

Bartleby Snopes

Issue 4

A Literary Magazine of Fiction

Edited by Nathaniel Tower

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Editor: Nathaniel Tower

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Editor's Note

The fourth issue of *Bartleby Snopes* is a tough one to describe. It's somehow our silliest and most serious issue yet. The stories are sometimes dark, sometimes uplifting, sometimes heartwarming, sometimes heartbreaking, and sometimes just plain absurd. It's a collection that very clearly defines who we are—a diverse magazine of original fiction with powerful prose.

As we complete our second full year, we can only wonder at our growth. The most important development over the last six months is the amount of positive attention our authors have received. Stories from our past year have been featured on popular fiction blogs and nominated for awards. Jac Cattaneo's "Bringing the War Back Home" (featured in Issue 3) was named one of 190 Notable Stories of 2009 by StorySouth's Million Writers Award.

We're very proud of the exposure we have received over the past months, and we hope the magazine continues to give so many authors a chance to share their wonderful words with the world. Please keep sending us your terrific words.

Of a Story by Kevin Winter

I wrote a story once and put it down in twelve point Times New Roman. The next weekend, my sister and her husband came up for a visit.

The story took place in a bus station. I was in the bus station; it was a first person job. I was walking along making my way to the landing and I spotted a caterpillar. But not right off. First I described the day (*morose baggy clouds hung down from the sky like bloated water balloons*) and the people in the station (*colliding into one another like the particles of a highly pressurized gas*).

Then, the caterpillar.

My sister's taste in men always steered in the direction of the neanderthal. Big hairy men with their heads too close to their bodies. Men with one syllable woodsy names like Colt or Chuck or Gill. Men that ate steak for breakfast.

Men that went snooping through their brother-in-law's office papers when they thought said brother-in-law was out on the fire escape for a smoke.

The caterpillar. The story.

I, the character, scooped the fuzzy guy up. There were so many stomping feet and I, the character, felt an obligation to protect him. Or her. I scooped him up and I described him with all the right words. Equal parts of lucidity and ambiguity. And all for under a thousand words.

"What are you doing, Buck?"

He looked up from my story.

"What's this?"

"It's just a thing. Put it down."

"A thing? Like what kind of thing?"

"It's a story."

"Bullshit it is."

"Hey, come on!"

"What? You say 'story' and I say 'bullshit'."

"Say whatever you like. There's places that will publish that."

"And that means what? Published bullshit's still bullshit. Lookit--*Moby Dick* is a story. *Hansel and Gretel* is a story. Fucking *Star Wars* is a story. This...this is two pages about a *caterpillar*."

"With all due respect, Buck, what the hell would you know anyway?"



"I can read can't I? It doesn't take a master chef to know if a jug of milk is ruined."

"Are you done insulting me yet? I worked pretty hard on that you know."

"Forget it. You remember that story you told me when you came down for Thanksgiving? The one about the mountain climbers?"

"The one where they get caught in the avalanche?"

"Yeah, yeah. That's it. They're all snowed in and they start going nuts. Now that's a story. Write that. Or something about zombies or something."

At the end of the story, I let the caterpillar go. I set him/her on a large fern just before boarding my bus.

Buck tossed my two-page manuscript in the wastebasket and we went out for that cigarette. And chatted about zombies.

Editor's Note

Of a Story was first published on the web site in April and was voted the Story of the Month.

Photo © Nathaniel Tower

DING! by Dallas Woodburn

The old man baked bread every Wednesday. An early riser, he baked before the sun came up. Even before he did the crossword puzzle--in ink, for he's a brave soul--because he often baked before the newspaper arrived.

He baked cinnamon bread. More like cake, actually. Flour, sugar, eggs, water, butter, and the secret "starter" ingredient of dough saved from last week's batch. Chocolate chips, sometimes, if he made it for the grandkids (which he usually did, considering he had nine of them.) Walnuts if he brought it to the office. Just plain for him, maybe an extra pinch of cinnamon--but he hardly ever made it just for himself. He could never finish a whole loaf before it grew dry and stale. And it seemed like such a waste to throw half a loaf away. His mother would have scolded him, just as she had when he was a boy during the Depression and didn't clean his plate.

Eat your carrots, Ollie! she would say. *Plenty of kids will go to bed hungry tonight and would give anything to have those carrots to eat. So be thankful! Wastefulness is a sin!*

Cooked carrots are a sin, the young boy thought then and the old man thought now, stirring the thick batter with a wooden spoon. His arm muscles would ache by the time the batter was smooth and ready for the oven, but he still stubbornly mixed everything by hand. To do it any other way seemed like cheating. A few years ago his youngest daughter bought him a shiny high-tech electric mixer for his 75th birthday. The best mixer on the market, the one Emeril uses. No matter. It went straight to the attic, its brand-new box unopened, out-of-place amidst the boxes filled with sweaters and mothballs and the old Christmas decorations and the rocking horse he'd made so long ago and never found the heart to give away. You have to sweat a little bit, toil a tad more, add in a pinch of labor and two doses each of love and honest effort, if you want to get a decent result at the end. *If something's worth doing, it's worth doing your best.* Those were his father's words. Good old Pop. He didn't care for cooked carrots either.

As he stirred the batter, watching the ingredients slowly soften and melt into one, the old man hummed quietly to himself. A show tune, from the Big Band era. No words, just music, music, glorious music. *Da-dum-de-de-dum . . .*

Soon he was tapping his foot, swishing his hips, swaying across the worn tile floor with an invisible partner in his arms, the batter-coated spoon still clutched in his right hand, momentarily forgotten. Nearly a decade had passed since he last shared a dance with her, but he could close his eyes and still feel her warm body pressed against his, the soft brushing of her skirt against his shins, her cheek gently resting on his chest. *Dum-dee-dee-dum*. He reached out his arm and twirled her--oh, how she loved when he did that!--and then gently pulled her back to him, their bodies sharing a secret language all their own.

They hadn't always danced this way, of course. When they were younger they moved hard and fast, quick steps, twirls and hops, stomping boots and clicking heels, panting and sweating and laughing with youth's overflowing well of energy. The years had slowed them down, as years always do, but the old man didn't mind. Looking back, of all the dances he ever shared with her--the square dance at the country fair where they first met, the jig at their senior prom, even the dance of honor at their wedding--their slow shuffling waltz around the kitchen was his favorite, her breath warm and sweet against his cheek as she whispered something in his ear, the subtle hint of her perfume on his shirt afterwards. *Dum-dee-da-dum*, a memory. . .

DING! The oven timer sounded and the old man opened his eyes. The oven was pre-warmed to 375 degrees. Batter dripped down the spoon's long wooden handle and he went over to the sink and washed it off. *Don't lick the batter, Ollie*, his mother used to say when she caught him with his tongue on the spoon. *It makes you look like a heathen with no upbringing at all.* His dad would just smile and shoot him a wink. Pop understood the best part about baking was licking the spoon afterwards. Funny that now, when the old man finally had the chance to do so without getting scolded, he always found himself washing the extra batter off at the sink anyway.

He gazed out the window above the sink. On clear days you could see the ocean, and on even clearer days the Channel Islands far away. But this early in the morning he only saw fog.

They had taken a boating trip to the islands one time, just the two of them, before she got sick. Nearly a quarter of a century ago, was that possible?

It rained on the boat trip back and everyone huddled under the awnings, wet and cold and miserable. Everyone except for her. She stood in the rain clutching the boat railing, her face upturned to the dark veiled heavens, her long hair bouncing across her shoulders with the jerk of the waves. He remained under the awning with the rest of the passengers, watching her laugh and shriek as the foaming waves splashed against the boat. Then she turned and called to him, looked at him with those eyes, and he found himself out on the deck beside her. Her kiss tasted of salt and rain.

The old man greased the loaf pan and sprinkled a light dusting of flour on the bottom--one of her old tricks to prevent sticking--before carefully pouring the batter in, spreading it evenly with a spatula. He popped a small handful of chocolate chips into his mouth before pouring the rest on top of the batter. His mother's words echoed in his mind--*Don't do that, Ollie, it means less for the bread!*--but this time he ignored them. She, the other she, his wife, had always swiped a few chocolate chips before sliding the loaf pan into the oven. "Reward for the chef!" she would explain, flashing her smile like a secret shared between them, her mischievous smile, the smile he fell in love with that first night at the country fair. That smile was his downfall, and she long knew it. One glimpse of it and he forgave her for anything: uncovering three bottles of vanilla extract in the pantry because she never made grocery lists and forgot she just bought some two weeks before; ordering a dozen boxes of Girl Scout cookies because "the girls

looked so cute in their little uniforms" even though the kids had already left for college and it was just the two of them and they couldn't eat *three* boxes of thin mints, let alone a dozen; leaving him to drive to work with the gas gauge on Empty because she refused to go to the gas station until it was "absolutely necessary." Which, in her case, was always "tomorrow." Yep, he forgave her for anything, because of that smile. He even forgave her for dying.

The old man wiped his hands on his apron--her apron, actually; his youngest daughter bought him a new apron for Christmas one year but he had never worn it. Crisp and new and creased neatly in its folds, it remained in the bottom drawer below the stove. Baking was something his wife used to do, something he did now to be closer to her. The first few weeks after she died, he wandered around in a fog, lost, his fridge filled with casseroles from well-meaning neighbors, his countertop piled with unopened sympathy cards from well-meaning friends. Then one day his granddaughter came to visit with a loaf of "Grandma's bread," this bread, plain but with extra cinnamon, the way he liked it.

"I know it's not the same as when Grandma used to make it. . ." she said, her voice cracking, and then tears were spilling out her big innocent eyes, and he was crying, too, as he cut them each a slice they tried to eat but couldn't.

A few weeks later, he went through some of her old cookbooks and found the recipe. The first batch was a disaster--burned on the bottom, uncooked in the middle, edges glued to the pan because he forgot to grease it first. Later, in the back of the refrigerator behind the casseroles, he found the saved "starter" batter for the bread. The secret ingredient. He gave baking another try, and this time the finished product was actually edible. An improvement, though it still wasn't nearly as good as hers had been. But the familiar smell of baking that filled the kitchen was like stepping into a memory, and he could close his eyes and imagine she was still there, right beside him.

So he kept baking, cooking, experimenting, paging through her shelves of cookbooks, watching The Food Network, trying out new recipes on friends. It was like therapy, or maybe like a drug, an addiction, but sometimes it was the only thing that kept him going through the endless lonely days so he figured it was all right. He eventually bought new pans and pots and cooking spoons because the others were getting stained and grimy; he knew she'd understand. But he kept her old aprons, every one. He couldn't imagine wearing anything other than this faded flowered apron that had once cinched around her waist, that still smelled slightly of her perfume if he brought it to his face and closed his eyes and breathed in deeply enough.

Clutching the mismatched potholders his daughters had stitched in Home Ec more than half a lifetime ago, the old man gently slid the pan into the oven, savoring the familiar warmth on his face and hands. He set the timer. Time to wait. It seemed he was always waiting, now.

The old man sat down heavily at the kitchen table, resting his head in his arms, suddenly exhausted. Funny how the years crept up on a person, slowly and then—

BOOM!--blindsided you. A blitz, like the coaches used to warn against in football. The old man broke his nose one time during a high school game. Jogged to the sidelines and popped it straight and stuffed some cotton up it to stop the bleeding. Then he ran back in and kept playing. That was when he was young, when he was invincible. Now he knew better.

Funny how baking took so much out of him these days. Or maybe it was the remembering. *I miss him terribly, Ollie*, his mother used to sigh after his father passed away. She seemed so much older as a widow. *I even miss him licking that goddamn spoon!* Funny how the things that used to annoy you were the things you missed the most when they were gone.

The old man missed discovering extra bottles of vanilla extract in the pantry. He missed the stale Girl Scout cookies. Heck, he even missed running out of gas. Sometimes he delayed going to the gas station for a day or two, just to see how close to Empty he could get, to remember how it felt to coast up to a pump running on fumes.

She only ran out of gas one time. He knew sooner or later it would happen; she would learn her lesson. But the one time she ran out of gas, it was at an intersection with gas stations on three--three!--corners. Needless to say, she didn't learn her lesson.

Funny how looking back, he was glad she didn't.

The old man closed his eyes. Imagined he felt the cool ocean breeze on his cheeks, saw the waves splashing the little boat, the rain streaming down her face. Her smile. He felt her in his arms, dancing across the boat's slippery deck, dancing around the kitchen, only it wasn't a ghost this time, it wasn't a memory, it was her, her, Her, and she was laughing as he twirled her, *da-dum-de-dum, Ollie I missed you so much. . .*

DING! An hour later, the oven timer went off. This time, the old man didn't hear it.

Editor's Note

DING! was originally published on the web site in June and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Wait by Eric Fershtman

Someone had beheaded George Washington's horse. I finally realized it after staring at the statue in the Public Garden for five minutes, drawn there by the crowd gathered at its base. Gloved index fingers were thrust into a clear sky, conducting a symphony of voices rising and cameras clicking and tires sweeping along the street behind. Washington himself was intact, a calm look upon his face as he gazed into the distance. But the horse, oh the horse, he (she?) hadn't made it, a casualty of war, of Washington's hubris, the victim of a bored teenager, or, the people whispered, a terrorist act.

I stood on the fringe of the group, my hands tucked deep into the pockets of my coat but my fingertips still frozen, watching the crowd grow, an instant community, moving and morphing—swaying—an indecisive mob, casting their eyes to Washington, pleading with him to tell them what to do, what to think. I tried to catch his eyes too, because I wanted to shrug, to apologize for the broken mass of humanity below him. But he never wavered, that's George Washington for you, staring beyond, at something indistinguishable, maybe the future. His horse was still standing, and wasn't that all that mattered? Stand tall, even when your head's lopped off. The real trick would be to do it with your legs cut out from under you.

The police came shortly after, on top of massive horses clip-clopping along the asphalt path. "What's going on here?" one of them demanded of the crowd. A small Japanese woman standing near caught his eye, and pointed. The policeman followed the path of her finger. "Oh my..." he said, letting the rest of the sentence get swept up by the wind, the unspoken word riding the air. The horses neighed and clomped the ground and demanded vengeance. "Who did this?" the policeman asked. "Who did this?"

We all felt the urgency of the question, as if a storm cloud covered the sky, small rumbles of thunder growing louder, lightning flickering within, each moment filled with the threat of an explosion. Something was going to happen. Something had to happen. Why didn't anything happen?

I'd only been in town two weeks, but I'd walked past the statue every day, cutting through the Garden on my way to and from work. I had even stared up at it the first time, admiring the contrast with the buildings rising behind, as if he were leading them into battle. I squinted, alternating focus between the statue and the buildings, each time discovering something new: the way Washington threw his shoulders back, or how his hands gripped the reins, or how his sword hung diagonally from his waist, rubbing against the side of the horse, maybe flapping against its taut stomach as it galloped. I remembered another statue, a shadow from my childhood: in Key West, a sad bronze sailor stood saluting, encircled by hundreds of tombstones. Almost every weekend of the first six years of my life were spent in the company of that sailor—whenever we'd leave the base, my dad always took me and my brother there first, I don't know why, maybe he

wanted to guilt us into acting good, or maybe he wanted to remind himself of something he was too afraid to forget. We'd stand in the cemetery, me and my brother fidgeting, pinching, pushing, while my dad stared up and offered a salute. "Stand straight, boys," he'd always say. "We're in the company of greater men."

The wind picked up, no longer a whisper but a whistle, pulsing through the Garden, the Commons, through the city itself, rustling the skeletons of trees, pushing along dead, brittle leaves that swirled and twirled and bounced along the beaten lawn and pavement. People shivered and stumbled, and the policemen leaned down as their horses braced themselves against the onslaught. A flake of snow dropped to the ground in front of me, or maybe the promise of a flake of snow, the foreshadow of a flake of snow. Then more came, a flurry of white dropping out of a clear sky, coming, literally, from nowhere. "What's happening?" a woman whispered, addressing her question to Washington. He stayed still, a stern look blanketing his face. I thought I saw the horse's muscles quiver, and wondered if maybe, in someone's closet, in Dorchester, or Malden, or Medford, among dirty clothes and empty duffel bags and boxes of pictures and legos, the bronze head of a horse was neighing.



smile playing on her lips.

"This is crazy," a woman said to the left of me, a few tufts of blond poking out from beneath a gray beanie, her hands opening to the snow that was slanting in with the wind.

I turned to her and she shook her head, still looking up. "I've never seen snow before," she continued.

"Really?" a man asked, on her other side. "I didn't know that about you."

"Yeah, you really don't see snow down south." She looked over at me, a small

“That’s right, I forgot, you’re from ‘the south,’” the man said, putting his arm around her. She laughed, and tilted her head up again, sticking her tongue out to the fluttering flakes.

“So does this happen often?” she asked after a moment.

“Oh yeah. It snows a lot in Boston. Good thing you have someone to keep you warm.”

“No, I mean this,” she gestured to the horse. “Is there a lot of vandalism around here?”

I snuck a peek again, and was surprised to meet her eyes. Deep dark clear blue, in which you could see for miles but never find the end, stretching on, maybe into infinity, carrying a million little promises that bob along the surface, so that you could just barely feel them, but never hold them. The kind of eyes Washington has—the whole country’s in those eyes. I looked away.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” the man said.

The white fell steadily now, a slow-motion rain, covering the asphalt and the grass and the bushes like a tarp, or a carpet, blurring the edges of the park, softening everything up. A few people were laughing, watching children try to catch snow on their tongues, one little girl bawling when a flake landed in her eye. The sky was blank, and it started to feel like we were standing there for hours, like it was twilight already but we were still waiting, and maybe we’d keep waiting, an eternity of waiting for something to sink in. I remembered places: Key West, Great Lakes, Ill., Kings Bay, Ga., Meridian, Miss., Fort Worth, Texas—a lifetime of waiting, never stopping to take a breath, because once you did, you were gone again, onto the next place. “I wonder if it wasn’t always like that,” the woman said. “It kind of makes sense, you know? I mean who really looks at the horse?”

Washington’s creamy bronze gleamed, and he sat stalwart, upright, ignoring the snow, fighting the elements with the same dignity he had at Valley Forge. I glanced at the woman again. “What do you think he’s looking at?” she asked.

The crowd began to disperse, taking cover from the elements. A group of 100 people dwindled down to around 20 within a few minutes. The police stood idly by, or rather, they sat on horses idly by, watching to make sure no one started anything, but unable to do any real thing about the statue. “Well, I’ve got to get to work,” the woman said. “I’ll see you after.”

I felt her eyes fall on me, which sent a tingle zigzagging down my spine. I wanted to look, to crawl right up into them and swim and swim and swim, past the tombstones, past the tall buildings, past the snow—I wanted to find what she saw, what Washington saw, what the sailor saw—home.

“The tail!” someone said. “It’s gone!”

One of the police horses snorted violently and thrashed its head back and forth, whipping the snow off its mane, the flakes hovering around it like a shroud for just a second. Then, it rose up on its hind legs and kicked out. Plumes of air came billowing from its muzzle and it rose again, and again. “Whoa, Nelson!” the policeman cried, but

the horse wouldn't stop. Finally, the policeman slipped off the side, and fell to the ground with a soft thud, a sheet of snow splashing around him. "Someone grab him!" he yelled.

The horse took off through the garden, galloping along the path, cutting across the lawn, skirting a bare-branched cherry tree. We watched in silence as it sprinted over the bridge and then disappeared, the sound of clip-clopping along with it. I turned to the woman, but she had already started to walk the other way, toward the street.

I looked up to Washington, hoping to catch his eye. He refused, instead peering out into the beyond, waiting.

Editor's Note

Wait was first published on the web site in January and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Photograph © Eric Fershtman

Bobby's Notebook by John Grochalski

Bobby slammed the door to his bedroom just as Nick was coming out of the bathroom. Nick looked at the door. He waited until he heard movement. Then he heard the television come on, and soon Bobby was laughing at whatever was playing. Nick thought about opening the door and saying something about the television. He didn't like how much television Bobby was watching. He was too old for cartoons. Nick didn't understand Bobby's attraction to all of the old sitcoms that played on the cable channels. Plus, wasn't it a school night?

"He's watching TV again," Nick said, coming into the kitchen.

