

BEAUTIFUL

CHAOS

SETON
CATHOLIC CENTRAL
HIGH SCHOOL

2010-2011
CREATIVE WRITING
CLASSES

BEAUTIFUL CHAOS

The Journal of the
2010-2011
Seton Catholic Central High School
Creative Writing Classes

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DEDICATION

*Seton Catholic Central High School's
Creative Writing Classes of 2010 & 2011
would like to thank*

*Tom Monteleone and Paul Wilson
for their their time and efforts.*

*Thank you for visiting us, helping us learn the craft of fiction,
and for sharing your knowledge and expertise.*

*Thanks also to the Broome County Discovery Center,
Laura Hobbs of the Arts Partners Program,
Broome County Catholic Schools,
and the Diocese of Syracuse
for helping to make this year possible.*



SYRACUSE DIOCESE
CATHOLIC SCHOOL OFFICE

At Seton, authors share secrets of the writing life



JENNIFER MICALE / Staff Photos

Author Tom Montealeone gives advice to student writers Thursday at Seton Catholic Central High School.

Creative writing students receive advice, feedback on work

By Jennifer Micale
jmicale@gannett.com
Staff Writer

BINGHAMTON — Tom Montealeone rustled the sheets of the short story, then looked out at the circle of silent students, who soaked in his every word.

"Some of you don't give a damn about punctuation," he said as the teens broke out into laughter.

But they should, he counseled. Writing is rewriting. It's revising, editing, looking at a piece with a critical eye.

And he should know. He's written 27 novels, mostly science fiction, horror and thrillers.

Across the hall at Seton Catholic Central High School, F. Paul Wilson — a New Jersey native who has published more than 40 books of his own in the same genres — spoke to another circle of novice writers.

The authors gave feedback to students in Kevin Lucia's creative writing classes Thursday and will continue today at the school. The program was funded by a \$3,000 Arts Partners grant from the Discovery Center of the Southern Tier, one of about eight grants offered this year, said Laura Hobbs of the Discovery Center.

"There's too much weather in the opening," said Wilson while reading a student's work. "The scene is really Randy's scene, so open with



Author F. Paul Wilson gives feedback to student writers Thursday at Seton Catholic Central High School.

Randy. You can talk about the snow through Randy."

Working in groups, students learned what worked — and didn't — from the two authors, Lucia and fellow teacher Kristen Kinner. Plot dynamics, character, grammar — all the many threads that make up the tapestry of a story — were discussed.

"We're trying to make it approachable to a general audience," said sophomore Damon Smith, who wrote a H.P. Lovecraft-type tale of "dark secrets and great flaming horror." The workshops, which continue today, are a special boon for Smith, who said Wilson is one of his favorite writers.

Sophomore Emily Ziewicz and senior Pat Clancy said the experi-

ence was valuable and a departure from essay writing. It's tough, too, because the writers have to expose their work to criticism.

"You learn not to take it personally," said Ziewicz, whose story concerned an abusive relationship.

Students were mixed on whether they could see themselves as professional writers; Clancy said he saw it more as a hobby.

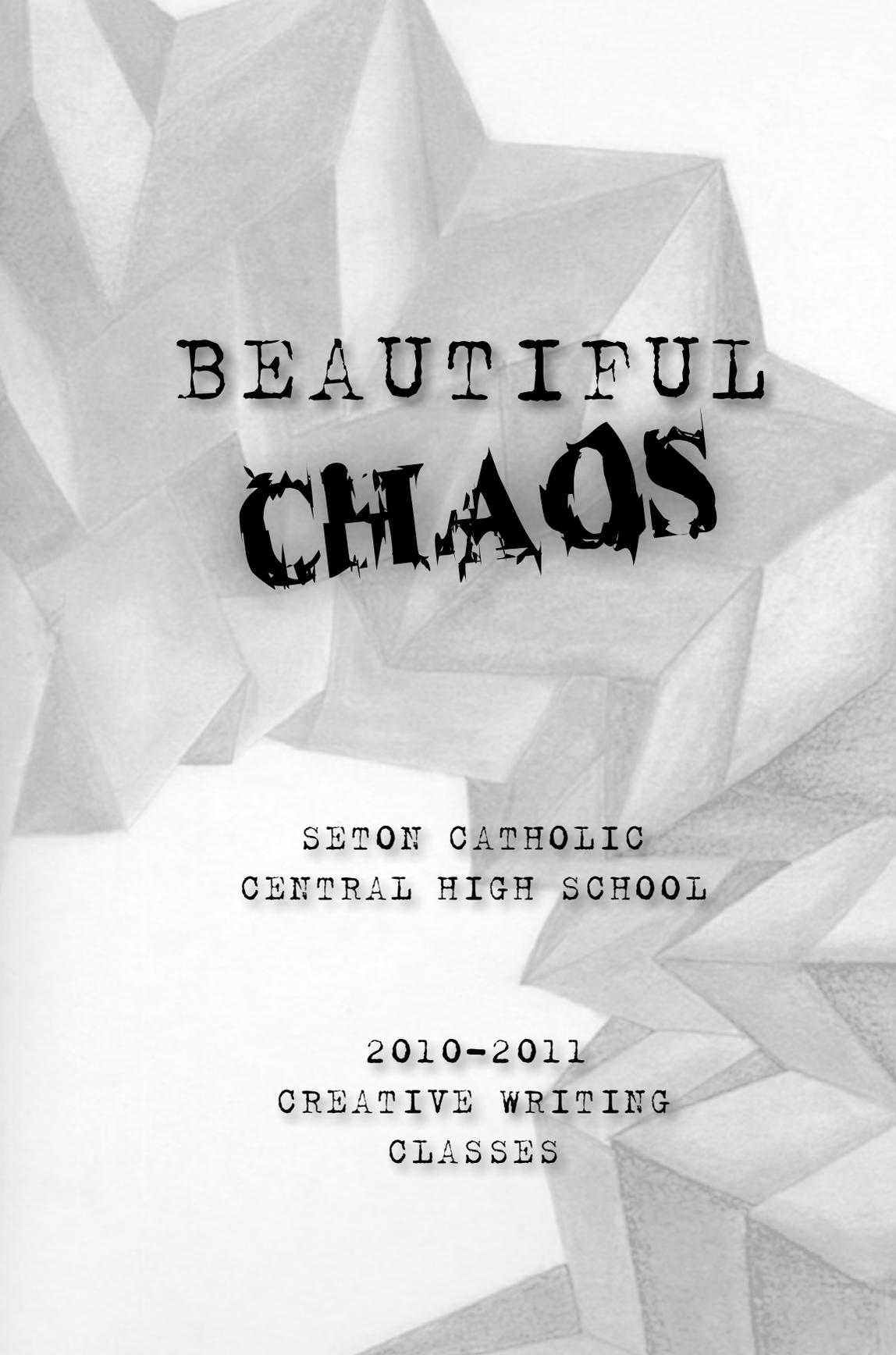
And that may be for the best. The life of a writer is a precarious one, said Montealeone noted, who sold his first story in 1972.

The first question he asks would-be writers, whether students or adults: "Why do you want to write?"

"The best answer you can get: It's the person who says 'I can't not write,'" he said.

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The background of the entire page is a grayscale image of crumpled paper, creating a textured, three-dimensional effect with various folds and shadows.

BEAUTIFUL
CHAOS

SETON CATHOLIC
CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

2010-2011
CREATIVE WRITING
CLASSES



THE EXPRESSION
OF
VICTORY

John Kline

MR. KEVIN LUCIA
9th-10th English • 10th-12th Creative Writing
Seton Catholic Central High School

FOREWORD

THE INSTRUCTION OF CREATIVE WRITING IS A STRANGE animal. There are plenty of set rules and standards—all that “Englishy” stuff—that needs to be taught, plus the “rules” of prose: writing dialogue, “showing” and not “telling,” avoiding the “info dump,” and POV (point of view) rules.

However, there’s much room for preference. Choice of genre and 1st, 2nd, 3rd person Omniscient or Limited perspective. Spare, minimalist exposition or Bradburyesque flair for the dramatic. Backstory, or implication only. A “leave ‘em hangin’” ending or a traditional resolution answering all the reader’s questions. Opening the story *in media res*—in the middle of the action—or offering a classic exposition that introduces all the characters and sets up the plot. Regarding that: plot driven story, or character driven?



Tom Monteleone critiques student work.

It's mind-boggling. Teach all that? AND, don't forget—teach it to an eclectic group of 10th-12th graders, a mix offering experienced creative writers, dabblers, and seniors who need an elective to graduate, and my class looked easier than AP Astronomy. And do all that in a class that runs from September to June, five days a week, when most Creative Writing classes on the collegiate level run for only a semester and meet two or three times a week.

The last two years have been experimental, moving toward something more structured and ordered. I learned very quickly that while half the class read all the material I provided on the Honor System alone, the other half didn't, so I—reluctantly—brought quizzes, midterms, and finals into the picture.

Also, five days a week for the whole YEAR is tough to fill. After the smattering of notes on Creative Writing fundamentals and theory, group workshops on student pieces, writing labs in the computer lab, discussion of the ever-changing publishing industry, debriefing after



Norman Prentiss, Bram Stoker-nominated Author of *Invisible Fences*, with former and current Creative Writing students (L to R): Julia Williams, Meg Cavanaugh, Erin Donovan, and Victoria Harding.

author visits, I was still left with lots of empty class time. SO, Thursdays and Fridays became affectionately known as “Buffy Days,” during which we screened Seasons 1, 2 & 3 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, simply because Joss Whedon (director, producer, writer) is one of the best writers in the business. He’s just such a good thematic storyteller.

And of course, I quickly learned that only half the class would watch *Buffy* closely and pay attention on the Honor System, so eventually the “Buffy” essays on the midterms and finals were born, along with paragraph summaries for every episode: summary, reaction, takeaway.

Thus, the creation of our “Visiting Writers” program, the core of my Creative Writing class. Having to meet with authors once a month, reading and analyzing their work, interacting with them, was better than anything I could teach. Hopefully, most of my students gained something from this, and I guess that’s my greatest hope: not that I’VE taught them so much about Creative Writing, but that I’ve



Phil Tomasso, author of *The Molech Prophecy*, with students Vincent Paniccia and Dan Maetzner

exposed them to a wide variety of writers, styles, and creative influences powerful enough to teach them through experience alone.

This year, we were fortunate to experience hands-on instruction when New York Times Bestseller Paul Wilson and USA Today Bestseller Tom Monteleone brought their famed Borderlands Press Writers Bootcamp on the road to our school. Even though our third day got snowed out, the students I'm sure learned more from this experience than I could've taught them myself, having their work critiqued, receiving hands-on-instruction from two bestselling novelists.

The stories in this journal are the works Tom and Paul critiqued for us. Some of them finished pieces. Others excerpts of works still in progress, or vignettes offering snapshots of life. Some are polished, others a bit rougher. Some approach a level of seriousness, either through dramatic "life" matters, or offering thrills and suspense.

There's a serial killer lurking among these pages, pursued by grim homicide detectives. Children of destiny. Of the night. A doomed cosmonaut lost in space. A splash of military sci-fi. A somber reflection on teenage pregnancy. A young woman haunted by the death of a childhood playmate ... or maybe haunted by her cursed stuffed animal (who



F. Paul Wilson, *NY Times* bestselling author, critiques student work.

knows?) Watch out, there's even a severed head in here somewhere, too.

Others are fun, witty, whimsical, ranty ... even unabashably silly. An elf fed up with the corporate machine of the North Pole who wants his OWN life. A girl rebelling against her parents' cultish ways to find real love. A touching homage to J. D. Salinger. A serial house sitter. A man wearing a tutu. One story even features a magical robot unicorn named Charlie.

What's important to consider is that over half these students had never once considered Creative Writing as a pursuit before this class. However, now they've been exposed to the following truths:

Writing Fiction can be considered Art.

Writing Fiction can also be a career that, in come cases, CAN provide a living, or at least an income.

Writing Fiction requires HARD WORK and DEDICATION and SACRIFICE.

But, Writing Fiction should also be fun.

And, though an Art form requiring HARD WORK, DEDICATION, and SACRIFICE, it can also be LEARNED.



Claudia Gabel, author of Scholastic Book's teen series *In and Out*, and *Romeo & Juliet & Vampires*, with Seton student, Julia Laude.

And in that, I feel what little I've tried to do this year has been successful.



Upper Left: F. Paul Wilson talks about the fundamentals of Creative Writing.
Upper Right: Rio Youers, author of *Mama Fish* and *End Times*, shares his story.
Bottom: Tom Monteleone critiques student work.

VICTORIA HARDING

THE KETCHUP ON THE RYE

MY NAME IN DJ COFFING AND MY SHRINKS TELL ME I SHOULD start writing about what happened. My *feelings* and stuff. Whatever. I'll tell you what happened but I'm not going to make it about my feelings and all that happy crap. So, this is how it happened ...

I had just got kicked out of school again and I thought I'd go out on a spree with the cash I had on hand. I decided to go to the movies with Bradford. I really wanted to hang with him, but halfway through the flick I got utterly cheesed at the guy and ditched him. What a poser. After my escape from Brad boy I hit up the local brothel. I thought I was being real smart about it because I looked older than I was. In the end I couldn't go through with it because it made me real sad thinking about that girl. So I left to be by myself for a bit.

After about ten minutes I realized that I hated to be by myself, so I went to Chuck's for a drink. That didn't pan out too well because I totally forgot that Chuck was a complete and total creeper. If he were any sketchier, he'd be a perverted doodle on an artist's sketch pad. That's right, 'Grade A' wacko. I practically jumped out the window to get away. I needed to be alone.

In the end, I was just sitting by myself in some diner. That's where it happened. That's where I ordered ... the sandwich. It was a simple sandwich. Thinking back on it, I can't even remember what kind of meat was in it. The waitress brought it out on a mostly-clean plate and I slowly opened it up to decorate it with condiments. I snatched up the Heinz and squirted it on thick. The bright red deeply contrasted with the plain floppy bread. It was rye bread. That was it. I couldn't take it anymore. Just the way it was ... was so horrible. The ketchup.

The ketchup on the rye.

It made everything perfectly clear to me. The world is a piece of rye bread. And me ... I'm the ketchup. I am the one who must give flavor to the bland mediocrity of this town. I'm the one who makes it red. So that's how I got here. That's it. I just flipped out. That and I think I'm a little bipolar. But hey, what are you gonna do?

DOMINICK MAIDA

COMMANDER VLADISLAV YEFIN

HELLO. MY NAME IS COMMANDER VLADISLAV YEFIN. I am the chief engineer for the Deep Inter-Solar Exploration Branch (DISEB) of the Russian Space Program. This is the tenth day of my ordeal. It is June 20, 2046, dark as usual with a steady temperature of -60°C. Here is my story:

I triple-checked the fluorescent orange safety belts and rearranged my helmet for maybe the twentieth time. The chin strap was a little too tight but with experience, I'd learned it is better to have more protection than less. I looked over at my second in command, Lt. Spartak Yakov (everybody calls him Yaky). I gave him a wink and thumbs up. I hate this time the most. I am strapped in with my crew of six; sweating, pulse racing, waiting for the all-clear and countdown.

"Commander, are we ready?" Our communications officer buzzed in my ear piece as I scanned the control board for the zillionth time. "Moscow has given us the all clear for lift off."

"Clear for lift off," I responded.

Counting down in my head, I felt the shift of the floor panels trembling beneath my feet as the main boosters ignited on the 10th count. On the 2nd, I hear the screams of metal under pressure. After the 1st, the horizon line began to fall as the ship started its ascent. After the first minute, the two main rocket boosters fell off, and that was when the ship really began to reach supersonic speeds.

"Yaky, what do we have on elevation?" I asked, wishing to break the silence and have a general idea when the rocket engine will shut off and we will enter into interspace gliding.

“We are at 400, 401, 402 kilometers and moving at a steady speed,” he replied with a cheery glance at the blue dial on top of the panel.

Suddenly, “Iv” Iverfenk, the observation officer on the port side of the craft, took in a sharp breath and yelled, “Hey guys, there’s a large blip on the radar about 1100 kilometers away and closing in fast!”

“What?!” I shouted.

“Holy crap, there’s a— a— a thing flying right toward us! It’s at ten-thirty, 890 kilometers from us and closing in at 1000m/sec.”

My brain worked on autopilot as I reached to my left and punched the circular green button that activates the manual control for the rocket boosters. As I pushed the button and reached for the controls, ready to steer the craft in a more easterly path, nothing happened except for hearing a lot of background noise as my crew scrambled around.

No! I yelled in my head as I repeatedly punched the manual override button, to no avail.

“MOSCOW!” I practically screamed into my headset, “We have a problem with our override system, it’s failing to connect.”

Yaky stared at me, knowing that whatever the answer may be, it could determine the fate of our lives.

“There is no override system connection ...” Came the buzzing response in my earpiece “ ... We have unwired all manual commands for the first 45 minutes from takeoff ... Do not attempt to change course ... Good luck ...”

I felt betrayed and sweated out a flood of emotions as my mind slowly came to the realization that my crew and I were at a total loss. I could not believe command did not tell us about this “unwiring.” As if we were some part of an experiment, for the total gain of the government and possible loss by me and my guys. However, I had to keep a cool head as we were now on a collision course with a speeding comet or some sort of intergalactic junk (which was NOT on any of the charts we examined.)

“Iv, keep an eye on the port windows. Zac (our flight instrument

geek) check on our positioning and acceleration. Yaky ... ummm just keep within earshot.”

Throwing down my headset, frustrated beyond anything I'd ever experienced in this world, I moved toward the emergency exit on my right.

“Cap. I have a visual of the blip.” Iv reported. “It is still far away but it seems to be red?”

“Okay, in four minutes report to the rear,” I responded.

Then it snapped. Red? No natural comet or meteorite emits the color red at these high speeds in space, only man-made objects. Could it be this was a suicide mission? Is that why Moscow cut the manual steering? To disable us from doing anything to save ourselves? Are we now sitting ducks? Like pigs in the slaughterhouse?

“SIR!” faithful Yaky screamed. “We have 70 seconds until impact. Get to the rear NOW!”

I ran with him down the short hallway to the loading dock and strapped into the Individual Emergency Craft, checking over the rest of my men as we proceeded to bail out.

Counting down in my head, I gave the command to eject with approximately 10 seconds until the ... the “thing” would crash into our craft. I flicked the red switch and we all lurched forward, the rear hatch flung open. As the commander, I exited last, allowing the junior officers to be the first through the green portal. We really weren't supposed to eject as fast as we did. According to protocol we are required to keep at least five seconds between personnel. Yet in this case we were all out in thirty.

This was when the ship quite literally blew up and disintegrated. Whatever it was that hit must have been at least one hundred meters across and five thousand kilos. These dimensions blew the ship apart and tongues of fire engulfed all of us racing away.

“Hello? Hello??” I called out “All units call in”

The silence was oppressing. All I could see was the moon as I twisted and turned around the dark expanse of space that engulfed me.

White-hot bits of metals flew past my visor, a horribly high-pitched screeching reached my ears. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw what remained of our ship. The entire loading dock was gone, as well as the front third of the nose. The observation windows were smashed and what remained of the body had severe dents and scratches. What remained of the spaceship was a shard of its original grandeur.

There was a brief period when I passed out, overcome with adrenaline and shortness of breath. After maybe four minutes I came to.

“All units ...” and then I stopped. There was no chance anybody would respond.

After about thirty minutes of floating, I passed into the shadow of the moon, the temperature dropping more than forty degrees Celsius.

“Blast.”

The moon began to loom closer and closer. I realized that I had begun to orbit the moon, steadily approaching a dangerous free-fall. The craters began to become better defined and the surface took on a bright white sheer color. The legs of the landing gear snapped into place and I braced for impact ...

And so that is how it happened. I am too ashamed to recall what happened in the few, supernatural moments following the collision. All that I know is that I am here and every 27 minutes and 18 seconds I am reminded of my crew which once was, revolving above around ... and around ... and around ...

DAMON SMITH

CTHUNGA'S SCONCE

I.

DURING MY SECOND YEAR AT MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY, in the small Massachusetts town of Arkham, the local museum began hiring extra staff members. They had recently received a loan from the Cairo Museum; an ancient brass Sconce that was found within the crumbling ruins of a city within the Arabian Peninsula called Tell Halaf; a city far older than mankind was thought to be. Because of the rarity of the object, they decided to hire more men for security. Desperately needing money to cover the extravagant costs of attending Miskatonic, I contacted the museum curator, Robert Amos, and got the job.

II.

UPON ARRIVING AT THE MUSEUM, I WAS GREETED BY ROBERT himself. A grizzled old man who had a queer look in his eyes that told me he had seen things that would turn the hair of most men white. He motioned to me and took me to the room where they kept the Sconce. I was not truly prepared for what I saw when I saw the Sconce. I was expecting the fixture to be a simple bowl made of stone or bone, but instead, much to my surprise, the Sconce was actually several smaller Sconces layered within each other; each made of brass and possessing bizarrely shaped holes within. I guessed that, when a fire was lit within the Sconce, the light shining through those holes would create images on the walls. The other peculiar thing about the room was the fact that, outside of a skylight directly above the Sconce,

the room was completely void of any other exhibits. Amos informed me that I would be on the night watch in this room because the old watchmen had “left” his station. When I asked why, Amos gave me a frank and frightening answer.

III.

THE “INCIDENT”, ACCORDING TO AMOS, HAPPENED ABOUT A month ago on the night of the full moon. The guard began the shift a very sane and lucid man, but when dawn broke, they found him barely alive. He had used his blood to write strange symbols upon the walls. When the authorities finally arrived to take him to the asylum, he ranted about many a horrific and pagan thing. He spoke of The Crawling Chaos Nyarlathotep, messenger of the Great Old Ones whom Azatoth is their leader. Of the unknown planet Yuggoth and the Sentient Fungi the Mi-Gos, who serve the Crawling Chaos. Most terrifying of all, he spoke of the Great Cthulhu, who lies dreaming within the sunken city of Ry’leth and who, through his rising, shall signal the second coming of The Great Old Ones.

IV.

IN ALL HONESTY, I DID NOT BELIEVE THE OLD MAN’S STORY. I simply shrugged it off as just another person who went insane due to work-related stress and nothing more. I told him that regardless of what happened to my precursor, I needed the money. So I was taking the job no matter what. Looking back, I should have listened to the old coot.

V.

THE NIGHT WATCH BEGAN RATHER UNEVENTFULLY. I WAS THE only one in the museum, as Amos had left an hour earlier. By now it was about midnight, and the heavy cloud cover which seems to be omnipresent during Fall in Arkham cleared up enough to let the stars shine through. I noticed, then, that tonight was a full moon. Its light

filtered through the skylight and into the Sconce, reflecting through the holes onto the walls of the room. The images cast were not as of the Ancient Gods of the Earth, but were horrible blasphemous things instead. Through some horrific epiphany, I knew their names.

