

Scenic Route

2009-2010



Kansas City Kansas Community College
Literary Magazine



Cover art by Isabeau Stewart-Martin



From the Editor:

This was the first year for *Scenic Route* and I am so proud of this magazine. We didn't have a very large staff but we all came together to put this together for KCKCC.

We wanted the magazine to be a place where students could send their work and be published, perhaps for the first of many times, and I hope we have accomplished that. We wanted this magazine to show the students, faculty, and community what talent and promise KCKCC students have. Most of all, we wanted this magazine to be a place where students could express themselves and be proud of their work.

I'd like to thank everyone for their contributions, not just the writers, although, without your talent we wouldn't have a magazine, but the staff, and especially Tasha Haas, who pushed for this and brought the staff together to create this publication.

I'd like to thank the Humanities Department for sponsoring the magazine and providing this space for young, and some not so young, writers to publish their work.

I'd also like to thank the dedicated staff who worked so hard to put this magazine together: Marcus Briggs Publishing Editor, Isabeau Stewart-Martin Cover Designer and Publishing Editor, and Katy Vavricek Layout Editor.

Once again, thank you to everyone that contributed, including you, the reader. I hope you enjoyed the magazine and will continue to enjoy it for years to come.

Sincerely,
Sarah M Moppin
Editor-In-Chief

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Kansas City Kansas Community College Third Annual Literary Contest

Poetry Winners

First Place: Into the Wilderness

by Donna Wolff

Second Place: The Mobile

by Michael Kelley

Third Place: Fall

by Cynthia Bird

Prose Winners

First Place: In an Instant

by Sarah M. Moppin

Second Place: Life During Wartime

by Brandon Durkes

Third Place: Close the Distance

by Donna Wolff

Honorable Mention

The Drowning of Ricky Talbot

by Max Evans

Into the Wilderness

by Donna Wolff

*A book of verses underneath the bough, a loaf of bread,
a jug of wine and thou, beside me singing in the wilderness
~ Edward FitzGerald*

His hands trace the country of my eager skin, become a cascading waterfall of touch,
they guide me wild, wilder, into the wild grape wilderness—deep
where I am most feminine
He forms me from the love in his eyes, his gaze holds mine every time, my spirit is a bird
but my heart is a willing captive
Fog gathers on towering peaks, magenta sunset mirrors off the glaciated mountains,
everything promises elevation here as the twilight sky unveils its diamond drape
down steep slopes of granite and evergreen shadow
I step from a luminous river, water streaming from my hair and limbs, to find him there
on the bank to receive me, we're cast as one on the anvil of our primitive need
My love is a warrior with one foot in the rapids and the other in a ray of moonlight, his
shoulders are wide, his legs are strong timber, and so I fear no evil, only
his lips can tame mine, I kiss him down to the ache in his marrow
We're the lovers in this verse over a circle of stones learning to build fire, and this
untrammelled forest holds enough mystery to blaze for our lifetimes, and
he sings to me with his wilderness voice while he strums to his unrestrained song as the
woods slowly darken around us
I hear his voice in the wilderness, I hear him calling for me, he calls me—

Night Flower, Pretty as a Willow, Woman

The Mobile

By Michael Kelley

The mobile swings above the crib
Its lullaby rocking the baby to sleep
Yet the overhanging objects cause a quiver in his lip
Eventually bringing him to weep

He wishes that he could escape
With his little hot wheels cars
But despite crawling every which way
The baby is trapped within the white bars

Forced to look until his eyes are closed
At the star and moon above
A planet green like garden hedgerows
And finally a flower supposedly filled with love

The shooting star passed by gently
Gliding through the night air
But through the good it has brought for many
The baby sees nothing but despair

In the moon, the baby sees himself
Or at least what he wants to become
And like the highest object on a faraway shelf
Slips out of his grasp as the lullaby continues to hum

The green planet confuses the baby boy
Because of the conflicting emotions expressed by the mother
Emphasizing its importance, but using it to buy her toy
The boy watches it pass, as would any other

Finally there is the flower, where love supposedly settles
Even though she smiles at him a lot
The baby can tell by counting the petals
That this flower loves him not

The baby pouts and watches it spin
Wondering why was it placed there
If he is supposed to be held in
How can he reach what seems so fair

If not this mobile, why should he pass
And live in this tiny bedroom
Will he ever leave the bottle, only to reach for a glass
With all this uncertainty, is his childhood doomed

Of course, the baby doesn't understand everything
Although he wishes now he hadn't walked
Now his parents think he can do anything
And are surprised he hasn't already started to talk

Yet despite all this, they still refuse
To let their baby touch the mobile
So why do they think the boy's pulling a ruse
When he never wants to smile

The mobile swings above the crib
The lullaby rocking the baby to sleep
Yet the only time he may ever be able to touch it
Is within the confines of his own dreams.



Fall

By Cynthia Bird

Fall bring me a quiet afternoon
Wind echo the noise of dry crackling leaves under my feet
Sun bring fire to the tree tops of autumn
Morning remind the earth of the stillness to come in winter's slumber
Stars remember the summer's sultry heat
Moon guide us through the stillness
Stone teach us patience until spring.

In an Instant

By Sarah M. Moppin

Chapter 1

Ella was married.

At sixteen her parents and brother-in-law, James Prescott, decided Ella would fill her deceased sister, Sophia's, shoes as mother to four-year-old Charity. Sophia had passed six months before while giving birth to her second child, a long awaited boy, who survived her by only a few hours. After Sophia's death Ella barely ate for weeks and had only recently begun sleeping through the night. She'd heard her parents whispering at night about Charity and how she needed a mother; Ella knew it was common for a man to marry one of his late wife's sisters, but since she was in mourning, she'd thought they would never consider her. She'd been wrong.

Yesterday, Ella had gone down to breakfast to find James at the table with her parents. Ella greeted James with a murmur, assuming he was merely visiting, apparently without his daughter since she wasn't at the table. Slightly off-balance because of James' presence at the table, she hadn't seen him since her sister's funeral, Ella picked at her food and halfway listened to the conversation between her parents and James. They spoke of James' business and Ella's mind turned toward her sister. As her mind skimmed across memories of Sophia: walking in the garden as children, shopping for Charity's frocks, talking late at night, Ella's ears perked at the mention of marriage.

Confused, Ella looked up and asked, "Are you getting married again?" James didn't answer, he only looked at her parents, her father looked at her mother, and her mother looked at her. Before her mother even spoke dread settled over Ella like the weight of a wet cloak.

"Ella," her mother began, "James feels that it's time he remarried."

"Oh, yes, I suppose Charity needs a mother." Ella responded. No one spoke so she awkwardly continued. "A young girl would be lost without a mother to guide her."

"We're so glad you agree." Her mother answered chipper and breathless, almost too happy about Ella's answer. "We've decided that even though you're still in mourning you should be a mother to Charity."

Ella, numb, waited for the shock and disbelief to hit her, but it never did.

"Ella, I know this is sudden, but you know Charity needs a mother, and you're the best choice. If she can't have, Sophia," her mother paused, as if pained to say her name, "then she can have you." Her mother rose and came around the table and sat next to her. "You would have been out of mourning and looking for a husband soon, and James is a good man."

Sophia had been seven years older than Ella was. Ella had looked up to her, mimicking everything she did; everyone said they were just alike. Sophia had been quiet and complacent, so Ella was quiet and complacent, even when it was difficult. When James had proposed to Sophia, despite the fact that he was nearly a decade older than she was, she'd said that he was just the kind of man Mother and Father would have wanted for her. She'd said nothing of loving him, but Ella had seen the way Sophia's eyes had shown when she'd talked of James. She'd been so excited to be a mother. Ella had watched the way Sophia was with Charity, loving, affectionate, the way their own mother hadn't been, and Ella knew she wanted to be the same kind of mother. She knew she could be to Charity.

"Yes, Mother." She heard her own voice, not even realizing she'd spoken. Her mother rose and went back to her seat.

Her father finally spoke, “We’ve decided the wedding should be as soon as possible, James has arranged the ceremony at the church; you will leave for his home after the ceremony.” Her father turned back to his food.

Ella looked at James, expecting a smile or any sort of sign that he was her future husband but he merely looked at his plate. He looked a lot older than she remembered. He was nearly seventeen years her senior, but he’d always seemed young before. Now he had gray in his hair and lines on his forehead. Her father looked at her, and then spoke. “You’ll make a fine wife and mother, Ella. We’re sending your dowry with you, and James has agreed to give you pen money every month. No need for you to worry about anything, we’ve talked it all out and everything is settled.”

Everything was settled except the fact that Ella didn’t want to marry James. Ella looked at him again. He wasn’t the kind of man she wanted. He was cold, almost calculating. He was Vice President of a bank, with the promise of President someday. The bank was all he’d ever talked about. He was too old for her. She wanted someone closer to her own age, someone smart, funny, and attractive. The thought of even kissing James, much less, letting him touch her, caused her stomach to tighten.

“When is the ceremony?” Ella asked no one in particular.

“Why, it’s today.” Her mother answered as if Ella should have known she was to be a wife and mother before days end.

“Today? But I don’t even have a wedding dress, I haven’t told any of my friends. Who will be at the wedding?”

“You’re father and I will be there to witness it. You can wear your new dark green dress. There is no need for a big ceremony. You need to leave at once and get home to Charity. She needs someone and James needs a wife. You can write to your friends.” Her mother pushed her chair back and her thin form up and toward the door. She stopped at the threshold and turned to Ella. “It is your duty to be a mother to Charity and wife to James. I had hoped you would be wise enough to understand that you are not a child anymore. You have responsibilities like the rest of us.” With that, her mother swept from the room.

Ella sat stunned. She tried to take a bite of the food on her plate but she found it had lost all flavor. The ceremony would be today. Today. She repeated it to herself over and over. She thought of her friends, she’d barely seen them while she was in deep mourning, but now that she was only in half-mourning they could visit. She’d been expecting a few friends for tea, but she would invite them to a wedding instead. She had to go; Charity needed her.

She looked from James to her father. Neither of them would look at her. “Well, that is certainly faster than I would have thought, but James, I’ll be your wife and a mother to Charity.” He looked at her and she could see something in his eyes, pain maybe. “If you will excuse me I need to pack my things and send notes to my friends. Please send a maid up to help me prepare for the ceremony whenever you are ready.” Ella set her napkin on the table, stood, and left the room on numb legs.

She wasn’t sure how she made it to her room but she did. She drew her trunk from its place at the foot of her bed and began packing all her belongings into it. She expected the day she packed to leave home she would cry. But as she packed her childhood mementos, her china dolls, her first sampler, and a music box, she didn’t tear once. Her eyes felt almost too dry. She glanced around her room with its soft hues of blue and gold set against maple wood. She’d picked the colors herself when she’d moved from the nursery. Sophia’s room at James’ house was done in pinks and browns.

At some point Karen appeared to help her pack, brushing Ella’s hands away, and taking over. Ella sat at her vanity, sent a few notes to her friends, telling them of the wedding at noon, and then she took down her long chestnut braid, and began brushing it. She brushed methodically until Karen came over and began arranging her hair into a twist at the back. Soon she found her self made-up and in her best dress,

dark green with black velvet trimming and a black velvet hat with a violet plume in the side. She never focused on herself in the mirror just sat, even after she was dressed. When Karen murmured the time, she stood and made her way to the door and downstairs.

At the foot of the stairs, she realized she hadn't spoken a word to Karen. Ella looked for her but neither Karen nor the other servants were in sight. James came into the foyer from the parlor.

"Good. I thought I would have to come fetch you. I see you're ready. You'll be taking my carriage to the church." James draped her fur-lined cloak over her shoulders, handed her her muff, grasped her elbow, and led her to his carriage outside. He helped her into the carriage then went back to the house. Soon she heard her trunk being loaded. James didn't reenter the carriage. Instead, when the door swung open her mother climbed in.

"I wanted to talk to you about your wifely duties." Her mother settled next to her, her sharp elbow digging Ella in the side. There was plenty of room on the bench seat but her mother pressed her sharp form against Ella. As if trying to be close to Ella for the last moments before Ella moved, but Ella had her doubts. Her mother had never been affectionate, never told her daughters a single affectionate word. Ella stared out the window, at the house wishing it weren't winter; maybe if there were sun or some bit of green she would feel better about the change in her circumstances.

The house she'd grown up in was pieced together before she was born from a farmhouse. The house was originally four rooms, but her father had constructed new wings and a second floor over the original structure until an imposing brick structure sat where a clapboard farmhouse had once stood. The yard was immaculate thanks to their gardener. He'd also constructed a meandering garden in the back with a fishpond and a few fountains. She'd spent hours of her childhood in the gazebo at the back of the garden playing. She'd imagined she was a princess trapped in the woods where she made friends with the animals and taught them to talk to her. The sunny image of the garden faded and in its place was the structure of the house, the last time she would see it, at least for a while.

The short ride from the church was filled by her mother's embarrassing explanation about what happened between a man and wife.

"Ella, I know your sister may have told you some about the wedding night, but I wanted to assure you that it's nothing to worry about. Every man expects his wife to be available to him when he comes to her. James will expect you to accept him without a fuss. A woman should lie there and let her husband take his pleasure. Just close your eyes and think of something pleasant. It will hurt, at least at first. Eventually, though, the pain will fade when your body accepts the act."

With the advice to lie there patiently while James took his pleasure in her ears, her mother began lecturing on how to be a good mother. By the time they pulled up in front of the doors to the church bile was crawling up Ella's throat and knots were tightening her belly. Her tension eased a little when she saw three of her friends standing in the doorway. She smiled at them as she climbed from the carriage. Her father was waiting to guide her inside.

"Ella," her best friend Alice called from the church door. "Ella, we were so surprised to get your note. I can't believe you're getting married. You never said anything."

Ella just smiled at them, not wanting to say she didn't know herself. "I know. We just planned it so fast. I'm sorry I didn't tell you." Her father cleared his throat. "Well, I guess we're starting." Ella waited while her friends and mother sat in the pews. They were the only guests. James waited at the end of the church. Ella's stomach tightened even more.

The ceremony took less time than the drive to the church. James gave her a chaste peck on the cheek, accepted her father's handshake while her mother hugged her, and cried on her shoulder. Her friends crowded around saying the polite platitudes, but she could tell they thought the situation was

strange. They wouldn't look her in the eye and they kept shooting sidelong glances at her new husband.

James drew her away and she signed the certificate and they were off to James's carriage, this time James joined her. They were rolling away when she realized she hadn't even told her parents or friends good-bye. Hadn't hugged her father nor kissed her mother. She twisted to see out the window but a cold November rain had started to fall and obscured her view, but she didn't see anyone in the churchyard watching her roll away.

This wasn't how Ella wanted to be married. She'd been only eleven when Sophia married James, but she remembered the ceremony well. Her sister had worn a white dress and carried white lilies. The scent of lilies danced around her while she walked down the aisle. Sophia had been happy. She'd practically glowed with it. Ella remembered what James looked like as well. He'd been smiling the whole time, beaming at her sister. He didn't once take his eyes off of her.

Her wedding had been hurried and James had only touched her when he'd put the ring on her finger and placed a kiss on her cheek. There were no flowers; she didn't have a bouquet of mums or poinsettias. The feeling in the church had been one of coldness and shock, not love and happiness. It was not the romantic setting Ella had wanted, but it was too late now. She was married. Ella kept repeating that to herself; maybe if she said it enough times she would believe it. The carriage kept rolling until they were beyond town and headed to her new home three hours away. The foot warmer which had barely penetrated the chill in Ella's feet before they started the journey was now doing nothing to keep the cold out of the carriage. She stared out the window huddled in her fur cloak cursing herself for not wearing one more pair of wool stockings.

"You're cold." Ella turned to the voice; James was looking at her as if he were seeing her for the first time today. He'd stared over her head at the wedding. He didn't wait for her to answer, what really hadn't been a question in the first place; he just pulled another fur from under the opposite seat and spread it across her lap. "Don't worry," James said, "Mrs. Plumm will have a nice fire when we reach the house. She'll make sure you're comfortable."

Ella murmured her thanks and went back to looking out her window. *She'll make sure you're comfortable.* The words echoed in her head, why had he left it to someone else to make sure she was comfortable?

"I want you to know," James stopped and cleared his throat. Ella turned to face him again. He looked uncomfortable, strained, and tense. "I want you to know that I loved your sister. And I love my daughter."

Ella didn't say anything. She knew he'd cared for Sophia, he'd seemed softer when they were first married, but she hadn't seen him soft since then. The cold must have made her brain fuzzy because she couldn't tell if she was supposed to respond to his statement or not. He took the choice from her.

"I provided a good home for your sister. We have several servants and I will do the same for you. Mrs. Plumm, you remember, is the housekeeper and cook, there are three maids, two downstairs and one upstairs; she'll act as your lady's maid. There is the driver, Mr. Plumm, and he is also the butler. There is also Mr. Gervarse, the gardener. We have all the comforts you could want.

"All I want you to do is run the house, raise Charity, and be a good wife. You need not want for a thing. When our period of mourning is over you're welcome to entertain at your leisure. Charity, of course, will begin school with a governess in a year but until then I leave it up to you to handle her. I've had a few nurses in the past few months. I assume now that you're here we will not need one of those anymore." James looked at Ella pointedly. Ella assumed he was telling her he'd better not be wrong that she could be a mother to Charity.

“Those are your duties. Sophia...Sophia and I shared a suit of rooms; you and I will do the same. I expect that Charity will be more comfortable now that you’ll be there. She’s been acting out.”

“I expect that’s normal when a child loses a parent.” Ella answered softly.