Amanda was putting the dirty dishes into the dishwasher. She had the kitchen sink running in order to wash off the bigger plates. But the water was just running. Nick looked at the faucet and then he shut the water off. "Hey."

"He's watching TV again."

"What would you like me to do, Nick?" Amanda asked.

"I don't know," Nick said. He sat down at the kitchen table as Amanda continued putting dishes and silverware into the dishwasher. He grabbed the glass of wine sitting there and had a drink. "Do you have any cigarettes?"

"You're going to have to go out for them," Amanda said. She opened a cabinet underneath the sink and took out the dishwashing liquid. It came in a green and gold container, the colors of the sports team at Bobby's school.

"How much TV does he watch?" Nick asked.

"A little after school. Then he does some homework and watches the shows at night."

"He's a C student."

"He has a few B's and A's too," Amanda added.

"Bobby got a C in math," Nick said.

"Well, we were both bad at math."

Amanda poured the dishwashing liquid into the dishwasher. She closed the compartment and then slammed the door. Nick cringed. The dishwasher had cost a lot. It had cost their tax return money and then some. Nick had thought about buying a home stereo system complete with a Blu-Ray DVD player, and maybe some sports stuff for Bobby with that tax return. But then the goddamned dishwasher broke. Amanda said that he had overstuffed the machine and that's why it happened. Nick had yet to touch the new machine.

"It's the TV," Nick said. He finished off the wine. "We shouldn't have bought him that TV for Christmas."

"It was inexpensive," Amanda said. She took the wine bottle from the counter and refilled Nick's glass. She didn't get herself one. "It's not even a flat-screen."

"Aren't you having any?" Nick asked, after having a bit of wine.

"I had two glasses already. I need to be sharp."

"For?"

"The book club is coming over," Amanda said.

"Oh Christ, when?"

"I don't have my watch on."

There was a noise upstairs, a hard pound on the floor and then movement back and forth. There were always hard pounds on the floor. Nick couldn't figure out what they were. Cries for attention? Teen angst manifesting itself? Bobby simply trying to walk across the room? It disgusted Nick to think that his kid made that much noise just moving. He looked up at the ceiling. He heard the TV turn up and then came the sound of a large weight landing, of Bobby falling back on his bed. It shook the light fixture in the kitchen. "How much did he eat tonight?" Nick asked.

"You were there," Amanda said.

"Was it two plates?"

"Leave him alone, Nick," Amanda said. "I think he had a bad day."

"Kids don't have bad days," Nick said. "Kids go to school."

"Well, don't you sound like your father?"

"My mother overfed me when I was a kid. I got fat," Nick said. He stopped talking for a moment. They listened to the sound of the new dishwasher as it cleaned up their mess. "She fed me two or three portions. It took me until the age of seventeen to lose it. I didn't even date until I was in college. I didn't have sex until I turned almost twenty."

"Bobby likes a girl in his science class," Amanda said.

"What does it matter if he keeps eating this way?"

"Her name is Katherine. Katie."

"He eats and he watches too much TV," Nick said. "Or he plays those games."

"You bought him that game system," Amanda said. "Remember I said wait a year or so."

"My father took my TV away. He took it away and told me I could have it back when my math grade improved."

"Did it?"

"No. But I didn't care. I decided to lose weight. I went out and jogged, and I lifted weights with my friend, Mitchell."

"How's Mitchell's divorce going?" Amanda asked.

Nick waved her off and had more wine. "You really already had two glasses of this?"

"I'm going to have more when everyone arrives."

"What are you reading?"

"Patterson."

Nick laughed. "What kind of wine is this?"

"It's French," Amanda said. "It goes down smooth, doesn't it? It never gives you a headache. You know how red wine gives me a headache."

"Yeah, yeah," Nick said. "Sulfates."

"Anyway," Amanda said, sitting down across from him, "I think Bobby had a bad day."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know. I got home and he was just sitting in the living room. He was just sitting there on the couch."

Nick nodded. "The TV wasn't on?"

"Yeah, it was on." Amanda took his wine glass and had a small drink. "It goes down smooth, doesn't it?"

"See, he needs to stop watching television." Nick had some wine then he gave the glass back to Amanda. "When I was a kid I had a paper route. He should get a paper route. That would take the weight off of him."

"They don't let kids deliver papers anymore," Amanda said. She finished the wine.

"They should."

"Did you lose weight delivering papers?"

"He'll never meet a girl looking like that," Nick said. He got up from the table and went over to the mantle. The mantle separated the kitchen from the dining room, and it was made of black-painted wood. "Are you sure there's no cigarettes?"

"There might be one at the bottom of my purse," Amanda said. Nick went over to the dining room table and opened her purse. He dug around and found a wilted smoke at the bottom of the bag. "Am I right or am I right?"

"There's only one."

"Let's share it."

Nick came back into the kitchen. He took a pack of matches off of the windowsill and lit the smoke, as Amanda watched him. The dishwasher whirled and rumbled. From upstairs there came another thump, and then something that sounded like a bowling ball smacked off of the floor. Again, Nick turned his head up toward the ceiling and then sat back down across from Amanda. He handed her the cigarette.

"What's with all of the noise?"

"He's a teenaged boy," Amanda said. "Teenaged boys are loud."

"He sounds like a goddamned elephant," Nick said. Then he felt bad for saying it. Amanda gave him a look. "I have to get ready," she said.

"But you don't know when they are coming over," Nick said. "Where's your watch?"

"It's upstairs," Amanda said.

"I'll get it." Nick got up from his chair.

"Wait. Something happened to Bobby today."

"What happened? What?"

"I don't know," Amanda said. "But he was just sitting there when I came in. I think it might be the kids at school."

Nick shook his head. "You shouldn't feed him so much. What does Bobby need with two plates of spaghetti? And all of that bread?"

"I thought you didn't know what he ate."

"I know."

"He said he was hungry," Amanda said. "I don't think he eats at school because of the kids."

Suddenly Nick got angry. He thought he didn't know why but he did. He pictured his son starving himself at school, and then coming home to raid the refrigerator, to attack the food cabinets. All that junk: the pastries, the cheese-flavored crackers and the cheese that came in a can; all of those bags of potato chips. All those bastard kids in his class. It never changed. Once when Nick was in high school and the teacher had to leave the room for a small emergency, this kid named Jamie Jackson got up in front of the class and started playing Duck, Duck, Goose, the child's game. It seemed odd the classroom playing that game. Kids rolled their eyes and threw paper at Jamie. But he kept it up, moving from kid to kid and shouting, "Duck!" When Jackson got to Nick he put his thick hand on Nick's head. He kept it there for an eternity. Then he pressed down hard and shouted, "Cow!" The whole class laughed. Nick had never wanted to kill a man until that happened. But what could he do? Jackson played wide receiver on the team.

"We need to take his TV away," Nick said. "We'll take it away until he gets that math grade up."

Amanda had a deep pull on the cigarette. "You do it. I'm not doing that to Bobby."

"Fine. I'll do it now." Nick made for the stairs.

"Here," Amanda said. "Bobby left his notebook downstairs." She handed it to him.

"His notebook?"

"Yeah. He was writing in it before dinner. I don't know."

Nick held the notebook in his hands. He looked at it. It was red and on the cover Bobby had written "Private" in thick, black marker. "I'll see about this notebook."

Nick pounded up the stairs. He was intent to put a stop to this. He wanted to put a stop to something. He stopped at Bobby's door and listened. There was no sound but the TV set. Nick figured he'd just go in there and unplug the thing. He'd tell Bobby that it was for his own good. It was just until he got the math grade up to a B. Nick would keep the TV in their bedroom until then. Bobby could watch his shows downstairs in the living room, only after he finished his homework.

Nick looked at Bobby's notebook. He looked at the word "Private" written on the cover, and then he opened it. Nick's dad used to come in his room without even knocking. Inside the notebook were little poems and stories. Bad stuff, Nick thought. It

rhymed. He wondered why in the hell Bobby was writing stories and poems in a private notebook. He wished that kids still delivered papers in the morning or after school. Delivering papers would take that weight off of Bobby. Nick knew it.

On the inside cover of the notebook Bobby had written his name and Katie's name. He gave Katie his last name. Mrs. Katie Whitman. Mrs. Katherine Whitman. It was written over and over again. Robert and Katherine Whitman. Nick cringed. It seemed like something that a girl would do. He read more. At the bottom of the inside cover Bobby wrote something else. He wrote: *Bobby loves Katie but Katie could never love Bobby because Bobby is fat.* Nick read it over and over. And then he read it again. Katie could never love Bobby and he knew it.

There came a labored sound from Bobby's bedroom again, and then the sound of footsteps. Nick stiffened in the hallway. He waited but Bobby only turned the TV up and sat back down on the bed. Nick could hear the springs tense up. There was a sitcom playing. It was a television show that Nick recognized from his youth. He had loved that show once. Nick listened. He closed Bobby's notebook and he listened. Nick put his ear to the door, and then he held a hand up to touch the cold wood. Someone on the show spoke loudly, animated. The laugh track reverberated through the door. And then Bobby laughed.

Nick opened the door without knocking

"Hey!" Bobby shouted. He was lying on his bed. He looked beached there, arms crossed over his humongous mound of stomach flesh covered by an ill-fitting Dallas Cowboys t-shirt, his trunk-like legs, clad in dirty, gray sweatpants, spread eagle and hanging over the mattress, and his extra chin resting on his neck. Bobby didn't even fit on his own bed. Nick took in his son and couldn't stop himself from frowning. "What?"

Nick remembered the notebook in his hand. "Here," he said. "Your mother found this."

Bobby's eyes widened. "Where? Where?" he demanded.

"I don't know." Nick held out the notebook. Bobby tried to raise himself to fetch it, but it was taking too long for the both of them. Finally Nick just tossed the notebook. It hit Bobby in his chest and then fell to the floor. "Did you do your math homework yet?"

"After this show," Bobby said. He lay back on his bed. He left the notebook on the floor, like it didn't matter to him. "Anything else?"

Nick stood there for a moment. "About the TV..."

"I said I'll do my math after the show."

"Okay."

Nick left the room. He closed the door and listened for a moment. There was no sound, not even the sound of Bobby picking his notebook up off the floor. Nick waited there for a while longer. He wanted to hear something, anything.

"Is everything all right?" Amanda asked, from the bottom of the steps.

"Yeah," Nick said. He left Bobby's door and came to the top of the stairs. "He said he's going to do his math homework after the show."

"See?" Amanda said. She smiled at Nick, and he tried to smile back. "Now come back down here and help me."

"Sure," Nick said.

He turned back toward Bobby's room. Someone on the TV shouted and then the laugh track blared. Bobby laughed too. He moved on his bed and the springs played a symphony of emotions. Nick held on for one last second. Then he went downstairs to join his wife.

Editor's Note

Bobby's Notebook was first published on the website in March and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Photograph: "Milk Canvas" ©
Christopher Locke



Colour by Renita D'Silva

When you were five, you looked up at me with your huge liquid eyes and asked, Mum, what colour am I? Am I white or am I brown? I squatted down to your eye level, took your soft chubby hands in mine and solemnly whispered in your ear, as if we were party to a secret, just the two of us. You are neither white nor brown, Caz. You are special. One of a kind. Perfect. You beamed and skipped away, your sturdy little legs stretching and bending, chanting, I am perfect. I am special, in time with each skip.

When you were eight, you looked up from the picture you were painting, your hair framing your face in light brown ringlets, the tip of your tongue peeping out of the side of your mouth as you tried not to get any paint outside the edges, and asked, What colour do you get when you mix brown and white? Before I could reply, you pointed to the glass of water housing the used paint brushes which sat beside the obscenely bright pots of fluorescent green, golden yellow and blood red paint. I think it's that colour, Mum. You said. Muddy.

When you were ten, you came out of school one evening in a strop and when I asked what the matter was, your face twisted in an ironic smile too old for your years. You walked ahead of me all the way home, kicking viciously at any stones or leaves that dared lie in your path. It was autumn, I remember, and there were plenty of both. I wish I could tattoo my body a different colour--white or brown, I don't care which. As long as it is not this, you yelled, pointing at your body when I breathlessly caught up with you, and tried to link your arm through mine.

When you were fifteen, you said you wanted to die. I said, don't be like that. And in a rare moment of candour you said you didn't fit in. Anywhere. Every teenager feels like that, I said. It was the wrong thing to say. I am not every teenager, you yelled. I am someone who will never belong. Not when I am an adult. Not when I am old. I said, Of course you will. And you looked at me and smirked. What do you know mum. You are white. You have always belonged. You put your hand next to mine and compared our skin colour. You are beautiful, Caz. I said. What I wouldn't give to be your colour, Mum. You said.

I wish I could have told you, Caz, that white and brown makes a delicate, translucent gold, that you were that beautiful colour, that you illuminated everyone around you. I wish I could have told you how much I loved you, how you filled my life with colour.

Now, all that's left is a monotonous, deathly grey.

Editor's Note

Colour was first published on the website in April and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

She's My Mother by Sherri Collins

I hear her breathing--a huffing and puffing of exertion. She's adding locks to the door. Locks that will protect me; locks that will keep them from coming to get me. I know she's been upset lately, worried. She makes me say it more often, but I don't mind. I like to say it. She's my mother. I love her.

That night, I peer through the slats of the wood, so that I can see the house. The light of the TV shines through the living room window, and I can see her, too. She stands in front of the TV and chews her nails. I can see she's worried, but I don't feel too concerned. Everything will be okay. Everything will be just fine. When she turns off the TV, she comes out to check on me. She strokes my hair, and she makes me say it.

Afterward, she rocks me on her lap and sings. "Everything will be okay," she says. At the same time, we say "everything will be just fine."

In the morning, I wake early, long before the sun has stretched across the dirt floor to my cot. I blink into the darkness of the shadows, and for a moment, I feel afraid. I reach out and touch Dolly. Her braids are dirty now, but I don't care. I push her into my neck, and keep blinking my eyes. Why am I----

"Sarah," I hear. I sit up and listen.

"Mama?"

The locks are rattling, the metal scrapes angrily across wood. Finally, the door swings wide and she steps in, takes me in her arms. Only then do I hear the noises that must have awakened me. Car doors shutting, low voices rising and falling.



"Mama, who's here?"

She places her hands on both sides of my face and stares into my eyes, inches from my face. "Say it," she says.

But I'm scared. The voices--

"Say it!" she hisses, and I flinch. I stare back into her eyes though the shadows keep me from seeing her expression.

"You're my mother now," I say. "I love you."

She kisses my forehead and grabs my arm. "We have to go, baby."

She pulls me off the cot, and I reach back for Dolly, but just miss her, her braid brushing my hand. "No," I say. "Dolly!" Mama grips my arm harder with her one hand and slaps my face with the other. "Be quiet!" she whispers. I whimper but don't protest as she leads me out of the shed and across the yard, toward the woods.

I look back at the shed, and my eyes fill up. Dolly was the last of it. The last of another time that I barely remember. Only fragments really. Fragments that I have to let go. I turn back to Mama and do my best to keep up. She's my mother now. I love her.

Editor's Note

She's My Mother was first published on the website in March and was voted Story of the Month.

Photograph: "Looking" © Christopher Locke

Incarceration by Linda Sienkiewicz

If their father could run afoul of the law and be jailed, Michelle and Jude wondered what crimes might land me behind bars. Forgetting to sign a permission slip for school or letting a "shit" slip out when I stubbed my toe on the dresser were apparently minor infractions, but Michelle hollered at me when I hurried through a yellow stoplight because "You might get caught!" She reprimanded Jude for not wearing a seat belt, telling him it was a state law. When did a ten-year old ever care about state laws, or that her younger brother might get locked up?

Then there was the time I forgot to bring the cashier's attention to the case of Pepsi in the bottom of a shopping cart. I was unaware that I hadn't paid for it when we walked out of the store. Both children exchanged glances with each other as I loaded the soda into the back of the car, but I didn't think anything of it; they often gave each other strange looks. When we pulled into the driveway at home, Michelle burst into tears and Jude said, "They'll arrest you for stealing!" Once I realized what had happened, I tried convincing them it was an honest mistake, explaining that things like this happen all the time, but they wouldn't settle down until I went back to the store and paid for it.

Both of them cried over the simplest things: broken rings in a notebook binder, not being able to have a friend sleep over, all the cheese sliding off a piece of pizza with the first bite. Michelle became obsessed with our mail. Every afternoon, I watched her sift through the junk, opening everything and anything so that we didn't miss a cash prize or trip to Disneyland. No opportunity would pass us by. One morning, I found a rubber-banded stack of credit cards in her book bag when I put her lunch inside. Fearing she'd been pilfering cards, I collapsed in relief when I saw they were nameless samples that banks enclosed with mail solicitations. I never said anything to her, letting her think she could support herself and Jude if anything happened to me.

Jude played *prison breakout* with his G.I. Joes and Ninja Turtles. He constructed army bases under his desk and in his closet, using cardboard, pencils and tape. He criss-crossed string from the bedposts to his dresser knobs and desk legs for his action figures to hang from. I couldn't walk to his bed for a goodnight hug without getting tangled, stepping on a bent paper clip, or hearing him screech at me for detonating a land mine.

The counselors at Safe Harbor told me, if regular visits were impractical, it might be good for the children to see where Gavin was staying, assuming he would straighten up and want a relationship with his children. I thought I could stomach seeing him if it was in their best interest, but the closer we got to Madison Correctional Center, the sicker I felt. We left at seven in the morning, allowing extra time to stop for lunch at Cracker Barrel and getting lost. I brought games and books for them to share with their father, which, as it turned out, we had to leave in the car.

Gavin looked as if whipped by a sandstorm. The lines in his gray face were deep, his hair was matted, and his clothes hung on his thin frame. Michelle and Jude were

overwhelmed and acted shy, shuffling nervously at my side, flinching at the echoed voices and sounds in the room, eyeballing the other prisoners. Most of them looked like any other man you might see working behind the counter at the post office, stocking cans at Fisher Fazio's, or delivering a package with a smile to your front door. Some had bristled mugs or tattoos on their necks, or flinched oddly. A man with a face distorted by mountainous red spots cleared his throat every five seconds. I couldn't help but study their hands, wondering if they'd forced a woman to her knees, pulled a trigger, or had simply written a batch of bad checks.

The four of us sat at a table, falling into the same seating arrangement we used to take at the dinner table. At first, Gavin was unable to look any of us in the eyes. I was glad he'd dropped the smugness. There was no way he could clown his way out of this one—the damage he'd caused was as clear and tangible as the waxed floor and steel bars. In a weaker moment, I might have pitied him. With his shoulders clenched and hands clasped in fists, he cleared his throat and said, "Hey, guys. Thanks for coming."

I swallowed, staring at him for a few seconds, then said, "Thanks for having us."

He recoiled. After a few shuffling, awkward moments, he said, "So, yeah, this'll be my home for awhile, but it's okay. Don't worry. I'll be fine. I, um, I got a lot of time to think about where things went wrong. It's not so bad." He rubbed the back of his neck, glancing at me. I lifted my chin and glared. Did he even wonder what I'd told our children about his arrest? Why he disappeared a few weeks ago? I felt as if I'd sugar-coated things, explaining that the amphetamines helped keep him awake when he was driving, but then he couldn't stop taking them, and when they didn't work anymore, he started taking other drugs. I should have told them he was an abusive junkie.

Facing him now, Michelle chewed her lip. Jude wriggled in his seat, swinging his legs, then tucked one leg under and picked at the dried blood from a scrape on his knee. I pulled his hand away from the scab.

He looked up. "Dad?"

"What?" Gavin said. "Ask away. Ask me anything you want."

He wanted to know if they slid his meals under the bars in his cell, if his bathroom had a door, if he slept with a pillow and blanket, and if he wore leg chains when he went outside. Michelle asked if he had a roommate. I wondered if they'd expected to see their father in a black and white striped uniform, like in old movies, and his state-issued blue pants and shirt disappointed them.

"Hey, maybe I'll get out early. Just remember, I'm still your father," he said, his eyes catching mine. He needn't have worried that anyone would forget. "You guys be good, you hear? I love you both."

Despite the fact that I was preparing to file for divorce, I flinched—he hadn't included me in his love. Michelle wouldn't hug him and started to cry when we had to leave; the guard apologetically told us he couldn't give us extra time. She pushed my hands away when I tried to comfort her. Red-eyed, shaken, Gavin turned his head and coughed into his fist.