Evil eldritch things, older than the universe itself, the faces of Yog-Sothoth, the guardian of the gate, Shub-Niggurath the Goat With a Thousand Young; Mother Hydra and Father Dagon waiting beneath the ruins of Devil's Reef, waiting for the sign to return to their damned children, The Deep Ones, and the mighty Tindalos, who waits beyond the curves of time, plotting his revenge against The Great Old ones who betrayed him.

VI.

I KNEW THEN THAT I MUST DESTROY THIS THING BEFORE ITS million screaming silences could reach other ears. I grabbed the flashlight Mr. Amos had provided—as he feared a gun would lead to destruction of museum property—and rushed to the Sconce, ready to smash it. But upon reaching it, I had the misfortune of glancing within the center. Within the flames created by the demonic moon I glimpsed a face; a face similar to my own but also horrifically alien. A face that man had glimpsed since he first gazed into the flames of the abyss and had it stare back into him. The blackened glow of the eyes of an alien God forever suspended within the Sconce's light. A writhing mass of luminescent darkness began to utter its name to me within the deafening silence of that night, and soon I spoke its name with it.

“Cthuga ...”

At that moment, the moon was once again obscured by clouds. Thankfully, I was freed from the eyes of that forbidden God, and passed into unconsciousness.

VII.

I AWOKE WITHIN A CELL AT ARKHAM SANITARIUM, BOUND within a straitjacket, inside a padded room. When the morning came,

Amos apparently found me on the floor in a similar state as that of my predecessor. But unlike him, who later I discovered had hurled himself into the muddy waters of the Miskatonic River shortly after the incident; I am still alive. I know the truth now. I know that the day when those stars align and Ry'leth rises from its ocean depths, the first great horror to come will not be the end of Cthulhu's dreams. Nor shall Nyarlathotep arrive before his brethren from beneath the shifting sands of Egypt. The threshold shall not be opened and its infernal guardian Yog-Sothoth will not spread its luminescent wings upon an unsuspecting world before dreams end. No, the first horror to come will be the day when the stars align and the Earth itself shall crack open, and from its burning depths shall rise the infernal city of Dis, long lost to the human race's memory and thoughts, and from it the fires of madness shall burn and sear the land, and when mankind is on its knees blistering and boiling from the very fires of hell, Dis's master shall arise. The blackened sun. The blinding night. The endless shining darkness that is Cthuga! And then the universe itself shall burn to ashes and be remade in the image of its new rulers; those wretched Eldritch things from beyond the curves of time, those things from which the voices from beneath the darkest seas praise and fear above all other beings, the Great Old Ones.

PAT CLANCY

DAN THE MAN

DAN COULDN'T REMEMBER A WORSE DAY. He found out his girlfriend was cheating on him. After leaving his job and telling his boss to "get bent," Dan found out that the other job had skipped town to do its "business" elsewhere. He was behind on a few payments with rent and his landlady was on him like flies on ... well, anyway, he was short on cash because he just gave his girlfriend a \$1,000 necklace and she had promised on delivery of the necklace that he could move in with her. She failed to tell her other boyfriend about this.

"Give it back! I need the cash now!"

"No! You can't take it back, it was a gift!"

"Because you said I could move in! You're cheating on me so I need that back to pay my bills!"

"Well then you should keep better track of your finances. It's not my problem you're stupid. Now get out, or I'm calling the cops!"

He knew she would. She had before. Not a big deal, but he had to get outta there.

"All right, fine. I'm goin', let me get my stuff first. It will only be like 5 minutes, that's all I need."

"All right. Get your stuff and leave."

He walked into her room, grabbing only what he needed. Her credit cards, cash, and the necklace. He snuck out the back window and sped down the road.

"Wow, what a DITZ."

He made his way across town to his apartment. Of course his landlady would be standing there waiting for him.

“Honey you gotta give me some cash now, you ain’t got no job and you owe me.”

“No no no, you got that all wrong. I gotta job and I’m gonna pay the rent! Everything’s fine! I’ll just go up to my room and get what I owe ya!”

“Oh sweet heart, you take your time. I’ll just wait right here, outside your door, waiting.”

“Yeah, I’ll be right out don’t worry ‘bout it!”

He only grabbed what he needed—extra cash, things he could carry with him in his pockets.

“Wow. How does that work twice in one day?”

She was hollering about rent she would be lucky to get. She aint gonna get none of it! And down the street he drove, he wasn’t coming back. He didn’t know where to go but it was sure that he wasn’t staying. He used his girlfriend’s credit to pay for gas, thank God he had an SUV. He drove out of New Jersey and into New York.

“Clancy’s Pub ... yesss.”

He drank until he couldn’t use the credit cards of his ex anymore. Then he used her cash. He stumbled across the bar. As he attempted to walk, the beer he spilled on the floor caused him to fall tumbling down, but the floor was not as far as he could fall.

He fell faster then he could have ever driven, he knew he was tripping but he couldn’t help but scream. When he landed he hit his head on the hard ground, but when he looked he was no longer in the bar. He realized that he had been transported to another dimension!

He ran around like a madman, trying to figure out how to get back to New Jersey. The sky was alive with birds and other weird stuff he couldn’t even describe. He walked around for hours until the sun started to go down and he made shelter under a tree.

“This is stupid! I lost all of that girl’s cash falling here and now I’m hungry.”

Dan continued to grumble to himself until he realized he was not alone. Two creatures crawled out of the bushes next to him, bewil-

dered by his presence. They were like dogs or bears or something.

“Can you get me outta here?”

“Yes! That’s why we came! We are on our way to find the Evil Eye! He can help you get home!”

“I’m Billy and this is my best friend Mandy! We have magic powers!”

“We can help you! But you must follow us and do what we say!”

“Oh my God! I don’t care at all, just get me home. How long will this take?”

“Only a few days!”

“Nope, I’m tired, too much work.”

“No, you have to follow us!”

“Well, do you have something for me to ride cause I ain’t walkin’ nowhere. I don’t wanna do anything right now. I feel awful.”

“Yes, you can ride Charlie, he is the magical Robot Unicorn! “

Charlie the Robot Unicorn ran right next to where Dan was standing, and he was screaming the most obnoxious song Dan ever heard.

“He won’t sing that all the time will he?”

“No, I can hum it if that’s better for you!”

“No.”

“Great! Hop on my back and make all your wishes come true!”

“What is that supposed to mean?! That is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard! Why did you say that?!”

“Um ... uhhhh, I don’t know why I said that ... it just seemed like ... umm ... something I should say at the time ...”

“Well don’t. It’s weird.”

Dan finally got on Charlie after he had some time alone to come up with a new slogan, but he failed to do such a thing and just cried for a few moments, contemplating where his life was going and what his life really meant to anyone else. When Billy and Mandy finally convinced him not to kill himself, and helped him out of his spiraling

depression, they were ready to begin their journey! They walked all night through the forest and in the morning reached a small village of candy people.

“About time. I’m starving!”

“No! Those are our friends! They will help us on our journey!”

“How many times do I have to tell you that I really don’t care at all.”

And so began the great massacre of the noble and gentle candy people. A peaceful people, they had no army or weapons to defend themselves and were no match for Dan, who slaughtered them mercilessly.

“Please stop, that’s my wife! Take me instead!”

“Eh, you don’t look to good, so I’m gonna have to pass on that one. What are you anyway ... butterscotch?”

“Yes! I’m delicious! Take me instead!”

“What? Oh sorry. Yeah, I’m done. If you wanted some you should have asked.”

“Oh my God! What have you done!”

“Well it started when my girlfriend broke up with me ... anyway, that will take forever. I’ll just leave you alone.”

“You killed everyone! All my friends and family and everyone I ever knew! You killed them! You killed them all!”

“Eh, this stuff happens. My girlfriend cheated on me and, hey look at me, I’m doin’ fine. So sack up.”

“My life means nothing anymore. I have nothing left to live for ...”

“Well hey, that’s not true! You can come with us! Were on our way to the great and All Seeing Eye!” said Billy.

“Well, all my people are dead. I guess I really have no choice to do anything else. Maybe I could start a new life.”

“There’s the hope! Come on and make all you wishes come true!” screamed Charlie.

“What did I tell you about saying that!” barked Dan.

“To not say it?”

“Yeah! So don’t! Is everyone this stupid everywhere?”

“Hey gang, let’s get going with our newest member ... umm what’s your name?!” chimed Mandy.

“Barron Von Butterscotch.”

“All right, Barron Von Butterscotch! Let’s go gang!”

The fellowship of Dan traveled many more miles before reaching the desert that they needed to cross to get to the All Seeing Eye. The desert was a vile desolate place where there was no life, only death. No water or shelter from the harsh elements for miles and miles. It was a place where thieves and murderers flocked. The quest continued on despite losing Billy to a horde of bandits. He was traded for 2 bags of beef jerky and a colorful swatch that did not have any batteries. Barron Von Butterscotch died of thirst and exhaustion after Dan made him walk on his hands for 6 miles then do jumping jacks until Dan said to stop—but Dan never said stop.

“I’m out of beef jerky! I think we should go back and get some more.”

“No, we can’t go back to save Billy we’re almost at the Eye!”

“All of our wishes are about to come true!”

“You can’t go. I told you not to say that again and you did, so go get me more beef jerky. Go on. If I don’t do this you’ll just end up growing up to be a brat. It’s called tough love. Now go get me some more beef jerky.”

“You really love me?!”

“No. Just get me some beef jerky.”

Charlie the Robot Unicorn was captured by the bandits, and since he didn’t have anything to trade for the beef jerky he was killed and melted down to make more swatches.

“So how does this work ... we just go and ask it things?”

“Yes. I plan to ask it for all of my friends that we lost on this journey to come back to life!”

“Sweet! No one cares. I’m getting outta here.”

“I am the All Seeing Eye. You may ask me for one thing today,” roared the floating glowing orb.

“Can I get outta here and go back to the bar?” asked Dan.

“It shall be done.”

A swirling portal of pure energy opened up and temporarily blinded the travelers.

“Well this is goodbye! I will never forget you Dan!” cried Mandy.

“Yeah, well, see ya.”

Dan stepped into the portal and found himself lying on the floor wearing a new swatch and holding a handful of beef jerky. No time had passed as he helped himself off the ground. Mandy did not realize that the Eye disappeared after it gave a wish or answered a question and she waited for the Eye to return until she was also found by the bandits who killed her.

CLARISSA WICKS

DESTINY

SO MUCH WAS EXPECTED OF HER. SHE THOUGHT BACK to the day her mother died. Those last few words still echoed in her mind. *It's all up to you now.* Why? Why her? She couldn't possibly achieve what they asked of her. NO ONE could. She sighed and looked back down at her book.

The time will come
It is plain to see
The fate of the world
Lies with thee

She had read these words again and again. Each time the meaning sunk into her skin and chilled her very bones. She couldn't do it.

I wish mom was here.

Mom. May collapsed onto her bed. Hot tears blurred her vision. It wasn't fair. The memory of her mother's death haunted her thoughts for the umpteenth time.

May heard the door to the living room open and slam shut.

"Mama mama! Papa's home!!"

"No no honey, don't bother him. He's very tired."

Her mother, who had been in the kitchen preparing dinner, ran, grabbed May's arm and held her close. May struggled in her grasp.

"But I wanna! Just one hug! Please just one hug!"

"No sweety! You can hug him tomorrow."

"But I wanna hug him NOW!!"

May broke free of her mother's grasp and sprinted toward her father.

She leaped into his arms with a squeal. A sharp pain vibrated through her body, causing her to let out a blood curdling scream. It felt as though barbecue tongs had been deeply gouged into her neck. Everything went black. When she awoke, she saw her mother lying on the ground next to her, breathing hard.

“Mama? Mama?!”

Her mother grabbed her hand and pulled her close.

“Do you remember that book I’ve always read you stories from?”

May felt the cold tears run down her face as she nodded.

“Good,” her mother smiled and squeezed her hand. “And what were the stories about?”

“Girls. Girls who saved the world. They were pretty and strong and always won. Then they had to have a baby and the baby would grow up and save the world too.”

Satisfied, her mother slid the brown, hardcover book towards May and squeezed her hand once more.

“It’s all up to you now.”

“Oh sweetheart—!” Her father burst through her bedroom door and beamed.

She sat up, forced a smile, and tossed the book under her bed.
“Yes, Papa?”

“Come help your father with some chores, will you?”

“Yes, sir.”

She went down the stairs and into the kitchen. The house teemed with activity. Her older brother, Mark, cleaned windows in the living room, while her younger sister, Vanessa, swept the small nooks and crannies where no one else could reach in the dining room. Unfortunately, this resulted in her head getting stuck between a dining room table chair and the wall.

“May, my darling, why don’t you start with—”

She had already scurried to the sink to begin washing dishes. Satisfied, her father smiled and grabbed his coat. May paused.

“You’re going out?” On the surface, she slumped. Deep inside, she tensed.

“Only for a bit. Hold down the fort while I’m gone!” He kissed her forehead and rushed out the door.

An apparent heaviness weighed down her entire body as a wave of disappointment flooded her. *Trapped. Always trapped. He won’t let me leave. Always watching. Always. He’s never away for too long. Ever since mom died I’ve been forced into the empty pieces of our family puzzle. I’m not mom. I hate this. I need to leave.* She continued the circular scrubbing motion on the plate in her hands, thinking. Up. Down. Up. Down ... and then it hit her. Tonight, it had to be tonight. *Papa couldn’t resist the lure of the local bar after a hard Friday’s work.* At that moment, she heard the screeching of a chair being pushed across the hardwood floor. She went into the dining room. Vanessa had popped free. She sneezed and shook her head wildly. May giggled and picked her up.

“Let’s get you cleaned up.” She walked toward the bathroom.

“Why’s Papa always out workin’?” She tugged on May’s necklace.

“Because we need money to buy food.” She freed her necklace by prying open Vanessa’s fingers.

“Why’s everythin’ gotta be so hard?” She popped her thumb in her mouth.

“I don’t know, Nessa ... I don’t know ...”

May blinked back the tears that started to blur her vision. She couldn’t leave Vanessa and Mark ... could she? The telephone’s all too familiar “clang” vibrated through the house. She went back into the kitchen with Vanessa in tow and picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey! Is your dad home?”

Aunt Jaime.

“Uhhh ... no, but hey, listen, can you do me a favor?”

“Sure kiddo! What do you need?”

She told her Aunt Jaime that her father was on an extended busi-

ness trip, that Mark had travel basketball, and that May wasn't going to be home because of summer camp. She asked her Aunt Jaime to look after Vanessa. When Aunt Jaime agreed, May hung up the phone and hummed a happy tune. She carried Vanessa upstairs and into the bathroom, gently scrubbing the dust off of Vanessa's body as they both sang loudly.

A few hours later, May's father dragged himself through the front door. He threw his coat onto the kitchen counter and stumbled up the short stairs. May gracefully drifted by him. Her nose scrunched in disgust at the stench of alcohol. He struggled to find the doorknob to his room, and when he finally managed to grab it, he threw himself inside and slammed the door shut. Perfect.

SHE BOLTED UPRIGHT IN HER BED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE night at the sound of her wristwatch. Cold sweat trickled down her body. She tensed and shifted. She felt an irritating itch. *I can't wait any longer.* She picked up her book once again and reread those haunting words in a moment's hesitation.

"No. NO! This isn't me!"

She jumped out of bed and grabbed a knapsack from behind her dresser. She stuffed the book inside it, and tiptoed down the hall. She closed her eyes and listened to the inhale and exhale of her father. He was fast asleep. She trembled as she hastily tiptoed down the stairs, threw on her shoes, and slipped out the door. Then she ran down the road, through the woods, ponds, and across neighborhoods. The panic and fear pressed hard against her chest, making it hard for her to breathe. She panted heavily, sweat pouring down her face. Her vision grew blurry, and the road before her spun. She tripped and skidded across the ground. She lay there, out of breath, out of strength, and out of will.

"You just gonna lay there all night? That can't be comfy."

She looked up to find a boy about her age staring down at her. She could barely see him. His hair was jet black, and his clothes weren't exactly colorful. The only thing that made him stand out was his sharp, fluorescent blue eyes. She inhaled sharply at the sight of them, and then slowly exhaled. *Calm down, it's not Papa.* He held out his hand. She took it and stood up slowly.

"So, what're you runnin' from?"

"Destiny." She looked into his eyes and blinked.

"Sounds fun. Mind if I join?"

She nodded and began walking.

"You know, you're never gonna get anywhere limping. You should rest a bit."

"The more time I spend resting, the closer he comes to bringing me back," she paused and whispered, "I can't go back."

He slapped her roughly on the back and smiled. "Then let's get movin'!"

AS THE DAYS PASSED, SONJAY AND MAY TRAVELLED THROUGH a dense forest due to May's urging. During their journey, she learned more about this mysterious boy. Sonjay. Such a rare name. She also grew more anxious. How long until he found her? How long? She fiddled with her necklace. *He can't take me back. I won't let him.*

"Woah! Somebody looks a little tense."

She snapped out of it and found Sonjay's face inches away from hers.

"I say we have a little competition." He waggled his eyebrows. She smiled.

"What kind of competition?"

"You go collect food, and I'll collect firewood. Whoever brings back the most wins."

"And what happens to the loser?"

“The loser,” he smirked, “has to follow the winner’s orders the rest of the day.”

May shot out her hand and grinned.

“Deal.”

They got into position, and when Sonjay whistled, they sped off in opposite directions. It took forever, but May picked tons of wild fruits and vegetables that threatened to tear her knapsack due to their sheer weight. She then added four canteens of fresh water from a nearby stream to the mix, and struggled to carry the load back to base. She dropped her findings at Sonjay’s feet. Her mouth dropped open. He had more wood than she had food, it was obvious.

“Your tiny woman arms couldn’t handle the weight huh?” He flexed his muscles.

She punched his arm and stuck her tongue out.

“Wood is way easier to carry than food! You cheated!”

“Sore loser are we? For my first command I want you to zip your lips!”

May scowled and crossed her arms.

“Good. Now for my second command, I want you to close your eyes.”

She frowned but did as he said. She waited a few seconds but heard nothing except his breathing. An alarm vibrated through her skull, but it was too late. She felt his hands at her sides and a shock of energy bolt through her body. She collapsed to the ground, closed her eyes, smiled, and howled with laughter.

“S-Stop! Hahahahahaha! Please!”

He then moved his way to her neck. A jolt of pain ripped through her body as he touched her scar. She immediately struggled to breathe and her eyes watered. She flung her hand out at him in an attempt to make him stop.

“OW!”

She opened her eyes and saw him lying on the ground holding his nose.

“Be careful stupid! You could’ve killed me!”

He chuckled.

“Please! You’re exaggerating! Besides, could you blame me for tickling you? You were wide open!”

She snorted and flung her knapsack over her shoulders.

“Come on, we have to get moving.”

“Now? Why?”

She looked up at the clear blue sky and fiddled with her necklace again.

“I can feel him coming.”

THAT NIGHT, SHE SAT ON TOP OF A HILL AND GAZED AT THE stars. She closed her eyes and thought of Vanessa and Mark. Vanessa would be asking for maple-filled cookies after dinner. Mark would be on the phone with his buddies talking about the football game. She wondered if Vanessa would cry because she wasn’t there to check for monsters under the bed. May knew better though. Monsters didn’t hide under the bed.

“Hey, mind if I sit with you?”

“Not at all.” She smiled and patted a place next to her.

“Be real with me for a second.” He looked at her. “What are you afraid of?”

After a long silence she spoke.

“A lot of things.”

“You gotta do better than that.”

She took a deep breath.

“My father. My family. My life. Everyone expects so much of me. I have no freedom ... Not to mention, my father poisoned me with this disgusting venom that’s ...”

She put her face in her hands. She couldn’t finish that sentence. He couldn’t know what she was becoming. Not yet.

“ I can’t even look at him without seeing this monster that ruined my life ... I can’t deal with this! I don’t want to! This isn’t me ... this isn’t my life ...”

She cried. Sonjay took her in his arms. She punched his shoulder but didn’t try to break free. She thought she heard him whisper a few comforting words before she drifted into darkness.

“I’ll save you.”

THE NEXT DAY THEY REACHED A SMALL TOWN. IT SEEMED FINE on the surface, but as they explored the buildings, May paled. The scene looked all too familiar. Everything was deserted. Streets, houses, jails, even the local hospital, empty. ... *Papa ... what have you done?*

“Huh, weird. Where is everyone?” Sonjay frowned when he saw May’s expression.

“We need to leave. Now.”

“What? Why?”

“ ... Do you want me to show you?”

He nodded.

“Then follow me.”

She led him to the very last house at the far end of town. A mansion that seemed out of place. She ushered him inside and guided him through an array of staircases and doorways until finally descending into the basement.

“How do you know this place so well?” he smiled a little, “Psychic?”

She shook her head. “I’ve seen this many times before.”

She hesitated before pushing open the door. Its hinges shrieked in agony. Two mutilated bodies collapsed at Sonjay’s feet. He looked up, slowly, to see a Victorian-styled room. An old, carefully groomed carpet covered the floor, and deep red drapes hid the walls. Black, plush, antique furniture was strategically placed around the room, and in the center sat a large coffin.

“Okay. What. The ...?!” Sonjay stood in the doorway, pale.

May twiddled her thumbs and couldn’t stop checking behind her. *He’s close, I can feel him.*

“We should go. Now.” She chewed her lip.

“Agreed.”

Sonjay grabbed her shoulder and led her out of the room, attempting to slam the door shut, but failing due to the bodies blocking the entryway. He dragged her to the front door when she gasped and planted her feet to the ground. A hard, slow knock echoed through the room. She spun and ran upstairs, out onto a balcony. Sonjay grasped her hand and pulled her back around to face him.

“*What* is going on May? You have some *major* explaining to do.”

“I can’t,” she struggled against his hold. “He’s coming! Let me go!”

She managed to tear from his grasp and stumbled backward. She clung to the balcony’s railing. A cold wave flooded her body as she tensed and hyperventilated. She paled and looked down over the balcony. Her legs trembled, Sonjay tried to steady her. Her father was climbing up the mansion wall at full speed toward her. He used nothing but his bare hands and well-polished shoes. His smile was wide and slightly forced, his eyes wild.

“No NO!!” May flung herself away from the railing.

As her father skittered up the wall and over the balcony rail, Sonjay pulled her back behind him and put out his arms as if to protect her.

“Now now, is that any way to welcome your father?” His aura oozed intimidation.

May inhaled sharply and froze. She stared into his deep blue eyes. Sweat trickled down her brow. She didn’t respond.

“May, darling.” He tapped his foot rapidly and crossed his arms.

“Who *are* you?” Sonjay scowled.

Her father’s head snapped toward Sonjay. His lips curled into a smirk and he turned his attention back to May. He reached toward her.

