.

Our friends ran back up from the beach, the four of them. They were wet and giggling and Andy rolled in the sand. Brooke told me I should have gone in and dripped water from her clothes all over me. We laughed together until we got into the van and drove back to school. I sat beside Brooke. Everyone was singing along with the radio while the sunlight blared in from the window. It was so bright I could hardly see the others. My stomach was still turning from the kiss. I couldn't believe I let myself go like that. I was embarrassed and hoped no one would ever find out. Brooke asked what my plans for the night were and I told her: I'm going to see a movie with my boyfriend. The song ended and I leaned up to close the curtain.

Temporary Insanity

Jeff wasn't home. She knew he wouldn't be. She could tell when she looked around that he hadn't been there in days; the house had that stale, un-lived-in smell. The shower was bone dry, as were the plants. The milk in the refrigerator was the same gallon that had been there when she'd left two weeks before.

She'd known. She'd known every time she called and there was no answer.

She decided it must be Jo Lynn. She'd only met her once. Starving third-world thin with stringy shoulder length dishwater blonde hair, sunken eyes, and sores all over her arms. She was Jeff's pot connection. She lived in a trailer park at the edge of town with her four stick-figure children.

Without actually deciding she was going to do so, she drove to the trailer park. Then she just drove around it until she saw Jo Lynn's banged up 1977 Buick Skyhawk with the crooked front bench seat clearly visible through the cracked windshield and the Visqueen driver's side window. She had second thoughts as she walked to the front door of Jo Lynn's house—an Airstream travel trailer with a red and rotting plywood shed built part-way around it. She hoped it wasn't too obvious that she'd begun to wheeze.

Jo Lynn opened the door with a look of surprise and invited her in. Elizabeth glanced around the room, noting the toys and dirty clothes strewn about but saw nothing that was identifiably Jeff's. Jo Lynn motioned her to a rickety, low-slung chair, circa 1970, with several articles of clothing spilling over the sides, as well as a few broken toys.

"Do you want a cup of coffee?" her hostess asked, pouring a cup without waiting for an answer. Jo Lynn

draped the laundry over her arm and batted the toys off the chair before plopping the cup of coffee in front of Elizabeth.

"Um, sure, I'd love some." Elizabeth sat on the edge of the stained chair. She only sat down because her legs were shaking.

"So what brings you here Elizabeth?"

"I'm looking for Jeff."

"Jeff's not here."

They were both silent for a moment. Elizabeth's hand trembled so badly she had to set the coffee on the burned formica table. She lit a cigarette. "Has he been staying here?"

"Yeah."

"With you?"

"Why do you care? What business is it of yours?"

"I'm his wife."

"You're splitting up. He told me."

"Well, he neglected to mention it to me." For a while it was quiet, and Elizabeth could hear nothing but her own labored breathing and the war drum that had begun in her head.

"You're not getting a divorce?"

"No. We are not."

"Then where have you been all this time?"

"You mean for the last two weeks? I have been on vacation with my mother in Mexico— are you sleeping with my husband?"

Jo Lynn looked down for a minute and bit her lip. "He told me you were splitting up. I wouldn't have done it otherwise. He said you were done with him. I don't know; it just happened."

"Yes. It happens with some regularity." She briefly wondered what venereal diseases she'd been exposed to in the process. The thought made her nauseous. "Do you know where he is?"

"Yeah, I think he's doing work on Dr. Rollins's house

with Jack.”

“Okay.”

“He shouldn’t’ve told me you were getting divorced. That was shitty. I wouldn’t’ve done it, Elizabeth, even wasted, if he hadn’t’ve told me that.”

“Never mind, Jo Lynn. I’m not mad at you.” She stood, the room suddenly blurred by the pounding in her head. She was tired. She had tried so many times to make it work, she was tired of hearing yet again—“she’s just a friend, Babe. I’ve known her forever. She just needed a ride—her car fixed—a couple of bucks—she’s crazy, she’s always had a crush on me, she’s just trying to break us up”—*insert more B. S. here*. She was tired of patiently waiting for everything to be all right—“just as soon as I get this job—get a different job—get myself together—get another car—get out of this town—get through school”—*insert more lame excuses here*. She was tired of rationalizing and justifying his crap to herself over and over again—“He’s just having a rough time—of course he could have just forgotten to pay the electric after I gave him the money for it, things happen—well, they don’t look much alike but I guess she could be his cousin—his boss just doesn’t understand him—he’d never sleep with her, she’s not his type.” She’d wasted so much of herself.