Once we were outside, Michelle told Jude he asked dopey questions. He punched her in the back and told her to "get real." On the way home, he asked in his high-pitched boy voice, "Can we put Daddy inside a big box and sneak him out next time we visit?" I shut my eyes and took a deep breath, having no idea what was going to happen to us. I told him, "Sorry, kiddo. It doesn't work that way."

Michelle asked, "We don't have to come here again, do we?"

I shook my head no. As I drove us home, I tried not to rage. I brought my right hand up, as if fixing my hair, so that Michelle, who was in the front seat, wouldn't see my tears of frustration. She stared out the window, hands clenched in her lap, forehead pressed to the glass. I reached across the seat to take her hand; she made a little grunt and pulled away. Jude was in the back seat, slicing his hands through the air while making terrible noises, screaming jet fighters and scudding bombs.

Editor's Note

Incarceration was first published on the website in April and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

The Strongest Netting by Karen Lenar

I tried to capture time when my mom told me that my father was sick.

Cancer, she said. Incurable. Less than six months.

My aunt frowned. Donna, you never were one to beat around the bush. Don't scare the poor girl. She gave my shoulders a squeeze, pressing into my skin with her long, red nails.

My father was more optimistic. Who knows how long? That's between Him and me, he wheezed, pointing up to the stained ceiling.

The water stain was shaped like a kidney bean. A leak from the upstairs bathroom, my father had said at the time of discovery. I'll fix it. And I believed him because he always fixed everything.

Soon after we noticed the stain my father had been admitted to the hospital. Cramps, he said when I visited, and tried to make a joke about menstruation.

That's when the air began to get caught in my throat. One night it got so bad I thought I was going to have to give the universal choking sign we'd learned about in our fourth-grade health class.

Luckily my aunt from South Carolina had arrived then, taking up residence in our guest bedroom. She assured me one morning over eggs and grits that she knew how to do the Heimlich maneuver.

After a couple of weeks of tests and needles we took home both my father and a hospital bed. My aunt offered to vacate the guest bedroom, but the medics said my father wouldn't fit in there, so instead they set him up in the family room. My mother and I, wanting to be close to my father, put our cot a few feet away. It was directly under the kidney bean, and when the air got caught in my throat, I'd outline the edges with my eyes, and gradually the sensation would pass.

Donna--you never were one to beat around the bush, I practiced saying in the mirror. When my aunt talked she drew out her words and made them sound sweet. I discovered that if I spoke like her, the air didn't get caught so much in my throat. One day she took me for my first manicure, and I chose red like the color she wore.

My father began to sleep more and more. Sometimes all day. I brought his brown slippers down from the bedroom and placed them at his bedside, but he never got up to use them. He started to look different, like he was someone else's dad. His arms were purple, and he was skinny. I haven't been this weight since your mother and I started dating, he joked one day when he caught me staring at him.

Visitors came and brought lots of food. The smell of lasagna and garlic chicken--my father's favorite--overflowed from the kitchen and spilled into the family room, making him nauseous. We learned to keep the front door open to air out the house while we hurriedly ate. Most mornings my mother sat on the front stoop, a jacket thrown over her bathrobe, to drink her coffee.

By the time my aunt left, my nail polish had started to chip. It looked ugly in splotches, and I tried to scratch off the rest of it. Donna, you never were one to beat around the bush, I said to the mirror, waving my half-polished hands, but with my aunt gone, I couldn't remember how to pronounce her Southern accent.

Now that it was just my mom and me, time moved slowly and without definition. My father remained sick, laying on the now familiar metal bed with electric buttons and occupying the space where our Christmas tree usually stood. The smell of garlic chicken and lasagna continued to permeate our house until even my pillow reeked of it. As soon as one casserole dish was empty, another appeared at our doorstep, as if our neighbors could see through our walls.

I had the thought that if every day appeared the same, if holidays didn't exist for us anymore, then maybe I could stop time--capture it. Maybe I could hold it in my hand and watch it, press a play button and when I grew tired, push stop.

The next morning, instead of going to school, I rode my bike to the hardware store and asked the old man behind the counter for the strongest netting he had.

What are you trying to catch? he asked.



Time, I replied.

He looked at me hard. Time, he repeated. Time. That's tricky. We don't have that netting in stock. But we could order it for you.

How long will it take?

A few months, he answered. Maybe three or four.

I thought quickly. How long had my father been sick? I looked down at my hands and saw a little nail polish remaining on my thumb. It couldn't have been too long, but what if I was wrong? What if *less than six months* had already nearly passed?

The old man leaned across the counter to peer at me, and I was struck by a familiar sensation. What was it? We matched stares, and then I realized. It was his eyes. They were pale blue like my father's.

I had an urge to hug him.

I'll tell you what, he said in a low, even tone. I'll get it express delivered. So you could have it in about four weeks, give or take a few days.

I was grateful and wondered if maybe he had also once tried to catch time.

He charged me one dollar for the netting, and I left to find a container to capture the time. I decided to get a perfume bottle, so I could spray a few whiffs of time when I desired without wasting too much of it. At the pharmacy I searched the beauty counter until I came across a brand called *Giorgio*, whose smell reminded me of my mom.

When I got home I went into my parent's bathroom and tried to unscrew the top, but it was stuck. So I just puffed the spray into the sink and under their bed until the bottle was empty.

Afterwards I came downstairs and found my mother sitting on the edge of the cot, watching over my father. You smell like me, she said.

Is that okay? I replied. She just drew me in and hugged me so tight that it surprised me. When she let go I saw that her eyes were red.

What's wrong? I asked and swallowed, and then I swallowed again. I looked over to my father to make sure that his chest was still moving, but I couldn't tell.

We're going to be okay, you know that? my mother said, and she pulled me in again.

I pushed her away. What's wrong? I spit out the words. My throat was nearly closed, and it was difficult to speak. I was facing her and didn't want to look at my father again. Why hadn't I gone to the hardware store earlier?

Honey, she said. That was all she said.

We lay together on the cot looking at the kidney bean while our tears leaked out. I thought that if we cried enough the room would get flooded, and then we could just float on the cot down the streets to South Carolina, where my mother said we'd go live to be near her sister.

It was the perfume that I smelled again first. My throat had cleared while I was crying, allowing me to breathe easier. I smelled the lasagna, and I smelled my father's sickness.

At the funeral I would smell the flowers with a hint of garlic chicken.

I went by the hardware store to tell the old man to cancel the order. The man said he assumed as much. A dollar rested on top of the counter.

How did you know? I asked.

I smell it on you.

That's probably my mother's perfume you smell, I said, sniffing my arm.

That's time, he replied. You caught the time.

As I left the store I pressed the dollar bill into my face. It smelled cold and metallic, like my father's hospital bed. I passed by the pizzeria, whose tomato sauce reminded me of the lasagna aroma that had pervaded our house. Next door, as a woman exited the beauty salon, I was hit with a gust of my aunt--the scent of red nail polish. I imagined it was how South Carolina would smell.

I sniffed my arm and smelled my mother kissing me goodnight after she and my father returned home from one of their evenings out. Downstairs the garage door chugged open as my father left to drive the babysitter home. Poor girl, I used to think. Having to listen to his corny jokes. I let my arm fall and pinched my side as my vision blurred.

Then I lifted my arm once more. This time it smelled nothing like *Giorgio*, nothing like my mother, and everything like my father.

Editor's Note

The Strongest Netting was first published on the website in May and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Photograph © Keith Nobert

Jensen's Bear by Joe Greco

I.

A bear lives in Jensen's back yard.

Jensen doesn't know when the bear arrived. He remembers a growing sense of danger, unease. He remembers tossing in his sleep, waking in the middle of the night, but not knowing why. Then one night he could not sleep at all and he realized that the bear had come for him.

Jensen's heart pounded that night. He lay under his covers staring at the ceiling. The bear was right outside his bedroom window.

Jensen thought of all the vulnerabilities of his old house where a bear could swipe a mighty paw through glass or dry-rotted wood. The bear could enter the house at will any time it chose. Jensen thought of the bear standing over him, its claws raised, its teeth bared. He tensed and shivered.

Just his luck, Jensen thought. Of all the places in San Francisco, the bear had to choose *his* little house with its little back yard on Telegraph Hill. The utter unfairness made Jensen angry and his heart beat even faster until he could stand it no more. He jumped up, walked to the kitchen and took a bottle of Scotch and a small glass from the cupboard. He poured and drained three glasses in succession, went to the living room and sat in his overstuffed leather chair.

Soon the Scotch buzzed in Jensen's head and he felt a certain bravado. Damn the bear! If it dared invade his house, he'd kill it with a knife, just like Daniel Boone. Jensen pondered which of the knives in his kitchen drawer would be most appropriate for the kill.

When the grey morning light seeped around the edges of the drapes, Jensen rose groggily from the chair and went to fix himself some breakfast. He then showered, shaved, brushed his teeth, dressed and walked down the hill to his law office on Montgomery Street, where he spent the day drafting wills and trusts for his clients.

II.

After several days, the constant pressure of the bear, not to mention the lack of sleep, began taking its toll on Jensen. He worried that, being so tired and groggy, he would begin making mistakes in the wills and trusts. His clients would become angry with him and a whole parade of disasters would follow. Realizing this, Jensen feared that sleeping would become even more unlikely until the bear left.

Jensen called his doctor. "I need sleeping pills," Jensen said.

"Why aren't you sleeping, Jensen?" asked the doctor.

Jensen hesitated. He'd have to answer a million questions if he told the doctor about the bear. It would be as bad as calling the cops.

"Work stress," Jensen blurted.

"Work stress? Since when?"

"It's been a few weeks."

"Hmm," the doctor said. "I thought you had a pretty stress-free practice. Am I right?"

"Oh, yes, usually so. I quite enjoy it. I'm just in a bit of a crunch, I guess."

"So this should pass in a couple weeks?"

Jensen hesitated again. How did he know when the bear would leave? "I hope so," Jensen said.

"I'll email the pharmacy a prescription for 10 Ambien with one refill," the doctor said. "That should do it. If it doesn't, come in and see me."

Jensen was relieved that the doctor hadn't forced him to divulge the bear. "Yes, doctor, thank you," he said.

III.

That night, Jensen took an Ambien and waited to fall asleep. As he waited, he thought of the bear breaking into the house to find him slumbering, helpless. The thought scared Jensen, but he knew he must be brave and go to sleep so that he could write his wills and trusts the next day.

Jensen waited for the pill to work its magic. He waited and waited, but he did not feel the least bit sleepy. He took another pill and then another, but he still could not sleep.

Jensen jumped out of bed. He cursed the pills, he cursed the doctor, and he went back to the kitchen for the bottle of Scotch. He plopped into his overstuffed leather chair, drank his usual three glasses and soon felt the room rotating around him as if he were the center of the universe.

Jensen slept until the grey morning light seeped around the edges of the drapes. When he opened his eyes, his head pounded. He hurried to the bathroom and vomited.

He cleaned himself, then went to fix some breakfast. He showered, shaved, brushed his teeth, dressed and walked down the hill to his law office where he wrote wills and trusts.

IV.

Jensen called his doctor that afternoon.

"The sleeping pills don't work, doctor. I need something that will make me sleep."

"The pills don't work? Try taking two; they're relatively mild."

"I took three."

"You took three? And still couldn't sleep? Come in and see me."

V.

Jensen went to the doctor's office.

The doctor told Jensen to take off his shoes, sit on the examining table. He looked Jensen over. "What's the problem, Jensen?" he asked. "I don't remember you having insomnia since you've been my patient."

Jensen chuckled. He might as well get on with it, he thought; might as well start answering the doctor's questions. "There's a bear in my back yard," Jensen said.

The doctor laughed. "What?"

Jensen smiled. "I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"You're putting me on, right?"

"No, I'm not," Jensen said seriously. "There's a bear in my back yard."

"Well, Jensen, you must be joking. There aren't any bears in San Francisco. What, did one escape from the zoo and walk all the way across town without being noticed?" The doctor laughed.

Jensen remained serious. "There are bears in Yosemite, doctor, and I've done some thinking. We get our water from the Hetch Hetchy reservoir in Yosemite, you know. A bear could follow the Hetch Hetchy pipes and aqueducts and wind up in San Francisco. It may be improbable that a bear has come to San Francisco, but one surely has and it is living in my back yard."

The doctor shook his head. "Jensen, what's gotten into you? You've always seemed like such a straightforward fellow. Once we got you to quit smoking, you've been as healthy as a horse. I don't have time for this nonsense about bears."

Jensen, looking down, became very quiet. Then he raised his head and looked at the doctor. "Have you ever had a bear in your back yard, doctor?"

"Well, no, of course not," the doctor said, becoming impatient.

"You've never had a bear in your back yard so you can't understand that someone else might have one in his back yard. Is that it, doctor?"

The doctor paused, raising his right hand to his mouth. Then he began nodding slowly. "Perhaps, Jensen. Perhaps you have a point," he said. "Let me ask you this-- why would a bear come all the way from Yosemite, following the Hetch Hetchy pipes, to *your* little house on Telegraph Hill?"

"I ask myself the same question, doctor. It is so unfair that the bear has chosen me."

"I see," the doctor said, nodding his head. "It's beginning to make sense to me, Jensen. You're afraid of death. There isn't really a bear in your back yard. The bear is death. We all have a bear in our back yard, so to speak. We are all afraid of death. I believe that once you recognize this, you will relax, you will sleep. The bear may still frighten you from time to time, but it won't always be outside your window. You will sleep." The doctor smiled reassuringly and placed his hand on Jensen's arm.

Jensen jerked his arm away. "Are you crazy, doctor?"

The doctor stiffened, his eyes narrowing. "What? What did you say?"

"Are you crazy? Do you think I'm so stupid that I would be spooked by some metaphor for death? Do you think I'm a child? There is a goddamned bear in my back yard!"

"No, no, Jensen. You are wrong. There is no such thing."

"Oh, but there surely is, doctor. There is a bear in my back yard. If you can't understand that, then I'm wasting my time and yours." Jensen jumped off the examining table, grabbed his shoes and left the room.

VI.

When the darkness came that night, Jensen thought about taking the remaining Ambien, but quickly dismissed the idea as futile. He sat in the living room, drinking Scotch, until he decided to try and get some sleep. But once in bed, Jensen felt anxious. He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. He tossed onto his right side, then onto his left, then onto his back again. But he could not sleep. He tensed and untensed the muscles in his arms and legs, trying to force himself to relax. But he could not sleep. He breathed deeply and slowly and tried to think of a peaceful place. He began feeling calmer for a moment, his mind drifting pleasantly to his last vacation seven years ago, when he'd taken a week off from writing his wills and trusts. But he remembered that the vacation had been in Yosemite, which made him think of the bear, which sent an electric jolt of panic up his spine. And he could not sleep.

Jensen threw off his covers and sat on the edge of the bed. He rubbed his eyes, staring into the darkness. Then he noticed a bit of light in the space under his bedroom door. He stood, took a few steps to the door, and slowly opened it. He craned his neck around the door, peering into the hallway. The light was coming from the living room. Jensen wondered whether he'd left a lamp on before he'd gone to bed, but he couldn't remember. He felt his pulse quicken.

Jensen slowly tiptoed down the hallway, being careful not to make any noise, keeping his body close to the wall. When he reached the kitchen door, he stopped and continued peering down the hallway into the living room. All he could make out in the dim light was the back of his overstuffed leather chair. Jensen squinted. Was he seeing the top of a head extending above the back of the chair? Could someone be sitting there? Jensen decided not to take any chances. He went quietly into the kitchen, slowly opened a drawer and grabbed the biggest knife he owned. He returned to the hallway and, grasping the knife firmly in his right hand, continued tiptoeing into the living room toward the chair.

Jensen felt his heart pounding as he saw a large mound of dark brown hair above the back of the chair. His mind raced, trying to figure out who could be sitting there. As he neared the side of the chair's right armrest, the bear suddenly turned its head back toward Jensen.

"Well, look who we have here," the bear said, grinning, showing its sharp, yellow teeth. Jensen, startled, fell back, dropping the knife, which clattered onto the hardwood floor.

Jensen quickly scrambled to recover the knife, keeping his eyes on the bear. To Jensen's dismay, the bear was pouring itself a glass of Scotch from Jensen's bottle. The bear held up the glass, sniffed and took a swallow. "Single malt. I like," it said, laughing loudly.

"What, what are you doing here?" Jensen stammered. "How did you get in?"

"Seems to me that's what you lawyers call a compound question, Jensen," the bear said. "Let's break it down, take the last part first. You left the back door unlocked tonight. It's almost as if you wanted to let me in, no?"

Jensen looked around nervously, trying to remember whether he'd left the door unlocked.

"As for what I'm doing here," the bear continued, "I think we both know the answer to that, Jensen." The bear lit a cigarette, blew the smoke at Jensen. "Mind if I smoke?" it asked, grinning.

Jensen gripped the knife in his trembling right hand. "If you think you can just barge into my house and eat me, I'll have you know that you're in for a fight," Jensen said, his voice wavering. He raised the knife until it was even with his right ear.

The bear started laughing and choking on the cigarette smoke. "*Eat you?*" the bear said, laughing and gasping for breath. "*Eat you?* Give me a break, Jensen. With all the great restaurants in this town, why the *hell* would I want to eat *you*?"

Jensen froze, not knowing what to say. The bear continued laughing and hacking on the smoke. "Now why don't you put that goddamn thing down before you hurt yourself," the bear said, motioning toward the knife with the glass of Scotch, then taking another gulp.

"I don't understand," Jensen said. "I don't know what you want."

"Oh, I think you do," the bear said.

Jensen shook his head. "No," he said. "No. I don't know why you're here. I don't know why of all the people in the world you could've chosen, you've chosen me. I don't."

"I think you do," the bear said, rising slowly from the chair. It stood on its hind legs, extending upward to its full height.

Jensen held the knife, his arms trembling, staring up at the bear, unable to speak.

The bear looked down, towering over Jensen. It raised its huge claws over its head and bared its sharp, yellow teeth. "You know very well why I've come for you, Jensen. You know what will happen now that I'm here," the bear said. "For when the grey morning light seeps around the edges of your drapes, I will not allow you to rise and fix your breakfast. I will not allow you to shower, shave and brush your teeth, or to dress and walk down the hill to your office on Montgomery Street. You will not be able to write your wills and trusts. The work will pile up higher and higher and higher. Your clients will hate you. You will lose them all and they will sue you for malpractice. You

will lose your practice. And then," the bear said, its dark eyes narrowing, "and then, Jensen, you will lose this little house with its little back yard on Telegraph Hill. And it will be mine, Jensen. All mine." The bear roared loudly and swiped its mighty paw at Jensen's head.

Jensen jumped back, evading the bear's attack. He gripped the knife and took a wild stab at the bear, missing. The bear roared and swiped with the other paw. Jensen ducked and stabbed again, feeling that he'd connected. He stabbed again and again and again, as the bear roared and clawed. But just as Jensen felt that he might be able to fend off the bear, he began losing his balance, falling backward. The last thing Jensen saw was the bear's paw approaching his face. Then blackness.

VII.

When the grey morning light seeped around the edges of the drapes, Jensen awoke, lying on the living room floor. His mouth felt as if it were stuffed with cotton. The right side of his face throbbed with pain. He jumped up and looked around for the bear, but the bear was nowhere to be seen.

Jensen's knife lay a few feet away from him on the floor. The floor was scattered with white fluffy clumps that led to the leather chair. As Jensen's eyes focused on the chair, he gasped. The chair was gouged and slashed and most of its stuffing had been ripped out. On the coffee table lay an empty bottle of Scotch and an ashtray full of cigarette butts.

Jensen ran to the bathroom and vomited. He iced the bruises and scrapes on his face, cleaned up the living room, and fixed himself some breakfast. He showered, shaved, brushed his teeth, dressed and walked down the hill toward his law office on Montgomery Street, where he'd planned to spend the day drafting wills and trusts for his clients. But as he approached the office, Jensen did not go in. Instead, he kept walking. He walked and walked and walked, looking for the pipes that he could follow out of the city, across the great expanse of the Central Valley and into the snow-capped Sierra Nevada, to the crystal clear waters of the Hetch Hetchy.

Editor's Note

Jensen's Bear was first published on the website in May and appears here as an Editor's Choice. Photograph © Justin Greco.