“Come now. Why don’t you just stop gallivanting around with this ... *vermin* and come home? I’m *sure* your siblings are worried sick!”

“Hey! Answer the question!” Sonjay shook in anger.

Her father chuckled. “My naïve child! During the short time you’ve spent with my daughter you have not once thought to ask her of whom the source of her eternal torment lies?”

Sonjay said nothing.

“Typical,” his laughter died fast, replaced by a smirk, “Are you certain you’d like to know?”

“Yes!”

Her father bowed once, then straightened himself to his maximum height.

“I am known in the here and now as Jonathon Mustow, but,” his smirk widened, “you are one of the few who may now know me as Count Dracula.”

MARBIKE PINNECKE

HOUSE SITTING

“MMM. STRAWBERRY JAM!”

She closed the fridge and looked through the kitchen. She knew that she had been here before, perhaps one year ago, but she could barely remember where to find anything. The room looked ready for an operation, everything seemed white, shining. Her stomach growled.

Randomly, she opened cupboard after cupboard, discovering cooking utensils she had never seen before. It took her a while, but then she found the bread.

In two ziplock bags. Of course!

Hastily she took one slice out of the plastic package and put a thick layer of jam on it.

After finishing her meal, she walked through the small living room.

I love these rich neighborhoods, she thought as she saw the white real-leather couch facing a huge plasma TV. This room did not look any different from the kitchen, just as sterile and spartan. No pictures on the white walls and the parquet was covered with a white carpet.

I wonder who keeps this house clean.

She looked around and found three more doors, probably leading to bedrooms. Even though she had lived this way for years now, she felt uncomfortable looking into the bedrooms of the families she was staying at. It seemed like the most private area and she did not want to destroy it.

Man, I really hope the family has a hot tub, like the last one.

She looked in the basement, and outside the back door, but did not find what she looked for.

She went back into the living room and stretched her back, kick-

ing her shoes off. She knew that the family wouldn't come back in the next two weeks and there existed only the neighbor, who was supposed to look after the mail and water the flowers every second day. So she had time, at least till tomorrow. She sank deeper into the comfortable couch, switching on the TV. Soon she fell asleep, exhausted by the long day.

She was a little girl again, just old enough to stay home alone while her parents were at work. She got up in the late morning and played with her toys until her parents came home from work, like everyday. They ate lunch and then her father took her to the playground. He went to talk to the other parents, but gave her two quarters: "For ice cream," he said, like every day.

She couldn't see any clouds in the sky, and the sun was burning. She loved to swing, the wind blowing in her hair, just as if she was flying. She imagined taking off into the endless sky, when she heard the melody of the ice cream wagon coming up the street. She jumped off the swing the way she had practiced it all summer and ran toward the wagon.

"One Popsicle, please!" she put her money on the little table.

She felt grown up, buying her ice cream all on her own. It was something her father had allowed her just at the beginning of the summer.

WHEN SHE WOKE UP, THE LITTLE DIGITAL CLOCK ON THE DVD player showed 5 a.m. The TV showed a report about a woman who quit smoking. She stretched her back. Sleeping on the couch had made it hurt. She got up slowly and walked over to the front window facing the street. The sun was about to rise, her favorite time of the day. She stood there, watching the day begin in all its beauty, then turned and began to put every thing she had used yesterday back into the place it belonged. In her head there was a list of things:

The bread and jam from yesterday.

Check!

The TV remote control back to its original place.

Check!

The couch standing in the right angle to the TV.

Check!

She looked around and seemed satisfied with her work. After years of living like this she could always remember the little important details which made the room look untouched.

SHE LEFT THE HOUSE AT 7 A.M.-ISH, AND WANDERED THROUGH the streets randomly, since she had nothing to do, and nowhere to go. She decided to head toward a little playground at the other end of the city. Even though she could not take the subway, she loved the fresh air in her face and walking, especially in the mornings. Everything was quiet, most of the people were still sleeping. She walked through numerous streets. For the whole last year she hadn't found anywhere she did not know at least one family and their vacation schedules. Sometimes she liked to say that this was her town, pretending that she was the secret leader, because she always knew everything going on. This was the city she grew up in, and she had never moved or even left its borders. This was her home, even though she did not have one.

She stopped at a traffic light and looked down. Laying on the ground were two quarters.

In an instant her good mood evaporated. She looked up again, pretending they weren't there, pretending there was no memory waited in her head, ready to be relived. She did not feel like destroying her mood, after this beautiful morning.

Quickly she moved on, walking fast, nearly jogging toward the playground which was already in sight. At this time, it looked dead and dry, but it wouldn't be long until it was filled with life. All the children that were usually here were either asleep, in kindergarten, or at school.

She sat down on one of the graffiti-covered benches built in a circle around the playground, giving parents the ability to watch their children play in a comfortable position. The day went on. Slowly more and more people came to the playground. She watched parents with their children, laughing, playing, running around. One of the girls was wearing a pink jacket, covered with mud, but she seemed to be having fun. She started to smile. Then she saw a woman running toward the girl, with her right hand pressing a cell phone on her ear and holding the newest fashion magazine in the other one. The vein on her neck seemed as though it would explode any second as she stared screaming:

“What are you doing? Your nice jacket! How do you think am I supposed to clean that now?”

“But ... I made you a mud pie!” the girl mumbled.

“I don’t want your freaking pie,” the mother screamed while pulling some tissues out of her purse and putting them into the girl’s jacket pocket. “ ... and I don’t want you to play in the dirt, and I told you, that you are not supposed to blow your nose with your pullover!”

She looked away, but the furious mother continued talking, this time into her phone. Her voice changed, from the high pitched screaming to a designated mumbling.

“No, I wasn’t talking to you ... Of course I am still interested ... No, I AM focused ... Okay, bye.”

She started to smile again. *That’s right, I love karma!*

She could see the veins on the mother’s neck pulsing. It wouldn’t take much more and she would completely explode. She got up and walked away, being close to that mother made her sick. Today was Tuesday, so it didn’t matter anyway.

DANIEL MATZNER

INNOCENCE LOST

I FLOATED IN DARKNESS; NICE, IF KIND OF COLD. BUT I DIDN'T mind, the cold helped, it helped me not to think, to feel. But the memories came, unwanted, unstoppable. My mother; cooing my name as she stroked my hair, "Andy, Andy, Andy ..." I saw my graduation from high school. And the fierce pride and happiness that went with it. Overpowering grief as I stand over my father's casket, knowing that I'd have to stay and support my family alone. The recruiter, intoxicating me: weaving a verbal story of a chance at college while still supporting my family.

I drifted, light as a feather from one memory to the next, feeling the cold steel of a rifle, smelling the stagnant sweat around a boxing ring, tasting blood in my mouth as I'm helped to my feet by an opponent. All the while I feel detached, the memories feel like someone else's life, a million years old. I drift in the darkness, the memories come, and the nightmare begins.

THE HELICOPTER BLADES SPUN THROUGH THE SCORCHING hot air, creating a roaring sound that was all but impossible to hear through. I checked to make sure that my shiny new Private insignia was still on my collar, and tightened my hands on the cold steel of my new rifle. A brand new M-16 with a thermal scope.

"How about I superglue that to your chest?" came a sly voice over my headset.

I turned with some difficulty to glare at my squad mate and best

friend, Private Wallace A. Jackson, or Wally for short.

“What?” he said, his eyes widening innocently, “I was just trying to help.”

I snorted, turning back, and said over my shoulder, “Just trying to be a pain in the ass more like.”

“Aw, come on Andy, I was just thinking about how horrible it would be if you showed up for inspection without your insignia!”

I made a mental note to keep my insignia hidden at night, Wally was a good guy, but he was a serious prankster.

“Three to dirt,” came a garbled voice through my headset.

I felt queasy. Three minutes until I was dropped straight into a combat zone. A cold sweat sprung up that had nothing to do with the heat. My hand tightened around the M-16’s barrel and I took a slight comfort in the deadly power it seemed to be radiating. I felt ready for combat. I was wrong.

THE DARKNESS PROBED ME; IT SEEMED TO WANT SOMETHING, but what? I had no idea. I floated, feeling content. Every now and then I’d feel a sharp pain, but it’d be gone shortly and soon I wouldn’t even remember it. What was my name again? Ah yes, Andy, Andy ... Mildrew? Milter? Miller. Yes, that was it, Andy Miller. The darkness seemed agitated by my thought process, it twisted and squirmed, and I had the strange sensation of something being pulled. My name? Why did it want that? ... I floated on.

A GRENADE BLEW A THREE-FOOT WIDE DIVOT IN THE GROUND not 20 feet away. I had arrived at the CP just 2 days ago, but we had been attacked twice by groups of masked marauders. I hunkered down behind a low wall, assault rifle in hand. I could feel the loose sand

beneath my boots, and hear the loud cracks as soldiers around me opened fire, but my thoughts kept straying to random places instead of staying where it was important, how to stay alive.

'I guess that's how it is in combat; the mind tries to shield itself from the brutality of reality,' I thought as a stray bullet blew a 2-inch wide hole just inches from my head.

I shook myself. *'Gotta get my head back in the game,'* I thought, and there came a subconscious answer; *nobody gets hurt in games right?!* Suddenly I felt a strong hand on my shoulder; I turned to find myself face to face with Gunnery Sergeant Buck, my commanding officer.

"Easy Private," he said in a deep baritone voice. "Calm down."

I looked down and was startled to see my hands shaking. I hadn't realized how worked up I was.

"Now Private, here's what's going to happen. We're going to go assist corporal Harker over in that building a ways south. He's got a few wounded and we're gonna lay down some cover fire while he gets his men out the back. You got that?"

I nodded silently. I didn't quite trust myself to talk yet, but running sounded *very* good right now, even if it was into more danger.

"Excellent," he said, "Now let's move! The rest of the squad is en route."

Run, duck, shoot, hide, crawl. That's all I focused on during what I came to think of as "The Nightmare Run." I did exactly what Buck told me to, no exceptions. And slowly, surely I started to feel better; it felt *very* good to have a leader on point. I guessed that was why *he* was the CO.

The squad shifted around me. We had reached the meeting point in good time, and the rest of the squad had joined us shortly after, but we were still sitting at the rendezvous point, staring at Corporal Harker's hideout.

"What are we doin' Sarge?" a soldier said in a drawl. "Why haven't we gone in 'ta help?"

“Stow it, Private. Do you see any outgoing fire? It’s way too quiet for a last stand.”

I focused harder on the building and was forced to the same conclusion. The place had the air of a crypt, and all the welcoming hospitality of an in-law’s house.

“All right, pay attention!” said Buck. “We were originally going in guns ablazin’ to draw fire, but I think instead we’ll take a more surreptitious approach.”

“Surreptitious?!” piped up Wally from the back. “Gee Sarge, I never took ya for a literate!”

A few men laughed, and even Buck smiled a little. When you’re about to go into a war zone, everything seems a lot funnier, and more frightening.

We crept around the side of the house single file. Not a word spoken or a joke offered. Even Wally seemed to have found the self control to shut up. I was three men behind Buck, so I was one of the first to see when he stiffened and held up his hand as a signal to stop. The line halted, the men shifted uneasily, and I leaned around the soldier in front to peer at the Sarge. He stood in front of a door and held up four fingers. The 4 of us closest to him moved up.

“Us five will go in first,” he whispered. “Tell Corporal Louis to take the rest of the squad to another entrance. We go inside in 2 minutes; his group will attack in 3.”

We passed the word back and Corporal Louis and the others faded away. Wally caught my eye and mouthed *good luck!* All joking aside: for once. When the rest of the squad had disappeared around the side of the building Buck pointed to each of us in turn, then to the door. Two of us crouched on opposite sides while the other two took up standing positions to clear the fields of fire. Buck stood in front of the door. He held up 3 fingers. We tightened our holds on our rifles, 2 fingers; I could feel a drop of perspiration sliding down my neck, 1 finger. Buck lashed out with a mighty front kick, and the door banged open. Immediately he dropped to the ground in a

firing position. Simultaneously the four of us rounded the corner, taking aim.

I saw everything as if in slow motion. Three men in the room, two of them rifling through several inert bodies wearing a blend of marine camo and rebel uniforms, and the last was at a computer. One of the men turned, and I found myself looking into the brown eyes of a dark-haired man with the lower portion of his face covered by a bandana. For a moment frozen in time, we stared at each other. Then he reached for the pistol strapped to his thigh. I pulled the trigger. The rifle kicked against my shoulder and three bloody holes opened in the center of his chest. His hand touched the grip of his pistol, but it fell away as he stumbled back. His chest cried red tears, but his eyes were dry, and focused on me. His eyes cycled from shock to fear to hatred. And he glared at me, hating me as he fell, the man who had taken everything from him, even his right to live. His expression never changed, even as his eyes glazed over and he passed on.

I felt numb, pumped as I was with fear and adrenaline it shouldn't have been a surprise. But I reacted to the world with such cold cruelty that it still shocked me to the core. Three men had been in the room. The one I had taken down had been the nearest to us, one more stood close to a computer monitor on the wall. He spun around, pistol in hand, and went down in a hail of bullets. The third soldier had seen us coming, and had dived through a narrow doorway into a room beyond. I had just gotten a look at the computer monitor when the barrel of an AK-47 appeared in the doorway and erupted into a hail of gunfire.

We ducked behind the doorframe; Sgt. Buck rolled to the left, and I had a moment of satisfaction when I saw that no one had taken a bullet, until I realized that not a single bullet had been directed at us. We heard the click of an empty chamber, and as one swung around the doorframe, weapons sweeping. I took in the scene, the computer stood smoking on the wall, both the monitor and the hard drive casing riddled with bullet holes. The rasp of a round being

chambered emanated from the narrow opening that served as our enemy's cover, and for the second time we ducked behind the doorframe. But yet again to our growing confusion, the hail of bullets was not directed at us, and they were accompanied by a strangled cry. We all looked at each other, checking to make sure that each of us was still in one piece. Reassured, we cautiously crept into the room, our guns trained on the doorway. "Hey Sarge, ya still with us?!" Called a voice through the open doorway. I let out a sigh of relief as we all relaxed a little. Then Buck spoke up;

"Yeah, we're in here, get out here so we can regroup."

The members of the second squad slowly filed through the doorway. Corporal Louis took the lead and saluted.

"We came in the back way and found what was left of Harker and most of his squad." He reported robotically. "We went through some rooms and found that guy." He said gesturing toward the open doorway. Buck nodded and turned to the assembled squad.

"Check for survivors, and relieve them of their weapons and ammo," he said. "Corporal—"

He was suddenly interrupted by a low moan from among the camouflaged corpses. For a moment nine different guns were trained toward the sound, until someone, Private Zack Smith, as it turned out, realized it was an ally, and rushed to his aid. We all stood stock still for a moment, then slowly we went around completing the grisly work.

Maybe I should have listened to my mom and been an accountant or something.

LAURA SCHILL

MATCH MADE IN ...

“AARON, LOOK, IT’S YOUR SISTER!” I YELLED.

He turned around to look, with a puzzled expression. I sprinted toward the swings. He caught up with me before I could get there, and wrapped his arms around me. I leaned back into his chest.

“Got you,” he whispered in my ear. I laughed, playfully shoving him back, and ran back to the swings.

“I love these swings!” I yelled to him as I pumped my legs to make myself go higher.

“Mackenzie, that is why I love you.” He smiled. “You cherish things that most people take for granted. You’re such a fun girl.”

“I know.” I smiled back. After reaching a decent height, I jumped off, landing perfectly on my two feet, and gave him a hug.

“You know what else I cherish?” I asked into his chest.

“What?”

I took one finger and pointed to his chest. “You,” I said. His grin widened. We both stood there, looking at each other. It’s such a mystery, looking into someone’s eyes. You could get lost staring. It felt perfect just standing there, but then my phone vibrated. I opened it up, then realized it was my alarm that went off everyday at nine-fifty.

“I have to go,” I sad sadly.

“Okay baby, I’ll see you in school tomorrow?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said.

We both hugged and I ran home as fast as I could. I silently walked up to the side of the dark house. I climbed up the rope that I’d left dangling from my second story window. Once inside, I coiled the rope up and put it in the box hidden under my bed. My parents

could never find that. I quickly changed out of my Hollister clothes and hid them in the closet chest. I threw on my PJs and jumped into bed. I needed at least two hours of sleep tonight.

I may seem like a normal teenager, but my life is full of secrets and lies. My parents practice this very strange religion called *Goinorism*. Makes no sense to me, but I'm not allowed to talk to anyone about what I think. We only come out at night, and we have to sleep during the day. We worship the dead and things that destroy people. We attend this secret school, and they teach us about how this religion will save us in the afterlife. They make us do these weird activities. We are not allowed to interact with people who don't practice our religion, and all marriages are arranged. My parents used to tell me when I was younger that I would understand this someday. I'm a teenager now, almost sixteen years old, and I definitely don't understand.

I'd been against this religion since I reached the age of ten. I enrolled myself into the local public school. I know what you're thinking; you need files, papers to enroll. I did get papers, and forged most of them. I decided to rebel against my parents and lead a normal life, because this religion was definitely not normal.

One night, I got a rope and tied knots in it so I could escape from my house without disturbing my parents. The first day of my new school, what I was wearing was nothing like the other children. They wore "normal clothes" and I wore this really creepy outfit I'd been forced to wear. A lot of people made fun of me, and told me to get some human clothes at the mall. I never really was experienced with things like the mall, or movies, or even knew what an ice cream shop was. No one ever told me, I'd never seen any of this.

I stole some money from my parents and went to that place called the mall. When there, I understood what they meant by "normal clothes." I bought some of my own clothes from places I saw other people buying clothes. It felt very strange, but I guess to them this was normal. I had to hide these clothes from my parents, because I knew they wouldn't approve. I could be strongly punished if the

ordoshnead (that's the leader of the group, the one who deals with rebels) found out. Over time, I gradually started to understand this new world. I made friends, and most people told me it was because I didn't start drama like most girls did. I really didn't understand what "drama" meant, but I guessed it was bad. I hoped I never caught it.

That was back in fifth grade. Now I'm in high school. I know the difference now. I'm very popular, and have a boyfriend. I lead two secret lives. Neither side can know that the other exists.

I fell asleep, but not for long. At midnight a really high-pitched bell rang, this meant that it was time to get up. Most people can't hear it, but we can. I quickly changed from my PJs to the weird uniform I had to wear. My parents shoved me into the vehicle. The windows had been tinted so dark I had no idea what I was seeing. They did this because they didn't want me to see the outside world. They even took extra precautions, such as blindfolding me. They really didn't want me to know there was a world out there.

We arrived at the strange building shortly. I still had no idea what the building looked like. I mean, I was blindfolded. As soon as we arrived, I had to report to a small black room. There was only one light, a tiny lamp in the room's front corner. This is where they were supposed to teach us what we needed to learn. I never knew what my "teacher" looked like. We all had to wear these mask things. It was really dumb.

"Teaching book," the woman said.

The teaching book was kind of like a Bible. It had the history, but also worksheets. Along with the other fifteen students I pulled out the small textbook.

"Why do we follow the sixteen rules of life?" she asked. "We need to know how to kill. In our afterlife it can help us greatly. The *menah* (judge of afterlife) only looks for those who have strategy, and we need to perform the best."

Yea, I know. It's really crazy. I can't believe I actually used to follow this. It makes no sense. I'll just live life thank you very much.

I wish I could tell my parents that.

She instructed us to fill out the worksheet. I disobeyed and looked around the room. I felt bad for these kids. They had no idea what was beyond this world. They didn't have any clue ... and sadly never would.

After hearing more ridiculous stories of our afterlife, we were directed back into a large room with our parents. We sat in our seats. Again this room was dark, only one candle lit in the front.

"News," one of them croaked. "We have a new engagement."

Oh great. More freaks getting married. I wonder who it was now, not that I ever knew them because you never really had a chance to socialize.

"Mackenzie White and Chris Macintosh," the voice pronounced.

WHAT! I couldn't get married. I'd been hoping I'd be able to escape before this, and now I had to marry this creep. I would not. I'll stay with Aaron.

"They will be married on April 13th."

Oh my gosh. Today was February 1st. That wasn't too far away. I could try to change things though ...

I barely listened to what else was said. Something about stupid afterlife. I thought hard. I wonder what this kid looked like. Not that I would marry him, but it wouldn't hurt to know. I also thought about my escape. It would have to be soon.

After a few more lectures and some weird activities I was allowed to go home, to sleep for the day.

It was about five in the morning. The sun was just coming up. I couldn't wait for school. I just wanted to forget about this. I went into my room, faking the same procedure I did with my parents every day. Today was really different. My parents actually stopped me to talk to me.

"The wedding is coming soon. You'll need to meet your partner," my mother told me.

"There are lots of preparations to be made. You will be meeting

him after a good night of sleep,” my father said.

They turned and went to bed. I quietly snuck into the shower and did my hair normal. I straightened it. I grabbed new clothes hidden under my bed. Finally back to my normal life. As soon as seven thirty came, I snuck out of my house. I walked over to Hailey’s. Hailey was my best friend from when I first came to this school. She was my favorite person to hang out with, she was so helpful. I sometimes wish I could tell her about my real life. If I told her, she’d probably think I had problems and needed to be sent away somewhere. I climbed the side ladder of her house onto her balcony. I opened the door and threw my backpack in the corner.

She turned around from examining herself in the mirror and smiled. “Hey Mackenzie!” She ran over to hug me.

“Hey girl!” I yelled back.

Hailey quickly glanced at her clock and grabbed her bag. “We’re gonna be late if we don’t leave now.”

I grabbed my bag and we made our way downstairs.

“Hey Mackenzie, how are you honey?” she asked.

“I’m great, Mrs. Collins. Thanks!” I smiled. She was like my “normal life” mother. I basically lived here during the days. She always gave me advice about boys. It was never weird talking to her. I felt really lucky. Hailey gulped a glass of orange juice then we dashed out the door.

We were running for school. It was like eight blocks away. We were really good runners because we ran track together. After making it there in less than three minutes, we headed to our lockers. Aaron stood there, waiting for me. I smiled. I really loved this boy. I hugged him.

“Good morning sunshine.” he said.

“Back at ‘cha!” I yelled, getting my books. After talking a few more minutes with Aaron, I headed to homeroom. The day rolled by. I was happy to listen to other people talk and feel normal. I was going to hang out with my friends after school, but I really needed sleep. Especially since I had to fake plan a wedding.

At midnight my parents actually woke me up. That was strange. I was usually expected to wake up on my own. They blindfolded me and we went down to the building.

“Today you’ll meet your partner,” my Mom said.

I really dreaded this. I didn’t want to meet this kid that was probably in love with this religion. They pushed me into a tiny room while they went to find Chris. They shoved the boy into the room and he took a seat across from me. He took off his mask, and boy was I surprised. It was Aaron.