“Where are you going? What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to talk to Jeff.”

“You shouldn’t talk to him like this. You don’t look so good. Why don’t you just sit for a few minutes and have another cup of coffee.”

She wanted to scream and claw the bitch’s eyes out. “I’m okay. Really.” She had to get out of this stifling, wretched place. “I’ll just go home for a little while and try to get myself together,” she lied and smiled. Sweetly, she hoped.

“That’s a good idea. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.” Jo Lynn followed her out the door to her car.

“It’s okay. Really. If it weren’t you, it would have been

someone else.”

She drove to Dr. Rollins's house in a fog. She couldn't think. She had no idea what she was going to say or do. *That's it! I'm not doing this anymore— I'm not doing this anymore. I can't. I won't. I'll just tell him to get out. Then I'll go home and throw all of his shit in the trash. No. I'll burn it— I'll burn it all— I'll set his fucking boat on fire, too.*

She pulled up in front of the house and sat there with the motor running. Jeff's face registered shock, quickly replaced by calculation. After a moment, he walked over to the car window. Dr. Rollins was gossiping with Jack on the front porch and the two of them watched the couple reunite.

“Babe! You're home! Did you just get in this morning?”

“No. I came in last night, which you would have known had you been home.” She couldn't breathe again.

“Oh. Well, I got a little wasted last night and stayed over at Jack's house. I knew you wouldn't want me to drive like that. Besides, we were working together again today anyway.”

“You've haven't been home in at least a week. I don't think you've been home since I left.”

“I've been staying with Jack. The house gets lonely when you're gone.”

She turned her head away for a minute and stared out the windshield. She could smell the exhaust; she wondered if that was what was making her so dizzy. Elizabeth looked back at him. “Stop lying, Jeff. Where have you been? Just tell me the truth. For once, just tell me the truth.” Her voice was flat. She felt calmer.

“I told you, honey. I've been at Jack's.” His blue eyes stared into hers. The sun caught in his lovely, wavy hair and Elizabeth fought an urge to snatch him by it and yank his head into the side of the car. Repeatedly.

“I just left Jo Lynn's. She's under the impression that we're getting a divorce.”

Silence.

Merciful blessed silence.

“Yeah,” he said, straightening up and stepping away from the car. “Well, at least she’s warm.” He turned his back on her and started to walk away.

I used to be warm once, too, she thought, when I believed “love” (she visualized his head slamming into the door), “honor” (again), “cherish” (and again) and “forsaking all others” (twice more—a bit of blood dripping down his forehead now) was for real and not just pretty words from a pretty boy.

She looked at the trees at the end of the street and had an overwhelming urge to drive the car into them – just floor it and drive as fast as she could. She could hear the shrieking metal, feel the satisfying impact.

Her foot itched. She eased it off the brake.

Jeff stepped in front of the car as he walked back over to his drinking buddies, pausing to glare at her one more time through the windshield.

For a split second, she imagined running him down. Driving that smirk off his face forever. *No*, she thought. Then she hit the gas.

Cold War

and you might have called it hippie love, but we were four decades late and protesting a different war. I was standing by a tree in Central Park smoking pot, and you were in the crowd holding a sign that said, "War Sucks." You walked up and took the bowl. You put it to your lips. And sometimes that's all it takes.

To say you were beautiful, implying that you were beautiful like all other things that are beautiful, would be a lie but not the kind of lie that passes in the moment. It would be more like "I'm not a crook" or "I did not have sex with that woman, Ms. Lewenski."