Our House is Like Switzerland by Jennifer Simpson

Her red coat came to mid thigh and the gold buttons shimmered in the early morning sun. She wore well-fitted grey slacks and black pumps. Her blond hair was drawn up into a chignon. Had I been in a big city, or even a different part of town, I might not have noticed her, but this was Albuquerque and I was living in a part of town some called the student ghetto. Most of my neighbors wore more casual attire: jeans, t-shirts, coats from the second hand store, good walking shoes. Girls wore pony tails, not chignons. My own green pea coat was worn and pilled and one of the plastic black buttons was missing.

The chill in the air hastened my pace from my usual saunter to an almost jog over to the Smith's grocery store two blocks away and by the time I was cruising the aisles trying to remember what I'd come for I had forgotten about the blond woman. "Coffee. I need my coffee. Now where's the creamer?" I muttered.

On my way back home I was just about cross the street to my house when I noticed her again. She lay crumpled on the sidewalk, sobbing. I admit it, for just a moment I thought about my coffee, the coffee I had not yet had, the coffee that was waiting for me to push a button on my coffee maker, the coffee that was waiting for the creamer that was in the bag that was in my hand, the coffee that was in my warm house. Maybe I debated this point for a bit longer than a moment.

"Are you okay?" I asked, crouching down and putting my hand on her shoulder, recognizing that had she not been so well dressed I would not have touched her.

She sobbed louder, her body rocked. It was the kind of keening cry that came from deep in her soul. I knew that cry; I'd cried it myself when my husband Paul died.

"Can I do something for you?" I asked.

"No," she wailed, lifting her head slightly.

"Can I call someone for you?"

"There's. No. One," she said between gasps and sobs before collapsing again onto the pavement.

I stood and looked around, looking for someone, I don't even know who. The bare branches of trees reached up into the bluing sky. The streets were empty streets, the houses quiet and dark. It was barely 7 a.m.

I'd not seen what direction she had come from, and I'd never seen her in the neighborhood before. Maybe she was crazy. Maybe this was some kind of ploy. I'd heard stories about people who took advantage of people like me. Maybe this line of reasoning was me trying to justify what I really wanted to do which was go back inside my house and have my coffee. But I also wanted to do the right thing, be the good Samaritan. I didn't feel right leaving her there.

The air was cold on my face and neck, and my ears were beginning to hurt. Thirty degrees was too cold for this Californian. I pulled my coat in closer, flipped up my collar and looked around one last time before stepping across the street to my house. Even

now I can't say if I was looking for someone to help or making sure no one would see me abandoning this woman wailing on the sidewalk.

I scooped the coffee beans into the grinder, *one, two, three....* I had an unfettered view of her from my kitchen window. Her face was pressed against the cold concrete. I imagined bits of gravel mingling with her tears and sticking to her skin and I touched my own cheek. Did she even feel the cold? I stared at the beans in the grinder. They were shiny and dark. *How many scoops?* I emptied the beans back into their original canister and started again. "One. Two. Three. Four. And one for the pot, five," I said. Sometimes this was the only way to keep track of things, to say them out loud, even though the only ones listening were my two cats, Calliope and Cleo, weaving between my feet begging for their morning treat.

"What do you think I should do, girls?" I asked, looking out the window once again. She was still there.

"I know, I can't leave her there," I said as I popped open a can of Fancy Feast and dolloped some into their bowl. "But I just don't know what to do with her," I said, as the scent of brewing coffee warmed the kitchen.

Some days I thought these two cats kept me sane, and others I wondered if having them didn't make me just a little kooky. I certainly didn't talk to them when Paul was alive. How many cats did one have to own before qualifying as The Crazy Cat Lady of Albuquerque? Or was talking out loud to them the deciding factor? "They were the last two left in the litter," I'd told Paul. "I couldn't split up a family," I added, widening my eyes and batting my eyelashes for emphasis. Paul could never say no to me, and besides, he was the one who'd said we should get a cat. Ironically I was the one who'd insisted that one was enough. Maybe the fact that I regale guests with the story of their origin made me a little nutty. At least I didn't dress them up, but I can't swear it's because both of them would claw through an artery if I tried.

I bent down and scratched Cleo's head while she ate, "Do you miss Daddy as much as I do?" She didn't answer, but she did purr. She always purred when she ate.

When my coffee pot beeped I poured myself a cup, then saw out the window that the woman was still there, sobbing. I sipped, grasping the warm mug with both hands, holding it up close to my nose so I could inhale the warmth.

When Recycling Man came down the alley pushing his shopping cart and started circling the woman, I knew it was time to act. I'd never had trouble with him myself. We used to leave our cans out for him packaged neatly in a bag in the alley. "He probably won't do anything, right?"

"You're so paranoid," Paul used to tell me and I'd look up at him. He was nearly a foot taller than I, so at six feet two, he was imposing even though he had boyish good looks.

I'd say, "Easy to believe in the good side of people when you can take care of yourself."

Then I closed my eyes remembering how it felt to be in Paul's arms and how safe I felt when he would say, "I'll take care of you."

But I didn't want him to take care of everything, at least not all the time and until we figured that out between us we had some tough times. I think our whole generation was confused. Half of our mothers stayed at home, the other half were burning bras and demanding equal rights. Half our fathers were hard working family men, the other half had midlife crises and ran off with their secretaries. Now I'm the one taking care of things.

"I don't know what I am waiting for," I said. Both cats ignored me, licking every last scrap of wet food from their bowls.

"Do you think she'd like some coffee?" The girls ignored me again as I grabbed a to-go mug from the cabinet. I chose my favorite, a purple insulated cup decorated with sparkly butterflies and a secure drip-proof flip-top lid.



"I bet you would like butterflies, wouldn't you? The butterfly may be a little too symbolic, but I think she'll like it." Whether the butterfly represented someone who had died, or rebirth, or just a hot cup of coffee with a solid lid, it was the right choice. We make symbols where and when we need them. I poured the coffee, and topped it off with a little Hazelnut creamer.

When my husband was in the emergency room some nurse brought me coffee. I remember thinking that coffee was the last thing I needed. I was already nervous,

sitting in that waiting room. Strangely though, the coffee calmed me. Maybe it was the warmth, the ritual of stirring in the creamer, sprinkling sugar, blowing on hot liquid. It was something familiar in an unfamiliar place, something warm in a cold place. For a moment everything felt normal, like maybe I'd just woken from a bad dream and was in my own kitchen. He was young. Only fifty-five.

Outside the street was still quiet. An occasional car slid by oblivious to the laments of the red-coated woman. Recycling Man had moved on.

"Hey lady," I said. With both hands full, one cup of coffee for her and one for me, I was tempted to nudge her with my foot. I did not.

The sobbing stopped. She lifted her body toward my voice, though she did not look up. Her hair fell across her face and her bare hands were splayed on the cold concrete.

"I brought you some coffee. I'm gonna put it right here," I said as I set the cup down next to her right hand. I hoped she was right handed. I am. "There's a little hazelnut cream in there, since I didn't know how you take it. I hope it's okay."

She did not answer.

"Are you sure I can't call someone for you?"

She let out a big sigh. Her body folded onto the sidewalk. Her forehead rested on the pavement. The wailing started again and I felt guilty, as if I were to blame, as if I could stop her pain. I needed to do something. She'd been here at least a half an hour. Her coat was wool but she wore no gloves. It was about thirty five degrees. I know I was cold. She didn't look physically hurt; there was no blood that I could see, just the sound of deep wrenching pain. How long would it take someone to die from exposure? Paul would know. If he didn't know he'd make up an answer and say it with such conviction that everyone believed him. It took me a long time to figure out his tell, the little extra blink and a quick look to the left.

"Can I call someone for you?" I asked again.

"There's. No. One."

Paul would have known what to do. He had a way about him. People trusted him. They let him help them. It used to bother me, the stray people he was always bringing home. I swear every one of his nieces and nephews had lived at our house at one time or another, usually during the worst of the angst-ridden teen years when their parents couldn't handle them anymore. "Our house is like Switzerland," Paul would joke. He was the calm older brother from a family of five. "It's more like Saigon, circa 1975," I would answer. I grew up the only child of academics in a quiet house.

Paul would have gotten her off the curb, served her coffee at our kitchen table, not on the street. He would have gotten her to talk, or at least calm down enough to tell us who to call. I couldn't even get her to look at me. And I couldn't stand out here in the cold any longer.

"Okay then. I'm gonna go back inside. I'm right across the street in that little red house," I was practically shouting at her, hoping she'd hear me over her own crying. "You come knock on the door when you want."

For the next few minutes I found reasons to be in the kitchen, to look out that window. I cleaned the encrusted mug that had been sitting on my desk for over a week. Then I hand-washed a silk top that had been at the bottom of the clothes hamper since Easter. And still she was there. In a way, I admired her stamina, keening for over an hour. Pretty much non-stop. Even the day of Paul's funeral I could only cry for twenty minutes at a stretch, and that was when I was alone. Of course I was rarely alone. I think my friends thought I might follow Paul into the ever-after.

It's not that I hadn't thought about it, but it was more of an intellectual exercise. Mostly. Overdosing would be the easiest, but probably the most unreliable. No doubt someone would find me, get me to the emergency room that was only five blocks from my house, and have my stomach pumped. I thought about shooting myself; Paul's gun was in the lockbox in the closet. The key was in the bedside nightstand, on his side. I knew how to use it; Paul had insisted on taking me to the shooting range until I could hit the silhouetted bad guy. But guns weren't my thing, and I couldn't help but think of the mess I would leave for someone to clean up, or the trauma of someone finding me with my head blown off, brain goo splattered all over a wall. With my luck I'd miss and wind up in a nursing home drooling for the rest of my life. I would probably be more accurate with a knife, slitting my wrists. I even knew to slit lengthwise, rather than across. I'd read that somewhere. The problem was I am afraid of blood. My own anyway.

The only way I could realistically imagine killing myself would be to drive my car off of a cliff. I could sail off into the sunset. Literally. There was one cliff in particular, along the Southern California coast, a curve in the road that seemed to be just sharp enough that the accident would be believable, a sheer drop, the ocean below. I'd gun the accelerator and hold the steering wheel straight. I imagined it would be like flying. Maybe what I really wanted was to fly. I didn't know anymore.

At 8:30 a.m. the doorbell rang. I thought for sure the woman had come to her senses. Instead it was Jillian. "Hi Auntie Jenny!"

"Did you lose your key?" I asked even though I knew all the kids still had keys.

"Yeah, but I didn't want to scare you. Or interrupt or something."

"Or something?" I asked.

"I don't know. You know what I mean. Can I leave my car here? I have class at nine. I brought back the blender that I borrowed. Here," she said, walking past me towards the kitchen Cuisinart in hand. I followed her and before I could answer she continued, "Hey, did you know there's a lady over there crying?"

"I tried to talk to her earlier. I took her coffee."

Jillian laughed, "Coffee? Did you bake a Danish too?"

"Very funny," I said. "Seriously. I was about to call the police."

"Why would you call the police?"

"I'm worried about her. I couldn't get her to come in. And I think she could freeze to death." I didn't mention that I had just looked this up on the internet, but all I could find were references to how long one could live in cold water before dying of exposure.

“Well, whatever, can I leave my car here? I’m late,” she said.

Paul hadn’t liked to admit it, but Jillian was his favorite. And while his brother Sam and his wife Irene had gone nuts when she dyed her hair blue, Paul told me he liked it. “I think it takes guts,” he had said. I agreed then added “Just don’t you go blue on me! I like your blond locks.”

I liked Jillian’s blond locks too, and I was glad she was going with her natural color these days.

“We’re family,” I told her. “You don’t have to ask.” I smiled. It had been a while since she had stopped by and I was so glad to see her. I’m sure she felt awkward with Paul gone. I felt awkward. It was like we didn’t know who ‘we’ were without him.

When Jillian left I called the police and reported a crying woman. It sounded ridiculous; I think the officer who took the report agreed, though he said nothing. I’m sure he thought they had actual crimes to investigate, but I didn’t know what else to do, and I couldn’t stand vigil all day long. I went back to my Saturday morning chores.

“How’d you like a nice clean binkie?” I asked Calliope as I pulled the blanket she was sleeping on out from under her. “Let me clean here,” I told Cleo, dust buster in hand as I tilted the dining room chair and dumped her onto the floor. “Don’t give me that look. Would you rather I start up the vacuum and scare the hell out of you?” I asked.

Paul used to tell me about this big ole tom cat his family had growing up that loved the vacuum, that loved to be vacuumed. I didn’t entirely believe him, but was envious and had tried it on both Cleo and Calliope. I had hoped that vacuuming their fur while it was still on their bodies would cut down on shedding. Neither cat seemed to see it that way.

I couldn’t say that I forgot about the wailing woman, but I pretended to for awhile, averting my gaze as I passed the kitchen window, catching only a flash of red out of the corner of my eye. Then at some point there was no flash of red. There was no wailing woman.

I don’t know if she got up and walked away on her own or if the police came, maybe accompanied by men in white jackets, and took her away.

During the last year I looked for her every time I walked in the neighborhood, though if she weren’t wearing that red coat I probably wouldn’t have recognized her. Jillian told me I was nuts, that the lady was probably carted off to the loony bin, but I liked to think that she got up and walked home, or went to a friend’s house. I liked to think I helped her, even just a little, that maybe the coffee reminded her of some kind of normal.

This morning when I made another early morning run for creamer I found my purple travel mug sitting on my doorstep. I set it on the table next to the week’s mail and then dashed across the street where I paused and looked back at my own kitchen window, one of the few lights on in the neighborhood. It was early, not quite light, and the trees were bare again. I stood where she had lain, then crouched down onto pavement. I placed my cheek where her cheek had been, my hands where hers had been. I felt the rough concrete, cold and hard, press into my skin, a pebble under my

hip, a wayward chunk of gravel from my neighbor's driveway lodged under my knee. I closed my eyes and let the tears come, slowly making a small puddle under my cheek. I wondered if it was too salty to freeze. How easy it would be to stay here forever, but I could smell the snow and needed my coffee.

Editor's Note

Our House is Like Switzerland was first published on the website in January and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Photograph © Jennifer Simpson

Handyman by Tom Mahony

They stood in the kitchen. The pipes were clogged, a pool of fetid water backing into the sink.

She frowned at him. "You gonna fix it?" But her expression said: *Are you man enough to fix it?*

"Of course I'm gonna fix it," he said.

"How?"

"Don't worry about my methods."

"Whatever you say." She shrugged and walked away.

He eyed the sink in befuddlement. How was he supposed to fix it? When she returned ten minutes later, he hadn't moved an inch.

"What's the verdict?" she demanded.

"Calm down. I'm still in the assessment phase."

He grabbed a wrench, ducked under the sink, and fiddled around, trying to look competent. When she left, he stopped fiddling and studied the pipes. He attempted to trace the hydrology of the system but it was a tangled mess, decades old.

He unscrewed a fitting from the main pipe. Water sprayed him in the face. He cursed and screwed it back on. He tried another pipe and again got sprayed. He tugged on a few hoses to no effect. He returned to staring.

After an hour, he'd made no progress. He was irritated and suffering intense back pain from contorting in the tiny space. *Are you man enough?* He was man enough, all right, but his strain of man-ness was a frosty mug of beer, a warm remote control, and a tight Rose Bowl game. He despised fixing things.

In a fit of frustrated rage, he slammed the wrench against a pipe. "You." *Bang.* "God." *Bang.* "Damned." *Bang.* "Piece." *Bang.* "Of." *Bang.* "Shit." *Bang, bang, bang.*

Then he heard a loud gurgle, a rush of water. He jumped up in surprise. The water had drained from the sink. His banging must have loosened the blockage.

She entered the kitchen, wide-eyed. "You fixed it?"

He mustered a scoff. "Of course I fixed it. I told you I would."

"Wow. I admit, I doubted you. But you're a master handyman."

"Yes," he beamed, knowing he'd just earned himself a solid month of unrepentant slacking. "Yes I am."

She smiled. "This changed everything. You're actually useful now. We can remodel the kitchen, then the bathroom. We'll start a new project each weekend. The possibilities are endless..."

Editor's Note

Handyman was first published on the website in March and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

The Whack-Job Girls by Bonnie ZoBell

Kitty's nails are long as the road out of Flashtown, and the cigarettes she smokes on the sly cause them to yellow. But she's in Nellie's Hair Salon, and Nellie doesn't give up anybody's secrets though she knows every last one of them.

Kitty's weeping even as her hand hovers over the bowl of cuticle softener. "It's that sad song," she says. Loretta Lynn's "Love is Like Bad Noodles" plays on the boom box.

"Hon, let's face it," Nellie whispers. "You started the waterworks cause a Wylie."

Wylie Brown broke it off with Kitty just because she squirted a beer in his face. The Whack-Job Girls think Wylie's an idiot, but Kitty's the only one in town without a husband, so they try to understand. They wouldn't want to be alone.

That's what the men have started calling the regulars at Nellie's since all the trouble started, the Whack-Job Girls. And the Girls call them the Short-Fuse Dudes. The Girls don't have to sit around and take it. Not according to Oprah.

Ever since they started reading Oprah's magazine—left on a table at Lee Fong's new restaurant—every last one of them has realized Flashtown is behind the times in the man/woman department. The Dudes can't believe they have the gall to read that magazine and eat at Fong's. Since then, the women have pooled their money for a subscription in Kitty's name since she, after all, is the one without the husband.

That's also the reason Kitty is the one getting hot pink hair extensions—she has no one to forbid her. None of the women in *O* wear shags anymore. Why should they have to?

"So you gonna get back with him?" one of the Girls asks.

"He's a good guy," Kitty says. She sings:

You asked me if I wanted Top Ramen
Like you cared about me oodles
But when you don't keep it hot enough
Love is like bad noodles.

"He's not worth it," says the Girl. "His bank is shutting down the little people—wouldn't even let Lee Fong fill out a loan application for the restaurant. He ain't even give a white person a loan in six months. Unless you already got a combine and don't need the money anywho."

Nellie and the Girls aren't teenagers anymore. Now that they can buy pies in town as well as make them, they've started talking about what really matters. Like yesterday afternoon, six of them hoofed over to the post office and tore into the postmaster for opening one of his old fling's letters. The Short-Fuse Dudes wanted to laugh it off.

"Natural curiosity is all," the Rexall pharmacist shouted over the Change of Address cards.

"No woman deserves to have her private business shown around," Nellie shouted back. And she should know since she's the one who gave the postmaster's fling a paraffin treatment last spring to soften her hands. Nellie knows who needs softness in their lives, and it's her job to provide it.

The postmaster wouldn't let it go. "She shouldn't write what she don't want people to read."

The Whack-Job Girls squirt setting gel through post office boxes. "We'll have you arrested on federal violations," the pharmacist says, "if every one of you don't march home and start dinner pronto."

What could the women do? If the FBI drove over, who'd fix the kids' meals and get them to school? Who'd be the only one in the house who could find the hemorrhoid lotion—sitting right inside the medicine cabinet? Nellie's husband's doctor says he won't cut his hemorrhoids off unless they're dragging on the ground and the dog's chewing on them.

So, yes, today the Girls at Nellie's indulge the Noodle song for the fifth time since they know Kitty's hurting and they've got to stand together.

You took me to the Noodle Shop
And ordered me the Pad Se Eu
Your cell phone kept a'ringin
Cause so many ladies are after you.

Wylie, Kitty's man until yesterday, bursts into Nellie's salon: "Kitty, this hissy fit of yours is all over Flashtown. It's ridiculous. If you hadn't yelled at the new manager over at the pet store for feeding the mouse to the snake and then squirted me with the beer, we'd still be together."

"You were rude."

The Whack-Job Girls quietly put down their scissors and blow dryers and step forward.

"And eating at Mr. Fong's so-called Great Wall of China Buffett," Wylie says. "That bean crud'll poison everyone. Flashtown's flash-fried steaks with white bean mash and butter beans put us on the map."

"Oh, Wylie. I knew you cared. Barging in like this." Kitty waves her hands like she's going to fly off, trying to get her polish to dry.

"People don't all have to be the same, Wylie," Nellie says, stepping in front of Kitty. "We're tired of it. We want us some culture."

The new pet store manager, who has a tattoo of a Chinese serpent wrapped all the way around his upper arm, fangs bared, opens the door.