“Yes, well. I believe that Sophia indulged her too often. I believe what she needs is discipline. I expect you to implement that. When she does something wrong she should be punished, not coddled. I want her to learn to be a great lady, and I’m sure her mother would have done that; I expect you can as well. She needs a firm hand.” James turned back to the window.

Ella stared at him for a moment. She felt like an army sergeant not a wife or mother. She felt her eyes burning for the first time today and swallowed hard. Not here. Later, in the privacy of her room, she would give in to the emotions clawing at her, but until then she would sit docile and keep her feelings to herself. That was all she had left now. What she felt no one could take away. She might have lost some of her dreams today, some of her freedom, and maybe some of herself, but she wouldn’t lose how she felt. She knew he was wrong about how to raise Charity. She knew exactly what that child needed, and she was beginning to doubt James was capable of the emotion.

Chapter 2

James glanced at his new wife; Ella didn’t look like a bride. When he’d married Sophia, she’d been all smiles, she looked at him with adoration, and he knew that that look was mirrored with his own features. James had always known how Sophia felt, her face read like a book, but the girl who sat next to him now was an enigma. She showed nothing on her face, no emotion, no feeling, no reaction. When her parents told her she was to be a wife and mother by the end of the day she didn’t react. He expected a smile, but he saw nothing. Ella did as she was told; Sophia did as she was told as well, but usually because she agreed with his way of thinking. Did Ella agree with him, or not?

James looked at his new wife; his new wife was looking out the window, not at him. He had no idea what she was thinking; he’d always known what Sophia thought, and if he didn’t know she would tell him what she was thinking, which usually agreed with what he was thinking.

The coach was cold, winter was coming in full force, but his new bride didn’t even shiver. Any other girl would have been complaining, even her sister had complained, but Ella stared out the window not looking at him.

“Ella?”

Ella turned and looked at him.

“Are you too cold? There’s another blanket under the other seat.”

She blinked at him, for a moment looking owl-like before her features went blank again. “No, I’m fine, thank you.” She looked at him for another moment, as if considering him, and then turned back to the window.

James opened his mouth to say something else, anything to end the silence in the carriage, but he couldn’t think of anything to say to the girl sitting next to him. Instead, he closed his mouth and turned back to his own window. Sophia. Sophia had been more than he’d hoped for when he’d married her. She really loved him, and he loved her back, and they had a beautiful daughter. But Sophia was gone, as was his son. For the past six months he’d tried to raise his daughter, but everything he did, trying to comfort her like Sophia did, failed. Charity was worse now than right after Sophia died.

Coddling didn’t work. Coddling had turned his daughter into a screaming baby again, and that was the last thing he wanted. Charity needed to be a great lady; Sophia had been a great lady, regal and poised, and he wanted his daughter to be like her mother. They had the same parents,

Ella should be just like Sophia, and she should mother just like Sophia. He hoped she would open up to him, and be a great mother, as he needed her to be.

Hours later, half-frozen, and decidedly miserable, Ella descended from the oppressive carriage in front of her new house. It loomed large before her, bigger and more intimidating than she remembered it being. The three-story structure was brick and Italian in style. Despite winter's coming, it had a manicured lawn and she knew there was a garden hidden in the back. She just stood staring up until James took her elbow and steered her into the house.

Once inside, a maid appeared instantly and took her wrap and muff. She looked around expecting to see Charity peeking over the banister of the stairs or around one of the corners as she'd always done when Ella came to visit before. But the hall was empty; Charity was nowhere in sight. She also noticed the lack of servants except the maid. She would have expected them to be lined up to meet her, but they were all absent. Her trunks, she assumed, had been unloaded and taken up the back stairs by the driver, but where was everyone else?

She stood in the entrance hall. The hall led away from her straight to a door she knew led to the kitchen. Off that hall, a parlor, drawing room, dining room, and pantry. She also knew that behind the stairs that disappeared into the ceiling leading to the family's rooms was the library with its own entrance, so James could come and go undisturbed.

Mrs. Plumm came rushing from the kitchen. "Mrs. Prescott, I am so sorry I wasn't here to greet you. Welcome home."

The name, Mrs. Prescott, struck Ella. She almost turned and looked for her sister. She schooled her shocked features before James could notice. Ella remembered Mrs. Plumm. She was warm and welcoming. A mother. Ella forced a smile to her face, the manners that had been drilled into her all her life taking over.

"Mrs. Plumm." Ella felt her smile broaden into a real one as she approached the housekeeper. Mrs. Plumm's hair was pulled back under a mobcap, and there was some flour dusting her round form under her black dress outside her white apron. She carried the smell of the kitchen, cinnamon, herbs, and cookies. "Don't worry about a thing. It's good to see you again. The trip was a bit long, the roads were muddy—"

James interrupted. "Mrs. Plumm, I am sure Mrs. Prescott would like to be shown her rooms."

Ella looked back at James. He was looking over the top of Mrs. Plumm's head, as he had with Ella at the church. Something clicked in Ella's subconscious, before she could explore it, he steered her towards the stairs. Mrs. Plumm toddled off down the hallway. James practically pushed Ella up the stairs. There was pressure behind her elbow. He wasn't exactly pushing her, but had she resisted she was sure he would have propelled her forward. Besides, no one refused James, at least Ella had never seen anyone do it. Up the stairs there were paintings decorating the wall. Ella knew they were members of James' family, and all men.

Once upstairs, James stopped. They were standing at the intersection of halls and rooms. At the head of the stairs was a small sitting room. There was a window instead of a wall facing the stairs, which the occupants could open or close for privacy. From there a hallway led to the family's suit and the guestrooms. Down the hall in the opposite direction, past the sitting room were the nursery suit and the servants' stairs. The third floor was servants' rooms.

Ella had been through the house before, but as she looked around at the gleaming wood, oriental carpets, and sparkling chandeliers she realized that this was her home. She wouldn't be

staying in a guest room she would be in Sophia's room. She had taken Sophia's place. James turned her toward her room.

"This is our suite. The sitting room off the hall separates the bedrooms. The left is yours and mine is to the right." He let go of her arm and opened her bedroom door.

Ella stepped through the doorway. The room looked the same, clean and tidy, colored in pinks, Sophia's. Ella felt a tightening in her chest as she stepped in. She expected it to smell like Sophia, like the delicate fragrance, she wore, but instead the room smelled of beeswax and starch. Ella glanced around. Her trunk had been brought up and set at the foot of the bed. There were two doors leading from the room. One was a closet and one was a washroom.

James spoke from the doorway. "Cathy will be up soon to help you unpack and change. Given the long journey today, I suggest you rest. I'll have Mrs. Plumm send up a tray. There is no need for you to do anything today. Charity has her nurse until tomorrow. I will see you tonight." With that, James left and shut the door behind him.

Ella stared at the door. Silence thundered in the room. The fireplace adjacent to the bed was crackling, but that was the only sound in the room. Ella sat down on the bed and stared at the fire. Soon the door creaked open.

"Mrs. Prescott? I'm Cathy." Ella looked over, again surprised to hear herself called Mrs. Prescott, to see a girl about her age in a servant's uniform.

"I know. I remember. You were Sophia's maid as well." Ella didn't move from the bed.

"I'll help you undress Ma'am; you'll want to rest after today." Ella stood and let Cathy help her out of her gown and strip to her chemise. Ella crawled onto the bed and slipped under the counterpane, suddenly very tired. Cathy pulled the curtains leaving Ella in the dark. Ella heard her moving about the room putting her things away. Despite her exhaustion, Ella couldn't seem to fall asleep. Her eyes began to burn as she stared at the dark curtains enclosing the bed, soon she felt tears begin, and for the first time today, the true reality of her situation hit her, and she gave in to the emotions she hadn't let herself feel.

"Ma'am?"

Ella didn't know when she fell asleep or how long she'd slept. Cathy pulled the curtain back letting the light from the fire and the lamps pour onto the bed. Ella sat up, her head was pounding, and her throat felt swollen and achy. "Yes, Cathy."

"Mrs. Plumm sent a tray up for you. She thought you might be hungry. Mr. Prescott also told me to tell you he went out, but that he would be back tonight." Cathy turned away from the bed and disappeared. Soon, Cathy had pulled all the curtains back to the posts illuminating the entire bed. Ella sat in the middle of luxury: velvet curtains, silk wallpaper, rich fabrics, and crystals on the chandelier on the ceiling. Her material life had improved, not that she'd grown up poor. Her parents were wealthy, but not nearly as wealthy as James was. She might be the mistress of a mansion with a ballroom large enough for fifty, but she felt like she'd lost everything.

Ella left the bed, the floor chilly beneath her feet, despite the fire. For the first time she noticed the winter wind howled against the windows. The curtains were drawn against the chill, but the cold still seeped in. Ella noticed a velvet robe resting at the end of the bed; it was Sophia's. She picked it up, her fingers running along the soft material. It was rose colored. She took a deep breath and put the robe on. It had been cleaned, she could tell; it didn't smell like her sister.

There was a small table in the corner flanked by windows. On the table was a silver tray and cover. Ella

padded over to it. She lifted the cover, steam rose from the plate. Roasted chicken with herbs, and sausage and chestnut stuffing. There was also dish of peaches and bread and a hunk of cheese. The steam brought the spicy fragrance of the stuffing and the yeasty smell of the bread to Ella, and her mouth began to water and her stomach rumbled.

Ella sat at the table watching as Cathy straightened the bed. She noticed her trunk was missing and her personal things had been set on the vanity. She ate with gusto, polishing off the meal in record time. After, she felt sleepy again, but refused to crawl back into bed. The clock on the wall read 8:00. Realizing she's spent most of the evening sleeping, she was overcome with the urge to see Charity. "Cathy?" Ella covered her empty dishes with the cover. "Where is Charity? Is she in the nursery, sleeping? Eating?"

"Ma'am, Miss Norris, put her to bed just a little while ago I would guess. She usually puts her to bed around now. Do you want me to send for her?"

Ella didn't want to bring Charity to her room as if she were being reviewed, immediately she decided to go to the nursery instead. "No. I think I'll go there. Would you help me put on the gray lawn. No, No corset."

Ella made her way down the hall toward the nursery. She could hear the nurse talking as she approached the nursery. The door from the schoolroom was open into Charity's room. A dim light from the fireplace flitted across the parquet floor as Ella approached.

"You need to go back to sleep. I know but little girls need sleep if they want to grow up to be pretty ladies," the nurse whispered.

Ella peered around the door. The nurse was standing over the brass bed arms crossed. Charity was curled on her side away from the door, facing the fire. Ella could hear her whimpering. Ella hadn't made a noise, but the nurse must have sensed her presence because she looked over at her. She ducked her head immediately and walked toward Ella, backing her into the schoolroom shutting the bedroom door behind her.

"Ma'am. Miss Charity is sleeping. I don't think she should be disturbed." The nurse, a woman about forty years of age was in her dark gray, high-collared uniform. Her hair was pulled back, not a hair out of place; a lace cap covered her crown. Her face, not one someone would classify as pretty, was pinched and lined. "I'll bring her to your room in the morning."

Ella stared at the woman. The nurse had to know that Ella was the new mistress of the house. How she could deny Ella the right to see Charity shocked Ella into silence for a moment. The woman's eyes were cold, and mocking, a little glint of a smile, although no smile showed around her pursed mouth. "No." Ella, as she had earlier that day, heard herself speak before she knew what was coming out of her mouth. "No, you won't. I am going to see her now. You're dismissed." Ella swept around the woman's stunned form and through the nursery door.

"Charity," Ella called toward the bed, she could still hear Charity whimpering. "Sweetie? What's the matter?"

Charity sat up in bed. "Aunt Ella!" She crawled out from under the covers and toward Ella. Ella sat at the foot of the bed as the child crawled into her lap, curled in a little ball. Her brown curls were fuzzy from lying down and the stray hairs brushed Ella's chin. She brushed the child's hair away from her face and off of Charity's. She felt the tears on the little girl's face and the heat from her crying. Charity didn't say anything else; she just wrapped her little arms around Ella and sobbed into her chest.

"Charity, what's the matter? Why are you crying?" Ella rocked Charity on her lap, cuddling her, brushing her hair with her hand.

“I miss Mama.” Charity’s little voice was muffled against Ella’s dress.

“I know. I miss her too. Did you have a dream about her?” Ella asked her shifting the girl and carrying her to the rocking chair in front of the fire. She felt Charity nod against her chest.

“I woke up and Miss Norris was there telling me not to scream. I told her I wanted Mama, but she said Mama was gone and I couldn’t. I just want to see Mama.” Charity began to cry again.

“Mama went to heaven. Remember? I know you miss her, but she is in heaven with your baby brother, taking care of him.” Ella paused considering how to tell Charity that she was her new stepmother. “But you don’t need to be scared, or lonely, anymore because I’m going to live here now. I am going to take care of you.”

Charity sat up and turned to look at Ella. “You’re going to stay here? I can see you everyday?” Charity smiled the quick reversal from crying to smiling, not unusual for a child. Charity’s blue eyes shifted from Ella to the door. “Will Miss Norris still be here?” Charity whispered.

Ella smiled and cuddled Charity back against her chest and began rocking her. “No sweetie. Miss Norris will be gone in the morning. I’ll be taking of you. There’s nothing for you to worry about.” Ella continued to rock Charity. Soon the child fell asleep in her arms. Ella continued to rock staring at the fire, feeling Charity breathe and lightly snore against her.

Ella opened her eyes when she heard James say her name. She turned her head to look at the door. James stood in the doorway arms crossed. “Ella, what are you doing, it’s nearly midnight.”

“James, I came to see Charity and she was upset. I was talking to her and she fell asleep, then I fell asleep.” Ella didn’t realize that it was the longest sentence she’d spoken to James all day.

“Put her to bed.” James spoke harshly then left the nursery.

Ella stood and gently laid Charity beneath the covers. She smoothed her hair one last time before leaving the nursery. She followed James to the hallway, but he didn’t stop. Cathy was in the hall, discreetly off to the side. Ella spoke to her, instructing her to stay in Charity’s room that night. Ella followed James down the hall to their suite. He was waiting in the sitting room for her.

“I told you that Charity needed to be disciplined, not coddled. I expected you to do as I asked. I understand that until now you have always been her aunt, it was never your job to discipline her, but now it is. She needs structure and discipline.” James paused, but before Ella could speak, he continued. “Charity has bad dreams, but I instructed Miss Norris to handle them. She will be fine, if we just let her scream. If not, she will grow up nervous and terrified.”

“James, I understand that, but she was upset. She misses Sophia and I only wanted to reassure her that I will be here from now on.” Ella didn’t mention she had no intention of letting Charity scream all night when she had nightmares. “I will be disciplining her as needed, of that you have no need to worry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep with her on my lap, but it’s been such a long day that I must have drifted off. It won’t happen again.” Ella ducked her head, staring at the floor, not the least bit sorry.

James didn’t speak for a moment, he didn’t even move. He eventually sighed then spoke, “I know it’s been a long day. I forgive you. I suggest you go to bed.” James turned and strode to his own room. Ella moved slowly to hers.

The lamps had been turned down and the fire had burned low, the cold outside lending a chill to the room. She added wood to the fire and stirred the flames back to life. Her dress buttoned down the front, allowing her to undress without Cathy’s help. She was standing in front

of the fire fingering her braid when she heard the door to her room open. She knew it wasn't Cathy; this was her wedding night.

James came up behind her. She didn't move, but her breathing changed. Her mother's explanation of the marital act began running through her mind. Ella swallowed hard, waiting for James to touch her. But he didn't he just stood behind her; Ella could hear him breathing. Eventually he spoke. "Come to bed." It wasn't the soft request Ella would have imagined she'd hear from her husband on her wedding night, but more of a command.

Ella turned toward the bed walking to it, her limbs jerky, and stiff. She crawled beneath the covers, eyes closed. She heard the curtains swish shut around the bed, shutting her in darkness, beneath her lids the light from the fire extinguished. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head away as she felt James join her in the bed. He turned to her beneath the covers and began to pull her chemise up. Ella took deep breathes. He didn't kiss her as she expected, but he did begin touching her in ways she hadn't imagined.

It was over faster than she thought it would be. It had been painful like her mother said. James left the bed and room as soon as it was over, without a word to her. Ella, cheeks flaming, left the bed as well and washed in the washroom. In a fresh chemise, her old one in the fireplace, she climbed beneath the covers pushing the soiled sheet away, curling on the bare mattress. She left the curtain facing the fire open, staring at the flames and for the second time that day let her emotions take over, soaking her pillow before falling asleep, lonelier than she'd ever been.

Life During Wartime

A Novel Excerpt

By Brandon Durkes

ONE

I

Despite the fact that in the past three days I've witnessed at least 400 people die, I'm feeling extremely positive. I guess Lithium will do that for you.

"Sullivan, get your ass down!"

I do as ordered; you kind of have to in the Army. And now, crouched down, hiding behind what I'm guessing used to be a desk, I wait for the all clear. Lord knows when it will actually happen, but I'm ok with the wait. It gives me time to think. And on this particular Saturday, January 5, 2030, I think back to why I am in this pickle of a situation.

The balance shifted on January 20th, 2025. After Harrison won... I mean, you know about all the fear-mongering, all the insanity, the bullshit that was thrown around during the campaign... Well, turns out, sometimes the craziest things said turn out to be the truest.

But that's not why I'm here. I could give a damn about the former United States of America. No, I'm not a spy for the Chinese, nor a saboteur of any design. I just think about the circumstances under which I was brought into Echo Squadron. Unfortunately, whilst remembering the crazy turn of events, to my left, something explodes.

"Sullivan! Get down!"