CHELSEA SNYDER

MID-LIFE RANT

“NO. NO. ABSOLUTELY NOT. THIS ... THIS IS ALL WRONG! What kind of idiot wrote this piece of ...! Who wrote this trash? They’re making me out to be some saint or something!”

My parents. That’s who must have written wrote this trash. They would be the ones to fluff me up like this. I read on;

‘ ... Fern loved to smile; she could light up the room with her warm, reassuring attitude. The Baron family will miss the light they cherished so dearly for all those wonderful years.’

”Oh this is such bull!” I finalized. And you, dear reader, must be wondering what in God’s name I’m talking about. If you’ve read this far, I might as well let you know that I’m reading a very important article in the local newspaper. It’s an article devoted to one person entirely, yet that “one person” never reads it. I’m the exception to this little rule, however, because today (July first, two-thousand-fourteen) I am reading my Obituary.

I think it’s a very good thing that people can’t see their own obituaries. They brag on and on about how wonderful of a person you are and about how much better you made life for everyone. That cookie-cutter fluffer-nutter crap your funeral home cranks out. I feel awkward about reading my own. I did not light up rooms with my smile because I rarely smiled. My attitude was not warm nor was it very reassuring. My obituary was a thin column of black printed lies. Though I shouldn’t be complaining about these lies, as I’ve been living a grand lie these past few years ...

Truth be told, I’m a bitter recluse trying to fool the Earth into believing I am dead.

I hate everything about this place. The Earth, I mean. It's nothing but a bunch of lazy knuckle draggers trying to fool the rest of the population into thinking they themselves are the best thing since sliced bread. Life here is a dysfunctional game show, and I was the first loser voted off the island. That being the case, I felt I deserved a little time off. It would be one of those leavings where I say, "I'm off to regain my sanity before all of you psychotic apes have me jumping off a building, see you in a week!" I'd be sending them postcards saying, "Greetings from Me Time! Stay out of my life, you're the reason I'm losing my last few stitches of sanity!" Then I'd add a smiley face or something, because deep down I'd feel slightly guilty for having offended someone so much. My personality is perhaps that of a chainsaw's with a tiny pink bow on top, as you can see.

I packed my bags over the course of several days. I wasn't totally sure I wanted to take personal time off, so I packed slowly in case my plans changed. But the more those packing days added up, the more enraged I became about the things happening around me. As the days went on, I crammed more and more clothing into my old Cross Country duffle from college. A true feat of ingenuity was realizing that over half my closet could be jammed within the confines of a relatively small bag. I sipped a skim milk coffee from Dunkin' ("Two Splendas, please!") and chain-smoked Virginia Slims for a good thirty minutes as I sat at the foot of my bed. I was staring at my now-bulging duffle bag. It's smooth white edge piping just about ready to snap. I let out a small laugh and started rattling off fat jokes to the bag.

I had a skirt and blazer ensemble pre-selected for our department meeting today, and seeing it hang in my armoire pissed me off past a point of understanding. I'd starved myself these past two weeks so I'd fit into the size five ensemble. The fact that I took time (and food) out of my life to get ready for a meeting I go to simply to manipulate my boss into thinking I enjoy working for him grinds my gears. The fact that I have an outfit worth more than my weekly cost of food prepared for my boss's approval grinds my gears. I darted my head

away from the outfit to the wicker clothes hamper. Atop the hamper was a new pair of skin-toned “Flattering Fits!” pantyhose (to wear with the suit, of course). Do you have any idea how uncomfortable those are? Imagine someone wrapping your lower body in a giant rubber band and staying that way all day. THAT’S what it feels like. “That’s it! I’m done! All this production for a job that I absolutely hate?! I’m fed up, adios!” And with that, I snatched the suit out of my closet and threw it in the trash. I wanted to light a match and watch it burn to ashes, but I used the last Diamond match on a cigarette. Pyromania suppressed, I put out my Slim on my bed post and threw the coffee across the room.

I threw on some old jeans and a white beater. I stuffed my feet into my old leather kicker boots without bothering to tuck the fitted Levis in. The perfect bun sitting atop my head was pulled out violently, and my wavy black locks fell well past my shoulders, the way it should be. I looked like Gretchen Wilson on a bad day. I slung the old duffel over my shoulder and stomped out of my apartment, slamming the door shut behind me by kicking it as hard as I could. My toes crushed under the force, but the satisfaction of kicking that stupid old door took my mind off the pain. Subconsciously I fished around in my purse for a Tylenol, one of the red ones they coat in sugar so you can pop them on the go without any water. I love those; they taste just like SweetTarts. It hadn’t really occurred to me that I had no genuine plan of where I was going or what I was doing until I reached the corner of my street and Watson Blvd. I stopped just outside of a used record store to plan my course of action. All I could think about was the possibility the store carried an old Santa Esmeralda album my parents used to play. However, with about sixteen cents change from the coffee stop this morning, it looked like I wouldn’t purchase that nostalgic record even if they did stock it. You ever notice how music can remind you of a simply perfect time in life? When things were easy and not so convoluted with work and bills and people? That’s what Santa Esmeralda means to me. I decided I needed to check, in any case.

The old green screen door squawked as I pushed it open. No matter where I stepped on the industrial carpet, the old wooden floor below it squeaked with the pains of age. I always loved floors like that. I felt it gave a structure character. Led Zeppelin was playing faintly from a stereo in the back. There seemed to be no real aspect of organization to the store, so I tottered around tables hoping to stumble upon the “E” section. After a few moments of rummaging, a large man wearing a grease-stained polo (untucked, naturally) approached me.

“Hey uh Miss ... you lookin’ fer something in particular?” he asked, sheepishly. He snorted. I almost laughed out loud. Sixteen cents says he’s a virgin.

“Actually, yes. I was wondering if you carried any Santa Esmeralda. I’ve got a pretty bad case of nostalgia and I kinda need this one record she ...”

“Esmeralda? Uhh, yeah lemme check,” said the clerk. He waddled off to the back of the store, completely ignorant of a wonderful childhood memory I was about to share with him. While I waited I flipped through some old Beatles albums, all of which I had at home. Who cares if it’s the twenty-first century, I pick records over iTunes any day. I heard a squeaking from behind my back grow louder and louder, so I turned around. The fat man was holding something in his hand ... could it be ...

“Uhh, sorry lady. We only got this one,” he said absentmindedly. It wasn’t even Santa Esmeralda. It was Esteban.

“I mean, my manager said they sound kinda alike,” he added. He couldn’t have been more wrong in his life. My heart sank. All those memories rekindled only to be extinguished by a chubby record clerk who needed a stick of deodorant.

And she’s buying a stairway ...

“All right,” I said with a faint smile. “Thanks anyways.” I left the squeaky store and stood outside for a while. I went to light another Slim, but somehow the sweet flow of tobacco wouldn’t be enough to

cheer me up. I crushed the unburned cigarette under my kicker boot. I thought about my childhood, about the time spent by the record player trying to belt out like Esmeralda could. My father being the grand audience, my mother the backup vocals. Without even thinking about it, I started to cry.

“Hey lady, why ya cryin’?” asked a childlike voice. I ran my forearms over my eyes to rid them of salty tears and looked around for the owner of the voice.

“What? Oh, I’m fine. Really,” I said, as I looked down at a tan boy of possibly four or five. He was one of the cutest kids I’d seen in a long time, subsequently reminding me that my internal clock was still ticking away. I wiped my eyes, smudging “Lash-Stiletto” over my forearms.

“Where is your mommy?” I asked, as I looked around for another woman. None were in sight.

“She went to the CVS ‘cross the street,” he said, as he pointed his tiny index finger at the drugstore. “I got to stay outside cause I’m a big kid now.” He said, rather pompously.

“I see. And what is your ...”

“You know, lady, if you’re real sad or somethin’ you can always try talkin’ to God.”

“Oh, well see God and I aren’t really friends. We just don’t ...”

“God’s friends with everyone, lady! He doesn’t even hate the Devil! You should really try talkin’ to him sometime.” This kid must have been a product of the local Our Lady of Sorrows or something.

“I’ll try. It just seems like every time I call on him, he doesn’t answer.”

“Like a phone? Well you can try writing to him then. Gotta have a post stamp though, that’s what the mailman says. My dad’s a mailman, that’s how come I know.” This kid was officially the cutest little person I’d ever come across.

“All right, I’ll be sure to try that. Thanks, oh ... what’s your name?”

“I’m Mike Finch. My mom calls me Michael though, I hate it.”

“Mike, pleased to meet you. My name is Fern Baron.”

“Oh, like that big plant? My mom grows lots of those.”

“So does mine! That’s why she named me Fern.” Somehow this small talk with Mike made me feel better about not having the old Esmeralda record.

“Michael?! Michael?!” belted a snotty voice from across the street. It was the voice of a wide-hipped, mom-jeans kind of woman. Mike’s mother.

“Michael Allen Finch WHAT have I said about talkin’ to strangers?” she bickered. I already hated her.

“Fern’s not a stranger. She’s my new friend. Her name is your favorite plant and ...”

“Michael, sweetie, get in the van. We still have to pick up Amanda from ballet.” Mikey waved goodbye to me with the saddest look on his face as his mother pulled him across the road. He had a “modern mom,” so a little depression was to be expected. Poor thing. Is it just me or are mothers getting less and less, well ... motherly?

Sometime later I found myself Southbound on the Amtrak, sitting alone with a copy of *Cosmopolitan* and its thirty-five ways to have a man become your personal slave. It was physically difficult to read, that’s how little value I found in this so called “literature.” Garbage was all it was, really. I still had no idea where I was going, except for knowing that I needed to go. The train stopped in some one-horse town, and the most attractive man I’d ever seen got on. What’s worse was that he found a seat right across from me. I couldn’t look at him, he was phenomenal looking. He was even wearing Old Spice, my favorite. This guy was giving me a heart attack by sitting down and reading the paper. I’m pathetic. The painkiller I’d popped earlier that had sat in the bottom of my bag had me feeling drowsy, so I nodded off ...

“Miss? Hey, miss? Miss you gotta’ get off this train,” a man’s voice called.

“What? Oh ... all right,” I said as I woke up. Apparently I’d taken

the Amtrak as far as it went.

“Where am I?” I asked, half asleep and rubbing my eyes.

“The station, ma’am. We’re in Philadelphia,” the conductor said, slightly annoyed.

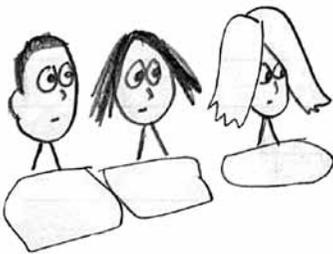
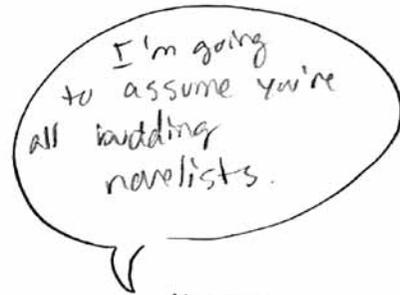
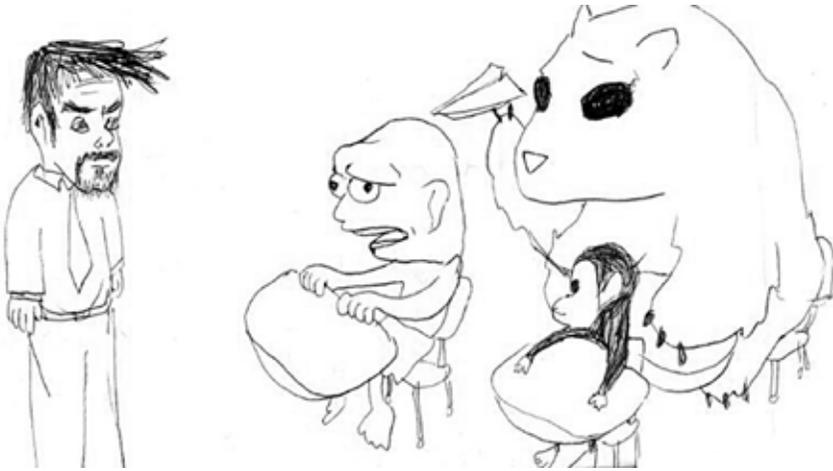
“Holy ...” I’d slept through nearly three hundred miles. I walked off the train and into the windy city. The sun was shining and the day looked promising.

I changed quite a lot whilst I was in Philadelphia. I’d stayed a week at some “Motel No Tell,” praying to God each night that I wouldn’t be consumed by bedbugs (or the sketchy inhabitants of the motel). The shoddy activities all around the city made me lose significant hope in my own life for some strange reason. I felt like I needed to completely start over, to hit the reset button on the Xbox. Through several sources I will not name, I was put into contact with a man who helped me change my name, address, social security number, everything. I was legally dead in the eyes of the government, just the way I wanted it. Search parties gave up two weeks after I took off, and I was officially declared dead eleven months later. I chopped off my long locks and gave myself a sandy blond bob so I didn’t look like the picture on the missing person’s fliers they tacked up in Walmarts and on telephone poles. There was a job opening at an old cinema. The hours sucked, I had to sweep buttery filth all day, but I got to watch all the unique foreign films I wanted free of charge. I met an incredible man in a showing of some Bollywood hit and we hit it off instantly. We married by the docks quietly and without an audience.

Am I comfortable living like this? Always having to dye my hair, lie about everything, and whatnot. Not always, but it has given me a chance to clear the slate of all the things I had to measure up to. All the things I could never really measure up to. I don’t have to worry about pressing a suit for a conference I have no desire to be attending. No longer do I have to paint a personality inside myself that conforms to the corporate common. Consequently, I’ve given up smoking. No stress means no tobacco craze. Life and lungs cleared, I’m flying free.

JOHN KLINE

CREATIVE WRITING: A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

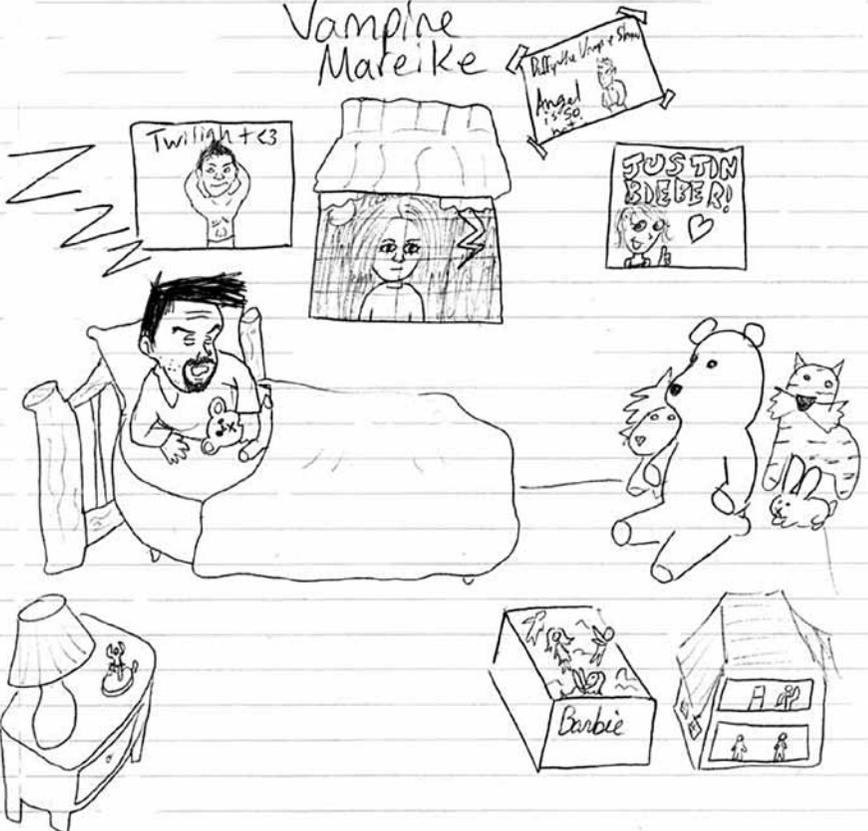


Why Mr. Lucia is not
in school.

Vampire
Mareike



Vampire
Mareike





... Why? ...



*** projector table



MARIAH DAVIS

QUID QUO PRO

SHE HEARD THE TRAIN BEHIND THEM. GOING TO BE CLOSE. Her feet pounded on the tracks and the familiar adrenaline rush kicked in. She breathed steady.

A race.

Approaching the bridge, she ran faster.

Just another race.

The end of the bridge. The finish line. Not twenty feet away.

Almost there.

She glanced left and spotted the gleaming eyes of the champion who stared back at her from the river, but only for a moment. She couldn't afford to watch her reflection; that would only slow her down.

"Mia!" Tyler called to her from behind. She could see her goal. So close. "MIA!" She closed her eyes and screamed in frustration. Stopping now might ruin everything, but she couldn't ignore the desperate cries. She tore her gaze away from her goal and looked back. Then suddenly her feet stopped pounding and she couldn't breathe.

Tyler gazed back at her with his watery eyes. His mouth was still moving but the train was getting closer and she couldn't hear him. The idiot must have fallen. And worse, he'd caught his ankle under the tracks. The train would squash him like a bug. She quickly examined the distance between them. She was close. She could make it. Maybe. She hesitated for a fraction of a second and looked back at the finish line.

The train honked its horn.

She ran.

The wind rushed behind her. She pushed herself as fast as she

could go. It wouldn't be enough. The train seemed to be going a whole lot faster when she ran toward it. But no, she had to make it. She had to be fast enough, so she was. Just another race. She never lost a race.

Then she was there. Checkpoint. She fell to her knees. He tried to pull his foot out from under the tracks, but he couldn't get a good grip.

"I don't know how it happened, I just fell! I fell! I can't get my foot out!"

She knelt next to him, but could hardly hear him over the train.

"It's okay, it's okay!" she shouted.

She seized his leg with both hands and planted her foot on the track that trapped him. Then she gathered her strength and tugged while pushing off with her leg for more power. She heard a loud snap as the tracks released him and he cried out in pain.

"I got it!" she yelled.

The train honked again, it closed in on them. She looked down at Tyler. He clutched his leg above his ankle and breathed heavily. She grabbed his arm and tried to pull him up.

"Come on! We have to go NOW!"

He shook his head. "I c-can't. I can't make it."

She didn't have time for this. Only one thing left to do. With all the force she had left, she shoved him off the side of the track into the river. Then she dove in.

Thirty feet. The plunge alone was hard enough. Her lungs must have been crushed, even if she made it back up she wouldn't be able to breathe. After hitting the surface, she sank deep under the water. She kept her eyes open, searching for Tyler. She didn't know how bad he had hurt his ankle. Would he be able to swim? The thought of his drowning made her shudder.

Come on, Ty. Where are you?

Her heart still raced even though she had already won. She scanned the depths for a few minutes and then came up for air. After gulping down five or six breaths she spotted him dog-paddling for shore and followed.

By the time she crawled to shore, Tyler was already there, glaring at her.

She folded her arms. “What?” Idiot.

“You hesitated.”

“So?” Why does he decide now to become perceptive? It doesn’t matter ... I wasn’t really thinking about leaving him ...

“Then you nearly broke my ankle.”

“Shut up. I saved your life.” There was no point to this stupid conversation.

“Why’d you hesitate?”

She grabbed a rock and chucked it at him. She didn’t mean to do it, but he made her angry. She had only hesitated because ... well because she wasn’t sure she could make it.

“Ow. Now you’re trying to break my arm.” He looked up at her and burst out laughing.

“Tyler, this isn’t funny. You could have died.” She wished he wouldn’t act like this. His carelessness would get him killed someday.

“But I didn’t.” He kept laughing.

“I’m serious, I told you not to follow me onto the bridge! You’re not fast enough and then you try to catch up to me and fall. If I was even a little bit slower you would have died.”

“Relax, I’m fine.” He smiled deviously. “Besides if I did you could just bring me back to life with your mystical powers. Isn’t that what Madam Rita says to tell all of her customers? I mean, didn’t you have to demonstrate them when you applied? We wouldn’t want a fraud—” She picked up another rock. “Okay, okay!” he waved his arms, “I’m sorry! I was joking, I swear.”

She dropped the rock and smirked. “Good.”

“Now don’t go throwing things at me, but why do you even work for her? She’s wacked. I mean, come on! She’s either a fraud, or she thinks she’s a witch.”

She looked down and pushed her hair back. “Because. It’s a steady job and if I can’t pay my half of the rent my brother’s gonna kick me

out.” She had told him this a million times. Sometimes she wondered if he ever actually listened to her.

“Oh yeah, sorry, forgot about that.”

“I’m sure it’s hard to remember when you have your parents to worry about that kind of thing.”

“Hey, I said I was sorry. You don’t have to ... wait, speaking of your brother, isn’t he supposed to be home soon?”

“Oh!” She smacked her forehead, “Of course! What time is it?”

Tyler checked his watch. “Almost five. Come on, I’ll drive.” He jumped up and yelped suddenly, grabbing his leg. “Oh yeah, forgot about that ...”

“Shocker.” She held out her hand. He rolled his eyes and threw her the keys.

“IAN!” MIA RAPPED ON THE DOOR. “ARE YOU HOME? IAN!”

Tyler nudged her aside. “Here, let me try.” He pounded repeatedly. “Ian! Come on man, let us in! Mia forgot her key again!” He sighed and turned to her, “Are you sure he’s home?”

She folded her arms and glared at him. Of course he’s here. At least ... he should be. What time is it? She grabbed his arm and pulled up his sleeve. She glanced at the watch around his wrist. Her throat tightened. She couldn’t bring herself to look up. “He should be here ... he told me he’d be here an hour ago.” Where was he? He had been gone so long. A terrifying thought struck her: What if he doesn’t come back? What if he likes living with her better than me? Would he ever abandon me?

“Hey.” Tyler touched her shoulder and ducked down face-to-face, “Don’t worry. I’m sure he’ll be here.”

Then she heard the lock click and the door swung open.

“Mia,” scolded the man holding the doorknob, “you forgot your key again?”

She beamed, pushing Tyler away, and ran up to hug her brother. “Ian!” she squealed, “You’re back.” Of course he wouldn’t.

He laughed. “I’ve only been gone a few weeks.” He pulled her out of the doorway to let Tyler in and closed the door behind him.

“So, what have you been doing all this time?” Tyler said, “I hear your cousin’s house isn’t too exciting. At least, that’s what Mia tells me.”

Ian opened his mouth, but before he could speak someone answered from the kitchen, “Well, who said he stayed in the whole time? Georgia’s pretty nice this time a’ year.”

“I know that voice ...” Mia glared at Ian. “No. You didn’t.”

Tyler looked between them. “What? Who is it?”

She entered the room, smiling sweetly. “Hi there. I’m Lila.”

“What is she doing here?” Mia demanded. Of all the cousins Ian stayed with in Georgia, Lila was the only one Mia was not okay with him bringing home. Lila was the reason she didn’t go with Ian in the first place.