"I come to apologize," he says. "Not everyone likes snakes. Name's Jeremiah." He holds out a meaty hand to Kitty.

The women can't take their eyes off his serpent, though mostly they're admiring his muscly, tattooed arm, his thick neck burgeoning from a worn tank top, the pelts of hair under his arms. His cute little behind fills out a pair of Levis, like they've seen in *O*. A few of them sigh.

"Now ladies," Wylie says. "This ain't proper. You're all married."

Jeremiah and Kitty can't seem to stop shaking hands, touching. "I like a man who's willing to apologize," Kitty says. "But forcing a gal to watch a mouse get sliced bloody by a snake isn't right."

Jeremiah winks. "I haven't been able to get that snake to eat all week," he says softly. "I thought the poor girl was going to die on me. I should have been paying more attention."

"I'd call that art," Kitty says, turning his hand still in hers to get a better look at the coiling reptile on his arm. "This meeting was meant to be, what with me seeing that snake finally eating a meal. You have a girl, mister?"

"But, Kitty," Wylie says.

"If you wait right here, honey," she says to Jeremiah, "I'd like to talk to you about that art form on your arm. Over a beer?"

Then she and Nellie step out into the alley to talk over their latest cultural find and have a smoke.

Editor's Note

The Whack-Job Girls was originally published on the website in January and was voted the Story of the Month.

The Generalist by Jeffrey Carl Jefferis

"Hello, there."

"Oh, hello in return."

"How's it going?"

"Not bad. Not bad at all. You?"

"Quite well, thank you. So, how did you end up here this afternoon?"

"That's a fair question. I'm Peter, by the way."

"Morris."

"Morris, good name. Nice to meet you, Morris. Anyway, let's see. About two years ago, I guess, I had just microwaved my frozen turkey and mashed potatoes dinner in the kitchen on my office floor. The last step on the box directions for microwave cooking of the dish was 'make certain that meal is cooked thoroughly; use thermometer to check internal temperature of food; minimum 165 degrees.' I thought all day in my cubicle about how insanely the processed food company had misunderstood its customer base. I mean, I can't be bothered with an oven or a plate or silverware, but I have a food thermometer handy?"

"That's an amusing anecdote, Peter. And I don't mean to be too forward here, but what's the point?"

"Oh, right. Well, after that, I spent the weekend considering how ridiculous my job was and how pitiful my life must have become if I were a regular customer of the insane processed food company. I never returned to that office, or that job."

"Well, that's perfectly normal. Happens to most of us at some point in our lives. So, what do you do now?"

"I'm a generalist."

"I'm not familiar with that term."

"I dabble in health care."

"I don't think health care is a field appropriate for dabbling, Peter."

"You know how there are medical specialists? Well, I'm a generalist."

"A general practitioner, you mean?"

"Not exactly. A general practitioner is a doctor. Again, I just dabble. I'm a generalist."

"Peter, I don't follow."

"Well, what I do is, I see people who are considering going to the emergency room and advise them as to whether their concerns are valid, or whether they should save the expense and wait before seeing a real doctor. I only charge a flat fee of twenty dollars per person. Five dollars extra per ailment if there is more than one, of course."

"Of course. Peter, are you qualified to make such determinations?"

"Yes, of course. I'm not some lunatic, Morris. I care about people. I went to nursing school for two years, though I never graduated."

"And why is that?"

"Well, a few weeks before graduation, during a CPR training drill, I was partnered up with, umm, a big girl. Really big. Freaking huge, to be perfectly honest. Just disgusting. Anyway, one drill required that I roll her off her stomach and onto her back. As she lied there on the floor motionless, I tugged and tugged and pulled and yanked, but I just could not budge her. I tried to push my legs off the wall to gain some leverage, and that's when disaster struck. My hands slipped and by the time the instructor looked over, I was lying directly on top of the large girl with my head on her buttocks and my groin on top of her head. So, ultimately, they expelled me."

"Ha! I mean, sorry. Sorry, Peter, about the not graduating."

"Yes, it was a setback. But I didn't want to let it hold me back. I am not prone to giving up. So, I became a generalist."

"With no medical qualifications, is what you do legal, Peter?"

"You know, I've never really thought about it before."

"You're kidding?"

"No, actually, I never have. But the hospital hasn't complained, so I hope that means it isn't. See, I rented a house right across the street from the hospital on the north shore. The house is all brick and plain looking, so it resembles an office. And I set up shop. I hung a sign above my front door, 'The Emergency Room.'"

"I must say, that does not sound very ethical."

"Sure it is, Morris. My business as a generalist revolves around one simple, direct question -- Do you need to go to the emergency room? So, that's what I put on the sign. I put a question mark after the word 'room,' distinguishing it from the hospital's emergency room."

"Well, I guess that is a little better."

"But the question mark fell down a few months ago."

"You're pulling my leg."

"No, I wouldn't do that to you, Morris, especially considering the circumstances."

"I appreciate that, Peter."

"You know, I had this one guy come in to my office slash living room. It was the damndest thing. He had paralytic eyeballs."

"You're misusing words."

"Don't you mean malusing?"

"No, I do not. Peter, body parts are paralyzed. A paralytic is an agent employed to induce paralysis."

"Riiiiiight. So, umm, anyway, this guy had para . . . lytish eyeballs. That better?"

"Perfect."

"He could still see. He just could not move his eyeballs. You know, I don't think people realize how their eyes are in near constant motion. You rarely stare at anything for more than a second or two. So, instead of being content with having to stare at an object, this guy would move his head to correspond to a normal person's eye movement. I tell you what, his head moved around and twitched so much it looked like he was

tracking the path of one of those little gnats when they get caught up in a zig-zagging group."

"That sounds horrible."

"Well, yeah, I know it must sound horrible. But I'd like to see you sit in the same room with him and not laugh."

"You do tell a good story, Peter. But, again, how did you end up here this afternoon?"

"Wait, do you hear that? Did you just turn on some music?"

"No, I didn't. That's just a sousaphone."

"I can hear that, Morris. But what's the sousaphone playing? What instrument is that?"

"Peter, the sousaphone is an instrument. It's like a tuba. That's my neighbor's kid practicing. We have thin walls in this building."

"Riiiiight. You know, it sure is windy out today. You feel that? It hasn't been this windy in a long time. A real long time. Well, there was that one day about a month ago, but it was storming that day. There is not a cloud in the sky right now. I mean, look at that sun. Such a big, old thing. It feels like you can just reach up there and touch it today. But that storm last month sure was something too. Mother Nature is a glorious gal. It was during the storm that I got evicted."

"I'm not following, Peter."

"Oh, well, you see, the power went out and as I walked into my spare bedroom slash waiting room, I was quite unexpectedly attacked by a coyote."

"Oh my God!"

"Yeah, that about sums it up. And let me tell you, when I walked out to the trash the next morning, past my neighbor Ms. Johnson's porch, holding her dead cat by the tail, she was pretty upset."

"You killed your neighbor's cat?"

"As it turned out, yeah. Not sure why I assumed it was a coyote. It didn't put up much of a fight."

"Peter, that's awful."

"That's what Ms. Johnson thought too. She even looked like she might be having a heart attack. I ran over to her porch and offered my services as a generalist, but she, well, she declined. And trust me, she was pretty strong for an old lady, especially one having a heart attack. She just kept screaming her cat's name, Jeff."

"I don't know whether I believe you, Peter, but you are entertaining."

"I know, Jeff is the oddest name for a cat ever, right?"

"So where have you been staying? Have you been homeless?"

"Oh, no. Not at all, Morris. But I appreciate your concern. I had been staying at my girlfriend's place. Actually, she was a client of mine too. I had made it a rule to not date clients, but that was until she walked in. She was my first attractive one."

"Of course. But it is nice to have someone, don't you think, Peter?"

"Yeah, it sure is. She dumped me yesterday. Kicked me out. You see, I took her youngest sister to the mall two days ago, as a favor. And, well, that was the end of it."

"Peter, you didn't . . . ?"

"What? Oh, no. God no. I would never do something that terrible to her little sister. All I did was watch her get beat up."

"What?"

"Her youngest sister, she bumped into someone she knew in the mall food court. I went to get a soft pretzel. I paid the cashier. I turned around, and there she was, getting beat up right in the middle of the mall."

"And you did nothing?"

"No. Of course not. She's a big girl. Well, not physically. But it's her life. Besides, I'm a pacifist."

"Peter, again, just awful."

"Well, she looked to me like she was holding her own. She was pretty feisty for a twelve-year-old girl."

"Twelve-years-old!?"

"Yeah, but you would never know it if you saw her fight. Thinking about it now, I would like to see her and old Ms. Johnson go a few rounds. That would be a quite a battle."

"Well, Peter, I must say, I can understand why your girlfriend was upset."

"Yeah, she was pretty angry. Though I thought I had calmed her down well enough. But then her little sister ruined everything and told my girlfriend that the guy I watched beat her up was my younger brother. He's fifteen."

"And was that true?"

"Oh, yeah. You don't think I recognized my own brother? Stewie is a pretty ornery little guy. He told me that his friends had dared him to walk up to my girlfriend's little sister and say to her, 'I want to French kiss your asshole.' Apparently, in response, the little sister called my brother a 'stupid jerk.' And that just set him off something fierce. He does not tolerate name calling."

"I see. Well, Peter, as I look at the time, I do have another appointment soon."

"Are you saying my time is up?"

"No! I mean, no. I'm not saying that at all, Peter."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Well, what say you grab my hand here through the window, and we get you off that ledge?"

Editor's Note

The Generalist was first published on the website in April and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

A Sackful of Ferrets by Stan Long

Yes, it was called bundling back then and Ruth, Miriam's mother, used the same bundling bag she herself had been forced to use when as a teenager, she made the long trip from Portsmouth to New England.

We were betrothed that first time, Miriam and I, when with the approval of our parents, we were bedded together. Miriam was in bed before me, her head showing from the bundling bag that her mother had firmly but loosely tied at the neck. Getting close was further complicated by a board that stood lengthwise between us. Our parents, as was the custom of the Puritans, were taking no chances with the fires of the flesh.

"Boaz, my darling Boaz," she whispered, sure her parents were at last asleep.

"Miriam, this board, it lifts quite easily from its slots," said I in a hushed voice.

"It was meant to be," she coaxed.

I laid it aside and felt for her and tried the knot which was too firmly tied. She lay on her back and for the first time, I kissed her full on the mouth. She responded hungrily, all her instincts on go. I laid hands on her searchingly but she was too well shielded by the bag and her clothes.

"Hold on Bo. Patience."

I could feel her struggling to shed her duds, so I undressed as well. It was customary to bed down in one's clothes back then, the fire dampened down to conserve fuel, and frost entering the house on winter nights. I pulled the covers over us.

"Hold me tight," she whispered, nibbling my ear.

I straddled her, her warm voluptuousness immediately responding to my weight but it was still an impossible distance the bag put between us. Then I found what pleased. Where I had pitied her tender skin against the coarse hessian, my fingers proved a boon. Its rough texture stirred her nipples erect, her cunny to a dampness that I could feel through the cloth until struggling like ferrets in a sack, she came. These last things I describe in hindsight for though I was highly aware of my own lust, I had no idea until then what it was like for a woman.

"Boaz, Boaz, my sweet and tender Boaz," she whispered when it was done.

I smiled to myself in the dark knowing she was totally unaware of the swamp my lust had made of my neckerchief. So much for bundling I thought, so much for romance but that's how it was in the beginning, away back then.

Editor's Note

A Sackful of Ferrets was first published on the website in April and appears here as an Editor's Choice.



Photograph: "Bird" © Christopher Locke

Old Habits by Nick Sweet

I was sitting out on the balcony after work, as I like to do, taking occasional sips from my vermouth and looking down at the street. It was a lovely balmy spring evening, and there is something about the quality of the light in this city that I love. Picasso commented on it, I believe. I don't know, you might call it magic...The street down below struck me as being rather like a stage-set, or a cinema screen, and there I was sitting and watching the traffic and people out walking come and go. Voices could be heard, as usual, from the bar on the corner, and this struck me as being rather quaint and in keeping with the scene. At such times I often reflect on my state of bachelordom and breathe a sigh of relief, even as I reflect on some of the near-misses in my past that came close to laying claim to my freedom. Marriage, I usually end up deciding is not for me.

Then my eye was taken by a handsome youth who came running along the street. He was wearing jeans and a black polo shirt, and had his black hair cut very short. He gave the impression somehow -- even at this distance -- of being rough trade...the sort that I have often found myself attracted to, even at my own peril on occasion. I found myself trying to imagine the scene he had just come running from: the eager, panting young mistress, the irate husband appearing unannounced...Or perhaps his tastes ran along different lines and were more in keeping with my own...It was rather fun to be able to sit at a remove, as it were, from reality, and look down on life as though it were a stage-set and make of it a drama of one's own imagining, safe in the knowledge that none of what you saw or imagined could ever have the slightest effect on you.

But then, just at that moment, the young man came to an abrupt halt under my balcony and looked up. I was rather taken aback and affected not to notice him, only for the young man to hurl an unprintable insult at me. I decided that the thing to do was act as though I hadn't seen him; then he would surely go away...And yet even as I was thinking this, I was sorely tempted to respond in some way: perhaps this was his way of looking for business, after all...I took another sip of my vermouth, then picked up my newspaper and hid myself behind its outstretched pages...

Moments later, however, I heard someone hammering at the door. I rose and went to see who it was, only to find that it was the young man I had been observing only moments down in the street. He told me, in a heavy Murcian accent, that we had better settle this thing once and for all. But what "thing" was he talking about? I asked him. Without further ado, he brought out a knife and said we should talk about it inside, and so, finding that I had no alternative, I let him in. He was going to kill me for what I done to his sister Julia, he informed me, before he lunged...but fortunately I was able to skip to the side and evade the thrusting blade...I managed to push, and then, poking out a leg, trip him, so that he went crashing down onto the tiled floor...I threw myself down on

top of him and a brief struggle ensued, during which my assailant fell on his own weapon.

He was killed instantly. I kept a cool head, and told myself that I must dispose of the body. So I dragged him out into the bathroom and chopped him up, then put the various limbs and body parts into plastic bin-liners. After that, I threw the bin-liners with the body parts in them into the deep-freeze. Then I waited...

Some eight hours later, in the middle of the night, I took the bin-liners and carried them, two at a time, down to my car, which was parked below in the street, and put them all in the boot. Then I drove out of the city, and when I got to a secluded spot in the middle of open countryside, I turned into a field and took the number plates from the car and put them in a case I'd brought with me, before I doused the vehicle with petrol and set it alight...

It took me almost two and a half hours to walk back to my flat, on Calle -----, and when I got there, I changed out of my things and threw them into another bin-liner and took a hot shower. After that I dressed myself in clean clothes and went back out with the bin-liner and burned the contents.

That all happened two months ago. I passed a nervous few days after it happened, I can tell you. In fact, I half-expected the police to come and knock on my door any moment...But they haven't so far. And you never know, I'm even beginning to think that I might well have got away with it.

The funny thing is, I don't have even the faintest idea who the chap was -- and neither do I know of any young ladies by the name of Julia, for that matter...But then, young ladies are scarcely to my taste, of course...The lad must have mistaken me for somebody else -- the man who put his sister -- this girl, Julia -- in the club, I suppose...The whole affair really was most odd, anyway.

And I'll tell you something else: I've refrained from sitting out on the balcony and looking down at the comings and goings of the street of an evening after work ever since that night...You never know, though, any evening now I might just get my nerve up and go and sit out there again...After all, old habits die hard.

Editor's Note

Old Habits was first published on the website in March and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Intolerable Impositions by Rae Bryant

She gnawed her arm off in the morning, before he woke. There was no way around it. Her forearm lay trapped beneath his thick neck, stubbled except for one irritated spot of skin, below the hairline where an infected pore rounded, tipped with puss. She had seen it the night before, the infection. She saw it in the dim bar light, pulsating, but the blemish did not matter after two glasses of cabernet. And besides, he presented so well from the front--pressed, suited, hip-but-not-too-metro tie, square jaw, and straight white teeth. His hair was thinning, but what consequence was scalp hair?

So they left the bar together.

After a tolerable sexing--topside, bottom side, behind, sideways, over the edge of the bed--he turned his back and asked if she would find the ingrown hair on his neck because it hurt him, and he had no one to do it now that his mother had passed away three months ago. In the dark silence of their after-sex, he explained how his mother cleaned the area with hydrogen peroxide then extracted the infection, fishing inside with tweezers and a needle to find the offending hair. He spoke with soft words: "She could always find it so quickly. Now I have no one. Would you mind? The tweezers and the peroxide are in the bathroom cabinet." It was a test, though he did not admit it. She had known other men like him--men who searched for a dedicated intimate, a partner, unsqueamish. It was their way of telling the keepers from the one-nighters.

She begged off the immediate task. "I'll do it in the morning," she said, smiling, as if the task did not disgust her.

She woke before him. The bulbous infection lay millimeters from her nose, an inch from her forearm. It would touch her if he rolled backwards, toward her. As long as he lay motionless, she was safe.

Pulling her arm in small increments, she worked it from beneath his neck, but each time her forearm moved, he moved, so that he inched himself backwards, forming into her an intolerable spooning. She had not consented to affections. There was no contract between them for this cuddling, nor was there provision for lovemaking, only sex implied, and she cringed at the familiarity of his back and buttocks and legs where they contacted her skin. It may have been different if he faced her. He was much prettier from the front.

So she rolled to her back, letting only her side and arm touch him now. She considered pulling the arm outright, facing his awakening before leaving a fake phone number. She considered pushing on his right shoulder so to roll him onto his belly, which may have released the arm, but still, it was risky, and would likely wake him that way, too. After endless scenarios imagined--pulling and pushing and facing the man she now loathed for no other reason than the cyst upon his neck--she considered loving him. She could simply stay and wake by his side then share eggs and coffee and the *Washington Post* before returning to bed again, but the venture brought the inevitable

task of extracting the hair and the puss, and she found herself glaring at the thick, heavy neck with hatred. Only one thing to do.



It took her the better part of an hour to gnaw through the bone. The flesh was easy--soft, pliable, seasoned with skin creams and the experience of her near thirty years. The blood, however, threatened to give her away. It pooled on the mattress beneath them, and he nearly woke from the wet.

As she snuck out of the bedroom, she turned to watch the sleeping man who now clutched her forearm. He pulled it to his chest and hugged it like a child's teddy bear. She remembered mornings when, she too, clutched forearms to her chest. It wasn't so bad. At least they had left her something before leaving. She tied off the left sleeve of her coat then moved out of the apartment and into the hallway, missing the forearm already, but resolved to leaving it.

Waking him and his cyst would certainly turn into the day, the week, a year and before long she might consider him more than a fancy. He would fill her life with a series of cystic burdens. He would seize her entirely. A single forearm was well-worth the escape.

Editor's Note

Intolerable Impositions was originally published on the website in February and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Painting: "Naked Banter" © LEX Covato www.lexcovato.com

Puppet's Prognosis by Schuyler Dickson

Slow afternoon. Dr. Grambling sat in his office, hunched over his desk. He leaned his head against his arm and gazed into the pattern eyes of a puppet, his fingers caressing the side of its bumpy, cloth face. He leaned back in his chair and sighed. He stared into the buzzing fluorescent light until his eyes watered. Behind him on the wall hung his psychology license and what looked to be ancient, framed magazine covers of *Psyche Today* and *New Therapist*. The covers of these showcased a much younger Dr. Grambling and his star patient, Larry Wilkes. The headlines read things like, "Breakthroughs in Puppeteering and Child Psychology" or "Grambling and the Puppet Method." The magazine covers aged about like the doctor himself, all wrinkles and discolorations.

Puppets were strewn across the room: one limply hanging on the child-sized patient's chair, two leaning against each other on the floor, one on Dr. Grambling's cluttered desk, all lifeless, mouths gaping, their cloth eyes open and fixed, like a grenade had hit Sesame Street. The doctor sat in his chair, rocking back and forth and thinking. He set the puppet in an open drawer and had just pushed it closed when a buzzer sounded.

"Larry Wilkes here to see you," the receptionist's nasally voice issued from the speaker.