Sullivan. That's what they call me. That's what I respond to. That's what my tags say. I suppose that's who I am. Thanks to the Captain's orders, my new position shields me from the blast. Of course, the Chinese have different designs, as another bomb explodes. I'd say my superior armaments would keep me safe, but... Well, right below my barcode is a small imprint reading "Made in China"...

My ears have decided to take on a slap-echo; fitting, considering my vision has turned strobe light-esque, making it all play out like some sort of movie missing every other frame. Pvt. Tolbert running. Blackness. Private Tolbert falling. Blackness. Private Tolbert dying. Blackness. The more I see, the more I believe this director has blatantly ripped off Saving Private Ryan. Bastard. But that's beside the point, the point being I think I got hit by something. Of course, it could be a bad cocktail of the MRE and the Chinese river water. Either way, I'm useless right now. Captain Sargent tells me to get somewhere safe. Ha, Cpt. Sargent. In the six months I've worked with him, I never thought of how funny his name is.

"Fall back! I repeat, fall back!" Sargent yells, before kneeling beside me. "Sullivan, can you walk?"

"Why not..." I say, trying to stand, "trying" being the key word. I quickly fall back. "Uh, I guess not, Cap."

He shakes his bald head, and reaches over to the body of another member of the battalion, retrieving bandages, and a pair of tweezers. I think that guy was Paul Jones. I can't tell, though, his faces being gone

and all. While I ponder the people who are eventually going to have to clean up this mess, Sarge goes to work on my leg. Shrapnel. Lots of it.

“Goddammit, Sully...” Sarge says.

I don’t think he was really mad at me; I think he was mad at my leg and the shrapnel. But then again, he would have sounded ridiculous had he said “Goddammit, Sully’s leg and the shrapnel within...” And with a name like Captain Charles Sargent, you can’t afford to be made a fool.

In a record one minute, 34 seconds, my wound is dressed, a splint on either side. Sargent lends me support on my left side as I’m made to stand. He hands me his side arm.

“You see anything move, shoot it. I’ll get us out of here,” He says, confidently, popping a piece of gum into his mouth. I hope this crazy bastard isn’t lying to me.

II

In a hallway in a house on 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Steve Jacobs walks with a slow gate. At the end of this hallway is a room where a man sits in a leather chair, eyeing a fireplace, crackling orange.

Before Steve has a chance to say anything, he stops and stares at the man in the chair. He remembers a short four years ago, when the man was more than a man: a beacon, a symbol of hope to come after years of corruption and greed. A good, decent man. He went to church every Sunday. He helped those in need. He bestowed in his children a sense of pride in their country, a sense of dignity in the face of adversity, a sense of hope in the darkest of hours.

But that man no longer sits in the chair. No, now he is an empty shell, a wrapper of a prize long discarded. His eyes, once an alarming brown have turned dull, sunken and empty. The full head of thick brown hair was now a sea of thinning grey. In his left hand, a cigarette burned slowly; a cigarette that hadn’t been there for 10 years. And he just gazed upon the dying fire, watching its lustrous wild flames turn to embers. Steve Jacobs breathes in to speak, but can’t muster the words necessary.

“Hello, Steve,” the man says, breaking the cold silence.

“Mr. President...”

“I know, Steve. I have a television,”

“We’re sorry, sir.”

“Can’t win ‘em all, can ya?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Sit down, Steve. Have a drink with me,” He insists.

The President walks to his desk, retrieving a crystal bottle, and two glasses. After pouring, he hands one off, and resumes his position. Steve Jacobs sits as he was asked. Saying nothing, he looks at the glass in his hand, and waits. Finally, the silence is broken.

“What did we do wrong, Steve?”

He looks at the other chair, eyes wide.

“I... I don’t know, sir.”

“Nor do I.”

The President takes a strong swallow, before continuing.

“This country is effectively over. Nothing will be the same again,” He says, finishing his drink. “The dreams we had, the dreams of our forefathers... of our children, gone.”

Steve Jacobs has been sober for three years. And now, as he looks at the man in front of him, the man of vision and hope broken to pieces, he takes a sip. High-end scotch. Before he has a chance to meet the demon inside of him, the phone rings.

"Sir, that will be Senat- President-Elect Harrisson," Steve says.

"I know."

He sits, and lets it ring.

"Sir, I-"

"Don't, Steve. Not now."

Steve Jacobs puts the glass down, and stands.

"Sir, it's in poor taste. Please answer the phone."

"Let me ask you something, Steve. Who do you blame in a situation like this?"

Steve Jacobs stands quiet for a moment before the continuing ring of the phone forces his hand.

"Sir, I understand how you must be feeling, but please, answer the phone."

"Do you blame the people, the public, waiting to hear something different, no matter what it is? Or do you blame the man who told them that something?"

"Al, come on. You're acting like a child."

"But neither of those are the answer, Steve. The answer is yourself, or me, rather. Lord knows we made mistakes. But they were the choices that had to be made, the choices they chose us to make."

"Al, it's a three minute conversation, please."

"Ya know, I almost think the office of President was designed as a cruel joke. Imagine, General George Washington, a war hero, coming home after battle, and being awarded the title of President... beginning the longest running practical joke of all time."

He takes a drag of the cigarette, before continuing.

"We're set up for failure, Steve. As human beings, we're savage creatures. Despite years of putting ourselves above the wolves, we always revert to what we truly are. And when the leader can't provide exactly what the pack wants, he is cast aside, whether it was right or wrong... The public wants what the public wants."

The man sits, eyeing the fire in the wall, retrieving the glass Steve Jacobs sat down, consuming its contents.

"President Harris, you're live in 15 minutes," an aid announces from the doorway.

"Thanks, Greg, he'll be out in a moment," Steve Jacobs says, not sure if he just lied to the young man.

"Come on, Al. Let's get out there, I've got your speech right here."

The President takes the paper, and glances over it.

"Thank you, Steve. That will be all."

Steve Jacobs walks to the doorway, before turning around.

"We'll be in the Rose Garden, Al."

Steve Jacobs watches the man wave him away. He shuts the doors, and starts his long walk to the outside. But before he can reach the final door, there is a single gunshot.

The next morning, the headline read "President Alvin Patrick, May 5, 1979-November 5th, 2024"

III

Standing in the elevator alone is never fun. This problem, of course, is exacerbated when you're on your way to the top floor of a newspaper office on your day off to get your ass reamed for taking a photograph in an area you're not allowed to take photographs in a certain building in D.C..

"You stupid, dumb ass, mother fucker..."

My inner monologue uses colorful language when upset. And upset it is. I wondered what I could have done differently. Maybe the picture was too graphic. Granted, I didn't have much time to set it up, get proper lighting, frame the shot in any way, but then again, maybe I could have. Maybe the caption shouldn't have said "President Alvin Patrick murdered?" So many other ways I could have phrased that. But, then again, it was a stop the presses moment and I had to think on my feet. No, I did everything I could. Didn't I? Yeah. Yeah, I did. And besides, even if I didn't, it's not like I can change them now.

"Logan, get your ass in here right now, goddammit!"

Editor-At-Large Glenn Liebowitz. He's not happy. This will be fun.

As I walk by the watering hole, I kill my inner-monologue. Unfortunately, the vibrant conversation that was happening dies as I walk by. Too bad. Eavesdropping is a sort of hobby of mine. And that hobby maybe just cost me a job. Into the office.

"Logan..." Glenn says, throwing the paper at the desk. "You realize this is a problem."

"No, it's journalism. Eye-witness journalism."

"Gonzo-Journalism, Eli. Yellow-Journalism. William Randolph Hearst-Journalism. Muck-raking. Sensationalism," He spits back at me. "How..."

"I was at the press conference," I say. "And it was taking awhile to start, so I meandered off. I made it to what I thought was the bathroom. And then I opened the door. There he was. And I shot the photo."

"So, let me get this straight... You meandered around the most heavily guarded building on the planet, which led you to a door, which, despite the lack of any sign indicating it to be a restroom, you opened with full intention of relieving yourself?"

"Yeah, I did. There didn't seem to be anyone around, so I figured it was alright to look around."

Glenn puts his left hand to his temple, and pops an aspirin.

"My phone has not stopped ringing, Elliott. For the past 13 hours, I have not had a moment of silence."

"Glenn, I'm sorry, but is this not what the paper is for?"

"Fear-mongering?"

"Information. Knowledge."

"It's one thing to question causality, and another to take sides, Eli. You've... Elliott, you are about to become a very important person."

"I just did my job, chief," I say, trying to hide the sweat on my forehead.

"Ha... Yes, you did. You did a fine job."

He stares out of his window. I swallow hard.

"You're fired, Eli. I'm sorry."

IV

Our battalion is dead. All that's left are Cpt. Sargent and me, Pvt. First Class Sullivan. Not that they know that. Nor do we know that.

“Jerky, Sully?”

Sarge extends a Ziploc bag to me, filled with dried meat. I take a piece.

“Well, what do we do now?” I ask him before biting down onto the hickory flavored leather in my hands. Sarge pops another piece of gum into his mouth.

“Well, I don’t know, Private. I suppose right now, we get some rest, and make plans tomorrow, while we’re still presumed dead,” He said, laying back onto a rock, looking at the stars.

“Right. Does your radio work?”

“Nope. Yours?”

I tried to turn it on. Nothing.

“No mas,” I say, tearing another bit of jerky off and chewing it.

“Beautiful, Sullivan. Just beautiful.”

“Should one of us stay awake as look-out?”

“Sully, if they’re coming for us, there will be more of them than you can count, with weapons. I doubt one and a half soldier’s really going to make a difference if they converge. Just go to sleep, and I’ll wake you in the morning.”

I look at him, considering a question about his jerky, but it eludes me as the painkillers take me easily into dreamland, and the same dream I’ve had every night since a gunshot killed two people on 1600 Pennsylvania Ave, in Washington D.C., November 5th, 2024.

Close the Distance

(A memoir)

By Donna Lynn Lash Wolff

I straightened my back and stood tall on my father's behalf as the honor detail from Jones-Lewis VFW Post 4687 came to attention and fired three simultaneous rifle volleys that cracked and echoed off the hillsides that surround the Combs Cemetery on Jumbo Road near Melbourne, Arkansas in IZARD County. The sound of Taps that followed was beautiful on the afternoon of October 10th, 1995. The air was still; the birds held their song so as not to interfere with the music. We stood there together, the minister, my step-mother, Marguerite, my husband and children, my brother, Mark and two of my sisters, Patti and Leslie, beside his casket beneath the black burial tent as the bugler played.

*"Day is done, gone the sun,
From the lake, from the hills,
From the sky.
All is well, safely rest,
God is nigh.*

*Fades the light; And afar
Goeth day, And the stars
Shineth bright,
Fare thee well; Day has gone,
Night is on.*

*Thanks and praise, For our days,
Neath the sun, Neath the stars,
Neath the sky,
As we go, This we know
God is nigh"*

There is something magnificent and wholly appropriate in the twenty-four notes of this call with its strains both haunting and melancholy, yet at the same time, hopeful and saturated with peace. The echoes of it have lingered in my heart more than a decade after its tones ceased to vibrate in the crisp, autumn air-- echoes not unlike the memories that return to me of my father.

The flag was folded thirteen times by two members of the detail with loving precision into a tight triangle with the star field and three metal casings tucked inside, each casing representing a volley. As one man handed it to Marguerite, he said, "This flag is presented on behalf of a grateful nation and the United States Army in appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service."

"Thank you," she said softly. I remember her whole being seemed numb with grief. She looked frail. She took his flag and held it to her chest.

I held my memories.

Looking For My Father

I lost my father long before he died. I lost him after my parents divorced when I was thirteen in the way people slip from your life even though you'd rather they remain. And because we both had lives to lead, and he'd moved to the side of a mountain and built a rustic home with his own two hands where he lived simply and close to nature.

When he and Marguerite were life-flighted and then hospitalized in Memphis at the Elvis Presley Trauma Center after a car accident, my sister, Patti, drove us kids to see them. Thankfully, they both recovered, though I don't think he was ever as strong after that. Families come together in crisis. I think our family also lost him to the alcohol he self-medicated his anxiety with, cigarettes, heart disease, and the hardships of his own childhood.

The writer, Sheila O'Connor, wrote, "We're all searching for our fathers, even when we have them. You're searching for your father, I'm searching for my father, and my husband is searching for his. The absent father, the distant father, the angry father--that's what we are searching for." My search for mine has often led me in confusing circles back to my own bittersweet childhood with its mixture of joy and sorrow, and in turn, to the woman I've become who now shelters the little girl I was.

My father operated a convenience store in Arkansas. On my birthday or Christmas, he'd send packages, often containing items from it like a flashlight or a ceramic egg with a pink rose painted on it which I still cherish. He'd always sign the card himself, for I recognized his handwriting and that meant a great deal to me. He once sent a VHS tape with his narration of the deer and wildlife in his yard for my son. I understand at this stage in my life and after having been through a divorce that all were ways of reaching out to say, "I haven't forgotten you, though things have changed."

My first husband, Steve, drove us down to Arkansas to attend the funeral. The roadsides and mountains were dressed in burnt-orange, red, and yellow leaves. The song "Kissed by A Rose on the Grave" played many times on the way there. I couldn't eat food or I'd get ill on the trip down and for about a week after.

Many relatives were already there at the funeral home when we arrived. My paternal Grandmother Mamie was not among them. She had passed away earlier that year on January 4th which was my Dad's birthday.

I remember kissing his cold forehead and I knew that his spirit was free and separate now from his body, but that his soul still existed. I tucked a photograph of us kids in front of the little farmhouse that had once been our home in the pocket of his suit coat so he would never be truly alone without us there in the grave. My adopted Korean-American sister, Susan (named Hae Sook Suh at birth) couldn't be there, but she was in the photograph and I felt she'd like that.

I thought of how he loved the songs, "The Green Beret," "A White Sports Coat and a Pink Carnation," and "When I was a Boy and Ole Shep was a Pup". He rooted for the Oklahoma Sooners and the Arkansas Razorbacks. He loved dogwood and redbud trees, deer, flowers, words, good food and drink, model train sets, his country, rivers, ponds and sunsets. He made some of the strangest stuff he called "chili" from any leftovers he could find in the refrigerator. I think he must've learned that when he was a bachelor.

I tried to write a short fiction story set in Breckenridge, Colorado as I spent seven days there. I have photographs and images of burnt-gray pinecones underfoot, blue columbine, mountain daisies, Icelandic poppies, chipmunks near the Blue River, fly fisherman, pyrite-flecked river rocks, lodge pole pines, and fresh snow fields on Peak 9 with a rose-peach and shadow-blue sunset against evergreen, and some of the heavy, morning dew covering the courtyard, steaming hot tub, and the garden below my suite, lit up by the

sun and turned to thousands of transparent-watery gems of all sizes combined to make a sparkling, green carpet. But this story came in its place and I've taken artistic license.

Growing up, my family moved often like many military families do. My favorite home we had was a one-story house on a country road north of McLouth, Kansas. There was a detached garage with a tin roof on which raindrops sounded like metallic drumbeats during a storm, and where we'd have slumber parties or give theatrical productions or concerts written and presented by us kids. In that garage, my brother Mark and I once unsuccessfully argued to my Dad that we should be allowed to raise five newborn mice that we'd found and placed atop cotton balls in a little box.

"We'll feed them milk from a dropper," we'd promised. "We'll save them."

I can still see their helpless, hairless, pink bodies before I surrendered them. It's funny how our minds burn certain visual memories deeper than others.

"They are cute now but they'll only grow up and be adult mice," my father said. "And carry disease. I'm sorry but you can't keep them." There was kindness on his face but he didn't waiver.

Further back on the property was a rectangular chicken coop which my father later converted to a rabbit barn. Surrounding all of this, was twenty-five acres of glorious pasture land, with a tree-lined creek running through it, east to west. Near the back of the acreage was a large pond where we'd all fish and swim, and where my dad would gig for frogs, with a can of beer in one hand, a gig in the other, and more often than not, wearing his best dress shoes, a detail which drove my mother crazy. My father built a cabin back beside the pond. He never did finish the roof.

I was eleven that year, and my school announced a state-wide writing competition for sixth graders called "Why I Love America." I'd never written anything for a contest and I wasn't sure where to start but I planned to enter.

The evening before my essay was due, I remember sitting at the kitchen table and staring at the blank pages of a Big Chief tablet. After pouring through *The Book of Knowledge* set, I finally had several pages of what I considered to be patriotic paragraphs.

"Dad, will you please read this for me and tell me what you think of it?"

He seemed pleased I'd ask for his help, and he responded, "Sure." So I handed it to him half expecting him to accept it as it was written. For a self-conscious girl, I often held a high opinion of my capabilities, which seems an odd contradiction. I had the kind of feeling a girl can have when she wonders if she isn't perhaps, because of all the fairy tales she's read, truly a foreign princess, kidnapped at birth and doomed to a middle class existence unless she's rescued by P. Charming.

In that cramped kitchen, under a starry mid-western sky, I waited for the gratification of hearing how well he thought I'd done. I recall my Mom, Bernice, was cooking at the stove. My mom is a pretty woman, and slender, with auburn hair and freckles. We used to twist together to Fats Domino music.

"Donna, did you know that your father earned dual degrees in business and in finance from O.U. in Norman? He double-majored with a 4.00 while he worked full-time. He made "As" and hardly ever even had to study."

"I didn't know that," I answered her. I looked at him with more appreciative eyes.

"And everyone always said he should write a book ... he can write so easily," she added. "He used to write me the most beautiful love letters."

I nodded and started to memorize a kitchen poem on a plaque on the wall for something to calm me while I waited for his review.