“Mia! Oh it is good to see you!” Lila threw her arms around her. “Ian said y’all’d show me all yer work stuff an’ he said you’d help me get a job up here!”

She pulled back. “He said what now?”

“Okay,” Ian faced Lila, “Why don’t you show Tyler here what you’re cooking in the kitchen?”

“Wha ...? Oh! Yeah I’d love to see what you’re making. It smells very ... interesting.”

She brightened. “Really?”

“Oh, yeah, definitely.”

“C’mon, you’ll love it.” She grabbed his arm and dragged him into the kitchen.

Ian turned back to Mia and her arms folded defiantly. “No, absolutely not.” She couldn’t believe he would even suggest this.

“She needs a job. I thought it’d be better for all of us if she stayed here. I know you’re hiring.”

“Not her.”

“Why do you hate her?”

“I said no.” How did he not understand? Lila ... how could he put her through this kind of torture?

He sighed and took her hands. “We need the money. It’ll get you into college faster.”

“Maybe I don’t want to go to college.”

“Don’t start this. What are you going to do? Run for a living?”

Yes.

“Come on, take her with you tomorrow. Please.”

LILA SLID HER FINGER ALONG THE SPINES OF THE BOOKS ON the shelf. “Wow, you got alotta books here.”

“Yeah. Sure.” More books than any girl from Georgia has ever read.

“Oooo, what’s this one?” She found one behind the counter and pulled it out. “A magic trick book! Can I look at it?”

Mia rolled her eyes. “As long as you don’t read it out loud.” Or not. Maybe she’d get turned into a frog. That’d be nice. I’ve never had a pet before.

Lila started flipping. “I thought you said none a’ this was true.”

“You know, just because Rita said you could tag along doesn’t mean you actually got the job. You might want to keep the whole ‘not real’ thing to yourself.”

“That might be a good idea.”

Mia looked at the books and sighed. “Even so, I still wouldn’t spend too much alone time in this place. It could hurt you.” Things snuck up on you when you spent too much time reading those books. You started to see things. Especially at night. Mia had spent enough time working on Friday nights to know that.

“If it ain’t real, how can ... Ack!” Mia spun around to see Lila clutching her finger. “Sorry. Paper cut.”

Okay, not a frog, but paper cuts ... the worst. Mia smirked and

grabbed a tissue from the counter. She covered the cut. “You were saying?” After a moment, she pulled it back. “Wow. You lost a lot of blood for a paper cut. I forgot how much these little things take out of you.”

“It’s all right. Look what it says in this ‘lil book, for everything saved somethin’s gotta be lost. N’ that should work backward too, shouldn’ it?”

Mia laughed. It felt strange. She hadn’t laughed in awhile. “I really don’t think they mean losing blood. This book, it’s for when someone loses other people, like their family.”

“Oh, you mean like you n’ Ian? We’ve all been worried ‘bout you two since yer parents died.”

Mia paused. She couldn’t believe Lila would bring that up so casually. She stuffed the tissue in her pocket and stood up. “I think it’s time for my lunch break.” She couldn’t spend another second here in this shop with Lila.

“But we’ve only been here twenty minutes ...” Lila jumped up behind her and grabbed her arm. “Wait Mia, I’m sorry. It just slipped out.”

Mia shoved her away and walked to the front of the shop where a man stood at the register.

“Hey Paul,” she called, “If Rita comes back, tell her ... I don’t know; just tell her I puked or something.”

He grunted and she walked outside.

“Wait!” Lila shouted as she started to cross the street. She ran after her and stopped her in the road. “Mia, I’m sorry. Honest. I know yer goin’ through a lotta stuff and I didn’t mean to say it.”

Mia spun and glared at her. “Then why did you? Did you ever think that subject might be a little delicate?”

Before she could answer, a black sedan came hurtling down the street. It was coming straight for Lila. She screamed and threw her hands in front of her face. Mia froze. It had happened so fast. The sedan came to an abrupt stop, beeping like mad.

“HEY,” the driver yelled, “GET OUT OF THE ROAD, YOU IDIOTS!”

“Oh!” Lila jumped, uncovered her face, and hurried out of the way, “Sorry sir! Didn’t mean to get in yer way.” The man sped away and Lila pulled Mia out of the road. “We gotta get outta the way. People ‘round here drive wild.”

Mia didn’t say anything. She stared at Lila and thought about the black Sedan and the tissue inside her pocket. For everything saved, something must be lost.

“Mia? Are you all right?”

She smiled. “Yeah I’m great ... Lila, how fast can you run?”

MEG CAVENAUGH

RILEY

THE GROUND FELT COLD. THE WATER LEFT FROM THE LAST storm soaked through her jeans, leaving little damp circles on her knees. It had been years since she'd been to this spot. Nothing had changed. The grass still looked well kept, the tree still stood tall and beautiful. As she looked past the field she noticed the play ground. They changed it; it looked new, too new. If she closed her eyes she could still see her friends running around the tree playing tag as she watched from her secret place. She could hear Kayla as she ran up and down the slide in her mind. Even though she had been in the park for less than five minutes she could see how it used to be.

The park re-opened a few years ago. They'd condemned it after the accident. Now neon-colored plastic replaced the aged wooden towers and ladders, giving it a fake, unpleasant look. Black concrete covered the ground where broken chips of wood used to lie. She remembered lying on the bridge that connected the two towers, looking at the clouds and naming the animals or shapes they formed. She remembered playing with Elbie under the slide, Elbie, the only one who stayed with her all those years in the clinic. She remembered Kayla stealing him and running off. She remembered the smell of sweat and blood as it pooled around her feet, she hated that metallic smell.

"No."

She stopped herself. She couldn't take herself back there, she wasn't ready. She'd been just a child then. The doctors said she couldn't blame herself. She was only seven; no sense of right or wrong had been instilled in her yet, that's what the doctors reminded her daily. She took a deep breath. She wasn't seven anymore, after ten years in

the clinic she found herself back at the scene where her shortly lived childhood had ended. She didn't know where else to go. The memories refused to leave her mind even after all these years. She was supposed to have moved on, the doctors told her that the past was over; she had to look to the future.

Besides it was Kayla's fault. She knew Elbie was special ...

She struggled to push the child's voice out of her head.

She stood and rummaged through the bag she brought with her. She found the bottle of pills at the bottom and popped off the cap. She had been taking these pills for about 10 years now, ever since she entered the clinic. They were supposed to help quiet the voices, and make her calm. After her first rage fit when she bit the doctor they made her take them every day. They were mainly for show, after 10 years the effect they had over her had diminished; she had gotten better at hiding her anger. She needed them if she was going to go back there. She couldn't handle seeing her again without them. The idea of being with Kayla again frightened her.

She walked over to the new slide. It seemed to be in about the same spot, maybe a few feet to the left at the most. It looked smaller than she remembered; she couldn't believe that this was the same place she hid as a child. She ran her hand over the smooth plastic, but in her mind it still felt like the cold, slightly rusted metal that used to make up the slide of her memories. She ducked under it and sat with her back against the plastic. What used to be an easy hiding spot now became a tight fit. Her old hiding place still felt like a safe haven even after all these years. She knew she had to remember, and this was the only place safe enough for her to do so.

“LALALALALALALA,” SHE SANG AS SHE MADE ELBIE DANCE around her eyes.

She stretched out in her usual spot under the slide of the tall-

est tower. It was enclosed and private, she could not make a trip to the park without being drawn to its seclusion. She didn't want to be around the other kids. They didn't understand her. They called her "Freak" and "Baby." She knew they were jealous. Elbie told her that every time she felt the sting of their words. Elbie told her a lot of things. He told her that only he truly loved her and that those children envied her for it.

"Found you Riley!"

Riley poked her head out from under the slide, her eyes squinting in the sun. She saw Kayla staring down at her, she felt small under Kayla's gaze, and she retreated back under the slide. Kayla was her only friend, besides Elbie. Kayla made Riley feel pretty. She had the curly blonde hair and bright blue eyes that made Riley's black hair and piercing green eyes seem all the more dark and unnatural. Riley wanted to look just like Kayla, she even bought the same blue ribbon Kayla always wore in her hair, she kept it at home next to her mirror. She once asked Kayla to show her how to put her hair like that, but Kayla laughed and said only she could have ribbons. She tried to tie her hair with the ribbon like Kayla did at home, but Elbie yelled at her and told her to throw the ribbon away.

"Go away. I'm playing with Elbie."

Kayla always wanted her ignore Elbie and play with her. Riley tried to turn away and continue her game, but being under the slide gave Kayla the land advantage.

"Come on. Riley, you've been playing with that stupid thing forever, come slide with me."

"No. Elbie wants me to play with him."

She held Elbie up and began her song again. In the middle of Elbie's dance, Kayla leaned forward and snatched him from her hands and took off across the playground. By the time Riley got out from under the slide, Kayla had vanished. Her breathing started to get fast and shallow, she had never been without Elbie before. She wouldn't even let her mom touch him.

She screamed, a shrill high-pitched noise which tore through her lips. She leaped out from under the slide and scanned the playground for Kayla. She saw Kayla take off at a run. She could see her blond hair whip around one of the towers and her shadow begin to climb. By the time she made it to the tower Kayla stood at the top, dangling Elbie above her.

“Elbie says he want to be *my* friend now. He doesn’t want *you* anymore.”

Kayla skipped away over the bridge. Riley looked at the rope ladder in front of her, she hated heights. Anything above the ground made her feel shaky.

“*If you’re too much of a baby to climb up here and get me, maybe I do belong with Kayla.*” Elbie’s voice filled Riley’s head. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she heard Elbie call her a baby, a name that he usually protected her from. She took the rope in her hand, and tried to scramble up the ladder, she couldn’t let Elbie down.

Elbie can’t be with her, he is my friend. He promised he would never leave me. She can’t take him away ... She kept repeating this to herself as she climbed up the never-ending ladder. When she finally made it to the top she had to grab onto the railing. Her knees felt weak, she took a deep breath and sprinted toward Kayla who stood with her back to her.

“Give. Him. Back.”

Each word came out sharp. She was out of breath from the running and her head felt fuzzy. Thoughts kept filling her head and she kept hearing Elbie call out to her. As Kayla turned around her eyes never left him. She knew he wasn’t happy, she could tell by the way he was starring at her.

“No, I want him. If you can play with him so can I.” She swung Elbie back and forth, mimicking the song Riley had been happily singing moments before.

“Come on Kayla! I’m not playing! I. Want. Elbie. Back.”

Elbie’s eyes burned into her, she knew she was in trouble. Elbie

would never forgive her for letting him go like that. She knew it was all her fault and she knew he would punish her. She could already hear him yelling at her. *“How can you be so stupid? You don’t deserve my love. You can’t even protect me. Kayla is the better one, the pretty one, the DESERVING one!”*

“He doesn’t want you anymore Riley. He said you’re a stupid baby, and would never play with you again.”

That cant be true ... he wouldn’t talk to some one else. He loves ME, he has to ... Thoughts swirled through her head as she watched Kayla toss Elbie up and down.

“No! No! No! No! No! No! No!” Riley couldn’t think of anything else to say, she started to cry.

Confusion passed over Kayla’s face, and she stopped tossing Elbie.

“Riley? Riley, I’m sorry; I just wanted you to play with me. You can have him back now.”

Riley looked at her. Kayla was reaching out trying to give her Elbie.

“She’s lying. You must protect me ...”

Kayla tossed Elbie up in the air, and in that moment she attacked. Riley rushed into Kayla, and knocked her down onto the uneven wooden floor. She could feel Kayla’s arms try to push her off, but Riley was stronger. Kayla tried to let out a scream, but Riley clamped her hand over Kayla’s mouth, pushing her head into the wood. She grabbed Kayla and pulled her down the slide. She slammed Kayla’s head into the slide at each bump in the slide.

“ELBIE. IS. MINE.” **SLAM** “ELBIE IS MINE!” **SLAM**.

Each slam was harder then the next, and before long Kayla stopped struggling.

Once she reached the bottom of the slide, she untangled herself from Kayla, and calmly walked up the stairs back to the top of the tower. She picked up Elbie and looked down. Kayla wasn’t moving. Riley climbed back down to get a better look. Blood was dripping off the edge of the slide and onto the mulch. The bright red on the metal looked oddly pretty. Riley stood holding Elbie in her arms,

cradling him like a baby.

“Elbie, why won’t she move?” Riley stood at the foot of the slide for an hour just waiting for Kayla to move.

She never did ...

SHE STEPPED OUT FROM UNDER THE SLIDE AND BLINKED IN the sunlight. After that day all those years ago the park was closed. They called it an accident, due to an unsafe structure. They told her it wasn’t her fault and that it would all be okay. After a while ,when they figured out she was far from okay, they placed her in the shelter. She climbed up the new rock wall, where the rope used to be. She walked over the new bridge and hummed her and Elbie’s old song as she ran her hand along the plastic. When she got to the slide she crouched and pulled her bag off her shoulder. She sat down and slid down the slide, feet first, and stood once her feet touched the ground.

She opened her bag and pulled out a white blob. She held it up to her face and breathed in its scent. After that day Elbie had stayed with her, but he never spoke to her again. His silence made her feel hurt, then angry, then used and finally empty. All she wanted was to hear him speak again. Elbie, her only friend, gone after that day. One day changed everything. One day took everything from her.

“Kayla, make him talk. It’s all your fault. You took him from me. Why would you take him from me?”

She fell to her knees and sobbed. All the feelings of emptiness rushed into her. She couldn’t breathe, she needed him. The pain in her chest almost made her pass out. This is why she was here, she needed to be with him again.

“Please.”

She held Elbie so tight that her fingers started to become numb. She needed to do this. She had to be strong. Elbie would never take her back if she wasn’t strong. She looked at the slide, she could smell

her. She could smell Kayla. She could even see her standing there looking at her. Riley closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Kayla had followed her into the shelter. Every day she would see her standing there. There was only one difference, the Kayla she saw no longer had blond hair. This Kayla's hair was red, like it had been stained. She saw her every day, when she woke up, when she ate, when she went to bed. Anytime the memory of Kayla's lifeless body left her mind for an instant, she would be there. The doctors told her to just close her eyes and when she opened them Kayla would be gone.

Riley opened her eyes.

Kayla was still there, but this time she was moving. No, not moving, running. Running toward her.

"Come and catch me, Riley, come play with me!" Kayla sang and danced around her.

Kayla stopped running and walked toward Riley until she was standing right in front of her. Kayla reached down and touched Riley's hand, dragging her up. Kayla said nothing as she pulled Riley up the rock wall and onto the platform.

"You want him to talk, don't you?" Kayla tilted her head to the side and looked into Riley's eyes.

"Yes." The answer was so quiet Riley wasn't even sure she spoke the word aloud.

Kayla reached forward and took Elbie from her hands. She held him up to her ear and smiled, like two old friends meeting for the first time in years. She lost interest in Riley and her eyes were transfixed onto Elbie's.

"You would do anything to hear him speak? Anything?"

"Yes. Please. Its all I've wanted."

"Close your eyes ..."

Riley felt a sudden pressure in her chest. Just one shove and her balance was lost. She could feel herself falling backward. She opened her eyes to see Kayla and Elbie smiling at her. Her head hit the slide, hard. The pain burned through her skull. She could feel her body

sliding down toward the ground. Her vision began growing softer, the sky began getting darker. She lifted her head toward the top of the slide and could see the two of them looking down at her.

“See Kayla, I told you, you were the stronger one. I knew we would be together.”

One tear dripped down Riley’s face. She watched as Kayla turned her back to her and walked away with Elbie. She saw Elbie smiling at her over Kayla’s shoulder. Riley began to close her eyes.

“This isn’t over, Elbie is mine.”

“Elbie.”

She whispered his name one last time, and the park grew silent.

EMILY ZIELEWICZ

SHADES OF DARKNESS

“I’M SO SORRY,” HE SAID, “YOU KNOW I LOVE YOU, RIGHT? You just make me so mad sometimes ...”

“No, it’s okay. This was my fault. I shouldn’t have said anything.” She carefully rubbed her arm where a bruise started to form.

“It won’t happen again, I swear.”

“It’s all right, I forgive you.”

She gazed into his eyes as they sat in the dark car outside her house. A soft smile spread across her face.

“Good,” he said as he smiled back and kissed her roughly.

“Goodnight.” She could feel her heart pound as she looked into his eyes one last time. She stepped out of the car and onto the pavement.

“Goodnight, Rae. Oh, by the way, happy early one-year anniversary.”

“Oh, that’s right! We’re still up for the movies and your house after?”

“Of course.”

With one last goodnight she closed the car door and he drove away.

“SO HOW DID YOUR DATE WITH JAYDEN GO?”

Her mother’s eyes swelled, full of pride, as she waited for her daughter to answer.

“Good. I had fun.” She took an apple from the fruit bowl and took a bite.

“You guys are just so cute together!” Her mother let out a giggle.

“Thanks, Mom ...” She took another bite and rolled her eyes.

But she had to admit she thought the same thing. Even though Jayden was three years older than her, in college, had a job, and a car; Rae felt they were a perfect match for each other. As her mom ranted about something, she let her mind wander to Jayden’s dark hair, his gorgeous hazel eyes, and of course about their one-year anniversary that Friday. She thought about how perfect it would be.

They’d go to the movies, then to Jayden’s for dinner.

Rae felt hypnotized by Jayden. No one made her feel the way he hah. Special. She couldn’t help herself from fantasizing him getting down on one knee and presenting her with a beautiful square cut, white gold diamond ring. She’d say yes, of course, and jump into his arms to live happily ever after forever ...

“Are you even listening?”

“What?”

“I’ll take that as a no.” Her mother’s good mood must have faded already. “I asked if you were going to work on any homework.”

“Uh ... Oh! Um, yeah. Schoolwork. Maybe. I don’t know, I have to check.” She started up the stairs.

“UGHH ...”

It took her a solid three minutes to stop her alarm. She winced as she raised her bruised arm to hit the off button.

Groaning, Rae got out of bed for school. As she walked over to her closet, she remembered to wear long sleeves; despite the warm temperature. She didn’t want her mother to worry. Or ask questions. Her thoughts were interrupted when a spark of nerves shot through her as she saw the day on the calendar. Friday.

School blurred by. Lost in her own thoughts, she didn’t notice much. The final bell woke her from her daze.

Rae walked out the front door of the school and briefly stopped

at the bottom of the steps to look for Jayden. She found him leaning against his car, waiting. She smiled and walked straight into his arms. He wrapped her in a tight hug.

“Ready for tonight?” He winked.

Her heart fluttered and a wave of nerves flowed through her. Still she smiled as she stepped into his car.

ONCE THEY GOT TO THE THEATER, JAYDEN TOOK HER BY THE hand as he led her to their seats. His grip felt strangely tight, and Rae’s hand began to sweat as they sat down in the back row.

“Happy Anniversary, Jayden.”

“Happy Anniversary to you, too.”

He kissed her gently for a second, pulled back and looked her in the eyes. She wasn’t sure how to decipher his blank stare and uncertainly stared back.

“What’s with all the makeup?”

“Oh.” Her face tingled. Her stomach dropped. She’d gone to the bathroom during ninth period to freshen up. All she put on was some mascara. “Is it bad?”

“I guess it’s fine. There aren’t too many people here. Don’t worry. After this we’re heading straight to my house. It’ll be just you and me.”

All she could do was nod her head. She felt absolutely horrible about herself, could barely look him in the eyes. She hardly noticed him kiss her again. The movie spun by in a matter of seconds. Or at least it did for her. Just like at school she drifted in a daze.

“YOU HUNGRY? GUESS MY MOM MADE SOMETHING FOR US ...”

He rummaged through the refrigerator, not finding anything. In frustration he slammed the door, which startled Rae from her daze.

“Not really.”

“Good thing. Nothing here anyway.” He laughed once and Rae forced a smile.

He walked over to Rae, leaned his forehead against hers. Jayden carefully lifted her hand and kissed it gently. His piercing eyes looked straight at Rae, completely pulling her from her fog. Again he took her hand, this time leading her up the stairs ...

“RAE, WHAT IS IT? IS EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT?” HER MOTHER’S voice faltered as she bolted into her daughter’s room at 2:30 in the morning.

“I’m okay, it was nothing. Just a nightmare.” She could feel her lashes against her cheeks as she blinked, wet and cold from crying. She must have been sobbing in her sleep.

Rae remembered the dream so vividly. She felt the uncomfortable hospital bed underneath her, and could picture the nurses and doctors hovering over her. The bright fluorescent lights shone in her eyes.

For some reason Jayden hovered with the doctors. Most of all, she remembered most vividly the pain she felt all through her body; like lightning striking through her. Rae lifted her hand to her forehead and felt the perspiration. She was still trying to make herself believe that it really was just a dream. She lay in bed for hours, staring up at the ceiling, trying to control the building nausea. Still it didn’t pass, even till the morning.

Unfortunately it was a Monday. She had school. She sighed, looked into the mirror at the bags underneath her eyes. Definitely a concealer day. After quickly applying some concealer, she put on her thickest sweater along with some corduroys. She hated the way the November air chilled her skin.

Then, Rae brushed her hair and plodded downstairs for breakfast.

“Good morning baby.” Her mother kissed Rae’s forehead, gave her

a quick one-arm squeeze. In her other hand she held a plate of eggs.

“I thought a good nutritious breakfast would help you out this morning.” Her eyes tightened as she looked at Rae. “So what was your nightmare?”

“It was nothing. Can’t even remember it.”

Just then her cell phone vibrated in her pocket.

Morning babe. What’s up?

She replied with a simple ‘nothing.’ But as she sat down to eat her eggs, nausea rolled through her stomach. She put her head down, took deep breaths, trying to make it pass, but that didn’t help. She jumped up and ran to the bathroom.

Her mother knocked on the bathroom door just as Rae flushed the toilet. “What’s going on?”

She opened the door and got a washcloth to wipe her face.

“Honestly, I don’t know. Just felt sick all of a sudden . . .”

“Maybe you better stay home today. It could be that stomach bug.”

“Yeah, probably.” She felt so tired from everything that had happened. She went straight to the couch to lie down. Her cell phone vibrated again.

I wondered if you wanted to see a movie tonight? That new one’s coming out.

She stared at the text for a minute, remembering the last time she went to the movies with Jayden.

Two months ago.

“Ohhh.”

Her hand covered her mouth in disbelief.

“No,” she whispered. She touched her stomach. She put her hand on a slight bump between her hips that she hadn’t remembered before. It felt hard.

“No.”

“All right, Rae. I’m leaving for work,” her mom called from the kitchen, “If you get hungry, there’s some food in the refrigerator.”

“Bye,” she whispered. She picked up the phone again.

Not today. Not feeling so good. Might be the stomach flu.

Rae felt herself slowly breaking down. She had no idea what to do. She could never tell her mom.

That was a suicide mission whether or not she knew for sure if she really was pregnant. Not only that, but telling Jayden. How would he react?