"Send him in," Doctor Grambling said, holding down the talk button. He let out a deep sigh and set down his pencil. He had been seeing Larry Wilkes off and on for close to twenty years now. He was his breakthrough in the puppet method, the first patient to ever be advised solely through puppetry. By now, Larry was well outside of the doctor's optimum patient age--he was thirty-six according to the chart. But Dr. Grambling saw him anyway. Larry's visits were not routine; he would not even make an appointment. He would just show up and wait until his doctor had some spare time. It was roughly once every year, and when he came, it was usually just to check in, say hey, how are you, good to see you, and back out the door.

The door opened and Larry walked in. He was balding, and the bags under his eyes sagged halfway down his cheeks. He wore a white, short-sleeved collared shirt that was buttoned to the top, the collar buried deep in Larry's fat neck. To Dr. Grambling, it looked like Larry had not slept in about a week. It reminded Dr. Grambling of the first time he saw Larry, when Larry was eleven, right after he had left his parents and moved into his grandmother's house. He had been locked in his room, stranded for over a week before anyone found him. He was set free only to find out that his father had killed his mother and then himself. During their first few appointments, Dr. Grambling feared that Larry would be one of his hardest patients. He was young and bitter, so angry that he would start crying in the middle of their conversations. At first, they would not talk

at all. The doctor would just watch Larry cry, all the while panicking, not knowing how to get him to stop.

"Larry, good buddy, how are you?" the doctor asked, standing and reaching a hand out towards his patient.

"Not so good, Doc," Larry replied, shaking the doctor's hand and sitting down in the child-sized patient's chair. He squeezed his rear in between the armrests and leaned forward, his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees. "Not good at all, really. That's why I came by. I need an opinion."

"Why, what's happened? You're not in trouble, are you?"

"No, no. It's nothing like that."

"Well, Larry, by all means, tell me about it."

"I'd rather not, Doc. No offense, but I'd rather talk to Dr. Procter."

"Dr. Procter."

"Yeah."

The doctor sighed and scooted his chair back. He hesitated before he slid open his bottom desk drawer. When his hand came back up, he was holding a puppet in medical garb. His nametag read "Procter, M.D." in broad, faded red letters. He set the puppet on the table. "Now, Larry, you remember that Dr. Procter is not real, right? He is a part of our imaginations, just a tool to help us tell our feelings to one another."

Larry smiled. "I know, Doc. It's more for old time's sake, really." Dr. Grambling nodded and inserted his hand up to the wrist into Dr. Procter.

"Larry," the puppet said, "It's good to see you again." Dr. Procter's voice was a few octaves above Dr. Grambling's normal speaking voice. It came rasping from the back of his throat in what sounded to be a part British, part German accent, with maybe a tinge of Scandinavian. He had begun his use of puppets about twenty years ago, and this is roughly how he began every session with a patient. A bad boxer in his youth, Dr. Grambling's facial features were unpleasant--contorted and flattened by his opponents' blows. At first, no child would talk to him. They were all too scared of his face.

Larry looked straight into the puppet's black, cloth pupils and told his story. "I woke up about six months ago with a speck in my sight. A tiny speck, almost like a tiny crack in a car windshield, was lodged in my field of vision. Kind of up and to the right." He held his thumb and middle finger like he was holding a needle just above his brow. "It didn't hurt or anything, so I didn't think too much of it at first, but after a week or two, the crack had stretched a good bit. It kept growing, so I decided to go and see the eye doctor. He couldn't find anything wrong, so I went to see some kind of specialist--I don't know his name, maybe it was a Dr. Green. He ran every test he could imagine on me, all with negative results. I went home pissed off every night, and every morning when I woke up, the crack was a little longer." He paused and reached for one of Dr. Grambling's business cards that were piled on his desk. It was a plain card with "Dr. Greg Grambling" written in balloons and a smiling puppet in the bottom corner. "Well, that crack formed a line that kept going all the way across my entire field of vision."

Yeah, I went to see different doctors, but the whole time I got no results. Got damn close to spending all the money I had."

He would not look at Dr. Grambling or the puppet. Larry just shook his head, hunched over his knees and staring at the floor. "Go on, Larry," Dr. Grambling said, peering over his glasses.

Larry cleared his throat. "So the line was there, but then, the space above it started losing its clarity, its color. Hell, everything. The entire space above that line turned into a thin fog and then to absolutely nothing. Nothing. I was blind in the top half of my eyesight. I kept going to different doctors--nobody could find nothing." He spun the card around in his fingers. "Well, this whole time, I was learning to live with it, I guess. No use in worrying about something that's not gonna change. I could still see out the bottom half, so I just craned my head a little bit and just started looking a little higher than what I was used to. I had gotten along fine until last week. Last Tuesday, while I was eating some turnip greens, the entire darkness on the top half of my sight got bright. Somebody turned a light on. I could see an office, not too different than this one we're in right now. There was an aluminum desk and a swaying light chain. A door was closing in front of me, the heels of whoever had switched on the light just out of sight when it clicked shut. That happened last week, and I knew that I needed to come see you."

"Larry," Dr. Grambling said, laying his doll face down on the desk, "before you go on, you need to know that I am a certified *child* psychologist. I can give you my opinion, but I have to strongly suggest that you see a doctor who specializes in your type of problem when you leave my office. Is that clear?" Dr. Grambling stopped himself from saying *go see somebody who knows what they're doing*.

Larry nodded his head. "I just want to know what's going on," he said weakly. "It ain't normal."

"So, let me get this straight--"

"Uh, doc. I'd rather hear it from Proctor, if, if that's all right."

"Fine, Larry," Dr. Grambling replied as he slid the puppet onto his forearm, again trying to hide his disappointment. The doctor continued in his puppet voice. "Half of your field of vision, the bottom half, is completely normal, right? Everything is just how it has been your entire life?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"And the top half. The top half is an--"

"Office, now. A year ago it was normal, then complete black. Now, I see a tiny office."

"Okay, an office. I must admit, Larry, this sounds peculiar, at best, if not entirely unique. Let me ask you this. Is there anybody else in the office that you see, you know, besides the person who turned on that light?"

"No, not right now. But sometimes, a man comes in the room."

"A man," repeated the puppet. "And do you recognize this man?"

"No, I've never seen him anywhere besides in the office."

"How often?"

"Hm," Larry thought hard as Doctor Grambling waited patiently, face rigid, his wrist cocked to make Dr. Proctor look like he was awaiting an answer. "I guess it's about once a day now, but it could be at any time, breakfast, supper, it doesn't matter. He'll show up."

"What does he look like?"

"Well, he's a good bit older. And, uh, he's, ah--naked." Larry swallowed hard. "Yeah, naked except for some plaid socks he's got on."

The doctor opened Larry's thick file with his free hand and started scratching notes on a clean page. "Does he ever talk to you? Ever tell you that you need to do anything?" the puppet asked.

Larry stared at the carpet. "Sometimes," he started and then changed his mind.

"It's fine, Larry. Take your time," Dr. Grambling said, scratching his forehead, giving his puppet voice a break.

"He talks, but he watches, mostly. Sometimes he tells me what to do, but not very often. The first time he said anything I was, ah, in bed, actually, with a--with a woman. He told me," Larry broke off, as if looking for the exact words. "He told me he could see me. He said he could see what I was doing."

Larry watched as the doctor made notes on Larry's file. "Did he say anything else?" the puppet asked.

"Well, yes." Larry looked straight into the puppet. Dr. Grambling could feel the heat of Larry's stare on his palm. "He told me he loved me."

Editor's Note

Puppet's Prognosis was first published on the website in February and was voted Story of the Month.

The 3.45 to Prestwich by MJ Nicholls

Onboard

Melvin knew something was awry when the train conductor buzzed through the PA: *There will be a delay in today's service. Unfortunately, there is a rhinoceros on the line, and it will take ten or fifteen minutes to get the train moving again. We are sorry for the inconvenience.*

He cosied into the groaning parabola of resentment from his co-passengers and broke off a second block of his Fruit 'n' Nut bar. An acid-burned woman reading Nicola Barker's *Three-Button Trick* caught his gaze and half-nodded towards the chocolate. He chose to interpret the nod as *might I have a chunk, please* but ignored this interpretation in favour of cramming the remaining three chunks into his mouth at once.

The man beside him, who reeked of pickles and toenail clippings, sighed and let slip the genesis of a vocal complaint. He tethered out the words *I don't...don't...* before sealing shut the *bloody believe this* for fear no one would pursue his grumbling strand and add their own phrases of grievance. Melvin was prepared to contribute a *bloody Virgin trains* and a click-tut to any actualised grumbles but wasn't given the opportunity. The man returned to his paper to read the TV listings, inwardly moaning about the *bloody repeats*.

The seat beside the woman was blank, and Melvin badly wanted to stretch his legs. He tried slotting his left leg between the half-opened thighs of the woman and found an extra sliver of room. Buoyed by this space-stealing success, he slithered his right leg into the space as well, forcing the woman's legs to spread-eagle. He wondered if declining to offer her a chunk of chocolate was enough irritation for one day, but he pushed his luck.

Just...squeeze in there. Lovely. Don't think she noticed.

She paused three-fifths through a paragraph to shuffle in her seat, sealing her legs closed. Melvin froze as the clamp of her thighs chilled the blood in his stringbean ankles. Her thighs were like frozen Roquefort 'stubbornly rigid and faintly redolent of dustbins. His eyes were fixed on a cow shaking its teats around outside, but if he left the awkwardness any longer, she might cry sexual assault, or at least sleazy sub-seat gropeage.

'Excuse me,' she said, her words rasping casks, 'you appear to have wedged your legs between my legs.'

The man beside me is listening. He's pretending to read. He's lis-ten-ing.

'Umm...'

He's listening to me. My sexual assault. Oh, God...'

'Sorry, I' I was looking for extra space. I didn't want to have to--'

Speak to you? Say anything?

'--disturb your reading.'

Better.

'I'm not really reading. I'm pretending to read,' she said, withholding the grin that might have been expected after such a remark.

Melvin giggled. The tension defused, he wondered how many people around him were doing the same thing 'pretending to read. He zoned in on those at the opposite table reading novels and noticed how no one turned a single page in about three minutes.

How peculiar. Wish I hadn't had those two extra choco chunks now. I feel queasy. Yeugh.

Outside

The rhinoceros holding up the 3.45 to Prestwich was reclining on the train tracks, thumbing through Nicola Barker's *Behindlings*. He found the text energetic and rich in stylistic zeal but was having trouble progressing past the first page. Likewise, the train driver and engineers were finding it impossible to progress past the first page of the Railway Procedure Code. After a few minutes, they turned over and pretended to read the rest.

The head engineer Cyril, who had the second finger of a Twix bar in his pocket, wanted the driver, Dennis, to stand a few inches away from him in case passengers thought they were holding hands. However, for Cyril to move away from the manual -- over which they were huddled in the prissy autumn winds -- might offend Dennis. *Do I smell? Does he dislike my cap? Do I have an old-fashioned haircut?* These questions might have arisen.

Cyril used the Twix bar as his excuse to pull away. Chomping the semi-melted caramel finger with his left hand, he held up the manual with his right and continued pretending to read. Dennis fixated on the Twix finger and caught his colleague's eye.

Does he want a piece? How do I break a bit off without my fingers smudging the chocolate?

'All right, we have to take action. I propose we -- '

'Can I have a piece of your Twix?' Dennis asked. His hands trembled as he gestured toward the chocolate. *No, Dennis. I want it all.*

'Ordinarily I'd have no problem with that, Dennis, it's just that...it's kinda melted in my pocket. My fingerprints would smudge the chocolate, which you might find yucky,' he said. *Back off. I want it all.*

'That's OK. I'll break it off. Pass it here.'

'No. 'Cause if you touched it, *your* fingerprints would be on the chocolate. I don't feel comfortable with that.'

'What? Come on, just give me a bit.'

Cyril scrunched up his face, eyed the remaining wodge of chocolate, and crammed it in his mouth. Dennis was more taken aback by this than Cyril could have imagined.

He appeared genuinely hurt: a sorrowful countenance formed and what looked like *tears* glinted on his peepersides. Cyril's guilt left him unable to savour the chocolate. It tasted exactly like spurning a friend (which, in this instance, tasted like melted caramel and soggy biscuit).

The men carried on pretending to read the Railway Procedure Code, but there was a deeply uncomfortable frisson between them. Dennis snuffled back his tears and Cyril teetered on the uncertainty of regret.

Should I apologise? What did I even do wrong? It was my bloody Twix.

'Dennis, I -- '

'No...it's OK. Don't say anything.'

'Right.'

Now where do I stand? God, this is unbearable.

Cyril swallowed the tension bomb in his throat and reached over to pat his colleague on the shoulder. Unfortunately, in his spook-frozen state, he only brought his arm up to meet Dennis's bum, and gave his left cheek a squeeze. Dennis shuddered in disbelief, yet found the gesture oddly comforting. He turned to his colleague -- his *friend* -- and introduced his face to happiness.

Maybe we have a future together. Maybe this is all I'll ever need. Just Dennis, his bum, and the rhinoceros.

Off-track

Leona, the excessively rhythmical cow, was shaking her teats at the helpless passengers on the 3.45 to Prestwich. Having opted out of the traditional raising-calves-then-being-made-into-a-burger route, she had to use her udder for something else. The train stopping before her was a sign -- a portent -- that dance was her destiny, so she perched on a knoll and began.

Balancing on her back legs proved tricky at first, but -- propelled by some greater force -- she found her poise and wowed the passengers with the golden loveliness of her two left teats. One woman, pretending to read a timetable of trains to Rotherham, dropped her spectacles in surprise. There were some handclaps and a carnation was thrown her way. However, two fatal distractions cut her performance short.

A man on the train was eating a delicious chocolate-and-raisin snack and had two chunks left. Being a cow, Leona wasn't allowed to harass humans for chocolate, but she *really fancied* a bit. Also, in the distance a train official attempting to clear a rhinoceros off the line was eating a succulent stick of choco scrumptiousness. Leona's craving for such confections was insatiable.

The hunger was cramping her performance. Although her ability to shuggle her teats was unrivalled among other cows in the field, a certain elegance was missing from her hoovework. After a minute of a quite enchanting *pas de deux* between her front and back legs, she flumped onto the grass, loll-tongued in desperation for a hit of choco.

I would dance the rhumba on my mother's grave just for one nibble on a Kit-Kat. Oh, moo...

Leona wrestled back her breath and cowsidled up to the train repairmen. She wasn't planning anything drastic -- perhaps a little cowsniffing or cownosing -- but secretly prepared herself to *kill* for choco.

Ram the guy with the fat bum then trample the weedy one and steal his Twix.

As Leona approached, the rhinoceros put down his book and perked up. The rhino was a supporter of the Bovine Terpsichorean Society and would back the cow once she showed him her moves. However, Leona was in no mood for dancing. She wanted chocolate.

'Look -- there's a cow,' Dennis said. Cyril turned to look at the cow and nodded. There was no other gesture he could possibly have made upon seeing the cow. The rhino left his book on the tracks and went over to grunt-butt the cow, asking her questions in gestures.

-- *Are you a dancing cow? What do you want?*

-- *Choco.*

-- *Do you want to rob the train with me?*

-- *Yes.*

Dennis and Cyril returned to the train and got moving again. They were already twenty minutes late for the citizens of Prestwich, and there would no doubt be delays getting into the station. As they pootled away, the rhinoceros (whose parents hadn't given him a name) leapt aboard the last carriage with Leona.

Operation choco-horde 2009. Let's vamoose with violence, Leona.

The Robbery

Once the train got moving again, Melvin rummaged in his pocket for his mobile phone, finding a neglected Crunchie bar from weeks back. He placed the remaining chunk onto the table as he read his messages. The woman opposite immediately eyed the Crunchie, brushing her legs up against Melvin's knees in a deliberate play for confectionery gratification.

'Excuse me,' she said, her words dusky husks, 'but I was wondering if I might trouble you for a chunk of chocolate?'

'Oh, um...it's old. It's been in my pocket for weeks. You don't -- '

'I don't what?'

'You don't, um...here. Have it. But it really is old and -- '

'Thank you,' she said, snapping up the chocolate and breaking off a chunk. *Mmm. Sublime.*

Leona spotted the choco through the sliding door but was stuck helping the rhinoceros into another compartment. She tapped her left hoof on the rhino's rump to indicate she had spotted some pickings and was going to investigate. The rhino grunted

at Leona the message *save a piece for me* but Leona was feeling mutinous. *No chance. All for me.*

The cow stormed into the compartment with a cacophonous *moo-mwoo-mwooo!* Passengers were startled from their books and papers, looking over in dread at the rowdy bovine. Leona clobbered a child with her udder to show she meant business. Everyone raised their hands as Leona approached the exposed chocolate. She banged her head against the table with a *mwooooooooooo* until the woman lifted the Crunchie. Leona nodded.



'No,' she said. 'It's mine. I earned this chocolate.'

Mwooooo! Cowstomp. Moo moo-woooo!

'I want this last bit. I was denied a Fruit 'n' Nut chunk earlier and I was leg-groped under the table. I had to leg-flirt with this creep over here for a chunk,' she said. The sweat of embarrassment broke out under Melvin's clothes, leaving him ashamed *and* smelly.

Leona tried walloping the child again, but the father poked her in the eye with a pencil. *Mwoah! Mwoaaaaah!* The rhino had freed his rump from the other compartment but wedged himself between the sliding doors in an attempt to provide backup. Apart from manic grunting and the thumping insistence of his feet, he was useless.

As Leona writhed around on her back legs, the woman released the valves on her udder, gradually draining the milk from her mammarys. It took her a few moments to notice. Upon realising her milk supply was leaking everywhere, she became somewhat depressed and collapsed in a lacteal heap, cowweeping into her unpasteurised discharge.

No one in the compartment was trained in cownselling so the last five minutes of the trip became somewhat soggy -- streams of milk lapping at their ankles under the Prestwich tunnel, reaching chest-level upon arriving at the station. The rhino was blocking the exit at one end, so the passengers waded, single-file, through the milk-filled compartment, out the train and into Prestwich station, half an hour late and with an unwanted dairy musk.

There would be complaints.

Editor's Note

The 3.45 to Prestwich was first published on the website in February and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Illustration: "Prestwich" © Laura Guthrie

Row, Row, Row Your Boat by Elizabeth Skoski

Ally leaned over the edge of her boat, plunged her hand into the ocean, and brought a handful of salt water to her mouth. She poured it down her throat, knowing that she shouldn't. Then she reached over again and scooped another handful into her mouth, feeling the sting from the salt as it snaked its way into the blisters on her hands and the cracks of her lips. It burned. It was wrong. But Ally couldn't help herself.

Halfway across the Atlantic, Ally's GPS tracking device caught fire. She never figured out how it happened. One minute, she was there, a tiny blinking dot making its way from New Jersey to England. The next minute, nothing but flames licking the edges of the screen, her dot vanishing behind a sea of static--then blackness. She put the fire out with her fire extinguisher, hit the burned out GPS a few times with the back of her hand, and looked out on the horizon line. Maybe, Ally figured, if she looked hard enough, she could see the green hills of Ireland, sheep kicking up their heels and ancient generations of drunks alerting her that she was almost there. But all Ally saw was thousands and thousands of peaks of tiny waves.

Ally made love to her boyfriend the night before she set off. In the shadow of the sand dunes on the coast of the Jersey shore, they had lain down in the sand, protected from view by the beach reeds that bend easy in the salty ocean wind. As the waves nipped at their toes, lapping into and out of their lives, Ally noticed the solidness of the earth under her back and the steadiness of her boyfriend, his weight balanced on top of her. So safe, she thought, sandwiched between two heavy solid objects, the earth and a boy. Like being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Once a day, in the afternoon sun, when the temperature rose too high to even think about rowing, Ally would open a letter from her mother. Her mother had spent the months before Ally's departure, sitting every day at her writing table, writing to Ally's future. In an art that seemed to have died when Virginia Woolf put stones in her pockets, Ally's mother penned exactly one hundred letters, one to be opened every day of the trip. No more, no less.

Ally had trouble sleeping in the first three weeks. Strapped down, across the tiny compartment of the boat, she couldn't shake the feeling that she would capsize. The idea that at any moment, one of the benign rocking waves would trick her. That it would suddenly combine with the surrounding waves, spurned on by some undetectable movement deep in the earth's crust and together as one giant wave it would rise, menacingly over the edge of her boat, and pummel her down into the unknown deep. Ally lay awake all night, her body riding up and down, up and down with the movement of the waves. Nothing below her, she thought, but slowly shifting waves. *And above us only sky...* Ally hummed softly to herself, the noise spreading out for miles.