My father read my work and looked me directly in the eyes and said, "I think what they want to know is why 'you' love America. Not merely why America is great, but what it means to you, a young

girl, right now, here in Kansas. Why do you, Donna Lash, love America? They don't want to hear history repeated or mere facts and dates from an encyclopedia. Your thoughts are what they want."

I'm sure my disappointment must have been evident to him, as I don't have a poker face. I had so hoped I'd done well and it was finalized. Basically, he wanted me to go back to the drawing board. I couldn't bear it. Could I do it? I felt panicky. It was too late to start over as I'd procrastinated till the night before.

Looking back, I believe this evening sticks in my mind because what he was telling me was what I needed to hear more than anything and knowing me well, he knew it. He was showing me that what I had to say was important, as important as what anyone else had to say. And this is a lesson I'm still trying to learn. I've approached it from all directions.

That evening also stands out because my Dad and I didn't do all that many things together. I have a few special memories like the time he carried me on his shoulders when I was three up the wide stone steps to Heidelberg Castle in Germany and down and then back up again after retrieving the stuffed puppy with a red leather collar he'd bought me that I'd dropped at the bottom on our first trip up. The golden cocker-spaniel sits on my shelf now. Or when he took me to feed bread to the ducks at a pond on a military base, or to buy an outfit for a junior high dance once so I didn't have to wear hand-me-downs from my sisters. And again when I was a teenager with a broken-heart I was sure would be fatal, how we planted red bud trees together in the sunshine to heal me. We shared several talks after my parent's divorce though we were always struggling to see the world through each other's perspective. I've come to believe that I am like my father in that we are both a contradictory mix of sophisticated and unpolished, joy and sorrow, light and dark, and serenity and anxiety. We both tend to tremendously overanalyze.

As we discussed writing that night, I had my Dad's full attention. He didn't leave me high and dry. He rescued me when I was in need. He stopped to teach me and share things he'd learned. And I, a middle child, felt special in his eyes.

I think he guided me through the essay from start to conclusion, but they were my words that he pulled from me. I wish I still had a copy of it. He asked me, "What do you like to do in America? What does it mean to you?"

And I answered, "I like to go to our creek and the pond, hide in the tall pasture grass on a blanket. I like to read books while eating Fig Newtons and riding my bike down the dirt road with Janice Kitterman, and playing Lincoln logs and pirate ship with Mark."

He told me, "You can do these things, because you're free to do them. In many countries, kids aren't free to do these things. They don't have enough food to eat, water to drink, or clothes to wear. No safe place to sleep."

"I'm lucky then aren't I?"

"Yes, you are. Remember to be grateful."

"Be thankful to God," my mom added.

My father was many things in his life from a federal air marshal to a soldier stationed at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico where he met my mother and where I was born. What I picture him most as was a Sgt. First Class in the U.S. Army who served in Korea and Vietnam. I understand more clearly now the point he was trying to make about the topic of the contest. I only knew back then that I wanted to win so that I would be more than ordinary. I feared being ordinary the most, and still do, but to a far lesser degree.

I can relate to my father more now as my son is a Corporal in the United State Marine Corp, and

my husband, Joe, is a USMC Vietnam Vet who defended the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, when it was attacked during the Tet Offensive. He raised the U.S. flag back over the embassy after they took it back. And I have seen “love of country” in their eyes and actions. Yet, what mattered back then at eleven, was that I was the happy recipient of my father’s attention.

My essay (or ours) did win the school competition! I was called up front at the school assembly and awarded a certificate and a wood plaque. Engraved on the brass was the inscription, “Why I Love America--Donna Lash--Honorable Mention, State of Kansas.” I had won First Place in my school and Honorable Mention in the State. And in my mind, I was surely not as ordinary as I’d been before this.

My father led me to the joy of creation. I can still see him in my mind’s eye so clearly that I am actually transported back to that table and that exact moment in time. He’s wearing a white t-shirt. I can smell through the open screen window, the four o’clock blossoms that lined the front of the house. I can smell the pot roast cooking in the stove and see the white fridge against one wall. I can see the kitchen poem on the wall I memorized while he studied my writing and can still recite it. It’s difficult to be anxious when you are intent and focused on something like a prayer or a poem. That focus can protect you sometimes from the pain and confusion of the present. Sometimes I’d sit at a meal and memorize that little plaque.

*“God bless my little kitchen Lord
I love it’s every nook
And watch me as I do my work
Wash pots and pans and cook
May the meals that I prepare
Be seasoned from above
With thy blessing and thy grace
But most of all thy love”*

I can still hear cars passing infrequently on the gravel road. But clearest of all, I see my dad vividly as he lights a cigarette even though one still smoulders in the tray and has turned to one, long, gray ash. I can feel my joy rise as he asks me my thoughts and opinions. I love my father for that shared memory that night. A night, so long ago in fact, that it might as well be some other lifetime, or some child other than me.

About a year ago, I found an old poem he wrote for his mother. He wrote it when he was in high school. I was surprised to learn that he wrote poetry as I do. I think that though so much has already been written, that we must all add our verses for the world to be complete. We must say, write, or live out our stories while we can. Sometimes our stories are simple but they are still invaluable because they are ours and sometimes they are a large part of all we have.

My father left me more than a broken pocket watch that keeps imperfect time. He passed on the gifts of what mattered to him. He passed on all he had to give including the gift of his love for planting and growing things and his love of words and the knowledge that they can help us convey our true souls to one another; how words can close the distance.

The Drowning of Ricky Talbot

By Max Evans

Ricky felt the sweltering heat as the sweat gathered weight and rolled down his cheek into the corner of his mouth. The salty sweetness, coupled with the intense warmth, made him think of ice cream.

Each summer, the ice cream man would drive through Ricky's mid-town neighborhood of Springdale providing the children with banana bomb pops, fudgesicles and frozen chocolate malts.

Ricky didn't understand the simplest of concepts, such as the ice cream man or what it meant to live in a neighborhood or the idea of summer for that matter. Even now, the renewed memory was more of a response to an exercised mental synapse, like a leg that flexes involuntarily when the knee is struck with a mallet. There was no moving picture of a memory set in motion, only a thought signaled by an action, the beginning and the end of a story in one short breath.

Ricky was born with such limited mental scope; it was all he could do to remember "not to potty in his pants," as his mother Emma always reminded him. "Potty" was the cleansed version of, "Boy, you better not shit your britches." This was his father Ralph's threat and the first step that lead to a slap to the head and a call to Emma to "clean the boy up" if the warning was not obeyed. Given Ricky's minute comprehension of such matters, he was likely as not to "shit his britches."

By simple frequency of occurrence, he came to associate defecation with getting struck by Ralph. And much like a cat that's spanked when caught peeing behind the couch, neither fully understood their errors. But for Ricky, every day was a new awakening; each moment different from the moment before; each new or old occurrence a chance for excitement and discovery. For example, Ricky liked the "ding, ding" of the bell in the ice cream man's van as much as the ice cream itself. It stimulated some underutilized neurotransmitters in his brain. The, "ding dings," always sparked a loud exclamation of "ice cream man," which sounded more like "I quee ma" in Ricky's garbled speech. And if someone weren't watching, he'd run the 200 feet from his house, up the long driveway and launch directly in front of the ice cream van. This usually forced any drivers new to the route to slam on the brakes and release a stream of cuss words that made some mothers tug their children back away from the curb and into their modest working-class homes.

But on this day, 35 years since he'd last chased the ice cream man, there was no one to pull Ricky from the danger of yet another van. He now sat inside, the windows shut tight, and the full noon sun threatening to melt the painted letters, "Taber Group Home," from the shiny new surface of the 15-passenger tomb.

Some of life's tragedies seem predetermined, as though no force of nature or fate can make any iota of difference in the outcome. This is how it's always been for Ricky. Oh, he didn't realize it. In his simplistic almost ideal world, Ricky was content – even happy. I rarely remember him without a smile.

Ricky was at our house often. My mother, a stay-at-home mom in the mid-1950s, would "watch" Ricky during the day while Emma worked her job as a telephone operator. Ralph worked in the meat-packing plant in the neighboring community of Templeton. Those in the neighborhood said it was his work, on the killing floor, that made Ralph so mean.

Many folk in Springdale worked the packing houses. In fact, it was one of only three livelihoods sanctioned by the collective neighborhood conscience. In addition to the work at Swift or Armour, the men of Springdale could assemble new Pontiacs at the nearby General Motors plant or work one of the jobs available in the three area rail yards. Any other work was suspect.

But the idea of packing-house work making you mean didn't seem to wash. Mr. Gardner worked at Swift, and he was nicer to the kids in the neighborhood than most any adult. He'd fix your bike, let you play

baseball in his back yard, and had a seemingly never-ending supply of bones for the local dogs, and Springdale seemed to be the point of convergence for homeless dogs.

Really, no one ever recalled seeing Ralph do anything “mean.” Any whippings given to Ricky, or Emma, for that matter, were done behind closed doors. True, Ralph did play the radio so loudly that nasally country music was present in every house within a two block radius. But it was more his demeanor that gave Ralph the reputation.

He was what most folks would call wiry. He appeared thin and muscular; although I don’t ever remember getting close enough to verify his build. My younger brother Jay and I would hide under the big weeping willow tree behind Ralph’s house and try to glimpse him moving through the dilapidating, wood-framed structure. I’m not sure we ever did see him; although in my mind’s eye, I can see him now being lifted up and carried from room to room on a breeze of Earnest Tubbs or Hank Williams.

I’d be an adult before I realized that rather than meanness, Ralph wore the cloak of frustrated ignorance, common to simple men, who, confused by such things as extra chromosomes, can’t rationalize chance, happenstance or luck of the draw.

Some who knew them before said it was Ricky’s birth that sent Ralph into his forlorn exile and caused Emma to bear the countenance of a woman nearly twice her age. And Emma wasn’t an unhandsome woman, or at least she hadn’t been. She was tall – very tall – and trim. Her skin was as pale as that of oriental women I’d seen in pictures, and like those women, she wore what had been jet-black hair pulled back in a tight bun. And I always picture her in a long straight dress that accents her height and slimness.

It was her eyes that looked like they belonged to someone else though, someone sick, tired, perhaps even dying, although slowly, with prolonged pain and agony.

Emma would walk one block to our house each morning, following the grassy path that would have been a street if the city would have ever put our road through. As it was, Ricky’s family and ours lived on the same street, but to get to Ricky’s house by car meant driving all the way around the block and entering a long gravel right-of-way, itself another street never completed and leading nowhere but to Ricky’s house.

Ricky would be in tow, struggling to bend down and pick a dandelion or stick his finger into the putrefying flesh of a rabbit dismembered by one of the unclaimed neighborhood dogs. Emma, whether patient or resigned, merely tugged Ricky along by the hand, dragging him to his destination.

Now, I’ve failed to describe Ricky. I just take his appearance for granted because his image is so vivid in my mind.

This stands at the forefront; Ricky always wore dungarees.

In the 1950s, jeans were known as dungarees. They varied a bit from what jeans would become. They were bluer, for one thing, dark, dark blue. And they were roomier, but not like the ones worn by the skateboarding youth of the 1990s. The best way to describe them is to use a term from the 1950s Sears and Roebuck catalog that described the fit as “husky.”

Ricky’s jeans were of the husky variety. Of course he appeared huskier than normal because, like many of those referred to at the time as Mongoloid; he was shorter than other youth his age and had a wide flat face that added to the broad image.

In addition to the dungarees, Ricky would be wearing a checkered shirt and tennis shoes of the ‘50s variety. He was sort of dressed like all the thugs in “Rebel without a Cause,” which, now, seems an enjoyable, if absurd, similarity.

We, my mother, Jay and I, would meet Ricky and Emma at the door. Emma would hand my mother a lunch pail, which, in addition to a sandwich, always contained a full pint of milk. The milk was in a stubby, glass bottle with a little cardboard cover on top, just as it had come from the dairy. With a sigh, she’d thank

my mother and finally release Ricky, who had been struggling to get free from the time he hit the door. Emma would say she'd be back at 4:30 to retrieve Ricky; then she dutifully set out across the grassy path.

In my mind, it was always summer when Ricky came to stay, although I know this isn't true. But his coming, like his final exit, will always be associated with heat, sunlight and a certain childhood innocence and naiveté.

We played with Ricky like he was a younger, but much sturdier, cousin, although he was older than me by two years and Jay by four. These were simple endeavors, like searching for four-leaf clovers, catching honey bees in empty mayonnaise jars, or exploring the creek that ran below ours and Ricky's homes.

It was the unnamed creek that held a special fascination. There we'd find crawdads and tadpoles, push sticks deep into holes in the rocky banks, or fashion walking bridges from rocks or bits of rotting wood. It was on one such day that Ricky almost drowned the first time. There had been many lesser accidents. Ricky and accidents seemed preordained.

Once, when sharpening sticks for arrows, Ricky managed to aim the wrong end toward his eye and sink it into the white area around his pupil. He survived that one in good measure, even though his eye was bloodshot like crazy for about a month. Other than the first few minutes after the incident, Ricky appeared unfazed, and was ready to return to normal play long before my mother allowed.

Another time, he was stung by a bee that he had taken from one of the mayonnaise jars. There was even a comedic, but pitiful episode when my mother had cooked us hot dogs for lunch. Ricky, whose experience with such an apparatus was apparently limited, managed to get his finger in the bun with the wiener, and biting down hard, felt the strength of his own teeth.

"Hot dog bite," Ricky yelled, as tears flowed into the corners of his eyes, which seemed to accuse the tubular bit of pork.

For years, "hot dog bite" was bound to get a smile when spoken by anyone in our house. And it wasn't said in a demeaning manner. I really believe there was a special connection between Ricky and everyone at our home, and saying "hot dog bite" was our reminder of simpler times.

But there was nothing funny about the day Ricky fell in our creek. In fact, it took a few moments for Jay and me to realize that it had happened.

You see, Ricky didn't play like regular kids. His motions were always fast and jerky, even when doing the same tasks as us. It was almost like he'd been programmed to run at a faster, but not so accurate speed. He'd rush through the motions of whatever task was at hand, and move on to some indeterminate work of which only he knew the purpose. The result was that, although we'd set out to play together, Ricky would end up doing something on his own.

This was one such day.

We'd worked on a bicycle; that much I remember, and then we walked down the terrace to play in the creek. I believe we'd been moving tadpoles from a pool in the creek to a smaller pool we'd made with an earthen dam. Both were only feet apart, and how Jay and I could have missed Ricky not being with us, I don't recall to this day.

For whatever reason, by the time we turned back to the larger pool, Ricky had somehow fallen in, although we didn't hear a splash. Perhaps he'd simply climbed in. We never knew. When we saw him, he was lying on his back in about a foot and half of water, eyes wide open and staring upward, straight at us.

He didn't look upset, panicked, or even frightened. He wasn't splashing, kicking, tugging at the air with his arms. Nothing. Here's the weird thing. He also wasn't breathing.

It was in kid's terms "double spooky."

“Wow,” both Jay and I said at the same time. Then Jay added, “Holy shit,” an expression we’d both heard our dad use on various occasion.

“We gotta get him out of there,” I replied, but remember thinking that it was probably too late, based on Ricky’s appearance.

The base of a large tree made up one end of the pool, and Ricky’s head was at that end. Jay climbed in on one side, I on the other, and we each grabbed an arm. Instinctively, we rotated Ricky’s body where we could drag him out on the shallow bank, but once there, we didn’t quite know what to do. I’m not certain how long it took to remove Ricky from the pool, but during that time, he hadn’t responded at all. And like those in an old photograph of my late Grandfather Chester that hung in the hallway at our home, the eyes seemed to follow us, even though the rest of Ricky’s body lacked motion or will.

“Run and get Mom,” I told Jay, as fear and adrenaline anchored me in place. I was absolutely unable to react.

“We’ve gotta do something,” Jay said, as he rolled Ricky onto his side and placed downward pressure on his shoulder. Little rivulets of water ran from the corner of Ricky’s mouth, but still his arms lay limp, and his eyes stared straight at a lady bug that was exploring the clump of grass inches from Ricky’s face.

“Do that again, Jay,” I said.

“What?” he asked. “Roll him over?”

Jay grabbed at Ricky from behind and started to push him over onto his belly.

“No, just push down on him,” I said, shoving Ricky back toward Jay.

Jay put his weight down on Ricky’s side, and again water ran and then bubbled at the corner of Ricky’s mouth. Several more tries resulted in more water, more bubbles, some thick whitish spit, but still no movement from Ricky.

Just then, as the panic was really starting to set in, the “ding, ding” of the ice cream man’s bell cut through the neighborhood, like the siren on an ambulance.

No one, but Jay and I, was witness to this weird occurrence, which was quickly moving toward the status of “tragic accident.” I wanted to cry. I wanted the release of just going into a fit of uncontrolled bawling.

Then I got mad. I wanted to stone the fucking ice cream man for being so god damned inconsiderate. Didn’t he know that now was not the time for ice cream? Ricky was dying – or was dead – and there was work to be done to erase these last few minutes from ever having occurred.

Then, I did cry. I got caught in one of those can’t-stop, hysterical, can’t-catch-your-breath cries that drain the life and energy from your body in a matter of seconds.

“Damn it Ricky,” I said, as I rocked his body violently back and forth. “Damn it.”

“Ding, ding.” By the sound of the bell, the ice cream man had topped Duncan Street hill, turned the corner onto Thompson and was heading down the incline next to the Williams’ house and toward the top of Ricky’s driveway.

Just then, I felt Ricky move under his own power, not much, but enough to bring me back to the nightmare at hand.

“I quee ma,” Ricky said, his voice groggy, like he’d just awakened from a nap.