All these thoughts rushed through her head at once, making her sick again. Her hand flew to her stomach. The unsettling feeling made her even more anxious. She got up to pace back and forth in her living room, trying to soothe herself, hand still on her stomach. How could I have not noticed this before? She started hyperventilating and had to sit back down.

“Oh my God.”

She cried with her head in her hands. Never before had she felt so hopeless. She couldn't tell anyone else. All she had was her mom, Jayden, a few friends from school. Friends she couldn't trust with something like this.

Jayden texted her again.

Well if u want I can stop by after class. But if ur sick we should probably keep our distance ;)

She replied:

Yeah that'd be fine.

Her mind raced. She began to sweat again, and something crossed her mind. Abortion. As quickly as it came, it vanished. She could never do it. Her tears dried and she felt the slight bump. Her baby.

Her breathing slowed. Tears came back but these were different. They were happy tears. Rae knew no matter what, she'd do whatever it took to protect her baby. She felt disgusted with herself for even thinking about abortion for a second. Because she loved whatever grew inside her. It was a part of her. Even though she thought she was alone, she really wasn't. Her baby was with her. She didn't need anything else.

Content with this, she knew she had to tell Jayden. She smiled

at the thought of how happy they would be ... raising a little boy ... or girl ... growing old together.

A KNOCK ON HER DOOR WOKE HER. SHE SPRANG UP, AND WHEN she opened it, Jayden stood there, smiling, holding a bouquet of flowers with a card that said “get well soon.”

“Aw!” She opened her arms to give him a hug and kiss, but he carefully pulled away.

“You’re sick, aren’t you? Don’t need to catch whatever you have. I heard there’s a bad stomach virus going around.”

“Actually, I need to tell you something.” The confidence she’d felt before she fell asleep faded in Jayden’s presence. Suddenly her stomach dropped.

“What is it?” He looked into her eyes, concerned. She looked back for a second but turned toward the kitchen for some food. She felt starved. “I’m not exactly sure ...” She turned to him, held both his hands. She stared down at them, afraid to look him in his eyes.

“I think ...” She glanced at Jayden. His mouth hung open in confusion, “I may be pregnant.”

“What?!?” He pulled his hands away. Looked her up and down. His breath came out in short spurts, and for a second she saw his eyes tear up.

“I’m so sorry baby. We’ll get this taken care of.”

“Taken c-c-care of?” Her voice broke as she echoed him.

“Don’t be crazy. You’re seventeen, you can’t have a baby. Are you kidding me? You are such an idiot, I swear!”

“I am not an idiot.” She glared at him. Both hands on her stomach; protecting her baby.

“C’mon! What do you call a seventeen-year-old who gets knocked up?”

“A girl who thought her boyfriend loved her.”

The words silenced Jayden and he took a step back. Rae's face went blank. She only heard the words after they left her mouth. Never before had she said anything back to Jayden. But now the world was finally clear to her. She blinked a few times staring at nothing in particular. She looked up at Jayden, just in time to see his fist come at her.

The impact made Rae fall to the ground. The flowers fell out of her hand and she felt her eye throb, right where he had hit her. But there was a pain far worse than the one in her eye. A blinding, sick pain shot straight through her stomach and she felt something tear ...

ERIN DONOVAN

THE GREAT CHRISTMAS ESCAPE

I HAD EVERYTHING PLANNED. THIS LITTLE GUY WASN'T GOING to let anything or anyone get in his way. I had Plans A-X, and each plan had small divisions in case something came up. All I had to do was get over that wall and I was home free, a straight shot to ... well ... to ... you know, I didn't know what's beyond that wall. I don't think anyone does but the Big Man. It has to be nice if we make all those toys that the Big Man brings out there. Whatever it was, I was going to get to it and it would be mine. The plan was simple, as long as nothing bad came up. Victory was mine.

That fateful morning, December 24th, I packed up all my favorite belongings; pictures of my friends and family, some extra warm clothes, lots of food, and a little bottle of extra magic, just in case. I waved goodbye to my house and left my cat with the neighbors. They asked why I was giving Whiskers to them and I just said that I expected a big promotion at work and wouldn't be home to take care of him anymore. They smiled, said congratulations, and I left. I walked to the factory, noticing the crunch of the snow from under my shoes. Goodbyes were sad and as much as I needed to leave, I was going to miss my home and my family.

I stopped at a candy cane-striped phone booth and dialed the number. After a couple of jingles, a familiar voice picked up the phone. "Hellooooooo?" My mother always over exaggerated her greetings.

"Hi Mom."

"Oh, Peri dear!" My mother was easily excitable.

"Hi, Mom, how are you?"

"Oh I'm doing great, honey, just putting the turkey in the oven!"

You're still coming over for the big celebration, right? Christmas isn't booked for you is it?"

"That's actually what I'm calling about Mom ... I don't think I'm going to make it. Work's been a little crazy and I think I'm going to get a head start for next year's line. You know, business. Plus I get paid a little extra for picking work right back up."

"I understand sweetie. Just make sure you're not stressing yourself! And see if you can stop by afterwards. Bye honey!"

"Goodbye. Oh, and Mom?"

"Yes Peri?"

"I love you. Tell Dad too."

"I love you too Peri. Merry Christmas"

"Yeah. Merry Christmas"

I hung up, wishing I hadn't called in the first place. My parents were the epitome of Christmas cheer. It would break their heart that I was leaving on Christmas Eve, but it had to be done today. It was the busiest day, the biggest party after, and no one would notice a little guy like me slip away from my desk for a few hours ... okay, years. I kept walking, thinking about all the things that I would be missing once I left.

The town was quiet; everyone was either working at the factory or getting ready for a Christmas party. I stopped at the Main Square corner, looked down one of the streets and saw it: the wall, big and stone and no way out. It was like a prison, but worse—most everyone was happy to be stuck in it. As soon as I climbed the factory steps, all the reasons I wanted to leave came crawling back. I opened the doors. Okay. Game Time.

The factory smelled like a combination of gingerbread men, marshmallows, peppermint, and elbow grease. The gingerbread men were probably in preparation for tonight's Christmas Eve celebration. I walked to my desk. My nameplate grinned at me with a sickening smile as if to say, "Good Morning Periwinkle Evergreen! You work at a desk!" I hate that nameplate. At least working at a desk was better

than on the toy assembly line. I still had all my fingers and my sanity.

I pulled out the blueprints of the toy I was working on for next year. It was supposed to be this year's, but when December hit, I completely ignored work. Why do it if I was just going to leave? Behind the toy plans were the blueprints to the entire factory. I had smuggled them away from the janitor around November. I was making sure I knew my route when I heard a familiar jingle behind me ... It was getting closer. I scrambled with the blueprints and shoved them into my bag. The jingle arrived at my desk.

"HI PERI!" A blue-eyed, blond-haired girl stood in front of my desk.

"Hi Nipper." I smiled.

I braced myself as Nipper took a breath, "Okay so I am SO excited for tonight, it's going to be the greatest send-off in the history of send-offs. This year nothing will go wrong and it will be absolutely-positivelyperfectlyperfect!" Nipper Winklepuff was the fastest talker in the entire town, and my best friend.

Except I didn't have time to listen to her drone on about how perfect the factory party was going to be, I had work to do. "That's great Nipper, but I don't think I'm going to the party tonight."

"Why noooooot?"

"Cause I'm just not, Nipper!"

"Well, we're going to your parents' after, right?"

"You can but I'm not." I stared at my toy blueprints.

"You're not going to your own parents' Christmas Party? What kind of son are you?" She kept inching herself closer to my face.

"The busy kind. I need to work."

Nipper put her best pout face on. "But your parents love you and they have the BEST parties. You're going to work on your one day off? That's just ridiculous."

"I won't really be working, Nipper." I sighed. The only way to get rid of her was to tell her.

"Then what will you be doing?"

“Can you keep a secret?”

She moved her fingers across her lips and zipped them shut. “My lips are sealed.”

I moved in close to her. “You can’t tell anyone, not even my parents or the Head.” She nodded. “Okay, well I’m leaving, getting out of here, going beyond the wall of the town.”

Nipper’s mouth dropped. “What? Why?”

“Because I’m tired of THIS Nip! Dumb desk with toy plans that never get finished, constant cookie and hot chocolate breaks, the everlasting snow, everything! Especially the whole one day off a year and then right back making toys for next year’s consumers. I have dreams of my own. I want to see the world the Big Man goes to. It’s not fair that he’s the only one that gets to go South. I want out.”

Nipper looked as if she might cry. “But ... but ... what about your family? Your friends? Me? Won’t you miss us?”

“Of course I’ll miss you, Nip, I just ... I can’t stay. I’m 124 years old, I need change.”

A single tear fell from her cheek, and then the waterworks came. She ran away without me getting a chance to say goodbye. I regretted telling her, but she had to know.

As I watched her run toward the little misses’ room, my friend Dinky O’Leary approached my desk. “Ya ready?” Dinky worked in the stables taking care of the animals. If anyone could hitch me a ride, he could.

“Yeah. I am.” I grabbed my bag, shoved some of the desk things into it, including my nameplate.

“Okay, now we just hafta wait fer the Big Man ta walk through here and then we’s can sneaks in after him and grabba deer.” He was the only one that knew any bit of the plan.

With that said a loud beep when off all around the factory. A voice came over the loudspeaker. “*Attention all workers ...*” The speaker cut out. “*... will be entering the workshop in t-minus 5 seconds to check the stables. Please stay out of his way and look busy.*”

At the end of the announcement, the large candy cane-painted doors at the front of the workshop opened and out came the Big Man. Everyone clapped except me, and the Big Man started to make his way toward the stable doors. People lined the aisles and stared at the Big Man like he was a god. The rest stayed busy, almost as if to suck up to him. This was one of the few times of the year that we saw the Big Man, so I guess they were justified. I rolled my eyes. He wasn't enormous but he was big enough that he could be considered intimidating compared to the rest of us. When he walked near my desk I could have sworn he looked straight at me, but he didn't look at anyone else so it must have been a little bit of paranoia. I watched his big feet walk past, and Dingy gave the signal to follow. We ducked and dodged until we reached the door before the Big Man closed it. We had completed stage one.

The stable smelled of peppermint, hay, and deer poop. The old wood was completely different than the shine of the workshop. Stalls lined the sides, each with a deer. The ones that the Big Man used had stars over their doors; he was checking those deer. Dingy led me to the first stall where a young deer stood.

“Okay, this is Chippers. He's not goin' on the trip this year—all the otha' deer are in top condishin. He's been waitin' ta get out for a while. The test run yesterday wasn' 'nough fer 'em. He should know where you wanna meet him, but just in case I left a bag of deer food outside the vent ...”

“Thanks Dingy.”

“Don't mention it, bud. I'm just sure goin' ta miss ya.” His freckles made his eyes stick out and they looked sad. “So go say hi to Chippas so he gets ta know yas before you set off.”

I walked up to the stable and inside was a beast at least the same size as me, maybe bigger. It snorted and I could see the fog from its breath. I reached my hand out toward it.

“Hi there, Chippers” I cooed.

It nudged its nose against my fingers. I petted him on the head.

“Are you going to get me South?”

It snorted again and moved its head up and down as if to say yes.

Dingy smiled. “Good, he likes you. Now ya better hurry up, the Big Man’s comin’ back and you gotta get through that vent before ya gets caught. I’ll meet you outside the wall.”

“Seriously, thanks Dingy.” I opened the vent grate that was behind Chippers’ stall. It was the perfect spot, not too out of the way, but not easily spotted. I waved to Dingy as I started to crawl. He smiled a melancholy smile but I couldn’t turn back and comfort him. I needed to go on with the plan.

The vents were fairly easy to crawl through. They had a stickiness to them, probably from all the cookies coming out of the kitchen 24/7. It smelled like cookies, too. It would make sense because I passed the vent opening over the kitchen about two minutes into climbing. I sat down near it and checked the blueprints of the vent system. I was headed in the right direction. The single vent that led outside the wall was all the way across the workshop. In order to get there, I would need to go over the kitchen, the Big Man’s office, the main part of the workshop, and the wrapping stations. It would be manageable, but long.

Right about now Dingy would be helping saddle up the deer for their big ride. He would accidentally let the latch on Chippers’ stall slip open, and Chippers would scurry on out of the stables. Dingy would volunteer to go out and find Chippers and meet me at the exit for some riding tips.

I crawled for what seemed like ten minutes or so until I hit the Big Man’s room. There were two vents that I could see into. I had to take a peek, no one besides the selected elite had ever been in the Big Man’s room. It was large, with green pinstripes on the walls. The whole room was decorated with Christmas ornaments and toys. On the big desk were two large lists with some letters and names on them, and on the wall was a big screen with a big blue and green ball next to it.

The Big Man was at his desk looking at the lists.

“Hmmm ... Well, that’s twice. I think we’re set to go.” His voice was deep but warm.

“Excellent, sir.” The Head, Quincy Quixlebell, stood next to him, checking off something on a clipboard. “Maybe you should check the weather for the first few stops.”

“Great idea, Quincy!” He walked over to the screen and twirled the big blue and green ball around till he found the stop he was looking for and poked part of the green section on the ball. With that the screen lit up. A news report came on and said that weather in some weird sounding-named place would be clear but cold tonight.

“Well wonderful!” The Big Man cried so loud his beard ruffled. “If the weather is bad on the first stop I know I’ll be late!”

“Excellent sir. And you checked to make sure each child gets the toy they asked for, or at least close?” Quincy gave him a tiny glare.

“Of course I did. It wouldn’t be Christmas without a good present.”

We send our toys to kids? Really? All my hard work, and the toys go to some snot-nosed little child who can’t even appreciate it. My toys are hand carved if I make them. I want appreciation. It all only made me want to get out of there faster. That and that green and blue ball ... was that the world? A globe? It looked incredible. I couldn’t take hearing it anymore, I kept crawling.

I crawled for a little longer, not much, and found an opening to the main section of the factory. It was right over Nipper’s spot, but she wasn’t at her work station. Odd. Maybe she was still in the little misses’ room. I shrugged it off and continued the dark journey.

After what seemed like an hour, I finally saw the end of the vent that led outside. Snow. White light. I could see Dingy’s legs right outside the grate.

I screwed open the grate and popped out. Freedom. I was out. I looked behind me. The gray stone wall was enormous in comparison to the other side, and the factory seemed even bigger. It was much darker than when I went into the factory, but its bright lights almost made it seem like Summer’s daytime. Dingy and Chippers were waiting. When

he saw me, Chippers stomped his hooves and snorted in delight.

“Well Chipps sure is glad ta see ya.” Dinky still had a somber smile on his face.

“And I’m ready to get out of here.” I felt out of breath, but that was just from the excitement building up in my chest.

“Well ... I have a little bita news fer ya ...” Dinky scuffed his feet in the snow. He stepped aside to reveal a blue-eyed, blond-haired girl, hair braided into pigtails. Her eyes were red from crying, and a green knapsack with red polka dots was slung over her shoulder.

“Hey Peri ...” Nipper’s voice was quiet.

“Nipper! What are you doing here?” I could hear both excitement and anger in my voice.

“I want ... I want to come along ...” She blushed but wouldn’t look at me.

Dinky smirked. “She followed me out here, an’ demanded that I tell her where ya went. She saw us goin’ into the stables and only saw me comin’ out. She’s pretty clever there, Peri.”

“But why? Why Nipper?” I couldn’t put the pieces together.

Her face started to match the polka dots on her bag. “Because you were right. Once you pointed out the flaws, I realized how hypocritical it all was. I couldn’t take it ... Besides, I want to be with you.” A tear rolled down her eye, but she caught it before it fell to the ground.

“You know how much trouble you could get in, right?”

“Yeah, I know. I want to go.”

I sighed. “Okay Nipper. Do you have everything you’ll need?”

She showed me her knapsack. She was better prepared than I was.

“All right Nips. You want to get going?” I scurried over to Chippers, who was impatiently waiting for our touching moment to finish.

“Of course I do!” Nipper followed and hopped right on Chippers’ back and grabbed the reins to steer. “Dinky showed me how to handle Chippers. I got it.”

Dinky and I shook hands. “Goodbye ol’ pal.” He handed me the bag of deer food.

“Bye Dingy.” I hopped on Chippers’ back behind Nipper. He was warm and soft, almost like fresh sheets right out of the dryer.

“Now Chippis will get’cha all the way ta the Arctic Circle Line. He hasn’t gone farther than that so I don’ wantta get ‘im all lost and stuff. So send ‘im back when ya get there. Ya’ll gonna hafta find yer own way South from there.” Dingy shouted as we started our journey.

“Thanks Dingy! For everthing!” I hollered back to him, but I don’t know if he heard me. Chippers was running so fast it felt like we were flying. The deer were trained for speed and Chippers was no exception. We would get there in no time.

Behind us I heard a faint, familiar sound in the distance. It was the sound of bells. Silver bells. It was the send-off, and the Christmas committee must have started off the celebration with the ringing of the Silver Bells, the sound of Christmas. I knew that, in around thirty minutes, the Big Man would be zooming past us, much faster than us in his chariot of red fire with eight deer attached to it. I mentioned this to Nipper and around a half hour later we took cover in a ditch behind a bush.

We listened. Silence. We stayed quiet and soon we heard that sound again. The Silver Bells. All too quickly, a beam of red light sped past over our heads. The Big Man had made his leave, and he was well on his way by the time we decided to continue.

“Are you sure we’re safe?” Nipper asked, petting Chippers’ ears.

“I’m sure. Don’t you trust me?” I reached my hand out to her and pulled her back up on Chippers’ back. She seemed tired, so I offered to drive. She passed out on my back a few seconds later.

As we progressed further South, the lights of the Aurora Borealis sparkled and dimmed in a rhythmic pattern, until all together they disappeared. I woke Nipper up.

“Nips ... I think we’re here.”

The Arctic Circle, Latitude: 66° 33' 39" N. We had made it all this way. We were pretty much home free, until I saw a familiar red suit waiting for us up ahead. This was the familiar red suit of a man

that I was trying to escape, and did not want to bump in to. The Big Man must have gotten lost and stopped to rest. I guided Chippers behind a bush.

“Thanks, Chippers.” I gave him the bag of deer food to munch on. “Now head on home.” He snorted, nudged his nose against Nipper and me and scurried back home.

“What’s the Big Man doing here?” Nipper’s face wrinkled. She was worried.

I too was panicking inside, “If we could just sneak past him I think I see some lights.”

We started to crawl our way through the snow. It was light and fluffy and made for easy tunneling. We made it past his sled and to the tip of the eight deer when from behind us we heard a booming voice. “Periwinkle? Nipper? I know you’re there!”

I felt a large hand clamp down on my shirt and knapsack. I rose into the air and came face to face with the Big Man. “There you are!” He smiled at the two of us, his cheeks rosy. “I was wondering when you were going to get here!”

We were speechless. The Big Man not only knew our names but he knew our plan as well. This was it. The thorn in my side, the hole in my plan, I cursed myself for not being careful enough to watch out for possible spies. I cursed Dingy; he probably reported Nipper and me for running away. I was so close to freedom ... I felt like crying.

“Oh ho ho ho.” The Big Man laugh. “Don’t be scared. No one turned you in, and I’m not going to punish you.” He set us down in the snow.

I gulped. Nipper looked as if she was going to pass out.

“Excuse me sir,” I piped up. This was my only chance to make a case. “But I’m not going back there ... I can’t.”

“Oh, I know all about you Periwinkle Evergreen, my best toy designer! You wouldn’t think that but I do. You know what they say, ‘He sees you when you’re sleeping and he knows when you’re awake, he knows if you’ve been bad or good ...’ He laughed again, and his

entire body shook. “I just love those great Christmas songs. You didn’t think I knew about your plan, did you?”

I shook my head. I honestly thought I’d been careful.

He laughed. My expression must have been funny to look at. “Well I did, Periwinkle, and I understand. Sometimes people need change. I guess I just don’t understand why you didn’t just tell me you wanted change?”

I looked at my fingers. All color had vanished from them. “I ... I guess I just didn’t think of it.” I also thought the Head would fire me; he didn’t like the Big Man talking to the workers.

The Big Man laughed again. “Well, I surely will miss you Periwinkle. I hope you understand what you’re doing ...”

I nodded. Nipper had stayed quiet. She finally spoke. “Sir?”

“Yes, Nipper?”

She blushed at being called by name. “Are you letting us go?”

“Yes, I am. I just wanted to make sure that you were ready for the consequences. The real world is a much different place than our small village. Once you leave, you can never come back. You have the choice. Ride with me tonight and continue to live at the village or leave and live in the real world.”

I thought about all the planning and the great ordeal it took to get to this point. I couldn’t just leave it all behind and be stuck with my job, living in that villiage. “I think I’m okay, sir. Thank you though.”

“I understand Periwinkle. And you Nipper Winklepuff?”

“I ... I ...” Nipper scuffed her feet like she did when she was nervous. “I just want to be with Periwinkle.”

I could feel my face becoming hot. Nipper wanted to be with me; maybe it was more than just friendship between us.

“Alright, Nipper. Thank you for everything. Before I leave I want to give you a special gift.” He waved his hands over us. Sparkles of various colors shimmered over us. He then handed us a present. “There, that should do it. Now you’ll be about twenty-four in the real world. Remember that. Now Merry Christmas you two! Take care, keep in

touch!” He hopped in his coach and sent the deer running. “Now dash away, dash away, dash away all!”

I felt funny. As if I was on top of the world, and at the same time extremely uncomfortable with my surroundings. We walked in silence. After a while, I looked at Nipper and she started to change. She looked bigger. In fact, she was bigger. She seemed about the size of the Big Man. I looked at my own feet and they expanded. My own body followed Nipper’s and grew. We were no longer short or small, and Nipper became even more beautiful than she already was. The Big Man’s magic had done something to us, and when we arrived at a small town, I felt as if I hadn’t changed at all, but I knew I would have looked like a freak if we had stayed the same.

We entered a building that looked like a store. “What happened?” Nipper kept staring at her hands.

“I think we grew.” I looked at my feet. They were huge.

“Hmmm ... so what present did the Big Man give you?”

“I don’t know ...” I unwrapped the present. Beneath the candy cane-striped wrapping paper was two books, one titled *The Night Before Christmas*, and the other *The Great Christmas Escape*.

“The night before Christmas, hmmm ...” I flipped through the pages. There was a picture of the Big Man and all his deer. It showed him giving out the toys and presents we wrapped, except the narrator called him a weird name, spelled S-A-N-T-A. He was just the Big Man to us.

“The Great Christmas Escape? What’s that about?” Nipper flipped the first page open, and on it was a picture of a small person with some blueprints in his hand.

“That’s ... me!” I shouted. I kept flipping through the pages, I saw Nipper and Dingy and even the Big Man. His cheeks were much rosier than I remembered.

“Merry Christmas Peri” Nipper kissed me on the cheek.

“Merry Christmas Nipper.”