You had long dark hair that streaked gold in the sunlight's flashing rays. Your arms trembled, but still you held the sign high. If I was talented, in the way that great men are talented, I would have taken that moment and painted it on a canvas as big as a building or maybe etched it in stone to give civilization hundreds of years from now tangible proof that someone like you did, in fact, exist. But I am not that kind of man.

I should have told you I loved you, but the formality of sex and relationships and everything in between prevented any such thing from being said without first getting your name. You told me your name was Amy and that you went to college at Sarah Lawrence. I still loved you. I loved you more.

At a protest of well over one hundred thousand people, we walked through the crowd, wondering when it would be safe to exhale. My hand was in yours, and I could feel the moist grooves of your palm. I watched the mist leave your mouth and mix with the November chill as we lamented about rights violations against Arab Americans. You told

me about Sarah Lawrence and your dreams of becoming a civil rights attorney. I told you I wanted to be a writer, and you thought that was good. Again, I wanted to tell you I loved you. So I opened my mouth and cleared my throat. You looked up at me with your eyes illuminated against a somber setting. And I just smiled.

We continued to float through the protest until we ended up on a subway. Sitting quietly on the 3 train, the hypnotic drone of wheels on steel enchanted us. We went to your apartment, where I found out the necessary things that a man needs to find out about a woman before he kisses her. You're a huge Ani DiFranco fan. You're originally from Berkley, California. You told me about your twelve-year-old brother and your fear of spiders.

Then I kissed you.

In the corner of the apartment was a small lamp with a thin shade that turned the light from a blinding yellow into a dim orange. The beam stopped short of your bed, which was nothing more than a mattress on the floor. We were two people who weren't big on definitions, yet I found myself wishing I had a Webster's Dictionary handy. And maybe all things in life would ideally be better without definitions. But you were idealistic enough for the both of us. And that was just one more thing I loved about you.

My lips skimmed over your neck. You whispered "I'm scared," and I ignored you, not sure what a man should say when the woman he loves says she's scared. But you have to understand, in that moment, I learned all things celestial and earthly are made from the same material, which wasn't a discovery to take lightly. I clenched your hand, our fingers tangled. We lay there, eyes closed. I heard your breathing; I heard your heart, and yet each one of these separate noises engulfed the other, sinking the room into silence. And men have gone deaf from stillness tamer than that. So I wanted to say something like, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," but I am a writer and have already stolen far too many lines.

Lifetimes passed before I spoke; wars were waged and lost; man traveled to Mars and back before I asked you, "What are you scared of?" Your mouth opened then closed. Your lips shuddered, and I saw your eyes dart back and forth under your eyelids. I slid my fingers through your hair. Tears squeezed out as I waited for the answer, but this was just the first of many silences.

With morning came reality. With reality came definitions, so we became what some people might call boyfriend and girlfriend. We did the things that boyfriends and girlfriends do. We walked through Time Square, arms locked, laughing at the people who bought into the capitalist machine that is Bloomingdale's and Saks 5th Ave. We stayed up late, and I read you my stories. You sat bundled in a quilt drinking tea and staring at me. I sweated and stammered my words, and you leaned over and kissed me. I smiled, and you smiled, and then I continued with more confidence and flair.

This is how it went until a Monday months after the protest. You were sitting at your desk, and I was lying on the floor, working on a story about a man who lived by himself and only ate clam chowder. That's when you looked up from your sociology book and said, "I'm scared... I'm scared because I'm Arab, and Arabs are the new niggers."

I stopped writing but didn't move my eyes from the journal. I had never heard you use that word. We always turned off music that used it, and you yelled at my friend, who one night got drunk and voiced the word relentlessly. To hear you say it put rocks in my stomach. To hear you say it blinded me like an atomic flash. To hear you say it....

You cried mutely, and I felt your tears falling like angels. I said nothing. You put the weight of the world on your shoulders, and I tried to bear as much of that burden for you as I could. When you heard stories of battered woman and news broadcasts about rape victims, you laid in bed and cried into your pillow. When you heard the words

"ethnic cleansing" or "genocide," you froze up. I would have buried myself alive under that weight if it meant you could go one day without the tears, one day without the torture. But in your ideal world, the only person who was allowed to suffer was you. The paradox was every time you suffered, I suffered, too.