He quivered and rocked, jerking his arms in a struggle to turn toward the sound of the ice cream man’s bell. And in one fluid Herculean motion, he pushed himself up, struggled to his feet, and took off up the terrace toward the grassy path that led to his house.

Jay and I were both stunned, and it took us a few minutes to comprehend what was happening. I think I was just so relieved that he was alive, that our horrible ordeal had been mitigated – and maybe resolved – that I didn’t take off after Ricky until he’d cleared the terrace and was running and stumbling down the grassy path.

Jay and I both responded. We managed to catch Ricky at the bottom of his drive. Thank goodness no one was home at his house. His clothes were soaked, his hair plastered down against his head, and a tincture of bloody spittle clung to the sides of his mouth and across his chin.

Ricky was crying now. “I wan go hom,” he said, as the tears burst from his eyes. “I wan go hom.”

I don’t know if his tears were because we had intercepted him and turned him back toward our house. We didn’t have any money for the ice cream man. If we had, we surely would have let him catch the van. I would have been delighted in the surprise and anger from the driver as Ricky lunged in front of the vehicle.

We’d have ordered his favorite, a strawberry parfait bar.

But it may have been that, deep in his subconscious, the ordeal had finally registered. Or maybe his mind never knew what had happened, but his body had sent a message of complete and utter fatigue.

I know that’s the way I felt. And I sobbed as Ricky bawled. And even Jay, who was usually the strong, emotionally-resilient one, got a little teary eyed as we led Ricky back down the grassy path to our house.

Ricky allowed us to guide him home. He didn’t have to. When he wanted, Ricky had twice the strength as a normal kid. He could, and often did, jerk away, run off in the other direction and evade us until he simply forgot that was the goal. But on this day, he walked like a man to the gallows, voicing resistance but resigned to his fate.

“He fell in the water,” was all we told my mother.

“Well honey,” she said, with just as much endearment as she would have spent on one of her own. “Sweetheart,” she said as she led Ricky to the bathroom sink to wash his face and dry him off.

Ricky, who had continued his “I wan go hom” plea throughout the walk, was now silent except for the deep sobs. He was comforted by my mom’s concern.

“Jay, you go get Ricky some dry clothes, some of yours,” she said. “And you go get Ricky’s milk,” she said to me.

With milk, clean clothes, and a nap for Ricky, the ordeal was officially closed.

Summers came and summers went. After a few years, my mother got a full time job, and Emma found other arrangements for Ricky. The local Armor plant closed. Workers who wanted to remain with the company had to move to a town an hour and a half north.

Here’s all I knew. Ricky’s family moved out. Another incident that might have been a dark omen on Ricky’s fate was when the local fire department used the now-abandoned home as a training burn. The house, which had been determined to be uninhabitable, was intentionally set on fire, allowed to reach a full blaze, and then the home was drowned with copious amounts of water. The charred remains were pushed down the hill toward ours and Ricky’s creek and covered with rock and dirt.

I wouldn’t know what happened to Ricky for nearly 35 years, until, while perusing news stories on the internet, I’d read about the sentencing of a man, a driver for a home for disabled adults, who had left his “clients” locked in a van for hours in temperatures in excess of 100 degrees.

The driver was sentenced to four years for involuntary manslaughter. Isn’t it an irony that only a space need be added to make manslaughter “mans laughter.”

The passengers all died of suffocation, the story stated, then continued by listing the names of the deceased. Rickey was among the dead.

I had to search for details of the incident. This is what had occurred: It was July. The driver had been asked to take the adults to the zoo, which was located in the middle of a large urban park just south and east of our city’s core.

He pulled the van into the park. The windows were shut tight and the vehicles' air conditioner was blasting cold air against the July heat, which had crept above the 100 degree mark for the fifth day in a row.

The driver was on his cell phone. He'd arranged to meet an old friend at the park. The friend had told him that he could score a bag of "weed" for the driver, who had smoked the last of his stash on the 30-minute drive from the group home.

He had four hours from the time he left until he was expected back, plenty of time to score a bag, and, if there's time left, maybe take the group to the zoo.

The driver parked far away from the other vehicles. It wouldn't do if someone came up on the van with a whole bunch of sweaty, odd looking folks inside.

A dull-gray, older Lexus pulled along side the van. The van driver got out, turning off the ignition, stepped quickly to the worse-for-wear former luxury car, and the two men pulled quickly out of the lot and into the park.

At trial, the driver would admit that he'd left the nine adults, including Ricky, inside the van for more than six hours. He'd admit that he'd left the windows rolled up tight so the "clients" wouldn't yell and draw suspicion. And, he'd admit that the air conditioner was off and the doors locked, and the clients had all been securely fastened in their seatbelts.

He'd say he didn't mean to be gone that long. His attorney would add that it was because the driver's addiction, fueled by a life of neglect and abuse, that was at the root of the incident. All those involved, including his client, were victims of a society that didn't support the disabled and underprivileged.

I don't know about all that. But as hard as I tried not to, I couldn't help but imagine Ricky's last hours.

I imagine that long before he got hot, he got bored. Ricky was easily bored. I imagine he struggled against his seat restraints and may have even pounded on the windows. Or, now a man in his late 40s or early 50s, he might have been too large to slip out of his constraints. He may have mellowed over the years and not fought at all.

All this is merely conjecture. But of this much I'm fairly certain; at some point, the slow suffocation would have felt like drowning. As the stifling heat drained the oxygen from the air, Rickey would struggle to breathe. His clothing would be soaked from sweat, his face and neck wet and his hair plastered to his head.

I wonder if, toward the end, his eyes would focus straight ahead like during the incident at the creek. If he lay back perfectly still and unresponsive.

He probably couldn't have been saved. That many hours in those temperatures would be too much for anyone, even someone with Ricky's strength and determination. But I wonder if finally, as the air got thin, and his breaths shortened to shallow, quick gasps, as he was drowning in his own sweat and bile, if he could have tried a little bit harder, perhaps held on a little bit longer, with only the "ding, ding" of the ice cream man's bell.

A Family Quilt

By Cynthia Bird

Without my family quilt, I would be lost, cold and shivering. Left with nothing to blanket myself. Vulnerable.

Family is thread woven into fabric, patterns sewn into my quilt. My quilt provides comfort, a place to hide, a place to feel wanted and important. I cannot help but linger. Longing to lose myself beneath the safety, I cover my head when I am frightened or swallowed by sadness.

Encircled in my quilt, I am myself.

Folds of overlapped time stitched delicately into place, family is the motif of my quilt: a block for my mother, one for my father, my brother and my Grandparents also. Lineage for honesty, forgiveness, acceptance, strength and stability. Each design encases unique colors and fabrics, textured recollections embellished with silky embroidery floss.

I am a pattern too.

As time encourages, my quilt grows larger. Blocks have been mended and redesigned as age frays fragile corners that resign from usage. Wisdom interlaces mature and compassionate memories with more complexity than before. Creating new designs, I intertwine thread enfolding familiarity in this lifetime: patterns sewn in the quilt that is my family.

Becoming the Big Brother

By Dustin Wise

I grew up the same as most guys that have an older brother; daily beatings were a normal thing. The days that friends were around were more painful than others, but if you were like me you wanted to hang around the older guys regardless, so it was a necessary evil. I was the short and chubby little brother that would hang around and try to be as cool as the big kids, even when my brother's friends weren't there I would do everything in my power to annoy him until fists started flying. When it got to be too much, I'd run off and tell Mom. Within in five minutes, as soon as the tears subsided and the throbbing stopped, I would be right there at his side again, just passing time until the next beating. This routine continued until high school.

By the time I entered high school; I caught up with him in height and surpassed him in strength. Naturally by this time things were somewhat different. Fighting still occurred, but less often, mainly because equal punishment was dealt and received. We had numerous mutual friends, and hung out at the same parties, even though I played sports and he did not. The abusive tendencies on his part inadvertently helped me develop an almost limitless tolerance to pain, which is another reason he didn't like to fight with me anymore. He once told me it was like hitting a steel door with a steel bat, it can be fun for a while, you can make a few dings, but after a while you get tired and your hands hurt, the little dings just aren't worth it. I took pride in my ability to withstand an immense amount of pain.

We stayed close until I moved to New Hampshire to live with my father because of behavior and drinking issues while in school. I moved back to Kansas City the day I turned 18 and bounced back and forth from friends' houses until I graduated. A few months after graduating, I decided to move in with Josh to help him deal with unreliable room-mates and I was in need of a place to live.

We lived together for about 6 months, enduring many problems and conflicts. I decided to start going to college. No major physical altercations occurred until one night I was having relationship issues, had too much to drink, and tried to drive. Concerned for my safety, he attempted to stop me, not realizing I was in an enraged blackout. When I woke up the next morning, my brother had a black eye and was packing things up to move; meanwhile, I was clueless to the prior evening's event. After learning all of the transgressions of the previous night, guilt swept over me like an eclipse. It had been over five years since either of us had punched each other in the face, and from what I was told I was the only one attacking this time. This was a first, and as I would soon find out, the last.

Within a week Josh was out and I was still trying to figure out the best way to apologize and make up for my horrendous behavior. While driving home from work on a day that I didn't have class, I got a call from a friend that lived near Josh's workplace. Evidently, there had been a motorcycle wreck at the end of his street. I was asked if Josh had a motorcycle anymore. My mind raced for a second and then realized he had sold it a month earlier. After talking with my friend for a minute, we went on about our days. I made a drink when I got home, which was common at the time. Then I had another shortly after and continued that process for a while. Two hours after my last phone call, I received another call that was from a random number, which I usually don't answer, and it was Josh's best friend. It was as though as soon as I answered I went deaf; my ears started ringing and felt as if they were waiting to pop. My heart was beating so violently it made it difficult to breathe. I remember saying "what" over and over but I couldn't hear my own voice, and I couldn't understand the stuttering mumbles on the other end. Then, as if someone pulled me out of a soundproof box, I heard a voice yelling, "Josh was in a really bad accident. He's not going to make it!" The phone dropped from my hands and the box surrounded me again, thoughts racing faster than I could comprehend. A single thought popped in my head, "Where?"

After realizing I had dropped the phone I picked it up and as calmly as possible gathered any information possible, mainly where he was so I could head that way to do "something". While driving well over 60 mph down busy main streets, crossing into oncoming lanes to pass people impeding my path, I was on the phone with my mother informing her of the situation. I was not going to let anyone or anything get in my way of seeing Josh one last time before his last breath. All I could think of was growing up with him, including the pictures we had taken together, the road trips we took together, the carnivals we attended, the football games we played in the field, the basketball games we'd won, and the snowmen we created coupled with winter sledding adventures. Then I started remembering pieces of the recent

night of our fight, his pleading for me to stop as I attacked him for standing in my way. The tears streamed down my face as I tried to force myself to breathe; uncontrollably shaking as I tried to hold the steering wheel and find the open gaps of traffic to cut through.

The next thing I remember is standing over this battered and deformed person that was supposed to be my brother. His face was unrecognizable because of the lacerations and swelling from landing head first on pavement traveling 35 mph. His body was littered with gashes, broken bones, bruising and dried blood. His windpipe had collapsed during the accident and under some sort of luck a nurse was driving by and performed an emergency tracheotomy on the street to keep him alive until the ambulance arrived. Every doctor and nurse we talked to said he would be lucky to make it through to the next day. Friends had already filled the waiting rooms by this time, though my father was stuck in New Hampshire until the next morning. I was no more than a walking zombie unable to put thoughts, let alone words together. My jaws were locked tight to somehow control the flow of tears trickling down my cheeks. I believed it was up to me to keep everyone calm, but in actuality I was creating more concern than tranquility.

Throughout the next few weeks, Josh's prognosis and condition slowly improved, going from statements made that he would never breathe again on his own, to he would never walk or talk again, to he will never function as an independent human being again. After my Father showed up it took a lot off me to help my mother. It seemed to make these predictions easier to work around. For the first month I turned to heavy drinking and recreational drugs to take my mind off of things. School seemed impossible with so much going on, so I stopped going. Work was not a priority until rent was drawing close but I still went enough to keep up with some things. Day by day Josh improved. Slowly, but surely, the doctors were proven wrong, to a certain extent that is.

Two months after Josh's accident he was released from the hospital with an urge to get back to his old lifestyle of dating and drinking and doing what made him happy; unfortunately, with his severe traumatic brain injury you pretty much have the memory of the lifestyle and belief that nothing is wrong, while in reality your basic and advanced abilities were comparable to a first grader. The worst things you can do in this phase of recovery are drink or do other drugs, even in moderation. It inhibits your ability to progress and let your mind and body develop back to as normal as possible. Imagine telling a 5 year old in a 24-year-olds place he can't do something. It's an uphill battle.

Five years later Josh is walking and talking, but some of his mental capabilities are equal to a 4th grader, partially because of his own substance abuse, partly because of being on the wrong prescription for 2 years. His ability to decipher right and wrong is questionable and his dealing with right and wrong is not usually fitting to the situation. In some ways, I've become the older brother, protecting him when necessary, which can be very often. It's amazing how many people try to take advantage of a person or try to bully a person who doesn't understand the situation or their surroundings. My father now lives in town because of the combination of Josh's accident and my daughter being born. Either way I am grateful; things tend to get out of hand and my father is an excellent source of help when either type of situation occurs.

Bettie

By Jessica Kent

Whips, chains, gags, leather, and lace...
Everyone who saw her was awed by her grace.
Pictures and movies, Men and Plays,
These were just a part of her regular days.
Sweet, Country Spiritual and Rare
She went where many others would never dare.
Though her life is gone and we never did meet,
I will always miss Bettie Page and remember her as a photographers greatest treat.

Breathing in Jackson

By MAX EVANS

I'm breathing in Jackson.

I see the pine trees lining I-55 between Memphis and the Mississippi capital city of Jackson. They blur as I envision myself looking out the car window as we, the car and I, breeze past.

I breathe out the two-lane highway that will take me into Hattiesburg. I see it as I've always seen it, dressed in red southern clay, freshly landscaped by bulldozers. Barricades keep the newer portion off limits, even though it looks like it's finally complete. They've been working on this road since the first time my family traveled it in 1960, more than 40 years ago. At least that's how it seems as I breathe in the small café in Lucedale and prepare to breathe out Mobile, Alabama.

Katie, the yoga instructor, has warned us not to do this.

"Concentrate on your breath," she says. "If other thoughts creep in, go back to your breath. This is your time to clear your mind of all thoughts, to forget about the day. If it helps, think of breathing in joy and love, and breathing out stress, jealousy and resentment."

If only she hadn't said those last things, jealousy and resentment, maybe I wouldn't be breathing in Jackson. But as it is, all I can focus on is the upcoming trip I must make to Florida, and I'm driving the entire route in my mind as I lay here in corpse pose on the health club floor in suburban Kansas City.

Corpse pose. How appropriate. Lying still like a corpse, a dead person. Katie said it's considered the hardest posture in yoga because it means clearing the mind of all thoughts, and my thoughts are consuming me and my corpse.

I got the call only yesterday. It wasn't like it hadn't been expected. Claudia had been ill for a long time. At least, it seemed that way. Really, she'd been diagnosed less than sixteen months ago. But terminal illness uses pain, grief, fear and anger to stretch time beyond its normal dimensions.

I'd have to go. There'd be no way of getting around it. And there'd be the entire group there, those I was escaping when I moved away more than twelve years ago.

I wondered if death brought the perfect corpse pose. Does death clear the mind of all thought? Or, does it open the mind for every thought, all things ever known, flooding into the mind like water from a broken tap?

"Slowly move your fingers and toes and prepare to sit up," Katie said.

I realized I'd not been practicing my relaxation or deep breathing. Likely as not, I was leaving yoga class tonight in worse mental shape than when I'd arrived.

There's something about a job, work, that keeps your mind off things, at least for a while. But once in yoga, as I start to wind down from the working world, the relaxation creates a vacuum, and all the random thoughts take advantage of the space and rush in to fill the void.

Claudia is one of those thoughts that is better left at work, in the past – anywhere but in your head. She also is one of those thoughts that demands to be front and center, not willing to be relegated to the past.

That's one of the reasons I finally left her after trying to flee since the second week after I met her more than twenty years ago. Claudia simply demanded too much. Everything. Always. Now.

As I rise to a sitting position, I breathe in Pensacola. I smell the salty ocean air as I go

across the long bridge over Pensacola Bay that leads into the town of Gulf Breeze.

A mile away, parents are unloading cars of white, chubby, spoiled kids in multi-colored swimsuits fresh from Wal-Mart. They have flippers, diving masks and round air rafts decorated with dolphin motifs. They move about the beach like salted slugs, rolling slowly from side to side as they poke their fat faces up to meet the searing sun.

“Okay, sit up,” Katie said, breaking the spell that had held me in the land of plantations, cotton, and more recently, paper-mills and sprawling, antiseptic coastal communities.

That’s where Claudia had been living – and dying – for the last few months. The promised “magic of beach living” didn’t help her situation. The housing development was called Sea Spray. The houses, all of which fell under strict building codes and as a result looked identical, were made to appear like rustic 1920s coastal homes from New England villages. Porches, screen doors and windows adorned with storm shutters graced each of the homes, and all were painted in the pastel colors of a vintage Miami.

“Brittany Spears has a condo not far from here,” Claudia had said during a late-night phone call after moving into the community less than two years ago. “And Al Green has a house on the beach just right down the street. I ride by it on my bike on the way to the market.”

She’d always been impressed by celebrity. Never mind the fact that Claudia couldn’t possibly afford to live in the neighborhood had it not been for the realtor she’d taken up with just months before. Problem was, Claudia was always taking up with someone – someone richer, hipper and cooler than the last.