JOE BOBROWSKI

THE MAN IN THE TUTU

ONCE UPON A TIME, IN THE YEAR 1974, THERE LIVED A BOY named Wilson. Wilson was fifteen years old, and he did not have many friends, on account of his terrible allergies. He would always sneeze all over the kids in his class, and so they thought he was gross and avoided him at all costs. One time in the second grade, while doing group work with the last three friends he would ever have, he went into a ferocious sneezing jag and accidentally stabbed a boy named Christopher Rogers in the eye with his mechanical pencil due to his involuntary muscle spasms (Christopher would die four days later in the hospital as a result of lead poisoning).

Well, in the fall of '74, after living twelve years with these perilous allergies, Wilson's mother, a heavy-set blond lady, decided it might be time to put him on allergy medication. One day after school, she took him to the doctor's office where he was prescribed Zerophran. Dr. Wentzworth explained to them that the medication would begin kicking in within hours, but he advised that Wilson must take extreme caution while adjusting to the medication. He warned Wilson that, while beginning the medication, he might experience some unpleasant side effects. Dr. Wentzworth did not go into specifics, but he did say that the side effects may include distorted visions of reality, and if Wilson wanted more information he could read the black label warnings on the back of the medication bottle.

Wilson, being the stubborn little bastard that he always had been, thought he would be just fine, and he did not heed the doctor's warning. He insisted that he would be able to decipher the difference between reality and non-reality ... Well, he had another thing coming ...

One cool, crisp autumn day, when Wilson was walking home from school not even a week after he had started the medication, he encountered something rather ... unusual. He took a seat next to a giant elm tree alongside the road in order to catch his breath. All of a sudden, he heard what sounded like the voice of a grown man coming from above.

“Hello Wilson.”

Wilson, being a devout Catholic, thought it was the voice of God. Without looking up, he got down on his knees and frantically fiddled with the rosary that he always carried. He began to recite the Prayer of Penance. His heart was thudding furiously in his chest, and his adrenaline was rushing. For those first thirteen seconds of silent prayer, Wilson never felt more at peace, until his heavenly frame of mind was rudely interrupted by the same voice.

“Look up you stupid brat!”

At that instant, Wilson came to his senses and realized that could not be the voice of God, because the Bible said that God would never speak in such a way. A bit frightened, Wilson slowly tilted his head upward, and what he saw put him in such a shock that his eyes opened wide and he became frozen in place. His ankles and his arms felt as if they were bearing heavy metal chains.

Staring down at Wilson was a man, probably in his fifties, wearing nothing but a pink tutu. The tutu was tattered pretty badly on the left side and smeared with blood in almost all areas. The man was missing two of his fingers on his right hand and was firmly gripping the handle of a machete in his left. The man did not move from his branch ten feet above Wilson’s head. He had an eerie, bloody grin which had the power to instill a mortal fear in a blind man. Once Wilson regained control of his legs, he began to panic and started to run as fast as he could in the opposite direction. His destination was the police department only a block away. He looked back to see that the evil man still had not moved from his place in the tree, but instead he forced out one devilish, shrieking laugh which carried on

at a constant rate. The laugh was so evil and frightening that it caused Wilson to go temporarily deaf in both his ears for a few seconds. This only made him run faster.

When he arrived at the police department, he quickly began telling the friendly neighborhood sheriff, Sheriff McKinley, what he had seen. He was still panicky and so almost everything he said came out in the form of one big long slur with an occasional stutter in between. It took him three attempts at telling the sheriff what had happened, until he was able to compose himself.

At first, the sheriff did not believe a word Wilson had told him, and he thought Wilson was just another heartless teen playing some kind of sadistic joke. However, when the sheriff tried to dismiss Wilson, Wilson broke out in tears and pleaded with the sheriff to believe him. The sheriff observed the intense fear in Wilson's eyes. It was a fear powerful enough to frighten the sheriff himself and made him realize that Wilson was not playing a practical joke. He was being serious. Sheriff McKinley asked Wilson to lead him to this outrageous discovery, and without any hesitation Wilson began dragging the sheriff down the road. Sheriff McKinley called the SWAT team for backup. In case things got ugly ...

Within a minute, sirens were sounding from all over the county, and there were over 160 people within a twenty yard radius of the elm tree where Wilson had encountered the evil figure. However, the elm tree was bare, with the exception of a few remaining dead leaves which had yet to fall off. There was no strange man in a tutu anywhere in sight. All of a sudden, almost all the eyes in the crowd were staring questioningly at Wilson, but he was in too great of a shock to notice.

Sheriff McKinley became furious with Wilson and viciously reprimanded him until the conflict was broken up by an even louder voice furiously approaching the scene. It was the voice of Wilson's mother, and she was not happy! She too began scolding Wilson, and before he even had one last chance to convince everyone that what he saw was real, she began dragging him home, swatting him upside

the head in ten-second intervals. Wilson was on the verge of breaking down, but he was still too stunned to allow any tears to come.

Everybody else also went home within minutes after Wilson's humiliating departure. Wilson soon became known as the boy who cried wolf because of his made-up story. What little respect anybody may have had for him was now gone for good.

That night, after a long verbal battle with his mother about what had happened earlier that day, Wilson was confined to his room for the rest of the week because he refused to admit that he was making up the story. Wilson knew he wasn't lying, and he knew that what he had seen that day was real. But being the sensible kid that he always was, he didn't expect anyone to believe him, because he had no proof. He thought about just giving up and ending all of this grief by lying and admitting that he was making the whole thing up, but he was never one to swallow his pride.

Something had to be done. As soon as he lay in his bed, tears finally did come, and he cried for two straight hours. Thoughts of suicide began to inhabit his mind.

Meanwhile, his mother was downstairs setting up an appointment over the phone with a local psychologist who would counsel Wilson. She believed her son to be disturbed.

Back upstairs in his room, Wilson became bored and began pondering things to do. He looked at his watch and realized it was nine o'clock; time to take his allergy medication. He retrieved the solid white bottle from his nightstand and twisted off the cap. He popped two of the green capsules and thought he would read the back of the pill bottle, just to pass some time. He read and he read and then he came across the black label warning. In big red capital letters, it spelled back this:

“WARNING! THIS MEDICATION MAY CAUSE DANGEROUS SIDE EFFECTS AND CAUSE SUBJECT TO SEE PEOPLE OR THINGS THAT DO NOT EXIST, SUCH AS MURDEROUS MIDDLE-AGED MEN IN PINK TUTUS HOLDING DAGGERS!!!”

Wilson became bug-eyed and was overwhelmed with joy. He wasn't going crazy! And now he had a perfectly logical explanation as to what had happened earlier that day on his way home from school. It was as if a million bricks were just lifted off his chest! He barged out of his room, taking down the door with him, and ran down the stairs so fast that he nearly stumbled.

He was overjoyed to tell his mother that it was the medication that had made him see the man in the tutu. She was confused by Wilson's explanation, but after reading the pill bottle for herself, she too became overwhelmed with happiness because she now knew her only son wasn't a nutcase. She then called Officer McKinley and explained to him the whole situation so he could notify everyone in town about the misunderstanding.

No one was furious with Wilson anymore (except Christopher Rogers' family, of course). Wilson was no longer considered to be disturbed, and now he would be more aware of the side effects and wouldn't let anything like that scare him again (as long as he was on the medication, that is).

On the final day of October '74, Wilson decided to go for a walk through the back woods. He was relieved that he wasn't going crazy anymore, and he wanted to find a clearing so he could sit down and thank God for his many blessings. As he began to pull out the rosary from his left-side jean pocket, something to the side of him caught his eye. He was startled to notice that it was moving. He turned his head to see that it was the same man in the pink tutu that he had seen before. Only this time, the man began to make his way down from the branch where he resided. This time, the tutu appeared to be even more blood-soaked than it had been before. Wilson thought nothing of it, forced a little smile, and flipped the image off.

"Screw you! YUR NOT REALLL!" he mocked.

He turned his back to the imaginary figure and began walking to a flat rock a couple feet away where he could sit and pray. As he was walking toward the rock, the last thing that ever went through

Wilson's mind was, "It's just the medication," before he was stabbed several times in the back of the neck with a six-inch blade. This was the last day of his life. The final thing he saw when he was on the ground bleeding to death was the man in the pink tutu hovering over him with that same devilish grin from before. Only this time, it was wider. Wilson's body was never found. Nobody even noticed he was gone, except for his mother.

To this day, she stares out the front window of their house with sad and tired eyes in hope that one day he will return. But deep down inside her heart, she knows she will never see him again.

PAT WRIGHT

TRUTH LEGEND

“MAYBE WE SHOULD TURN BACK?”

“Come on, we’ll find it ... eventually.”

“Yeah sure.”

Rick and Matt were fighting in the middle of the forest late in the evening. They heard about a town legend that says, “When you find what you were not expecting, you will find the truth to everything.” They heard that many people traced this legend into the forest where they almost uncovered it.

“Maybe we’re trying too hard,” said Matt anxiously “I don’t think were supposed to go looking specifically for this... whatever it is. I think we’re supposed to just stumble upon it.”

“Matt, why are you bringing me down, don’t think about every little detail so much, just have some fun man.”

Matt and Rick, best friends, were both in their twenties, recently graduated from college. They went from studying and cramming every little detail into their life, to having too much free time, hence the searching in the woods for days. Eventually they wanted to be successful music producers working for Columbia records, but in the mean time, this was fun too.

“So I’m thinking that pretty soon it’s going to hit us,” Rick was exclaiming as they walked down the path with the moon shining behind them.

“Yeah sure, it’s going to just hit us Rick. I think there is more to it than that.”

“You’re right, I think we should just continue searching in the morning. Let’s camp out here for the night.” They both pulled out

their tent from the big back pack. This was becoming a routine for them, they searched in the day and rested at night.

THE NEXT MORNING CAME TOO SOON, WITH THE SKY SEEMING brighter than usual. Rick got out of the tent, ready for the day, while Matt could not even move. Rick had to scream in his face to finally get him out of bed.

“Come on, wake up Matt. We got a long day ahead!”

“Shut up ... Okay, I’m getting up.”

They started their search for this mysterious substance that seemed impossible to find. The trails seemed to stretch on for miles and miles, never ending. Leaves were changing to that beautiful orange color, the weather was becoming colder, they knew fall was on its way.

“So I wonder what the big deal is about this whole ‘truth’ that will be given to us?”

“I’m guessing that we’ll learn about our future, or maybe we’re just idiots and wasting our time.”

They kept on walking, breathing in the wonderful smell of fall.

“Did you hear that?” Matt asked nervously.

“Yeah, it sounds like someone else is in the woods ...”

They felt like someone was watching them. They kept hearing this sound over and over.

“Anyways, I wonder if anyone has really ever found this truthful substance?”

“I’m sure someone has,” Rick said, however he sounded as if he was unsure.

Toward the end of the night, they built a camp fire and started roasting hot dogs and made s’mores. As they sat there in distress, they realized there was a huge object in the distance, just behind a bunch of trees.

“Is that what I think it is? Let’s check it out!”

“Yo, Matt, I think this is an abandoned cabin. Let’s go inside.”

As they searched around, it seemed as if no one had lived there

in ages. All the rooms were covered in cobwebs and there were dead mice everywhere. They almost left to go back to sleep in the tent until they discovered one last door hidden in the corner of the living room that led to a very clean and colorful room.

“Dude, what’s up with this room, it’s so clean.”

“Yeah, unlike the rest of this cabin. It seems weird to me that the whole house is trashed and then there’s this one room that almost seems as if it were decorated for a king. Maybe this house isn’t vacant.”

“It has to be, I mean we haven’t seen anyone around these woods in miles ... I think we should stay for the night.”

“Matt are you serious, what if someone shows up in the middle of the night?”

“Come on, we’ll be fine. You act like a child sometimes.”

They decided to spend the night in the cabin, seeing as they needed a change from the coldness and the millions of mosquito bites they had in the morning. The room had two king-size beds which they jumped right into. The sound of crickets echoed in the twilight as they laid there. Right as they were falling into a deep sleep, they heard a loud crash, and woke up to realize the cabin was on fire!

“GET OUT!” THEY SAID AS THEY RUSHED UP.

“Dude, the door is locked, now what?!”

“Look for something to break the door down!”

They scurried around the room, trying to find anything that would put a dent in the door, but it seemed there was nothing. Finally, they noticed a chest in the corner of the room. Hyped up in the moment, they threw the chest at the door, breaking a hole through it. Running as fast as they could, they reached the front door and got out as fast as possible.

“Who’s the freak who set the cabin on fire?” Matt said into the darkness of the forest.

As they looked to the right they spotted a dark figure running

deep into the woods. With all the anger built up inside of Matt, he ran after the figure.

“Matt come back!”

It was too late, Matt was gone in the distance. Rick stood there in dismay, watching the cabin burn to the ground.

THE BIRDS WERE FLYING DOWN SOUTH AS THE SUN ROSE THE next morning. Rick was sleeping up against a tree, until the chirping birds woke him.

“Whoa, what happened last night? I don’t even remember falling asleep here ... Matt’s gone! I completely forgot about Matt running after that thing last night. I can’t believe him, what an idiot, who knows what that thing was up to. I hope he’s okay, I feel like I should’ve just gone after him ... I need to go find him, wherever he is.”

Rick started off deeper into the woods, searching for his friend. He would do whatever it took to find him, however that might just not be enough.

“What is that?” Rick was saying to himself, when he saw what looked to be a string of clothing coming out of a bush. He reached to grab it, until he noticed it moving. He backed up slowly, hoping it was nothing to be worried about, however that hope surely faded.

A man in a cloak revealed himself, coming out from behind the bush with a blade in his hand, covered in blood.

“Who are you!?” Rick said in a panic.

“I’m the truth!”

Horrified by these words, Rick was nearly ready to run, until he turned and saw Matt’s head, lying next to the bush.

“MATT!”

“Just like everyone else who goes looking for the truth, he received it.”

“What kind of sick person are you?”

“I’m just carrying on the legend ... And I’ll do the same with you ...!”

VICTORIA HARDING

WINDOWS TO THE SOUL

THE BAR WAS PACKED FULL OF PEOPLE TRYING TO GET THEIR drink on. William glided through the crowd and took a seat next to a woman wearing a bright red miniskirt with fishnets.

And aren't you the quintessence of lust. This should be too easy, lovely.

He gave her a smile and slipped her a fifty. He raised his eyebrows and gestured toward the back door. She gave him a quick once-over. He felt confident because he knew for a fact he was a lot nicer than what she usually got in this place. She nodded and headed for the door with William close behind.

They left behind the blaring music and stuffy atmosphere of the bar and stepped out into the night. The door slammed shut and she faced William.

“All right, handsome, where you want me?”

“Right here, baby.” He pushed her against the wall of the building. He kissed her roughly, pulling her close.

Hmmm ... definitely more satisfying than the last four.

She gasped, but he quickly covered her mouth with his hand as he pulled away. With his other hand he twisted out the knife he'd plunged into her belly as it crackled with purple sparks. He licked the flat of the blade as she slumped to the ground.

“You taste good, love,” he said to the corpse.

He leaned down, took his fifty dollars back with interest, and got back to business. He took his knife and carved out her left eye.

I always did have a very steady hand. Should've been a surgeon.

Then he scooped it up with a plastic baggie, snapped the baggie shut and replaced it inside his jacket.

Thank God for Ziploc.

He stepped over the body and searched the pocket of his jacket until he found what he was looking for. William casually walked out of the alley playing with his lighter, looking as if he had gone out for a smoke. He smiled and began walking home.

*"It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me."*

"That's me!!! Daddy, that's me!"

"That's right, baby doll. Now it's time for bed."

"Awww ... but Dad, I'm not sleepy!"

"Sorry, pumpkin, but that's the rules. Now let's get you all tucked in. Goodnight Anna. I love you."

"Love you, too."

"Sweet dreams."

ANNABEL OPENED HER TIRED EYES, EXPECTING TO SEE HER father standing over her bed, and saw nothing but air. She was dreaming again. They were becoming less frequent, though. She still missed him sometimes, but it was getting easier. She looked at the clock. So ... early. She felt the bed shift as Sterling put his arm around her. She snuggled closer to him and drifted back to sleep ...

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. HIS EYES SHOT OPEN AND HE reached across a reawakened Annabel to grab his beeper.

What is it now?

He read the message and cursed silently. He got up and began getting dressed.

“What’s up?” asked Annabel.

“Nothing, Belle, go back to sleep.”

She sat up to face him. “Whenever you say ‘Oh, it’s *nothing*,’ it’s always something. If it’s really nothing, why don’t you go back to sleep?”

“Do you want me to get kicked off the force?”

“Your dad is the mayor. You’ve got *connections*. Besides, you wouldn’t get kicked off the force for missing one call.”

“I know. I know.” *Why did she have to be so stubborn?* He sat down next to her and brushed the hair out of her face. “But I’ve got to go get the bad guys, remember? I need to keep the city safe. For you. You know I’d be lost without you.”

“You mean that?”

“Of course I do.” He kissed her on the forehead.

“Mmmm ... well, all right. You can go, if it’s for me and all.”

“All right, I’ll try not to be too long.” He got up and headed for the door.

“Wait!”

“What?”

“You still have next week off, right? You promised that we could go to the beach.”

“Do you really think I’d forget something like that? I know how much you love the beach. I promise you that by next week, you will see the sea.”

“Ha. See the sea.” She yawned.

“I’ve gotta run. Go back to sleep. Be back before you get up. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Sterling drove to the address from the message, which turned

out to be a dingy little bar called Randy's. It was crawling with cops and CSIs. *Probably the most business this place is ever going to get.* He searched the sea of blue and spotted his partner, Lucas Lotts. They went way back.

"Whadda we got, Lotts?"

"What'd I tell you about saying that, Sterling?"

"Hey, I'm on duty, Lotts. That's Officer Pender."

"Well then I would be Officer Lotts, thank you very much."

"What's the situation?"

"Oh, right. We've got a white Caucasian female aged twenty-nine."

"Cause of death?"

"The vic was stabbed twice: once in the stomach, once in the eye."

"Any witnesses?"

"Nope."

"What do you mean 'nope'?" he felt a twinge of annoyance, "You mean to tell me that this girl was stabbed directly behind *this* bar, and *nobody* heard her?" He couldn't help but think of something like that happening to Belle.

"It doesn't look it, but Randy's is pretty popular. Last night it was packed: A lotta people, booze, loud music. No way anyone could hear her over that."

Sterling ran his fingers through his hair. "Does she work here?"

"Oh, she worked here all right."

"Waitress?"

"Try pro."

"We got a name?"

"Princess Katrina.' That's what the regulars called her, said something about her rocking like a hurricane. Hey, are you okay?"

Sterling frowned and tried to hold in his displeasure.

"Yeah. It just makes me sick to think that there are people out there who treat women that way. Like a piece of meat. It's just wrong."

"Speaking of pieces of meat, we should prolly go back there and

check out the crime scene before it's all cleaned up. Unless you wanna continue your speech. It was starting to sound real pretty. I think I'm gonna cry. You shoulda gone into politics, like your old man."

Sterling punched his shoulder. He could feel his heart slow back to normal. They both walked around the side of the bar and ducked under the yellow tape.

"You really need to get yourself a girlfriend, Lotts."

"Nah, you're too much woman to handle. If I threw a real girl into the mix, there'd be trouble." *Lucas always was able to pull me out of a bad mood. Well almost always ... Oh God.*

"Princess Katrina" lay slumped against the wall in a pool of blood. Her once beautiful face was now mangled and dripping with crimson. He tried to look away, but Sterling felt drawn into her icy stare. One unwavering eye looked straight through him, while the place where the other should have been allowed him to stare through her. An echo of a scream remained on her lips, a scream that no one could hear, a scream no one wanted to hear.

I hear you.

"Did you hear me?"

Sterling flinched. "What?"

"I said, do you think it was a mugging? She doesn't have any cash."

"No. If it was just a mugging, why kill her?"

"Maybe a jealous wife?"

"Why take the money?"

"We need more to go on."

Sterling glanced around the small alley to see if there was anything they had missed. *There has to be something else. I can feel it. Something ... magic. I hate magic.* He noticed scorch marks on the wall that began at the blood trail of Katrina's decent. He reached out and placed the tips of his fingers on it. He could feel warmth and a slight jolt of electricity. *Great.*

"Hey, what're you, a rookie? You don't just go around touchin' things in a crime scene! Get some gloves on."

“Sorry Lotts, I’m still sort of drowsy.” Sterling then became drawn back into Katrina’s gaze.

“Where’s the eye?”

“Stabbed in with a knife, remember?”

“No, not stabbed in, just gone. We have it?”

“I dunno. Lemme check. Whatcha thinkin’?”

“Maybe it’s a trophy. Wasn’t Vinnie Sacco missing an eye when those fishermen found him?”

“Yeah, but Vinnie’s death was ruled out as gang related.”

“Was it?”

“Wait a minute. You think we got a serial killer on our hands?”

“I don’t know, but if we do, we need to stop this from happening again.”

Sterling ran his fingers through his hair again and looked at Katrina one last time. *I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.* After a silent prayer, he began walking away. He had work to do.

UGH . . . MY HEAD. WHAT’S THE TIME? 12:33. WILLIAM DRAGGED himself out of bed and put a trembling hand to his throbbing temple. He groaned, reaching for the little bottle on the table. He opened it, poured out a white pill, and tossed it into his mouth. He stumbled across the room to the fridge and grabbed a beer to wash it down. He flopped down on his bed and waited for the pain to subside. He finally relaxed and stood up.

Why did I wake up so late? Oh, yeah. Better open shop or they’ll think I’m dead.

He walked into the adjoining room that served as his swap shop and unlocked the door.

He sauntered over to the cash register, sat down and began reading a magazine. *Ah . . . the latest sleaze, thanks to the hard work of our nation’s celebrities.* He flipped the page. He had only been reading for

ten minutes when the door slammed open, causing the bell to fly off the wall. *There goes my morning.*

“WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“You never were a morning person, Sterling. Could you fix my bell?”

“What?”

“Bell. Small metal thing that makes a pretty sound.”

“I know what a bell is. What are you talking about?”

“You knocked the little dangly bell off my door. Fix it.”

“No! And stop avoiding the question. Where were you last night between eleven and twelve?” Sterling said as he charged across the room and grabbed William across the table.

Thank god there's something solid between us.

“Wow. Some grip you have there. Have you been working out?”

Sterling responded by tightening his grip. *He is not amused.*

“Ah ... last night. Last night I was at a poker game with some buddies of mine. Why? What happened?” William said, feigning concern.

“What happened is that a girl, Katrina, was murdered last night behind a place called Randy's. You ever been?”

“No. Sounds like a dive.”

“Did I mention that she was killed by magic?”