Ally drank the salty water from the ocean until her body wouldn't take anymore. Then she leaned over the edge of her boat and vomited, the current quickly pulling the

contents of her stomach out to sea. Then, Ally leaned back and waited for the inevitable effects she knew would come.

Figuring her best approximation of direction from a rudimentary knowledge of the stars and her best-guess attempt at map reading, Ally picked up her oars and started rowing. She couldn't bob there any longer, letting the current take her further and further off course. Feeling her calloused hands around the oars, Ally pushed deep into the sea and started in a direction.

She saw dolphins a few times. They were the most curious, splashing up to the side of her boat, so close that Ally could lean a hand over and pet them. They looked almost like dogs, cocking their head and questioning what she was doing so far out. They felt like rubber, not slimy and wet, but almost dry, water slicking off their bodies.



Ally ran out of fresh water. She tried to wait for rain, setting out whatever make-shift buckets she could to catch the clean water from the sky. But it never came. Day after day it was only the round globe of sun, beating down on her, heat and glare like a solid weight on her shoulders.

Somewhere in her mind was the knowledge that she shouldn't, but the thirst that plagued her was unrelenting. It was a hand around her throat, closing off oxygen, a hole

in the pit of her stomach that refused to fill, a weight heavy in her chest making it hard to breathe. Ally leaned over the edge of her boat and spooned more ocean water into her mouth.

There were whales now, at night. Under the stars in the sky, so big it looked like a curved dome, Ally heard thunderous clapping in the water. From where she lay, on her back staring straight up at the sky, Ally thought it must be God's hand furiously creating waves in the water. But when she struggled up, and peered over the edge, there was the magnificent "V" of a whale's tale, rising out of the dark ocean and then flattening hard against the surface, with a boom that seemed to shake the very boat Ally lay in. She saw the tale rise again, out of the water, and then, again, *BOOM!* Ally laughed and clapped at the whale. "V" she thought at the sight of its tale. "V" for victory!

Ally was out of letters from her mother. All hundred pieces of paper lay scattered around the bottom of her boat. There were no more letters. The final one had read give up and come home.

The other girl told her about the beach. Ally heard her singing before she saw her. A voice from somewhere close accompanied by the steady, rhythmic sounds of oars slipping in and out of the water.

"Row, row, row, your boat..." Ally heard the girl singing. Ally shielded her eyes against the sun and looked out on the endless ocean. "Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream."

The girl was younger than Ally, significantly. She could only be ten years old, eleven at the most. And she was in a regular old rowboat, the kind old people rent at Central Park, not the sophisticated extreme-sporting boat that Ally was in. The girl's hair was pulled back in two pigtails that bobbed with each stroke she took. Her feet were bare, but she was wearing a frilly dress, red with tiny white polka dots and a frilly lace bib around the neck.

"Ahoy!" The girl yelled to Ally, pulling her boat alongside Ally's. "What are you doing out here?"

"What are you doing out here?" Ally asked.

"I'm out for a row." The girl giggled as if answering the silliest question.

"In the ocean?"

"Yes." The girl laughed again. "But there's a beach right over there." The girl pointed behind her. Ally leaned over the edge of her boat, anxious to see the shore. "No," the girl giggled. "You can't see it from here. But it's there. Trust me."

Ally remembered that frilly bib. It itched her neck and her mother had put hair in pigtails that were too tight and pulled at her temples. Ally always hated the color red.

"You'll find it!" The girl promised. And with that, the girl dug her oars into the water and rowed away. Until she disappeared, Ally could hear her humming, *merrily, merrily, merrily...*

There was no more water. No more dried food. No more Global Positioning System. No more letters from her mother to open.

But there was a beach, and the direction the little girl with pigtails and a red polka dot dress had pointed to. Ally hurled her heavy oars into her boat and lay them on the floor of the small cabin. There was nothing left but the whisper of a beach.

Ally sat perched on the side of her boat, letting her feet dangle in the salt water. Yes, she thought, she could swim to the beach. She had all the water she could possibly need. How silly of me, she thought. I could've done this days ago. She eased her body into the ocean, kicking her feet to keep her head above water. Her arms already felt tired from treading water. No matter, she thought kicking her feet to propel her forward, there would be dolphins and whales to help her along the way. And the girl had said the beach was right over the horizon.

Editor's Note

Row, Row, Row Your Boat was first published on the website in May and was voted Story of the Month.

Photograph: "Boat" © Graham Kates



"Lake Effect" © Christopher Locke

Why Do You Kill Anything? by Brian Ted Jones

I found a brown turtle on the road beside my mother's house, struggling along the rocky way. I picked it up by the sides and studied it. The tiny elephant legs and dinosaur head. The mouth opening and closing, like a man speaking lines in a movie with the sound turned off. I ran it back to the house, holding it aside so the trail of turtlepee wouldn't trickle on my feet. Grandfather was sitting on the porch, smoking a cigarette. His eyes were nearly shut under the brim of his white stetson. His eyelashes were like curled, black caterpillars in his rough, red eyelids. It was July, and the heat made him sleepy.

"I caught a turtle," I told him, out of breath.

He came awake and looked. "Yep."

I nodded. "I'm gonna keep him."

His eyebrows lifted.

"You want to eat him?"

My mouth dropped open. "You can't eat turtles!"

He chuckled. "Why of course you can."

I thought about this.

"How?" I asked.

He grinned and set his Marlboro snipe down inside an ashtray shaped like a sheriff star. He grunted. "You'll need a rock, a knife, and a hanger."

I started to run into the house but remembered the turtle. I looked at Grandfather. I opened my mouth to speak.

"Don't worry," he said, before I could get a word out. "I'll watch him for you so he don't get away."

I nodded. "They're slow," I said.

"Well. That ought to make it easy," he said.

I ran into the house. I grabbed a hanger from my closet and a butterknife from the drawer in the kitchen. My mother was taking a nap, thank god. She would never have approved of something so coarse as turtlekilling.

I ran back outside and handed the butterknife and the hanger to the old man. I looked for the turtle and began to freak out when I didn't see it. The old man pointed down. The turtle was beneath his scuffed brown boot, pushing its stumpy legs and feet against the porch like it were swimming in place. Its dull, jeweled nails clicked on the concrete. I laughed.

"Okay," Grandfather said, taking inventory. He held up the hanger. "This is good. You want to put the end down near its mouth. Just widen it out a little so he can get ahold of it."

I took the hanger and did as he said. He watched me and said "Good." Then he held up the butterknife. "This won't work."

“Why not?” I asked.

“It aint sharp enough. It’s okay, though. I’ve got one.”

He reached into his pocket and took out a lockback knife, the kind with nickel bolsters and a deer-antler grip. The blade was worn from age to the color of a wet tree. He worked the slipjoint and the blade snapped out. I jumped. He smiled.

“Now you need a rock,” he said. “A good one. You go get that and I’ll meet you in the driveway.”

I ran off and he called me back and made me leave the hanger behind, so I wouldn’t slip and impale myself on the god damned thing.

I ran around the garage--growing cautious near the black, oak stump where I’d once seen a tarantula--and sped up again by the hydrangeas. I made for the driveway and skidded to a halt there, before deciding that gravel rocks would be too small for the job. So I headed for the ditch, near the mailbox. I looked around and saw a smooth, tan stone the size of a little league baseball mitt. I picked it up and confirmed the weight. I nodded to no one and dashed back to the driveway. Grandfather was already there, kneeling among the hot, white rocks. He held the turtle to the ground. The turtle continued to attempt escape.

Grandfather eyed the stone and nodded. He said “Good.” I nodded too, set the stone down, and backed away. Grandfather reached behind him and pulled the hanger from his waistband. He looked at me. He grinned.

“Well. You got to hold him,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, fast. I knelt. My bare knees scraped the gravel. I put my hand on the back of the turtle’s shell. I didn’t pull away at the weird, dusty touch. I wanted to and I didn’t.

Grandfather squatted, working the hanger with his big palms and knotty fingers. He squeezed the lopsided curve I had made until it became smoother, rounder. He looked at me with a big, blue, sunburnt eye while he did this. I nodded. He nodded. He settled further into his squat and held the hanger down near the turtle’s mouth.

Its square leather head receded. Its slow eyes blinked.

The head moved forward a little, came back.

Snapped out.

The turtle gripped the hanger in its lipless mouth and held on fast. I flinched. Grandfather chuckled and reached into his pocket.

“Keep holding him,” he told me. I nodded, feeling squeamish at the touch of the dust and the grime of the turtle’s shell.

Grandfather settled the hanger into his right hand, flexed his grip, and reached into his pocket. He took out the knife and flipped out the blade with the bloodscarred tip of his thumbnail. He tugged on the hanger. I watched the turtle’s neck stretch like a piece of taffy. The head reminded me of an oldtimey football helmet. I felt a gust of love for the creature. Grandfather took the knife and held the blade down over the neck. I imagined a man having his thumb amputated. Grandfather applied pressure with a soft

exhalation of breath. He sliced into the dark flesh, like I'd seen him cut through jalapeno peppers. I didn't have time to prepare. In the moment of the killing, I didn't even relate Grandfather's action to the turtle's death.

Grandfather raised the hanger. I looked for half a second at the coarse neck. It hung from the wire and made me think of a Christmas ornament. I looked at the stump in the shell, at the arms and legs clawing. I looked back at the neck and back at the stump. Blood the color of ink and thick as oil poured onto the driveway and stained the gravel. Grandfather stood, wiped both sides of the blade against his jeans, then he pushed it against his thigh and back into the groove.

He pointed at the shell.

"Pick that up and carry it to the ditch."

I did as he said. I turned the bleeding stump toward the house as I went, so the turtle's blood wouldn't splash me on the legs. I reached the ditch and set the corpse down among a bedding of green leaves, pine needles, and jagged blue rocks. Blood still poured from the wound, soaking through the understory and coating the hard, black earth beneath.

A shadow appeared over everything. I turned and saw Grandfather figured in the sun. The hanger was in his hand. The turtlehead was gone. In his other hand he held the big, tan rock.

"We can do this two ways," Grandfather said. "We can crack the shell with this," he held up the rock, "and take the meat out and boil it, then clean the turtle when it's boiled. Or we can just boil it with the shell still on, get the shell soft and peel it away. I'd like to take the shell off first, but you don't need to. Mama just made us do that. She thought a turtle shell was dirty and wouldn't let one be in the house."

He smiled. I did too. He looked at the turtle's body and so did I. The blood had slowed down, but a pool of it stood by the corpse like a blot of melted tar. I looked back up at Grandfather.

"Let's crack the shell."

He nodded and raised the rock. I scampered out of the way. He drew back as if to throw, but stopped and turned to me.

"Do you want to?" he asked. His voice hung in the air.

"No," I said quickly. "You do it. I'll watch." I thought he might argue with me or make me do it anyway. He looked like he was thinking about it, too. But he just nodded, raised the stone, and half-dropped, half-chucked it at the shell.

I watched the stone shoot through the air and land with a flat, muffled crack on the olive shell. My eyes closed at the sound but popped open again right away.

The shell had split horizontally, leaving a white seam among the plates that reminded me of lightning. I reached down and grabbed one side of the shell, near the right leg. The leg moved. I screamed and backed away. Grandfather laughed.

I looked at him. He was knelt over, hands on his knees. The laughter built up until he was shaking and wheezing. I got mad at him. I wanted to push him over. I might

have, too, if he hadn't looked up at me. "Oooooo," he wheezed, smiling. "Hm," I said, my mouth set meanly. I smiled.

We turned back to the turtle. Grandfather removed the twin halves of the top shell. There was a stretch of green flab beneath. Grandfather knelt, he grabbed the back leg, he lifted it. The body came away with a soft, tearing sound, like when a stickynote is pulled off a pad.

"Good," he said, looking at me. "We cracked the top shell and separated the body from the bottom shell. You know what the bottom shell is called?"

I shook my head.

"The plastron," he said.

I nodded and repeated the word. He smiled.

"Run into the house and grab a big bowl. We'll boil him, then we can clean him."

I did as he asked, and when I came back outside, he was still in the driveway. I ran the bowl out to him. He smiled at me, took the bowl, and knelt. The plastron fell away and Grandfather tossed the headless body into the bowl with a fat, wet plop.

He told me to go inside and set a pot of water on to boil and I did, and when I came back outside he was sitting on the porch smoking a cigarette.

"You didn't wake up your momma, did you?" he asked.

"Nope," I said. I looked for the turtle. It was sitting in the bowl on the bench beside Grandfather. He raised his elbow at it.

"Go take this inside so't the flies won't spoil it."

I nodded, picked up the bowl, and set it inside the house. When I came back I sat down across the porch from Grandfather on the antique settee mom had bought at a garage sale. I looked at him. He was looking at me.

"Well," he said.

"Yeah?" I said.

He took his fingers and plucked a bite of spit from between his teeth. "What do you think about it?" he asked.

I thought for a minute.

"Well," I said. "I just wonder why."

Grandfather frowned. "Why what?"

I blinked. "Why kill the turtle."

He nodded. "Ah," he said. The question seemed to make sense to him, and he reflected on it.

"Well," he said, after a while. "Why do you kill anything?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

He smiled at that.

"I don't know either. Seems to me, though, if you are gonna kill something, you might as well kill something that's good to eat."

My head cocked. "Turtles are good to eat?"

He nodded and smiled. "Oh yes son. Yes they are."

That didn't sound right to me, but Grandfather knew more.
"Huh," I said.
I thought about it.
"Still--" I said.
I felt a good point come up in my head.
"Still. A dog might be good to eat--"
"It aint," Grandfather said.
"Still," I said. "A dog *might* be good to eat. But we wouldn't eat it."
"Why's that?"
I shrugged. "Because we like dogs."
Grandfather thought this over.
"Well," he said, "why do you think we kept dogs around long enough to find out we liked them in the first place?"
I thought about that. I didn't understand the question. "Huh?"
Grandfather flicked gray ash onto the porch.
"Cavemen. If they saw something alive, they'd eat it. Right?"
"Right."
"Because they were hungry all the time, right?"
"Right."
"So. Why didn't they eat dogs?"
I mused my lips together and creased my brow.
"I don't know. Maybe they did?"
He smiled and pursed his lips in good faith consideration of my question. "Maybe they did, you're right, but . . . it's like...." He thought for a second and said, "You ever eat a black jelly bean?"
I grimaced. "Yeah."
He nodded. "They aint good, are they?"
"No, they're terrible."
He smiled. "So when you get a thing of jelly beans, you have all the black ones left over at the end, right?"
I scratched my arm and nodded. Grandfather went on.
"Okay, well, dogs were kind of like that. We tried eating them and found out they weren't any good to eat, so when we ate everything else we had all the dogs left. But, we kept them around long enough to find out they were good for other things. Like hunting, or hell, just companionship."
"Okay," I said. "But a black jelly bean aint a dog. It's a black jelly bean."
He nodded, smiling. "Correct."
"And we actually just throw out the black jelly beans when we're done with the good ones."
Grandfather thought about that.
"Huh, well, yeah," he said.

I went on, excited at winning the argument. “And if red jelly beans ended up being nice to play with or to talk to, we wouldn’t eat them, no matter how good they were, right?”

“Well,” Grandfather said, flicking ash off his cigarette and grinning. “We might if we were hungry enough. But I see your point.”

We sat in silence. Both of us. Thinking.

“Turtles are nice,” I said.

“I agree,” Grandfather said.

I looked at him.

“We aren’t starving.”

Grandfather shook his head, grinned, and patted his belly.

“No,” he said. “We certainly aren’t.”

I looked at him.

“So why did we just kill that turtle?”

Grandfather blinked. He didn’t say anything, and neither did I. We sat on the porch until he finished his cigarette, and then we went inside the house. We boiled the turtle. We ate it. We were very quiet.

Editor’s Note

Why Do You Kill Anything? was first published on the website in June and was voted Story of the Month.

How You Leave Home by Alana Cash

I felt like I had just gotten to sleep. Headache. Dizzy. Sweaty. I jumped out of bed and ran down the stairs two at a time. On the landing, I saw Mom pulling on Dad's arm as he pushed Kenny toward the front door. I ran down the rest of the stairs, broke Mom's hold on Dad's arm, and pulled her into the kitchen.

This argument was about Kenny's hair. Kenny was lead guitar in a rock band called Cheese Enchiladas and his long hair, pulled back into a ponytail, signaled something Dad wasn't prepared to accept. He'd been in the military all his life. It was his life. His family was just an accessory.

Dad backed Kenny into the corner by the front door and punched him. Mom shouted again, but I gripped her arm and she stayed in the kitchen.

"Pack your shit."

Dad always spoke to us kids in short orders.

Mow the lawn.

Wash the car.

Make that bed.

This was a final order and changed everything.

"No!" Mom wailed.

Dad cocked his head and froze for a few seconds waiting for her to say *one more word* which she did not. Then he walked into the kitchen, through the back door, and out to the alley where the station wagon was parked. He was going to change the oil or check the tire pressure or tune up something like he did every Saturday morning.

Kenny was already headed up the stairs. Mom started to follow him.

"No, Mom," Kenny said, shaking his head at her.

Instead, I followed Kenny upstairs and into his room to watch him pack.

I had gotten home at 4:00 hours after a night drinking with my friend Mike. We were celebrating the swimming scholarship I'd won to UC Santa Cruz, and after I spent an hour or so puking out the window of his car which was parked outside the main gate, I took a nap. I woke an hour later with the dry heaves, fell out of the car, walked over to the guard, flashed my I.D., and stumbled home.

Sitting on Kenny's bed, my head hurt, my vision was blurry, and as sad as I was that Kenny had just got thrown out of the house, I really wanted to go back to bed. Kenny, on the other hand, was humming as he dumped the contents of his dresser drawers into a big suitcase.

Is this how you leave home? Travel with your parents to four different bases in four different cities and two different countries, and then get thrown. Can you ever come back? Are you allowed to visit?

"Where will you go?"

"I'll move in with Blake. We already talked about it anyway. His dad's paying for his apartment."

"Will you stay in school?" I asked.

Kenny had registered at a local community college where he majored in music management.

"I quit school two months ago. I've been faking it."

"Oh," I said, thinking how different he and I were.

Kenny was two inches shorter than Dad and 40 pounds thinner. From the time Kenny was six years old, Dad picked on him to muscle up. In high school, Kenny said he was going to the gym to work out, when he was really going to Blake's house to practice with the band. I was the one with the muscles. Big Soviet shoulder and leg muscles from swimming, which was an even bigger disappointment to Dad because I was a girl.

Mom appeared at Kenny's door. Kenny looked at her and quickly looked away because she was wiping tears from her eyes.

"Here," she said softly and placed a wad of money on his bed. "It isn't much. It's all I have."

Kenny didn't look up or touch the money.

"Well," she said wringing her hands, and when neither Kenny nor I moved, she left.

Kenny was Mom's favorite. She had given birth to him when Dad was away on an isolated tour at McAndrew AFB in Newfoundland, had him all to herself for over a year until Dad got stationed at Aviano AFB in Italy, where I was born. She never stopped worshipping him, *mollycoddling* is what Dad called it. I think that's why Kenny was the kindest person in our family.

I don't remember Italy, but Italian was the language I studied in high school. We transferred to March AFB in California when I was three, which is where I learned to swim. Every summer, from the time I was five, I was on a swim team. Kenny took swim lessons too, but he never competed.

When we moved from California, which is the first move I really remember, I looked out the back window of the car and started to cry as I waved goodbye to my best friend, Lindy.

"Stop crying and face forward!" Dad demanded.

I turned around and faced the front seat and he caught my eye in the rear view mirror.

"Now," he ordered, "I want you to tell me everything you see out the front window of the car."

"Sky, street lights, cars," I said. "Billboard, grass, bushes, red light."

The game only lasted five minutes because I got bored, but it took my mind off the past, and I never cried again. Ever. I remembered what he said every time I felt like crying and I faced forward and put my mind somewhere else.

When we transferred to Wright-Patterson AFB, I joined the middle school swim team. We had access to an indoor university pool all year round and I learned that

swimming laps is the best form of facing forward -- the cool water, the lightness of my body, wearing myself out with the crawl.