Those were really the only criteria. Looks were secondary and age unimportant; that was apparent from her last move upward. Rick Price must have been in his late 60s. He was balding, poorly dressed, and, most agreed, had a personality to match. But he drove a Mercedes convertible when not in the Hummer that he used to show houses and home sites along the sandy and sometimes swampy coast line. Those material elements would have made Price appear seven feet tall and handsome to Claudia.

Fuck. Why am I thinking of this crap? It’s so easy for me to get caught up in resentments again, by wrestling with a fragile ego and certainly not finding the “peace” that was promised of the one-hour yoga class.

In truth, Price and all those before him had done me a giant favor, although it had taken years to realize that.

I was never going to make Claudia happy. I simply wasn’t “right.” I’m not even certain how we managed to hook up in the first place.

I really think ours had been a relationship of convenience – and lies – convenient in that it provided both of us with companionship.

Wait. What am I saying? There was never any true companionship. That was the biggest of the lies. Sex was really closer to the truth. And being completely accurate, the sex wasn’t great. It was at best mediocre and lackluster.

I always wondered if Claudia gave just enough in any relationship to spring the trap. Perhaps she had better skills that she could launch if the prior tools hadn’t gotten the job accomplished, starting with the least effort and only giving enough to reach the intended destination.

But here I am again – thinking myself into renewed jealousy and resentments.

What did any of it matter now? She was dead, and dwelling on resentments seemed even more petty than usual. And I could be petty.

If Claudia's primary fault was always looking for something grander, I existed in the land of the lesser. If there were a way to twist something into a morbid, feel-sorry-for myself, pity parade, I would be the grand marshal.

Maybe Claudia had it correct; life was about the taking, plunging a straw deep into the sweet nectar, sucking it up quickly, steadily, and when it was gone, finding a new piece of fruit, new situation, new person, new Him and sticking the straw in again. After all, in Claudia's realm, where a new dawn signaled an entire new world, the prospects were endless.

Goddamn it. Here I am again, trapped in self-righteous thought, standing alone in a darkened yoga studio while everyone else has already filed out.

Maybe, I could fly down instead of driving. It would save a lot of time. But I sort of relish the idea of the drive. It would give me time to prepare, to be ready for the clamor that is guaranteed with funerals, everyone loaded with false sadness and remorse, ready to heap a platitude on the deceased should anyone make small talk.

Who knows, maybe there would be real grief. Although where it would come from, I had no idea.

Thank God I have the locker room to myself. Seems no self-respecting guy will take Katie's yoga class. I've been told they find her too airy, her talk of peace, relaxation, and finding "your own nirvana" a little too hippie dippy.

The bench is cold, which sends goose bumps over my own white flesh.

Poor Claudia. In the end, Rick Price could have cared less. He took up with a bartender from the Crab Trap a week after Claudia's diagnosis. To make matters worse, the Crab Trap was where Price and Claudia had met only a few months earlier. His only grace was that he allowed Claudia to stay in the Sea Spray home until she was finally taken to the hospital, a trip with no return, no breathing in Jackson, or Fort Lauderdale or Miami. Claudia only got the permanent corpse pose.

I look down at old skin over old bones. At least, I hadn't gotten fat like so many in my age group. But the big blue broken veins showed the years, the wear and tear.

I was a young man when Claudia and I first met, not a bodybuilder, but fit. I was a runner – ten miles a day, every day, year round. My running was similar to driving, with various places along the route dredging up odd, yet familiar, thoughts.

There was one stretch through the park where I would always recall a small town along the two-lane highway that took me to my first reporting job in western Kansas. While running, I'd pass a stand of hedge. At that very moment, each time I passed this particular point, I'd think of that small town, a brick two-story building that stands – or stood – along the highway. A small former gas station sits adjacent to the brick building. Both appear abandoned.

Why these thoughts? What is the significance of this scene from my past, and what is the connection to this particular stand of hedge trees?

There's another similar recollection involving Claudia. For no reason that I can fathom, each time I make coffee and look out the kitchen window, I see Claudia during a trip we took to Jamaica. She's standing on the beach at sunset, looking out past the ocean to the horizon. That's the extent of the remembrance; although during the actual incident, I walked the fifty or so feet to where Claudia stood and asked her what she was thinking

That may have been the closest I ever was to understanding Claudia's true nature, however nebulous it may have seemed at the time.

In truth, there may have been good times or, at least, times that were tolerable. The summer we found a stray cat on a trip to Missouri's wine country was one. The cat, a thin, but large, black male, was walking along the blacktop road off the main highway. It was on a mission. Though obviously tired and starved, it was determined to find its way home.

Good luck. The poor bastard didn't realize it had been dumped out here, and the last thing in the world his former human family wanted was him to find his way home.

Even tempted with a can of pate we'd brought along for a possible wine, cheese and pate picnic, Jack, the name we'd given him in honor of Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, wasn't easily deterred from his journey. Eventually, he ventured out from the culvert he'd ducked into and greedily ate what had to have been his first meal in days.

Jack took to the pate and the cheese we'd brought, and, exhausted, agreed to get into the car, where he immediately fell into a deep, deep sleep on the back seat, among overnight bags and grocery sacks.

Jack lived with me even after Claudia didn't. Although she was affectionate to the cat, there was never an argument about possession. Her only comment was that she hoped he liked going back to the Midwest after living the luxury coastal lifestyle.

Truth is, we didn't live the life of the wealthy. We were not the usual radiologists or surgeons from Atlanta or Birmingham, who purchased multi-million dollar second homes along the coast. We weren't even the retired Canadian Snowbirds, who used government pensions to travel to the sandy beaches during the winter, a time when most locals wouldn't step foot on the beach unless the grouper were biting.

We had moved to Florida's panhandle, known affectionately to locals as the Redneck Riviera, after Claudia had seen a spread about the region in a copy of Southern Living magazine. I liked it fine. I got a job as a stringer on a tiny, twice-weekly newspaper, and Claudia began working a string of waitressing jobs that would lead her to her destiny at the Crab Track. Although, before Price, there would be trial flings with numerous bartenders, assistant managers and even the occasional busboy or valet.

We had a long-term lease in one of the area's first, then luxury, high-rise condos. The Sea Grass I and II towered above the glistening white sands. But their grandeur had long since faded, and other than the out-of-place vacationer seeking a low-budget weekly rental, most of the units were home to the elderly or otherwise disenfranchised.

Jack didn't mind that we lived on the eighth floor. He'd long gotten over his previous owners and was pleased with canned food and semi-regular brushing. I fell into a similar routine. Salmon or tuna right out of the can became a staple, and if only I'd had a seasonal brushing, I might have been content.

Summers were pleasant enough. In the evenings, I could walk the beach, and weekends allowed for short trips to Panama City or even as far away as the mountains of Alabama.

But Claudia didn't seek contentment. She sought whatever she didn't have. If she had a great week of tips, she wanted more shifts. If she got a certain look from one of the wealthy patrons, she demanded all his attention. Claudia's late nights and overnights turned into weekend training seminars in Fort Lauderdale and Key West.

But I was partly to blame. I was a pouting complainer who wouldn't find a life on my own. Why? I can't say to this day, nor can I explain why I stayed as long as I did in a relationship that I'd known from the start was sold on a false bill of goods.

I made friends with some of my co-workers. Darren, an underachieving photographer, was always game for a late night beer, so long as Auburn or the Gators weren't playing. Man, that's all the folks in northern Florida seemed to do, buy big screen televisions and watch Auburn football games – well, that and take off work earlier if the rumor of good fishing made the rounds.

In addition to Darren, there was Soffie, a buck-toothed South Carolina transplant who worked in advertising. She would accompany me on my otherwise solo treks to antique stores and thrift shops. We were both sort of hoping to find the same thing at these stores – the secret to our mutual unhappiness.

I pretty much alienated both of those relationships with my unabridged bashing of Claudia. Neither said much when I announced my imminent return to the Midwest.

Katie may be right. Perhaps the goal should have been to look for the light, to seek my own nirvana, my own “spiritual center.” It just seemed easier at the time to blame my unhappiness on someone else rather than to take responsibility.

And now, I was expected to come face-to-face with all these old cronies: jealousy, resentment, hurt feelings, self pity and animosity. I just wanted to wash them all away, like the grime and sweat from an hour of yoga.

Normally, the water in the health-club shower takes a minute to get hot, but then it delivers what I crave; it washes the day clean away. Sometimes, if it's hot enough, it washes away weeks and months.

I think that somewhere, maybe in one of those roiling Japanese baths, there is water so hot that like jewelry in a solvent, it can rinse away the tarnish of a rusted life. Water so hot and so pure, that you melt into the flow, merge with it to circle down the drain, inhaling and exhaling through miles of pipes and tubes, catching your breath as you're released, in a rush, into the open air; breathing past houses, factories, schools, business parks, past entire towns and even through other states; exhaling down small creeks and drawing long breaths across wide rivers, and finally merging with the infinite waters of the ocean, where one drop is like the next, and each breath merges with the breath of the world.

Peace. Nirvana. The perfect corpse pose.

I think I may write a note and send flowers. Claudia would expect nothing more.



The Drive

By Robin R. Light

Fog hung low in the sky,
October sun not yet warm enough to burn it off.
They left the place where burning summer
often skipped over to cold winter,
the leaves never burst with color.
They dealt with driving wind, dusty throats and eyes,
driving past harvested fields, empty pastures, waiting for the moment,
they crossed the invisible line.
Beyond the overpass, they saw it in a small huddle of pine trees
on a nearly empty prairie:
“Welcome to Colorful Colorado.”

The Two Kinds of Artists That Exist In This World Or Philosophy After a Bottle of Scotch

By Brandon Durkes

I hate calling anything that I do art. Art to me is a painting, a picture, something thrown onto a blank canvas without wide or college ruled lines with which to adhere. It's not words put to paper, it's shapes that haven't been invented yet sprawled across some shape that has a name; it's chaos presented on order. Other people will say that art is anything that the mind creates, and through some mathematic property I won't even pretend to know the name of, leads to every living person being an artist. These people are communists, and there is a special circle in Hell reserved for them. But I digress, until a new word is invented to label art, I will begrudgingly call it art. And I would say that I conform to the train of thought that art is something of an animal.

Going along with monotheistic beliefs instilled in me against my will at an age when I didn't have a real grasp on things yet, the animals were created by some faceless being, who by all accounts actually has a face that looks like everyone and no one, to inhabit this planet for some reason that has yet to be, and more than likely never will be, revealed. Yet, he, in his supposed infinite wisdom, put them here, and has yet to present a better model. In case you're lost, I'm implying that the artist is God.

And so, to get to my point, I don't see any rhyme or reason to critiquing art. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying, "Don't ask questions!" "The word on paper is unchangeable law!" I'm saying, "The artist had a message of some sort they were trying to convey, and by releasing said art in any capacity as a finished product, they are, by definition, finished." By critiquing such an animal, saying that it is wrong or it is right or it is uninspired or it lacks the same definition some other presumed artist conveyed, it is to say that you do not understand the nature of the beast!

For instance, the original wording of the prior sentence read at the end, "that you are not understanding the nature of the beast!" However, good old Word decided that what I meant to say was "That you do not understand the nature of the beast!" And while some guy decided a long time ago that it makes more sense to say it the way it sits in the above paragraph, my initial artistic vision said to put it so I would get a maddening green line beneath it. These green lines are the antithesis of what I believe art to be.

Art is violent, kids. Art is the inside of the brain. Artists are the ones who reach inside that mess of infinite possibility and pull out the original design of duck billed platypus {[henceforth known as artist number one) while the duck billed platypus will be known as the DBP] which implies the body of an otter, and the bill of a duck, sans tail, to clarify}. They don't conform, because conforming, as the wonderfully brash bully from seventh grade said in regard to something that has nothing to do with this particular line of thought, is for fags.

And hey, that actually works as a transition. This bully, who I will call "Neil Simon" for no reason, would always spout this particular line, no matter the context. For instance:

"Hey, Neil Simon, would you wanna hang out and play tennis?"

"Pshh, tennis is for fags."

And while I will not argue that the etymology of the term 'fags' in this context is offensive to people, I will argue his usage of the word. You see, Neil Simon is still an artist in my grand scheme of things. No, he didn't create the term fag out of a void of madness, but he conformed to the idea that another artist made, and made it his own identity. This will be what I refer to as artist number two, or, for the sake of more dialogue from the supposed mouth of Neil Simon, Neil Simon.

“That’s not art!” some will argue. “That’s plagiarism!” And yes, by definition, Neil Simon is a plagiarist. But let’s take a step back and look at artist number one for a moment.

What is it that is so inspiring about he who created the DBP? In times past, though times more recent than the actual invention of the DBP, creating a DBP would result in the creator, artist, what have you labeled a simpleton, slow, or, as our good friend Neil Simon would put it, a fag. Well, that is more or less the reason why he is an artist; he had the brass balls to step up to the plate, look society in the face and say that this otter needed the bill of a duck. And we hailed him for it.

Neil Simon works basically the same way, only different. His balls are brass, and he will also look at society’s face and tell us that the otter needs the bill of a duck! Only... he will do it a day later than artist number one. And in that one day, he will also throw a silly tail on it, and voila! Neil Simon has given to us DBP v. 2.0!

“Hold on now, Chuck,” you might be saying. “The history books show that Neil Simon came up with the DBP first.” And you’re right. The history books will say that Neil Simon did it first. But this, my friends, is where Neil Simon’s true art is made.

As you may have heard, history is written by those who win, or at least those with better agents. And Neil Simon will always have a better agent than artist number one, because Neil Simon, though unable to create something out of nothing, is quite capable when it comes to the business end of art. This is to be expected, since Neil Simon spends no time actually creating art (as defined by the people who say art has no definition) per se, just throwing ridiculous tails onto the perfectly capable work of artist number one, and exploiting it.

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And so... I guess if there’s one thing I’m trying to say, it is that everyone is an artist, and everything they do is art, from the chaotic lines that aren’t really lines thought up by artist number one to the lines that aren’t lines so much harder and more originally than the lines that aren’t really lines created by artist number one created by Neil Simon, introduced after the original non-lines were conceived by artist number one, but recorded as done by Neil Simon first because he has better representation, and won’t throw artist number one a bone because that would hinder Neil Simon’s ability to wipe the fecal matter from his behind with freshly minted thousand dollar bills, and honestly, who doesn’t want Neil Simon’s ass wiped clean with money that could be used to fund arts programs in schools and in developing countries? Fuck Neil Simon.

Last Minute

By Robin R. Light

It was a Friday. Wayne knew better than to go to Wal-Mart on a Friday, but he hadn't been thinking clearly when he'd pulled into the parking lot. He'd run in and grabbed the one thing he needed, hoping the lines at the express lanes wouldn't be too long. The minute he rounded the corner from Health and Beauty his hopes had been dashed. They were ten deep at every register. Getting into the shortest line he could, nine deep, he waited, shifting from foot to foot.

To Alex the beeping registers sounded like a bad symphony played by five-year-olds. The people around him stood with various expressions of annoyance, resignation, and loathing. One woman in the line next to him was bouncing a screaming two-year-old on her hip, looking frazzled with uncombed hair with a Cherri-O in it. He looked at her purchase on the counter: a pregnancy test. He rolled his eyes.

Alex looked down at his own purchase, sending up a short silent prayer. One little box. Alex cursed himself for not going to a gas station instead of Wal-Mart. Turning back to his line, Alex let out a groan as the woman two people ahead of him argued about her coupon.

Wayne wished the damn cashier would hurry. It seemed she wanted to tell her life story to everyone. And now the lady in front of him was arguing with the cashier about a price or coupon or something. Why did the little old ladies always argue when the price was only going to be 15 cents different? Finally, the lady seemed appeased and finished. He avoided the cashier's questions and her eyes to escape conversation. All he wanted was to buy his damn condoms and leave. He had to get to Celeste's. They only had an hour and a half before her husband got off work.

Alex watched as the guy in front of him left. The guy bought the same thing Alex was buying. Ah, Friday night. Alex paid for his condoms and left the store at a stroll. Maybe he should buy flowers, of course, that would mean he'd have to go back in and get in line. He stopped outside the sliding door and looked back in. The lines were still there, people with crossed arms and frowns, screaming children and beeping registers. The flowers were right by the door, but he'd have to wait another thirty minutes before he'd get back out if he was lucky. No, he decided. Coming home an hour and a half early for the first time in a year was enough of a surprise.

The Looking Glass

By Marcus Briggs

To hate that which you are,
To love that which you are not,
To touch the one that exists only in your delusions,
To forsake the one that held you close,
To cherish everything that you are not,
To reject the things that matter most,
To love those around you,
To hate the one that stays with you,
To destroy yourself and yet help build the ones who cause your destruction,
To one day find yourself in a world of ruin, which is your life,
To one day see a shimmering light that seems to cut through the ruins of your life,
To walk up to the shimmering light only to see that the light is you,
To stare at yourself and see all that is, has been, and could ever be,
To realize that, though you can become anything in this world, you cannot become what you weren't meant to be,
To realize that though you want what someone else has, you have something that they could only dream of,
To look at yourself on this glorious day and see the beauty that was once masked by the veil of darkness,
To one day look at your ruined life and begin to rebuild it brick by brick,
To stand tall on the mountain and look down at the life that has been rebuilt,
To love yourself first, and still love those around you,
To see the light for what it has always been,
To understand that the light is and will always be the thing that holds you close,
To have truly looked at yourself inside the Looking Glass.

For Alanna
by Sarah M. Moppin

I remember you're gone
as the corn rushes by.
I remember you're gone
as the tires whine.
I remember you're gone
as night falls on.
I remember you're gone
as the spot draws near.
I remember you're gone
as the white cross appears.
I remember you're gone
as the road rolls on.
I remember you're gone.