“Did I mention that I wasn't there? I'm not the only person in town that's got a knack for magic.” *This is getting boring.*

Sterling let go of William. “Her eye was missing. Any of your 'buddies' have an eye fetish? Or maybe I should poke around here and see if anything pops up that you forgot to mention?”

“You can't do that. You need a warrant.” *He's grasping at straws.*

“Fine. I won't turn over your precious little junk shop. But if I find out you had anything to do with this, you'll be thrown in jail so fast you won't have time to fix that bell back to your door. I'll be watching you.”

“Okay then, Officer. I'll try to keep my nose clean. You won't have any trouble from me.” Sterling turned and stormed out of the store,

not waiting for William to finish his sentence. *What a TOOL. I'd better make a few phone calls before this gets too out of hand.*

AFTER LEAVING THE JUNK SHOP, STERLING HAD 'BORROWED' some files and gone to the library to do some reading. He was nose deep in a book when a redheaded girl in glasses addressed him.

"So ... interested in human sacrifice?"

"Huh?"

She pointed to the title of one of the books: '*Idiot's Guide to Ritual Human Sacrifice.*'

"Oh. It's just some research for a project of mine." He hid the case files under his stack of books. *Five cases, all with the victim missing their left eye. Including Katrina.*

"A project on ..."

"Rituals of ancient civilizations," he lied.

She smiled. "Well, as long as you're not going out and sacrificing people."

"Yeah ..." Sterling said with a lightning fast smile. There and gone. *I just hope no one else is. They must be using the eyes for something. If I could only find a pattern, then I could figure out who might be targeted next.* Sterling stared at his watch. *I'd better call Belle and tell her I'll be late.*

"I'm really into that kind of stuff. Different cultures, not killing people," she laughed. "Isn't it fascinating?"

"Ugh. Yeah. Fascinating. Now if you'll excuse me, I have somewhere else I need to be," he said politely.

WILLIAM WAS ENJOYING A DREAMLESS SLEEP WHEN HE WAS interrupted by shouting and a swift hit upside the head.

"Hey!" a dark-skinned woman with a snake tattoo stood at the register.

“Ah!” William fell out of his chair. “What d’you want?”

“I dun wan’ anything. You called me. Remember?”

“Oh. Right. Isn’t it bad luck to wake a sleeping man?”

“No. An’ anyway, you weren’t sleepin’, you were bein’ lazy. You supposta be runnin’ dis store, yes?”

“Well yeah, but I had a long night.”

“I know. An’ da way you been doin’ it, *he’s* bound ta figure it out soon, too.”

“I *know*. That’s why I called you. Did you bring it?”

The woman produced a little red cloth bag tied with leather. As he reached for it, her other hand grabbed him. Her electric blue eyes looked into his.

“If yer not careful, no amount a gris-gris will hide ya. Be careful.”

An eerie silence followed as her words sunk in. William eyed the tattoo wrapped around her left arm and thought he saw it tighten its grip on her.

He smiled nervously. “Careful’s my middle name. William Careful-as-careful-can-be Mordrid.”

He put the amulet around his neck. “How much do I owe you, three?”

“How bout five?”

“We agreed on four!”

“Yes. An’ you wanted ta give me less. So, I’ll take five.”

“Fine. But just because it’s hard to find people like you so far north.” He reluctantly handed it to her. She winked. William watched her slide outside. *That girl is one bad Mamma Jamma*. An older man entered the store and looked around.

“Excuse me, but do you have any antique firearm parts?”

William felt safer with the amulet. *No way ‘Little Brother’ can interfere with my plans now. I’ll make sure of that. Even if this stupid hoodoo bobble doesn’t last.*

STERLING HAD BEEN WRONG, OF COURSE. HE WASN'T BACK before Annabel got up. But that was all right. At least this time he called. *He works so hard. I can't wait until next week.*

Annabel continued to write in her notebook. She thought of herself as a 'budding novelist' when having a good writing day. On bad days, she was a 'struggling artist.' Today she felt like a 'struggling artist.' *Great. I just wrote my character into a corner. Again!* She scribbled out her words, tore out the page, ripped it in half and crumpled up the pieces. She threw them at her wastebasket, missing completely.

After an hour of writing, Annabel decided to work on something less stressful. She put her notebook down and went to her studio. Mostly she got a fair amount of money for her paintings. Whatever she didn't sell she kept in her private collection. Usually she let Sterling see her projects, but this one was top secret. She was painting the two of them using a picture of the first time they went to the beach together. His arms held her and they were laughing. The boardwalk lights were bright and colorful, but you could still see the faint glow of the stars. *Hopefully, I'll finish it before we leave. I just know that he'll love it.*

Suddenly, the door knob rattled.

"Sterling? Did you leave your keys, again?" she said as she covered up her painting.

No answer. Annabel froze. Something wasn't right.

"Sterling?"

The doorknob continued to rattle. She slid up to the wall and pulled open the curtains a crack. There was a strange man snarling at the door as he tried to rip it open. His hand appeared to be smoking in the dimness of the evening, and he struggled to maintain his grip. Seeming to feel her eyes on him, the man looked up and his luminescent yellow gaze met hers. They both stood motionless for a moment and then she screamed as the man pulled back and ran into the shadows.

She sprinted to the phone and punched in Sterling's cell number.

Come on. Come on. Pick up your phone. After ringing forever, her call went to voice mail. She hung up and dialed Lotts.

“Hello?”

“Lucas, its Belle. Do you know where Sterling is? He’s not answering his phone and somebody just tried to get into the house but they ran away and Sterling didn’t answer his phone. He always answers his phone and I don’t know what to do and ... Ah!”

“Belle?!”

“Sorry. A car drove by. I’m fine. Is Sterling with you?”

“No, he left awhile ago. I thought he’d be home with you by now.”

“Oh my god.”

“Hey, I’m sure he’s fine. Listen, you want me to come over and look around?”

“Would you?”

“Sure. Sit tight and I’ll be right over. ‘Kay?”

“Okay.” She heard the click as Lotts hung up and then gently put the phone down. She sat on the couch and wrapped her arms around her knees. Her heart was still pounding. She closed her eyes and tried to calm herself down. *Lucas will be here soon and Sterling’s phone is probably out of battery. That’s all.*

STERLING SAT IN A WAITING ROOM WITH CROSSED ARMS and watched as a receptionist answered the phones.

“Mayor Pender’s office, please hold. Mayor Pender’s office, please hold,” she said in a tired, nasally voice. *What’s taking so long?*

“Your father will see you now.”

“Thanks Rose.”

Sterling entered the large dusty office and awkwardly stood in the middle of the room. His father sat at his desk, signing some papers. The dim light from the desk lamp cast shadows across his face and made him appear older than he was.

“Ah, Sterling. How are you, son? I haven’t kept you waiting, have I?”

“No.” *Yes.*

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I have. Young people today are always in a rush to do something. Though, I remember Marlin telling me the same thing when I was your age.” He smiled.

“Dad, you’re only forty-six. Stop talking like you’re a hundred and six.”

“Well, I feel old. Now, what was it that you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Something bad is going on and I think William has something to do with it. See, this girl was murdered last night using magic, and her left eye was taken. I did some research and found other files that say that the eyes were taken from the murder victims. I have a feeling that William is involved. He seemed really suspicious.”

“Slow down. What makes you think that he has anything to do with this? Maybe he’s finally found himself a girl. Besides, William’s no sorcerer.”

“He could have borrowed. He wouldn’t give me a straight answer when I went into his little junk shop and asked him where he was last night.”

“You shouldn’t be heckling your brother while he’s working.”

“He is NOT my brother! Stop treating him like he can do no wrong. He has always gotten away with everything since we were children. Can’t you see him for what he really is?”

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” he said, rising from his seat. “That’s enough. I do see William for what he really is. He is my son. I am aware of some of his ‘activities,’ but anger won’t make it any better. Now, I want you to calm yourself down and go home. Spend some time with Belle. She’s such a lovely girl.”

“And what about William?”

“For the time being, just let your brother—”

“Half.”

“Half brother go about his business. If he’s really up to anything

dangerous, I will take care of it.”

“All right.” *I can't believe he isn't going to do anything. I guess that means I'll just have to take care of this myself.*

Sterling turned and exited the office. He needed some fresh air. On his way out he bumped into Marlin Emris, his father's assistant. Emris was an elderly man, but by no means frail. In fact, he always looked stronger whenever Sterling saw him.

“Sorry Emris, I didn't see you there.”

“Perfectly all right. I couldn't help but overhear your argument. Your father is only trying to protect you, you know.”

“Yeah, but I'm fully capable of protecting myself.”

“So, you just stay away from the Herrson warehouse tonight.”

“What?”

“The place where William is meeting with one of his suppliers from the black market. That's what you were talking about, yes?”

Emris' eyes seemed to flicker momentarily from their usual blue to a steely grey. Sterling blinked and did a double take. They were blue. *Of course. Get a hold of yourself Sterling. You're just seeing things.*

“Yeah. That's what we were talking about. Don't worry, I'll stay well away from the warehouse district. Now I have to go; Belle is waiting for me.”

“Who?”

“Annabel, Emris. Annabel Parker? Love of my life, remember?”
Come on don't keep me waiting.

“Of course. Parker. Goodnight, Sterling. Be seeing you.”

“Night,” Sterling said, and rocketed out of city hall. He hopped into his car and zipped down to the warehouse district. *This time I've got him.*

WILLIAM SLIPPED OUT THE BACK DOOR JUST AS THE GLAMOUR began to wear off. He ducked behind a car as the real Marlin Emris

walked inside. *That would have been awkward.* He stood up and inspected himself in the car's mirror. Before his eyes, the beard and wrinkles disappeared. He pulled out his cell phone out and dialed the number of his associate.

"Yeah?" the voice on the other end answered.

"He's on the way. Be ready."

William hung up and put his phone back into his pocket.

"Hmmm ... Annabel Parker. Wonder what she's like," he mused on his way home.

He entered the shop and locked the door; he went to the back and tried to enter the mind of his little half-brother. After several long minutes, he was finally able to tune in. The picture was blurry, but it was there.

Sterling had just pulled up to the Herrson building. It had been out of business ever since it had been cheaper to make shoes in China, and was the perfect meeting place for people that didn't want to be seen. The perfect place for scum like William. He quietly walked up to a rusted door and took his gun out. He opened the door and checked behind it. All clear. He then proceeded to search the whole building. There's nothing here. Maybe Emris was wrong about this. This is the last room and then I'm going home.

"Hey, you!"

Sterling turned to look and was greeted with a punch in the face. He reeled back and, before he had time to think, was kicked in the stomach with a steel-toed boot. He sank to the floor and his gun was kicked out of his hand. He squinted up at his attacker. It was a wiry man with a broad nose and golden-brown eyes. Then everything went black.

IT HAD TAKEN HER A YEAR, BUT SHE WAS FINALLY STARTING to get over him. No one had a clue where he had gone. It was as if Sterling had vanished. She continued to have nightmares in which

Sterling was in danger and she was haunted by the eyes of the man who had tried breaking into the house. Lucas told her that the two events were unconnected, but she couldn't shake the feeling that they were. She was currently having one of those now; a nightmare. She tossed and turned in her bed and then jolted up, covered in sweat. Then she felt arms around her and a voice that tickled her ear as it spoke.

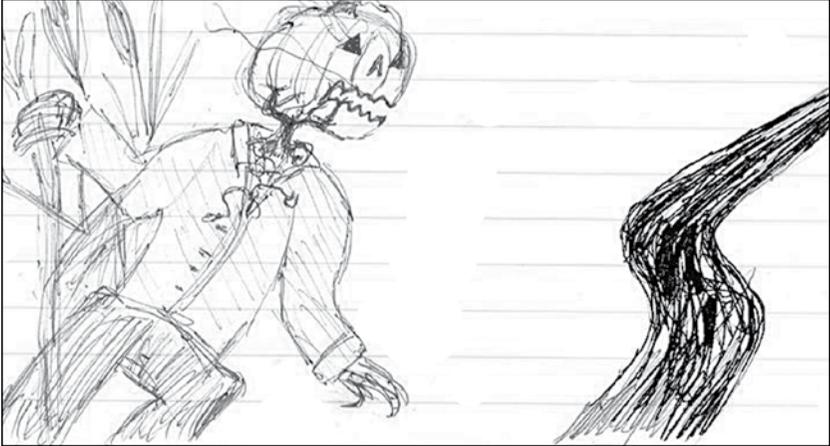
“Shhh ... listen Anna, it's just a dream. You're all right.”

“I know, William. I know.”

She held William tight and shut her eyes. *It was just a dream. It's not real.*

A CONVERSATION WITH NORMAN PARTRIDGE

Sawtooth Jack sketch by Victoria Harding.

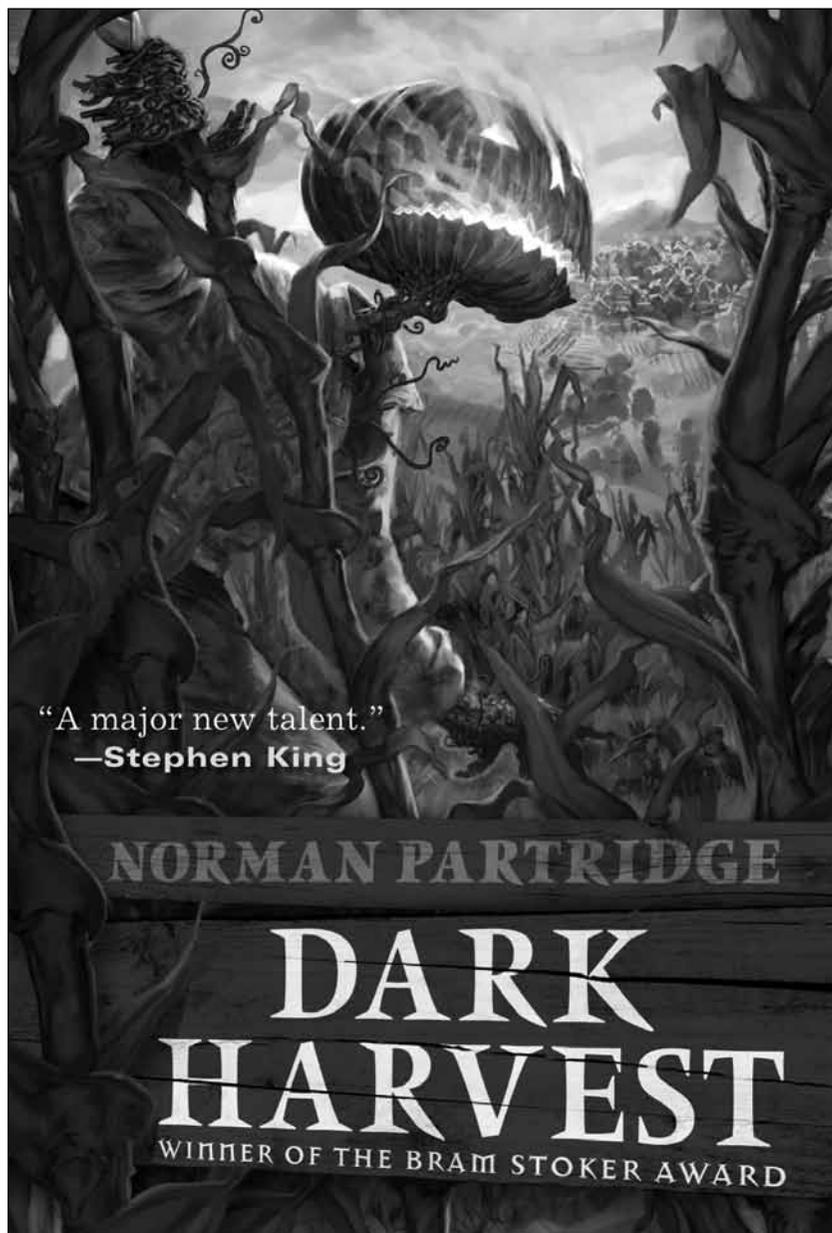


AUTHOR NORMAN PARTRIDGE VISITED THE CREATIVE WRITERS, AND KINDLY ANSWERED STUDENT QUESTIONS ON HIS BOOK, *DARK HARVEST*.

MARIAH: Where did you get the idea for the unique structure and changes in POV in Dark Harvest?

The initial spark came from the campfire stories I loved as a kid—tales of ghosts, vanishing hitchhikers, and hook-handed killers who prowled places that always seemed to be right around the corner ... or just down the road. My dad told stories like that, and so did my brother and some of the older kids in the neighborhood. I've always remembered the immediacy of those tales, and how they captivated me on the summer nights when I first heard them. That's what I was aiming for in the opening sections of *Dark Harvest*. I wanted to grab the reader and pull them into the world I'd created the same way those stories grabbed me when I was a kid.

Once I had the reader, I used some other tricks to move the story along and move it from character to character. Some of the techniques came from film—there are several tracking shots in the book, and those were a lot of fun to write. The one that carries the reader out



of town on an October wind, past Rod Serling in the cornstalks and on toward the October Boy and the gang of teenage hoods stalking him, was just a blast. I don't think I've ever had as much fun putting words on a page as I did writing that section of *Dark Harvest*.

MARIEKE: Did it take long to work it [structure/POV] out?

Some sections were easy, others were hard. The trickiest one was a little dance between the POV of Dan Shepard and all the fathers who'd come before him who'd sent sons out on the Run. The reader becomes a character in that section as well, so it was a challenge to write.

PAT, JOHN, MARIEKE: Why black licorice streets?

Just a little Halloween poetry there ... and a tip of the hat to a favorite writer of mine (Ray Bradbury).

MARIEKE: Did you intentionally use so many metaphors?

Yes. My aim was to provide a rhythm for the story, and for the voice I wanted the reader to hear in his or her head. It was also my way of painting a distinct picture of the town and the people in it. I wanted those metaphors to spark images in the reader's mind that were just a little bit different, images that (hopefully) would stick with them and (in some cases) grow stronger with repetition as the story moved forward.

DOMINICK: Is there a direct connection between the October Boy and the candy (stuffed in his guts and pumpkin head)?

Sawtooth Jack is the walking, talking embodiment of Halloween, so I guess the answer to that question is yes. Plus, I'm a third-generation Californian, so a little Mexican influence crept in. In other words, I remember swinging at plenty of pinatas as a kid. Only this pinata is alive ... and the October Boy is just as dangerous as those who are stalking him with baseball bats and pitchforks on the night of the Run.

CLARISSA: What inspired you to write this story?

Dark Harvest started out as a Halloween present for my wife (writer Tia V. Travis). I thought I'd surprise her with a short story for the holiday. But as soon as I wrote the first few scenes, I knew I had a novel on my hands. And that means it took a little while for Tia to get her present, but I think she'd say it was worth the wait (and, yep, you can insert a virtual wink).

PAT: Did an editor/publisher ask you to change any part of the story?

No. One of the great things about working with Richard Chizmar at Cemetery Dance is that he gave me the keys to the car and didn't ask for them back. Rich and I have a long-standing relationship—he published my first short story in '89—and he let me crank up the story and drive it my way. *Dark Harvest* hit the page just as I wrote it. When Tor picked up the novel for paperback, things were the same way ... so it was a great experience for me all around.

VICTORIA: Who exactly is the omniscient narrator meant to represent?

That's a question with a few twists and turns I'll have to leave alone for those who haven't read the book ... but basically the narrator is the town's Everyman. He's lived there, and died there, and seen it all.

DAVE: How did you develop the concept of October Boy himself?

I've always loved horror stories about scarecrows that come to life. I've been trying to write one for years. In fact, I wrote one novella called *Red Right Hand* several years ago that involved a gang of Depression-era bank robbers who come nose-to-nose with a scarecrow and some bad mojo in a cornfield—but something else happened when I got to the part of the story where I expected the scarecrow to come down off the pole. And since that something was better for the story, I went in a different direction than I'd originally intended and figured I'd save my scarecrow story for another day.

When I got the idea for *Dark Harvest*, I knew it would be my

scarecrow story. Kind of. Because the other thing every horror writer wants to do is create their very own monster, one that hasn't been seen before. That's what I did with the October Boy, and it's one of the things I liked best about crafting *Dark Harvest*. Sawtooth Jack is my guy, from his flaming pumpkin head right down to his twisted root feet. Making him up was a lot of fun.

EMILY: Why are the boys starved before the Run?

I wanted the night of the Run to be a wild, anything-goes kind of thrill ride. Starving the boys was just a way of amping up their internal hunger—both in their bellies and their souls. They're desperate. They want the October Boy so bad they can taste him, and since he's packed with candy that's a literal possibility.

DAVE: Why didn't anyone question the ritual before Pete?

There were people who did—Kelly Haines' dad for one. But people like that ran up against the Harvester's Guild. And you can figure out what the Guild did to them. They ended up like Kelly's dad, just another example to everyone in town of the cost of stepping out of line.

MARIEKE: Why didn't the parents stand up and do anything?

Part of the answer to that one is in the answer above. Another part is human nature, which is something most horror writers explore. I believe most people cling to a sense of stability, sometimes at a great cost. And the cost of the Run in *Dark Harvest* may seem extreme at first, but not when you place it within the parameters of human history. Take Nazi Germany, for example. People lived in that society, lived their lives day-to-day, got up and went to jobs and came home and made dinner. Laughed and cried on the weekends. I'm sure some of them didn't know what was going on, and some of them chose to ignore it, and some of them were knee-deep in it but still managed to close their doors at night and sleep like babies. I'm sure others battled nightmares, and some couldn't sleep at all. None of that's pretty, or

pleasant, but for me it reflects one of the darker and more frightening truths about the human condition.

JOHN: You don't give much history or background to the rituals. Why?

Good question . . .and one I get a lot. Again, part of this answer is in the one above. For most people, I think *why* isn't necessarily the most important question when it comes to day-to-day existence. The important question is *how*. As in: I don't care *why* this is happening; I care *how* I'm going to get through it day-to-day.

That's something I've explored in a lot of my stories, and for me it's a much more interesting question than *why*. Really, *whys* are a dime-a-dozen. If I wanted to toss one into *Dark Harvest*, it could have been as simple as one line or a paragraph: *Well, the town was built on an old Indian burial ground, and there was this curse, and the October Boy was part of a ritual to make a deal with the Devil, and . . .* You get the idea.

To tell the truth, I didn't care about any of that. I wasn't concerned with *whys*. I cared about how people would live within the very dark parameters they faced in that town. I cared about the *hows*. For me, those were the questions that made things interesting, and those were the questions that shaped the story. Seeing how each character dealt with the situation. The environment. The horror. Seeing how reactions and actions shaped them. For me, that's the real meat of most stories, and that was my focus in *Dark Harvest*.

Norman Partridge writes horror, suspense, noir, pulp—with combo plates available for repeat customers. His “personal best” novel is Dark Harvest, which was chosen as one of Publishers Weekly’s 100 Best Books of 2006. His sixth short story collection, Johnny Halloween, is now available from Cemetery Dance Publications. Visit him at www.normanpartridge.com.