I also learned to drink at Wright-P, which I considered the second best way to get myself facing forward. I went to a party at the home of a general's kid. Her dad was out of town, but his liquor cabinet wasn't. She offered everyone any kind of drink they wanted. I got sick on Scotch and never drank it again. There were no more parties at her house because her dad grounded her for what she'd done and they were transferred six months later. But, after that, a bunch of us stole beer from a local convenience store and drank on weekends. I'm glad I didn't graduate to drugs like some of the kids did.

Because I was a female, Mom expected me to look out for myself as soon as I started getting my period. I washed my own clothes and made my own breakfast. On their birthdays, she made chocolate cream pies for Dad and Kenny because that was their favorite. On my birthday, she made cupcakes. She never made lemon meringue pie, even though I asked for it every year.

I was invisible mainly. I could never make Mom or Dad proud by being visible. They never came to one swim meet. But I could embarrass them by getting pregnant or being a lesbian or having a bloody spot on the back of my pants -- anything that pointed to my being female.

"You want these?" Kenny asked, throwing a pair of John Lennon-style sunglasses on the bed.

"Sure," I said and put them on.

Kenny threw the money and a notebook of songs that he'd written into the suitcase and zipped it closed.

"You can have the rest."

The rest included his old stereo and two dumbbells.

"See ya," he said.

He turned to pick up the suitcase, and I could see the red mark on his jaw where Dad had punched him. I wondered if it would swell later on. Kenny would be proud if it did. He leaned to one side as he hoisted the suitcase, picked up his guitar case, and went down the stairs one step at a time.

I went back to bed. I could hear doves cooing in the bushes down below. Noise. Light. Heat. Sleep.

When I went downstairs at 14:00 hours, Dad was watching an Astros game in the living room. Mom was gone to the commissary where she shopped every Saturday afternoon for the weekly groceries.

When Dad saw me, he said "Get a job."

Then he took a sip from his Lone Star longneck and returned to the ballgame.

I didn't explain that on Tuesday morning I would start my summer job as a lifeguard at the NCO pool. I had secured that job in March by applying with Sgt. Jackson at the

Rec Center. The sarge made me swim 20 laps as he ate donuts in his office. He also demanded proof of CPR training and a Life Saving Certificate, which I managed to supply by the middle of April. That was the thing about jobs on base, once you got a qualified applicant, it was first come first served.

I hadn't told Dad about my scholarship either. I tried not to risk talking to him directly. Mom would tell him, and then we'd see if he approved that I was going so far away or if he turned it into another mistake that I'd made. Or if Mom made it one of those things that you *don't tell Dad*. In which case, he would just have to notice that I wasn't at the supper table in the fall.

Being a lifeguard was a perfect job if you had a hangover. I didn't start work until 11:00 hours and wearing sunglasses all day was natural.

There were very few rules --

once an hour everyone had to get out of the pool for five minutes so we could scan the water for turds

anytime there was lightning or the sky got cloudy, the pool was cleared

no running around the pool

no sitting on the rope that divided the shallow and deep areas

only one bounce allowed on the diving boards

no glass containers

at 17:00 hours when the military work day ended, everyone had to get out of the pool and salute the flag as it was lowered and "Taps" played over the loudspeaker.

And there were perks. Before the pool opened, I played volleyball in the pool with the other lifeguards, and I could swim laps for half an hour after the pool closed.

One afternoon, Airman First Class Seabrook offered to buy me beer if I agreed to skinny dip with him after dark. The lifeguards weren't trusted with keys to the pool, so three or four nights a week we climbed the fence to drink and swim. Seabrook was a good swimmer and Saturdays when he came to the pool, he did triple flips off the high dive. He wasn't just any airman, which is why I had sex with him in the pool. I didn't want to be a virgin when I left for college, and I didn't want to be in love either.

The first time hurt like hell, and I really didn't know why any girl would want a second round of that, but Seabrook convinced me that it would feel a lot better the next time. And it did.

The MPs patrolled around the pool at night, using flashlights aimed through the fence to see if anyone was inside. We were careful to get into a corner at the deep end and keep quiet when we heard them coming. I don't know what would have happened to me if we'd been caught, but he would have been court martialed. I was still seventeen.

Kenny came to visit me on Tuesday afternoons after he'd been to see Mom and before he started his shift at Rosa's Pizzeria. He brought hamburgers that he bought at the Operations Cafeteria, which everyone simply called Ops. It sounded like the name of

a trendy restaurant, but it was actually the flight line cafeteria across the street from the pool. Filled with crew and pilots and the airmen who repaired their planes, it sold the best French fries ever made -- thick cut, they steamed in the middle when you broke them open.

Kenny and I ate in the lifeguard office, which was a small eight foot by eight foot unairconditioned hut with a window through which I checked I.D.s and took money for people entering the pool area as guests. Kenny talked about the band and sang songs he had just written. He didn't pull his hair back anymore and it flew out loose and bushy, which made him look even thinner.

I felt sad that Dad would never hear Kenny's music. He wanted to impress Dad, but he didn't have the stuff in him that could do that. Kenny had never played sports. Never hit anyone.

Dad liked to fish and hunt. He was on a bowling league and had won golf tournaments. He went to football games at local high schools, worked on the car, and repaired the plumbing. Dad didn't know how to swim. Swimming was for sailors. And he didn't care anything at all for music. That was for fairies.

Mom didn't come to the pool, although she knew how to swim. She spent her days keeping the house spotless. Besides an annual inspection, the Base Housing Office held surprise inspections, so she had to keep the floor under the stove and refrigerator clean and the glass in the oven door had to be shiny. If the inspectors found dirt on the sill above the back door or a screen was torn, they put a note in the file. If they found cockroaches, our family would be ordered to move out of base housing.

After she finished cleaning, cooking, shopping for groceries, getting her hair done, and visiting the neighbors, Mom liked to have a couple of ounces of peppermint Schnapps that she kept hidden in her dresser drawer and take a nap. She was always up and preparing supper by the time Dad walked home at 17:15 hours, and the food was served at 17:30. Fried chicken on Monday. Pork chops on Tuesday. Meatloaf on Wednesday. Chicken fried steak on Thursday. Shrimp on Friday. They ate at the NCO Club on Saturday nights. Roast beef on Sunday.

Chow.

There were two lifeguard high-chairs facing each other on opposite sides of the pool. The little umbrella stationed above the chairs didn't provide much shade anyway, but sitting on the south-facing chair, there wasn't any. I got a really bad burn that first week. After I tanned from my first sunburn, though, the job was a piece of cake. An hour on the chair. An hour walking around the pool twirling the whistle around my left index finger.

The south-facing chair was up high enough that I could see over the cyclone fence that had been lined with pale blue slats to keep the pool area private and keep the airmen from ogling the girls and cracking up a jeep. From up there, I had a view of the

street and the flight line behind it. By mid-afternoon, the heat came off the tarmac in waves. There were mirage pools everywhere.

At 16:00 hours a convoy of Army ambulances drove down the street. There were always four, but sometimes as many as seven ambulances travelled past. They drove onto the flight line, then parked on the tarmac. Waiting.

The first time I saw them, I stood up on the lifeguard stand to watch. I didn't know what was happening. Why were Army ambulances on our Air Force base?

A little while after the ambulances arrived, several transport planes landed and taxied near where the ambulances were stationed. Army crews dressed in green fatigues and high-top black boots unloaded their *special cargo*, wounded soldiers, and wheeled them on gurneys over to the ambulances. The medics opened the back doors and loaded the patients inside.

The victims were covered in white bandages that were so bright in the sunlight, glowing almost, that they looked like something holy. The soldier's heads were sometimes visible, but more often they were bandaged too.

The war. This was about the war. It hadn't touched me till then. Air Force personnel were on alert and *scrambling* my whole life. I grew up thinking that the world could end any minute, on the one hand, and the complete safety of living within a patrolled compound on the other. I walked down the street any hour of day or night without thinking of harm. Who is going to steal your bicycle if they can be seen riding it around base?

The airmen had jobs with Ordnance, Supply, Operations. They painted the lines in the middle of the street, painted the curbs, painted the chapel, and repaired bomber engines. I didn't know what my dad's job was. I didn't care either. Everyone looks alike in a uniform. You serve.

As for the war, I just expected that the Air Force gave air support to ground troops -- flew the planes, dropped their *issue* on the target and came home. They weren't supposed to fight on the ground getting wounded and paralyzed and burned up. They were in the air. If they crashed, they usually came home in a body bag. Or they just never came home.

So now, here was the Army, bringing the war to me, and I could hear sounds flung out on the air, words to sentences that I couldn't make out because they were so far away. But I knew there was no laughter.

When the transport planes were unloaded and the ambulances loaded, the convoy drove down the street past the pool in the opposite direction toward the main gate. The patients rolled away to get lost in the V.A.

This ritual was reenacted seven days a week.

The first time I saw it, I thought that if he'd gone along with Dad's idea for his career, Kenny could have ended up like those guys. Next time I saw him, I told him about it. He said he went to the V.A. Hospital on Sunday afternoons to play his guitar and sing for

the guys. He said they were from all branches of the military because war was not picky about who got hurt.

I felt bad when he said that, and that night I took a walk. I wove my fingers into the chain link fence that separated the flight line from the rest of the base, just looking. I saw where the transport planes had been parked, where the soldiers with voices I never heard had rolled gurneys, where the wounded had been loaded into ambulances. I saw all of it while I listened to the roar of jet engines being repaired in the big hangar across the runway.

These soldiers had done their duty. This was how they came home. Burned.

I *saved* a little girl from drowning that summer. She was right at my feet, going under, and another kid yelled up at me to help her. I climbed down from the stand, pulled the four-year-old out of the water by her arm. As I carried her to the lifeguard office, she puked water all over me.

I said the little girl's name over the loudspeaker, and as soon as I had finished, her mother rushed into the hut. When something like that happened, the family had to leave for the entire day and we were supposed to write up a report which would go through channels and whoever was the active duty member of the family got a lecture or some kind of strike against them for not looking after their kids. It was not the responsibility of the lifeguards to babysit, and someone dying on base was not tolerated, unless it was an absolute accident. Like the guy who did die at the pool.

It was the last day that the pool was open for the summer and we were closing up. A really large man was lying on a towel near the fence at the deep end, while every other swimmer was packed and leaving. I whistled to get his attention, but he didn't move. I whistled again. He still didn't move.

I told another lifeguard to go wake the guy up because I was in the pool about to unhook the rope and put it away. All of a sudden there's a yell, *GET A MEDIC*. I ran climbed out of the pool and ran to the phone and called for an ambulance.

It was too late. The guy was dead. We were told later that his aorta had ruptured and there's no way he could have been saved no matter what we did.

The night before I left for Santa Cruz, Mom and Dad and I ate fried chicken. It was a little weird because I hadn't eaten with them since I got the lifeguard job and didn't get home until after 19:00 hours. On my day off, I ate at the Rosa's Pizzeria where Kenny worked.

Mom and Dad talked about a car accident that Sergeant Greeley had in a staff car and what would happen to him because he ran a stop sign and hit an officer's Lexus. Sergeant Greeley and his family shared our duplex.

I had spent the day doing laundry, ironing, cleaning my room, buying toiletries at the Base Exchange, and packing. I boxed up Kenny's stereo and shipped it in care of my dorm at Santa Cruz. While I was at the base post office, I realized that I had never

packed unless the family was being transferred. I had never thought about returning to a house I had lived in like it was home. Home was where I *unpacked* my stuff. So, would Santa Cruz be home or here? I started to feel a little panicky when I thought about moving to a new place and being among civilians who grew up in one city with lifelong friends. But then I realized they'd be lonelier than I was and have more trouble making friends.

Face forward!

When I got back from the post office, I called Seabrook at his job in Ordnance to say goodbye. I wasn't in love with him, but I felt close to him when I was lying underneath him on the diving board.

My call freaked him out, because our agreement was *no phone calls, no nothing* that would make anyone think we knew each other. In our very short conversation, he managed to tell me that he was being transferred to Alabama in October. I didn't know if that was true, but I knew I would never speak to him again. I felt a little guilty, maybe a little ashamed when he brushed me off, but I then realized that it was because he felt guilty and ashamed and not because I had any reason to. I hadn't gotten caught, which would have made me visible, and I hadn't gotten pregnant because the military doctor at the dispensary had *dispensed* birth control pills to me when I explained that I was a lifeguard and wanted to have small periods that wouldn't trail around in the pool.

At supper, Dad asked if I was all packed and I said I was. After I cleared and washed the dishes, I stared at television with them. I could feel a tension among us, and I wanted to say that I would miss them, but then I might cry. So I said nothing.

When the news came on, Mom and I went out to the front porch. We sat on the aluminum lawn chairs in the thick humid darkness. When she got bitten by a mosquito she sprayed us both with the can of OFF that sat on the little table between the lawn chairs.

She asked me if I had everything I needed. I hoped when I told her that I *thought* I did, that she would give me a wad of money like she gave to Kenny, but that didn't happen. I asked her when Dad found out I was leaving, since he hadn't said anything. She told me that he had known since June. Then she started talking about Kenny and how much she worried about him.

She didn't say it, but it was implied that she wondered how he would ever have enough money to get married. I wondered if Mom would lose respect for Kenny if he married a woman who made more money than he did. Dad didn't have any respect for Kenny so it wouldn't make a difference to him. I wanted some peppermint Schnapps.

We heard the television go off and I got up and went inside.

"I guess I'll see you at Thanksgiving," Dad said to me.

Since I was leaving on a Tuesday, Mom was driving me to the airport.

"I guess so," I said.

"Call on Sundays," he ordered.

"Yes sir."

He nodded his head and went upstairs to get ready for bed, and I went outside again. Kenny drove up just as I was sitting back down. He knew Dad went to bed after the news. He got out of his car and walked toward the porch. Mom stood up like she was

going to offer
Kenny her seat,
but just as
Kenny reached
the steps
leading to the
porch, we all
heard a sound
that made us
freeze. A
strange, eerie
sound. A sound
that was very
frightening and
very confusing
at the same
time. Kenny,
Mom and I
took turns
looking at each



other. Then Kenny stepped backwards into the front yard. Mom went down the steps into the yard, and I followed her. We all looked up.

The windows to Dad's bedroom were open and the sound that we heard was coming through them. We could hear Dad bawling like a little kid in mournful, desolate sobs.

Editor's Note

How You Leave Home was first published on the website in April and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Photograph: C-130 Hercules (copyright free photo supplied by USAF)

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Jeffrey Carl Jefferis is the more stylish son of Carl and Kathy. He graduated the fifth grade with honors, along with high school, undergraduate college, and law school. His work has recently been, or soon will be, published in Word Catalyst Magazine and Foundling Review.

Brian Ted Jones was born in 1984 and raised in Oklahoma. He is a graduate of St. John's College and the author of *Everything's Fearful Dead*, a novel about religion. He lives with his wife, Jenne, and their sons Oscar and GuyJack.

Karen Lenar is a recent MFA graduate of Fairleigh Dickinson University. Her publishing credits include a forthcoming essay in the 2011 issue of *North Carolina Literary Review* and a book review in *The Literary Review*. She resides in Boston with her husband. She realizes it is unusual to dedicate a short story, but she would like to make an exception and dedicate this to her father, Frank Lenar, who recently lost his very brave battle with multiple myeloma.

Stan Long is a published writer and single father who, once his chores are done, lives in his head and when his mind and his screen go blank, must wrestle with the idea of virtual reality - hence his motto taken from Aesop: "Beware you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow."

Tom Mahony is a biological consultant in California with an M.S. degree from Humboldt State University. His fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in dozens of online and print publications. His first novel, *Imperfect Solitude*, is forthcoming from Casperian Books in Fall 2010. Visit him at tommahony.net.

MJ Nicholls is a callow manboy clacking out experimental, sometimes amusing, but otherwise awkward fiction in Edinburgh, Scotland. He is currently undergoing creative irrigation. His works have been published in *Gold Dust Magazine*, the *Delinquent* (UK) and *Piker Press* and *New Paradigm* (US).

Linda Sienkiewicz's stories have appeared in *A TWIST OF NOIR*, the Cleis Press anthology *FRENZY*, and other magazines online and in print, and her poetry has been in numerous literary journals. She has an MFA from the University of Southern Maine. This piece is a novel excerpt. She is represented by Maria Carvainis Agency, Inc.

Jennifer Simpson is a student in the MFA/Creative Writing Program at the University of New Mexico where she writes what she calls "very creative mostly non-fiction." Her work has been published in community newspapers as well as in *Practical Welding Today* and *The Fabricator* magazine. She sporadically maintains a personal blog at <http://akajesais.com>. This is her first official foray into fiction.

Elizabeth Skoski holds an MA in English Education from Columbia University, Teachers College and a BA in English from Binghamton University. She currently lives in New York City and is an Associate Editor for *Anderbo.com*. This is her first publication.

Nick Sweet's stories have appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *Forge*, *Offcourse Literary Journal*, *Shelf Life*, *Fertile Source* and issues 117 & 118 of *Evergreen Review*, and another of his stories is due to appear in *Paperskinglassbones* in July 2010. Previous stories of Nick's have appeared in *Cutthroat* (summer 2007) and *Descant* 106, while his novel, *Gemini Games*, received a degree of critical acclaim. He is currently working on a new novel.

Kevin Winter resides in Northern Mississippi with his wife and two dogs. He is the author of several short stories (only one of which involves a trio of mountain climbers, an avalanche, and the ensuing events) and one currently unpublished novel. His works appear or are forthcoming in *Bartleby Snopes*, *The Battered Suitcase*, and *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*. Until the completion of his website, he may be contacted at kswinterrx@yahoo.com.

Dallas Woodburn is the author of two collections of short stories and a forthcoming novel. Her short fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *Arcadia Journal*, *Zahir*, and *The Newport Review*, among others. Currently an MFA student at Purdue University, Dallas has also studied creative writing at the University of Southern California and the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. She is the founder of a nonprofit organization, Write On! For Literacy, that has donated more than 11,000 new books to underprivileged kids. Learn more at <http://www.writeonbooks.org> and <http://dallaswoodburn.blogspot.com/>

Bonnie ZoBell has received an NEA Creative Writing Fellowship, a PEN Syndicated Fiction Award, and the Capricorn Novel Award. Recently included on Wigleaf's 2009 Top 50 list for very short fiction, she has work included or forthcoming in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Night Train*, *Storyglossia*, *American Fiction*, *The Greensboro Review*, *dcomP*, *Rumble*, and *NO--Journal*. She received an MFA from Columbia, teaches at San Diego Mesa College, and can be reached at www.bonniezobell.com.

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Laura Guthrie is a writer, artist, scientist and performer, but not at the same time. She dabbles in drabbles and doodles on dreidels. She resides in Edinburgh, Scotland.

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Matthias Krug is a young writer born amidst the flowing deserts of the Middle East and currently living in Madrid, where he is working on the novel 'Selfishness'. He has written and photographed for prestigious publications across six continents, including literary magazines like *Bartleby Snopes*, *The Furnace Review*, *The Potomac Journal*, *Abode* and *Danse Macabre*. He can be contacted at mkkrug@gmail.com, or visit www.krugwriting.com

Christopher Locke was twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize in poetry. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in such magazines as *The Literary Review*, *Adbusters*, *Southwest Review*, *32 Poems*, *Connecticut Review*, *Alimentum*, *West Branch*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Atlanta Review*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *The Sun*, *Slipstream*, *Agenda*, (U.K.), and twice on National Public Radio's Morning Edition. Chris has received several awards for his poetry, including a 2006 and 2007 Dorothy Sargent Memorial Poetry Prize, and grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, New Hampshire Council on the Arts, and Fundacion Valparaiso (Spain). His four chapbooks of poetry are **The Temple of Many Hands**, (Dead Drunk Dublin Press—2010); **Possessed**, (Main Street Rag, Editor's Choice Award—2005); **Slipping Under Diamond Light**, (Clamp Down Press—2002); and **How To Burn**, (Adastra Press—1995). His first full length collection of poems, **End of American Magic**, is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry (Ireland) in September 2010. Chris lives in New Lebanon, NY with his wife and two daughters and teaches literature and writing at The Darrow School.

Keith Nobert is a photographer in New York City. He is looking forward to attending veterinary school this fall at The University of Pennsylvania where he hopes to merge his two passions.