The Gift

By Ryan Davis Anderson

I can still remember
The anticipation of the day
Lost in the childhood wonder
Of a fat man with a flying sleigh
The excitement we felt
My siblings and I
Not able to sleep
As time slowly passed by
Straining our ears
Hoping for a sound
The tell tale laughter
That Santa was in town

How clever we thought
That we might be
If we could catch Santa
Under our tree
But the night would catch up
And we'd drift off to sleep
Lost in the dreams
Of the treasures we'd reap

And early we'd wake
On the day Christ was born
To spy on our bounty
That crisp winter morn
And there under the bows
What would we see?
But a handful of presents
For my brothers and me
So we'd open our gifts
And together we'd play
While Mom made us breakfast
Singing carols shed sway
And Dad would just sit
In the corner and watch
With a strange look on his face
I never thought of it much
His face lit up with a smile
And a tear in his eye
It wasn't till I grew up
That I found out why

See when you're a kid
Joy comes from the gifts and the stuff
But when you get older
It just isn't enough
The stress of the year
It all goes away
When you see your own children
Lost in their play
And the impish smile
And the bounce in the stride
Of the beautiful woman
That stands by your side
You realize these things
Are worth more than gold
And your heart absorbs this
As the events unfold
As you watch your family from your
Chair, you never forget
The toil, the stress, the work
Was all quite worth it
And on that day
I had finally understood
That I had gotten the gift
That every father should
And on that day
It had become quite clear
Our gifts to our fathers
Are that smile and that tear

Healthy Dessert

By Sarah M. Moppin

The woods were damp, like always, but today, it was cooler. The summer heat which had been stifling and holding her back for weeks, months, had finally broken with a wild storm this morning. The ground soaked up, leaving nothing but the scent of damp earth. With the rain came a northern breeze that dropped the temperature to a cool 80 degrees, a welcome change from the near triple digits. The sky was still overcast, another storm looming, but Sadie ran anyway. She ran every morning; the same path she'd worn through the leaves over the years. This morning the moisture in the air cooled her skin and the smell of the earth, leaves, and grass boosted her energy. She felt like she could run forever, needed to run forever. This morning, before her run, she'd peed on a little stick and almost immediately, the little plus sign appeared. She peed on a second stick and again the plus sign appeared. She'd taken the tests on a hunch, not because she was late, and today at 3:00 she would know if the tests were correct, after she went to the doctor's and peed again, this time in a little cup.

Sadie finished her run and her cool down walk back to her house. She showered, changed into comfortable clothes, and sat down to kill the five hours until her appointment. The wallpaper of a lake surrounded by mountains stared back at her from her laptop's screen. She had memos to write, files to organize and research to do, but she didn't. Instead, she stared at the screen. After twenty minutes, eyes burning, Sadie had started to work on several things, but after a few minutes she'd get distracted, quit, and start something else. Sadie stood up from her desk in disgust and walked out of the room.

Sadie went to her hamper and carried her laundry downstairs to the basement. She put her clothes into the washer, poured in the blue liquid soap, and started the load. She mopped her kitchen floor, then switched the laundry, then vacuumed, then ate a Warm Delights Molten Chocolate Cake, then dusted, then vacuumed again after she realized all the dust was now just sitting on the floor. Next, Sadie sat on her linen colored couch and had a break down.

The little plus signs this morning had been the result of the Fourth of July picnic and too much wine. The museum she worked at held a picnic every summer and this year, as always, it had been a hot, but breezy day. Sadie ate fried chicken, potato salad, and three pieces of chocolate cake. As she ate, she'd been drinking cheap wine and talking to Mark, a fellow researcher whose office was down the hall from hers. They'd danced around each other, flirting, for the last six months, since he started working at the museum.

Three weeks ago, Sadie had been at the dessert table set up under the shade of a maple tree, debating a second piece of chocolate cake when Mark came up beside her. She'd seen him earlier and she'd said hello, but she couldn't bring herself to flirt openly at the picnic, she thought it might make her look desperate or pathetic.

"That chocolate cake looks good. Is it?" Mark asked.

Sadie just looked at him for a moment and debated whether he'd seen her eat the first piece. "It was good last year. Helen made it. She can cook like the devil." She decided to take a second piece of cake.

She watched Mark for a second; he looked to be deliberating over desserts, never taking his eyes from the table. His dark hair was ruffling slightly in the breeze, giving him a rugged look.

He took a piece of carrot cake. Out of all the desserts, most of which were already half gone, the carrot cake was unique. It was uncut. Mark looked up at her. "What?" He asked, sucking some of the white icing from his thumb. "I like carrot cake."

Sadie turned to find a seat in some shade. The only seats in the shade were on the ground. She decided she wasn't too proud to sit in the grass; besides, jeans wash. She sat with her back against an oak tree, and, surprisingly, Mark sat next to her; Sadie felt her eyebrows rise.

“Sorry,” he said after he looked at her face. “Did you want to eat alone?”

“No. You just surprised me, that’s all.” She took a small forkful of her cake. “Why do you like carrot cake?”

“Honestly?” Mark asked between bites of his cake. Sadie nodded. “My mom used to make me carrot cake for every birthday. She thought that all junk food was bad for you. She was always worried we would be obese if she dared to let us have sweets. I guess she thought carrot cake was healthy. We never had the icing though. I like it better with the icing, not that I’d ever tell Mom that.” He ate another bite. “Why do you like chocolate?”

Sadie stared at him. “Really? I mean, it’s chocolate. I am all for healthy, but when it comes to chocolate I have no logic. It’s like eating a slice of happiness.”

Mark smiled. “I think that that is the corniest thing I have ever heard.”

Sadie smacked Mark playfully on the shoulder. “So? At least I’m not the one who likes health food posing as dessert.”

Mark looked mock offended then they both laughed. “I’m going to get some wine, want some?” After Sadie nodded, Mark handed his plate to her and stood. She didn’t try to tell him she’d already had two glasses. She felt good, and she figured the wine would just enhance that.

Soon, they were both a little tipsy and they flirted more and talked more, had more cake, and eventually the heat led them back to his air conditioned apartment, where they proceeded to be busy for the rest of the night. The next morning, Sadie woke up before Mark. For a moment, Sadie sat in bed, the sheet clamped beneath her arms and holding her head before she quietly left the bed, got dressed, left him a note saying she needed to get home and she’d call him later, then she left.

For the last three weeks, Sadie had been avoiding Mark. Which wasn’t difficult really; she hid in her office, and she hid in the back of the museum setting up a display. She was always aware of footsteps on the wooden floor of the hall outside her office. She waited for Mark to come to her door, she looked up, dreading and hopeful at the same time, every time someone walked by her door, but he never came. Then Mark had left on a business trip and for the last week, since her hunch crept into her mind, she’d been working from home. Sadie had wanted the sex with Mark to be a one night stand; she didn’t want to deal with a relationship, especially one at work, until this last week. She hadn’t called him as she said she would, and she didn’t answer her phone when he called, twice before he left on his trip and once when he got back. All week, since she got the idea into her head she might be pregnant, she’d thought about a relationship with Mark. It didn’t seem like a bad idea anymore. Pregnancy had a tendency to put things into perspective. They didn’t really see each other that much at work. They never worked on the same projects. If it didn’t work out, it wouldn’t really affect her work. A relationship would have been feasible. But now, there was another complication.

After her nervous breakdown ended, Sadie got off her couch and washed her face, keeping the water cool for her heated skin. If she were pregnant, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. She was twenty-eight, had a good job, and could take care of the baby, or if she chose she could bypass all that and make an appointment at the local clinic. The only thing that was really a wild card was Mark. How would she tell him if she decided to keep it? They barely knew each other. They’d had the first date conversations and conversations about work, but she didn’t even know where he grew up or his parents’ names, or even his middle name. Who has a baby with someone when they don’t know anything about them?

At 3:15, she sat on a table in her doctor’s office, waiting. She’d peed in the little plastic cup they’d given her and now she sat on the table covered in paper kicking her feet like a child against the metal end and sitting on her hands. She looked up when the door opened.

“Okay, honey,” her doctor, Melissa Johnson, said as she shut the door behind her. “Your test came back and you were right, you’re pregnant.” Dr. Johnson’s voice rose at the end, betraying her excitement for her patient. Sadie wished she felt the same.

“You’re sure?”

“Sadie, you took two tests this morning and we did one, all three were positive. It’s pretty safe to say you’re pregnant. Now, from what you said you’re only two or three weeks along. I want you to start taking prenatal vitamins right away . . .”

“Uh . . . I am not sure I want to have the baby.”

Dr. Johnson looked at her for a second, betraying nothing, then she said, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. And I am not sure, but I don’t want to commit to anything until I am sure.” Sadie stood up. “If I decide to keep it, I’ll make an appointment. I’m sorry. I need to go.”

As she opened the door, Dr. Johnson put her hand on Sadie’s arm. “Sadie.” She turned around. “Are you okay? This isn’t the end of the world, you know. Take a few days before you make any decisions, wait until you’re rational. Do you want me to call you a cab?”

“No. I drove, and I’m okay. Thanks.” Sadie turned and walked out of the office. When she got in her car, she just sat there. She wasn’t surprised; she’d known she was pregnant before she ever went to the doctor. She reached for her cell phone.

“Mark? Hi, it’s Sadie. Listen, I was hoping we could talk. Yeah, about the Fourth. I’m sorry I didn’t call you, but we should talk. Can you meet me at Emerson’s Café, say, around four? . . . Yeah . . . Thank you, I’ll see you there . . . Yeah, I’m okay.” She put her phone back into her purse and sat; her mind tumbling over thoughts, lingering on nothing. Finally, she turned on the car and drove to the Café.

Mark was already at the Café when Sadie walked in. There were only ten tables in the tiny café and not one of their colorful tops was empty. Mark sat at a two-person table by the front window. She looked over at him. Mark hadn’t seen her yet, she didn’t think; he sat staring out the front picture window. Sadie looked the other people in the café over. It was mostly couples sipping their steaming drinks, basking in each other. They all looked happy, or at least content. She felt like her skin was trying to leap off of her body.

Mark looked up. She smiled at him and walked to the table as he stood up. “Hi. I’m just going to order something to drink.” She walked to the counter and ordered a chamomile tea. While she waited, she peeked at Mark over her shoulder. He looked nervous, but not annoyed. She sighed. She’d thought about it the whole way here: whether to tell him about the pregnancy or discuss the relationship first. She decided if she ever wanted to know how he felt she’d have to tell him about the baby after they discussed their relationship, if she told him at all. Sadie picked up her tea, sweetened it liberally with sugar and went to sit with Mark. When she sat down, he smiled at her.

“You look good. I feel like I’ve barely seen you since . . . Where have you been?” Mark said; he looked genuinely interested. Sadie took it as a good sign.

Sadie smiled and said, “I was hunting down the world’s perfect carrot cake.” Mark chuckled, and she continued, “I’ve also been busy with an exhibit, and then I worked from home this week.”

Mark just looked at her for a second and took a sip of his coffee. Sadie felt a shift.

“Sadie, you never called. And you’ve been avoiding me.”

Hoping to cover the guilt she knew must be naked on her face, Sadie took a drink of her tea. She kept the warm sweetness of the tea in her mouth, feeling it flow around her tongue before she swallowed.

“You’re right. I was avoiding you.” She set her tea cup down and leaned on the table, resisting the urge to try and take his hand.

“I had a great time at the picnic, and what happened after, when we, well, when we drunkenly slept together, was fabulous. And that’s not something I do very often . . .”

Mark sighed. “I would hope not. I don’t want to be a one-night stand. I admit that maybe when it first started that’s all I had in mind . . .”

“I did too.” Sadie said and sat back in her chair. Mark just looked at her. “I wasn’t planning on

sleeping with you, but when it looked like that was where we were headed I decided that was all I wanted. Then I woke up the next morning, and I realized what I had done, and I couldn't deal with that right then, so I left."

She leaned on the table again. "Now, after thinking about it, I think I might want to explore what this could be. We had fun at the picnic. Maybe we could try and date, if you think it could be more than just sex."

She stared at him, watched him process the idea. Mark didn't look at her. She could see his eyes moving over the table, although she guessed he wasn't looking at the colored tiles covering the top.

He looked up at her. "Why did it take three weeks for you to tell me all of this?"

Sadie took another drink of her tea. "Well. I . . . I haven't been with anyone in a while and the last relationship I had didn't go well, to say the least. Robbie wasn't . . . nice."

Sadie paused for a minute, remembering. Mark didn't say anything. "I lost myself in that relationship long before I ended it . . . I caught him with someone else. I don't want to lose myself to someone else again." She let out a long breath.

Mark looked at her for moment. She searched his face, but there was nothing there she recognized. She knew she came with a past, everyone did; most guys wouldn't want to wait and help her sort through it.

Finally Mark spoke, "Sadie. You just unload all this on me, what do you want me to say?"

Sadie rushed in, "I know. I know. I want you to be honest with me. I know we only had one date, if you want to call it that, but you must feel something for me. If you don't want to try then I'll accept that."

"What do you want me to say?" His voice was soft, like someone who cared, someone who had lost any trace of annoyance. "I already said I wanted more than a one night stand." Mark sat back in his own seat. "I can deal with your baggage as long as you can."

"That's great." Sadie smiled, a full, real smile, the first in three weeks. "Um, before this goes any further. I just want you to know that I like you too, and I meant everything I said." She paused and took a drink and refused to look at him. This was what she'd truly been dreading, she felt her stomach twisting, tightening. She almost wished he'd have said everything she didn't want to hear because then she wouldn't have to do this. "Mark, I'm so sorry to do this, but you should know that I am also pregnant. And it's yours."

Mark's mug clattered to the table, spilling coffee across the colored tile. Sadie shoved her wrought iron chair back from the table to avoid the steaming black liquid. She looked up at him. He was glaring at her; he ran his fingers through his inch-long brown hair and ignored the coffee spilling everywhere.

Sadie looked away from him, and his accusing glare, to the counter. "Can we get a towel?" The little sales girl nodded, rushed over, and began wiping up the coffee.

Sadie looked at Mark. He was no longer glaring at her. His face was blank. He waited until the girl left with the dripping towel before he said anything.

Hands on his hips, breath puffing through his nose, he spoke. "Why the hell didn't you tell me that first?"

Sadie didn't say anything. Mark stood up and headed for the door.

"Mark, wait." Sadie followed him out of the café.

Sadie stayed a step behind him. "Mark? Mark, I'm sorry. Listen to me, please."

Mark stopped. But he didn't turn around.

"I didn't know what to tell you first. You needed to know, but I wanted to know how you felt before I told you. I wanted to know how you felt about me first, not me and the baby." Sadie waited with her arms wrapped about her.

After a moment, Mark turned around. He looked hurt, confused, and angry. "I don't know what to think about all this. I don't hear from you for weeks; then you extract information about my feelings from me, the whole time knowing you're pregnant. Let me ask you this, if you hadn't gotten pregnant would you have called me back?"

Sadie looked at the ground, not wanting to meet the hurt look in his eyes. "I don't know. I think so. I thought about you, but I was so embarrassed I tried to avoid you, then you were gone, then I thought I was

pregnant. I barely had a chance to think about you without being pregnant.” She stepped closer to him, and was encouraged when he didn’t back away. She was aware of people passing them, staring at them having a fight. Their first big fight and they weren’t even dating. “I know that before we slept together I thought about you. I was interested, that’s why I flirted. But, then we . . . and I think I would have called you, had I not started to worry about being pregnant.”

“How do I know that?”

“I guess you’ll just have to trust me. Or try to. Just like you wanted me to trust you.” Sadie waited. She watched his face; he wasn’t looking at her, but around her. She’d felt calm for a moment in the café, now her skin was twitching and she was using all her will power to not fidget like a child.

“I need time,” Mark said, still not looking at her.

“Take all the time you need.” Sadie looked at him, eyes on his hurt expression as he turned back to her. “If you don’t want to be with me I’ll understand that, but you’ll have to make a decision on the pregnancy too. I know all this seems like a scheme or game-playing but I don’t expect anything from you. I want you to know that.” Sadie looked into Mark’s eyes. She didn’t see any reaction in them. It was as if he’d shut off. “I don’t expect anything.”

Mark looked at her, the look in his eyes softened a bit and Sadie saw something else shift, something she couldn’t define.

Then he spoke, “I need to think. I’ll call you in a few days.” Mark looked at her for a moment longer then he walked away.

Sadie watched him go. There was no anger in his step. Sadie watched until other people blocked him from her view.

* * *

Sadie spent the next two days trying to get her life in some sort of order. Sadie had to decide if she wanted to be a single mother with no support system if Mark decided he didn’t want to try and have a relationship with her, and he didn’t want to be involved with the baby. She cleaned her house, again. She ran twice as much as normal; to burn off all the cake she’d eaten. In between work, Sadie looked online: baby cribs, baby outfits, baby bedding, and baby toys. The circles her mind ran in made her weary. And true to his word, and a good sign, Mark called two days later.

“Sadie? We’re you sleeping?”

“Um...just napping,” Sadie said, sitting up on the couch. She waited as patiently as she could, biting her tongue to keep from blurting the questions on her mind.

“I’ve spent the last two days waffling between being angry with you and sympathizing with you. I realize now, after thinking about it, why you asked me about how I felt about you first. And I also realized there is no good way to tell a guy after sleeping with him once that you’re pregnant. I know what you do with the baby is your choice, but if you decide to have it, I do want to be involved. It is my child. I didn’t expect to have my first child like this, but . . . Anyway, if in the course of this pregnancy whatever we started before the picnic happens to work out, then that would be fine with me.”