After that night, we went on exactly like we had before. We went to bookstores and drank coffee. We snuck into movies. We held hands on the subway. We ate pizza on 111th Street at Famiglia's. We visited Central Park and reminisced about the first day we met. At some point, it seemed like a good idea for me to go with you to Berkley to see your family, so we made the arrangements and bought the appropriate tickets.

The day before the trip, I called you to go over the details. You picked up the phone, and I asked you how your exams had gone. You answered, "Fine." I asked if you were finished packing. You answered, "Yes." I told you I was looking forward to going to California with you. And you didn't say a thing.

At first I was unaware this was becoming a cold war through quiet indifference. But ten seconds passed, and you still hadn't spoken. But the last thing I had said to you wasn't a question. I had only made a statement, and maybe it was wrong for me to expect you to reply with a simple, "I'm looking forward to going to California with you, too," although that did seem the custom. But now twenty seconds had gone by, and I was sure somewhere in the world people were mouthing the words to sad songs. And based on that logic, I decided to play cold war, too. But I had to wonder, was it logic that propelled men up a beach at Normandy? Was it logical for one man to stand in front of a procession of Chinese tanks, facing certain death? And after twenty-five seconds I wanted to scream, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" But every wordless moment that passed, another stone was put in place. And by now, the wall had been up for decades and was covered in graffiti.

And on the thirty-third second I was froze, staring at a microwave clock, thinking about the Gulf War and how it ended in forty-one days. I was thinking about Korea and Vietnam and how they dragged on for so many years. I was thinking about the world wars and how long they lasted. And this war had only been going on for thirty-seven seconds and was already the longest one in history.

Why weren't you responding? What was going through your mind? Were you thinking about the AIDS victims in Africa or the homeless man you saw everyday on your way to class? Those things were such a big part of your life that they killed you a little each day. And that became another thing I didn't want us to share, but that doesn't change the fact that I would have gone to Africa to hold all the dying children until they fell asleep. If I could have, I would have stopped the homeless man from shaking in the cold. I would have fed him and bought him new clothes. But tomorrow, it would be the homeless woman on 111th or the Chechen people being slaughtered by Putin and his army. And things would have gone on this way until all that pain started to kill me, too.

By the eighty-third second, I was ready to end the cold war. So I searched for the words of great men. If I had only spoken softly and carried a big stick, if I had only spoken of a Great Society or if I had a dream, I might have been in your arms that night, looking forward to our upcoming trip, but those were all the words of great men. And a great man I am not. So when I finally did speak, I said, "I have to go." And even as I was saying it, I wondered where it fit in history. Would my words sit on the shelf of your heart next to the words of Mahatma Gandhi and Malcolm X? And when I hung up the phone, I still loved you. And every day since. Even now, the cold war rages on, and I can picture you in the park with your cheeks a gloried red.

Submission Guidelines

We are accepting submissions for Fiction Fix Third Injection Vol. III, due to be published in December 2004. This issue will be open for submissions of short fiction and novel excerpts. Please submit each submission electronically as a Microsoft Word attachment to:

fictionfix@hotmail.com

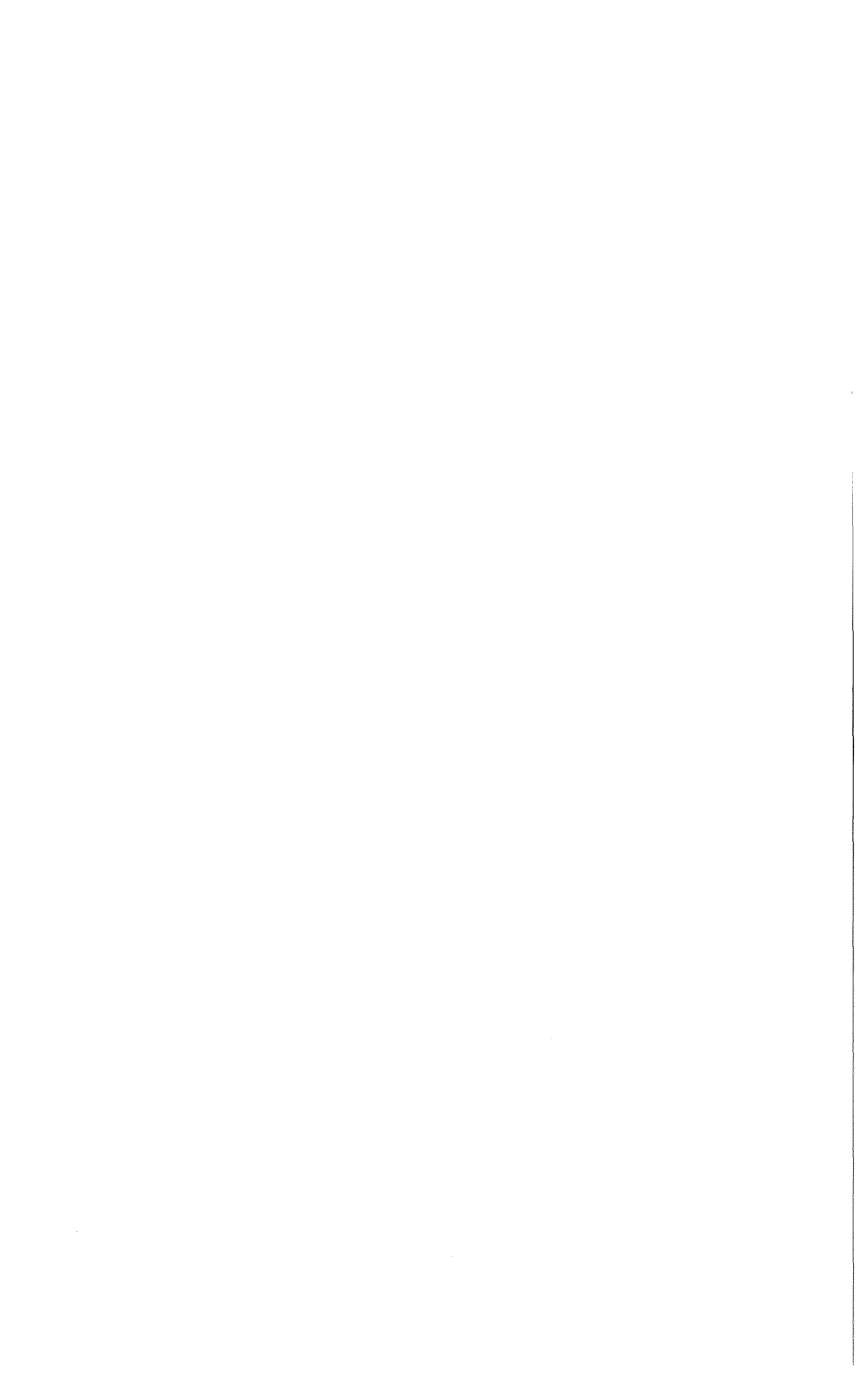
All manuscripts. . .

Must be anonymous; names should appear in emails only. They must be double spaced with one inch margins and Times New Roman 12 point font. Fiction Fix does not set a word limit, but greater consideration will be given to stories under 3000 words.

The deadline for submissions is June 15, 2004. Submissions received after that date will be considered for the Fourth Injection Vol. IV.

We thank you for contributing to our publication.

The Crew of Fiction Fix



U.S. \$8.00

I didn't ask
what your problem was,
but why don't you tell me a story...

Welcome, fiction junky!

Some people get their fixes by shooting up herione or snorting cocaine. Others are addicted to alcohol, cigarettes, sex, sports, or TV. But when my hands start shaking and I break out into a cold sweat, nothing cures me quicker than a good dose of gripping fiction...

Fiction Fix is celebrating its first birthday with the Second Injection. Although this publication is fully staffed by former and current students of the University of North Florida, the following eleven stories are penned by both Fiction Fix members and authors outside our staff. Enjoy!

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4567 St. Johns Bluff Rd. South
Jacksonville, Florida 32267
fictionfix@hotmail.com