Sadie waited but he didn’t go on. It was more than she’d hoped for, more than she’d expected. The tired feeling that had dragged her down the last two days dissipated, her skin stopped twitching, and she felt lighter. “I think that sounds like a good plan.” She waited.

He answered. “So, before all this, I was wanting to ask you, would you like to go to dinner?” Sadie heard amusement in his voice.

“I’d like that,” Sadie answered, feeling a smile spread across her face.

Is There No Mercy?

By Max Evans

A people
Black ... and illusive as shadows
Captured
Families
Broken
Histories
Shattered
Traditions
Torn
Transported to a land of beauty
Rich green mountains pungent with saltwater seas
A canopy of blue skies
Made to work in hot fields of cane
No rewards for the weary
Worship the King's god ... and pray

Prayers answered
- perhaps -
By rebellion and war

INDEPENDENCE

a vague notion

New kings as corrupt as the old
For most
 Purses of poverty pay for future pain
Death breathes deeply as hope exhales
Leaders burn tires around the shoulders of the rebellious
Tongues protrude from slashed throats
Green mountains devoured for fuel
Saltwater seas poisoned by the souls of the dead
All that remains is the hot blue sky
And for believers a god who will not forsake them

Then
 Mountains shake and the earth roars loudly
 Thrown into darkness
 a tomb for many

Is there no peace
No mercy

Oh Haiti...
 May Grief claim all that is hers

Hurts To Know

By Michael Kelley

Mom always said “Knowledge will quench your thirst”
But she never said such a drink would make me hurt

She didn’t tell me ‘bout the pain from news everyday
From Chinese minority riots to people round the way getting blown away

The depth of empty pockets in this recession
Protests in Iran for what seems like unfair discretion

When I tried to explain, people would say “What do you care for?
Don’t deliver us to enlightenment unless it’s at our front door”

For some reason I irked them; it’s havoc that I wreak
Instead of listening to what I know, they criticized how I speak

Now Mom raised me right, without having to ship me to a monastery
But why didn’t she tell me I’d be persecuted for my vocabulary

It’s scary, how teachers will give you props
Meanwhile kid gets dissed for wearing short shorts and mismatched socks

The answer, what I got for what seems a question of Catch-22
Is to knowingly be a nerd instead of fitting in as the fool

And of course, idiots don’t coincide when I gripe
They don’t smell the stench of ignorance or see the tears that I wipe

What I’m researching now are kids committing suicide cuz of some uncaring bully
But what’s more messed up is that I understand them kids fully

But I also love my mom too much, so I’ll continue to take that sip
Because I MUST learn, I’ll continue to take every bit

I love being smart, but it hurts, I mean IT HURTS to know
But what would hurt me even more is if I were to let go.

In the Library

By Sarah M. Moppin

“Look out!” The man’s warning, though helpful, came too late as the book I had desperately been trying to put away slipped from my fingers, and fell on my head.

He had dancing brown eyes; at least they looked like they were dancing as I blinked at his swirling face. “You took a good hit,” he said.

For a second I was going to tell him that I’d never done drugs when the instant before the book conked me flashed in my mind. “You were late,” I said.

“Well—”

“And don’t say ‘better late than never.’” I cut him off as he helped pull me to my feet. I leaned against the stacks trying to get my bearings, his body holding mine. I could feel the heat radiating from his body. The scents of leather, dust, and what could only have been him drifted across my brain. The closeness of the stacks, the smells, the warmth of his body made my head swim.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked.

I wanted to tell him as long as I could keep smelling him I would be fine; I could smell him forever, but instead I merely nodded.

“We should take you to the hospital. After a loss of consciousness it’s standard procedure to get a CT.” He was looking deep into my eyes.

A cozy ride, holding his warm, strong hand, sounded like heaven, goose-egg start or not.

“You’re a doctor?” I asked as he led me from the closing library.

“Almost,” he said.

My mother will love him. As I pondered what it meant to be an almost-doctor, I remembered my purse. “Wait. I need my things.”

I started to turn around, but he put his hand around my waist, and it felt good, it felt right. I could feel the heat through my clothes.

“I have your Louis Vuitton right here. I grabbed it before we started out.” He held up my brown and white bag. “It’s nice, even if it is last season.”

Damn.

Genesis

By Amanda Coyle

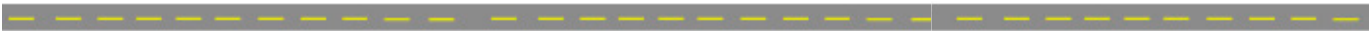
Summer nights drown in yellow cotton
Screams covered up by sitcom laughter
Struggling and drowning against the heavy weight rage filled by tears
Winter nights arms wrapped in cotton
Red water kept at bay by antiseptic and cool tile floors
Promises of violence in the dark
Words spoke to be forgotten
Red against the yellow cotton

I have seen the shining stars of my generation
How they dance on stage and sing songs to the bricks curled in bathroom stalls
I've watched them fall burning brightly in a glittering pyre fueled raging minds and morphine kisses
Our hands held tight in junkie shivers words expressed in shadow only to burn away in the morning chill

Neon is our altar puddles sacred wine soaked crimson pulsing in the rain
Beat and bevel break the sub space of thudding beats and rhythm
Cherry lips and golden curls pulled back against the satin
Violence and tears under the disco strobe lights

Yellow cotton sheets smothered and wet
Comforting words forced from the child
Rough hands against smooth skin
Welcome to the middle class facade
Lies and truths built and broken on memory lane
Beat downs and makeup line the hall of shame
Denial runs dark and heavy

Voices swung against the road a life lived out of back packs
Wandering road philosophies and love in twilight
Winter seems to lift her arms to spring
Born from the ashes once again
Battered boots and weary but happy faces seasoned by travel but ready for more
The child I have been is no more



One Hundred Forty Miles

By Sarah M. Moppin

Instead of across town, you're across the state,
69 highway stretches the distance between us.
Memories scattered along the empty fields.

Your two-day stubble against my neck,
stinging,
Your teeth course over my skin,
pulling,
Your tongue dips into crevices,
swirling,
all bring an ache,
sweet and deep.

Cougar slippers no longer trip me at the door,
cold un-rumpled modal sheets, smooth pillows
lacking your scent: sweat, tobacco, cucumber soap
all bring an ache,
sharp and deep.

The Shell Comb

By Isabeau Stewart-Martin

He started his day like any other, with his nagging wife shouting at him about something else she didn't like, that morning it had been how she didn't like the fact that his chosen home for her and their children was so close to the ocean. "What if the children wander out and drown?" She shouted up the stairs at him as he got dressed in his jogging sweats.

"Then you weren't doing your job well enough." Orlando called down with an angry huff as he tied his running shoes. Once... once she had loved the idea of living by the ocean. Once she had been happy... Her silence lasted until he appeared in the kitchen heading for the back door.

"Where are you going?" She snapped. "You know you have to take Jeremy to the teacher meeting this morning." Her dark hair was haphazardly pulled into a tail at the back of her head, wayward strands wafting across her face, once... he had loved those little details. But now as if he was incapable of remembering things on his own, she mocked him with her tone... She had picked up the habit sometime around their second or third year of marriage. Today, a part of him thought that even through the hardship of an arranged marriage, they would have found some way to be in love, that hope was slowly drowning.

"Jogging same as every other day." He replied pulling his sweatshirt over his head. "I'll be back in time to take Jer to his meeting." She hated that nick name, a part of him knew this, and used it, as retaliation. Petty and childish, but he couldn't help feeling vindictive, she nagged him day and night, they barely slept in the same bed as it was.

Orlando let the screen door slam, the instant loud crack drowning out if only for that moment the sounds of his wife's indignant and hurtful mutterings as she did the dishes before the boys got up. She hated him so much, and he couldn't figure out why.

Every morning from six to seven Orlando went to the beach and ran through the sand, the surf surging up to catch him if he got too close. It was his escape, his way out of a terrible day. Running helped him forget the nagging voice of his wife, the stress of his job, and an equally nagging boss... most of all, it helped him forget for a moment, who he was, and how his life had turned out.

It was cold this morning, the clouds gray and bleak leaking chilled drops of mist in a drizzle that stuck to his skin and hair like morning dew. Perfect weather for a perfect day. He thought sarcastically as he headed towards the beach, not even a half a mile's walk from his back door. He used to appreciate the view... thinking on that, Orlando used to appreciate a lot of things.

The moment his feet hit the soft pliable sand Orlando let the sound of strides pounding against the sand along with the drum line of his beating heart drown out the thoughts in his mind, and tune out the world around him. Just like every morning.

The rhythm broke just shortly after it had started, his heart faltering, his foot falls slowing, there was something missing, almost as if a part of him had been ripped right out of his body before he had a chance to notice anything was attacking. But those kinds of feelings were ridiculous, because there was nothing missing. Nothing wrong with him at all, Orlando felt absolutely fine. His stomach didn't pitch and roll in protest, his vision didn't blur and see spots, the goose bumps crawling up his arms were only a side effect of the chill in the morning air, nothing more. Unlike every other day, this day was becoming something out of the ordinary. Orlando's strides slowed all the way back to a crawling pace as he walked along the beach, frothy white foam seeping across the shore as the tide leapt forward to claim the land and fall back just to try again. Today he found himself staring out to sea, the choppy waves capped white and gray to match the sky. It took him a moment to remember even that he was walking before he realized that his shoes had been soaked, and he stood ankle deep in the continuous tide.

It was as the surf sand back out to sea before it redoubled its efforts that Orlando spotted something that seemed to sparkle as if the sun had hit it just right jutting out of the wet sand. It was purely impulse that drove him forward, his knees bending, arm out stretched. He snatched the thing with a hand full of wet sand up before the salty water could rush back over the object and take it for its self.

Dipping his hand back into the water as it coiled about his feet, the current too weak to take him back with it, Orlando shook his hand about, loosening and clearing away most of the sand as he brought the object back up. A pretty little thing, the comb itself was made out of bone, the type of ornate object a young princess would wear just to hold her long ebony bangs at bay, a beautiful accessory to a beautiful woman, the shell shimmered in all different colors, the primary decoration of the hair comb, the inlay set up to resemble flower petals blooming towards the sun.

His mind wondered, who did the pretty little thing belong to? Was she pretty? Was she young, single, waiting for someone, for something to find her? Orlando shook his head, the wayward thoughts pulling out the loyal side of him, its rational voice chastising him for thinking such things while he had a very capable wife at home, with two children and a third on the way.

Though, he couldn't banish the vision of a gorgeous woman with long ebony hair and a soft easy smile... she smiled just for him.

Face coloring with heat Orlando turned to look back out at sea, and found his heart racing as he paused, confusion furrowing his brow as he stared at the waves.

She moved with the water as though one with it, rising and falling like the waves, just beyond the underwater cliff were the sand and shore stopped and fell down towards the deep ocean floor. Was she swimming? In this weather! Daft... she would catch a cold... she could be taken further out to sea, the undertow and currents...

"You," she said in a singing voice that slid over his senses like the water around his ankles, the sound carried, almost as if it were one with the crashing waves, she and water, there was no difference between them, "seem lost."

"How so?" As if having a casual conversation with another jogger he'd met on his morning run, the confusion echoing around him, there was something about this moment, something too dream-like to be real, and yet here he stood.

Orlando couldn't help the reality of the situation, and the thoughts of his mind, how cold she must be, how she shouldn't be swimming, how dangerous it was, how the water couldn't have been above freezing, it was after all half way through winter here.

"Only those seeking find my comb, and only those lost can see me." She said, as if talking right next to him, not some feet away rolling with the water. "You are lost at sea, like a wayward sailor."

"Aren't you cold? You should come back to shore; you really shouldn't be out there swimming." His hand went to the hem of his sweatshirt, she would need it...

"Come for a swim Orlando." She called with that laughing voice and easy smile. "Come swim with me."

There was little reason left in his mind, like someone else was controlling him from afar, while he sat inside his own head watching in disbelief. He'd never jump into the water... He wasn't the greatest swimmer when it came to the ocean currents... it was near suicide. And yet, he walked towards the cliff, the water leaping up around his knees, then his waist until he could swim without hitting the sandy bottom. Orlando took three quick over hand strokes to her side, where he tread water, panting and waiting.

She smiled that easy smile as he shivered, holding out her hand she continued to smile. “Let’s see if we can find you.” She said, and he took her hand.

There isn’t much after that initial smile and offered hand that Orlando remembered as a single moment of importance, every moment that followed those separate actions seemed to blend together into one long string of motion, none stop, and perfect.

The world took on a tint of blue hue that saturated and soaked into every image, and memory, like looking through water without the irritation. They swam, they went running, they laughed and sang together, one day after another he found happiness. Remembered the taste of the sun and the breath of a lover worthy of the name, all the things he was missing in the realm of reality, Orlando experienced in this dreamscape.

One moment she was a fish, tail long and covered in scales that glittered and gleamed like precious jewels as they swam along the bottom of the ocean through shipwrecks and in the next breath he danced with her across the sands. He didn’t recall the color of her hair nor the scent she alone carried, but he remembered the sound of her laughing voice.

“There’s the Orlando I know.” She whispered in his ear as he held her close. “The man I fell in love with, who I’ve had three children with, the man my father picked out for me to marry; dearest Orlando why did you leave me?” And in the next moment his arms were empty and she was calling out her accusing questions far out at sea, swallowed up by rolling waves.

Orlando stood alone and isolated on a single two by two rock jutting out of the waves by mere inches, he held his hand out to her calling her name but she only seemed to get further and further away. “Arielle.” The name burned in his throat as he called and screamed long after she vanished from sight. The name of his bickering spiteful wife...

He thought of her then, dolled up in her mother’s wedding gown, soft black hair piled and coiled atop her head, heavy curling coils falling and bouncing as she moved. That was the day he really fell in love wither, the smile she seemed to have just for him, the smile that vanished a year later after their first son Jeremy was born. Orlando had gotten his promotion that year, he’d picked up running in the same year. So much had changed, it had been his fault... she hated him because he hated himself. It took him hours to figure this out, hours sitting alone on the rock out at sea.

“I get it now.” He whispered, “I understand now.” The waves rolled around him spraying him with salt mist like a fine shower spray.

“Good.” He heard the voice but couldn’t see anyone or thing for miles but rolling water that seemed to grow higher and higher with each new wave. “Now you’ve been found.”

The water grew more turbulent, splashing up around him for a moment Orlando thought to be scared, letting the panic tense his body and blind his mind, the water settled in the same instant and he realized that it was the magic of this place, of this ocean, of the woman with long black hair and glittering tail, it was time to go home. The instinct, like before, took hold and Orlando leapt from his rock, he waited for the initial cold splash, the tight suffocating feel of water closing in around him, but all he found was sand.

Turning over onto his back, the barest breath of water washing over his finger tips as the tide turned back to sea, ever so slightly leaving the sandy shore. The sun had breached the dark gray layer of clouds, cascading fractured beams down against the waters surface much like he had cracked through his own wall of clouds, maybe she was right, maybe he was found.

Checking his watch Orlando groaned about being soaked and covered in sand before he rolled to his feet, he had just enough time if he hurried. Without questioning the laps in time, or the strange daydream experience he jogged away from the beach towards home.

Arielle was making the children breakfast when he came in sopping wet and covered in sand as he was. “Orlando.” She snapped “What on earth...” He caught her in his arms, spinning her around ending her protests as he danced her around the kitchen before kissing her full on the lips like he used to.

“I’m sorry I’ve been gone for so long.” He whispered hugging her tightly.

“What has gotten into you?” She whispered hardly believing him as she stood stiff in his arms. Her reluctance to cave in took his breath away.

“I found myself.” He murmured. “I’m sorry its been so long sense I showed you how much I loved you, told you how much I needed you. I love you so much.” He said looking her in the eyes her pretty brown eyes.

“Orlando.” Breathly and full of tears she was crying as she leaned forward and took him in her arms, embracing him for the first time in ten years.

He remembered that day as if it were just last week, though it had been four years. Stretching carefully Orlando turned in the hammock that had been tied between two trees near the beach, a sleeping boy curled against his side. David was going on eight, Jer was out on the beach kicking a soccer ball back and forth with a few friends, it was hard to believe he was sixteen already, turning his attention from the boy in his arms he smiled up at his wife.

Arielle sat in a comfortable looking fold up chair, their four year old daughter snuggled up for her nap, soft blond curls twisting and laying against her plump little cheeks.

“We did good.” She said with that easy smile he’d come to love.

“Yes we did.” He agreed brushing a few strands of soft blond honey hair from David’s forehead.

It was the ivory and shell comb in her hair that reminded him of that day so long ago, that day he realized how much he had changed, how much he had left behind, and what it was he was missing. All because of a shell comb.

Radiation Rhapsody

By Amanda Coyle

Blazing light fell across the devastated wasteland
Such potential had be granted such love
Wretched creatures toiled through fields of glass and sand
Fallen heavy by radiation and heat
No flowers grew no water flowed
Hungry earth drank greedily blood spilled on burning land
Such potential was given, such waste
Twisted visages replaced works of beauty against the hole in the sky
Cracked vessels crying out for relief in a hell of their own design
A pitiful aria of devastation
With one step ushers forth destruction
With one step ushers forth creation
The goddess rose and took pity upon the broken figures whom raised their dirty faces to the sky from a land
drained of color and substance
She cast her arms wide voice raised in silent song
The wasteland eclipsed in sound and light
In silence the world burned clean washed by purifying rain the goddess wept

Change

By Robin R. Light

Pines dance in the breeze like ballerinas on stage, releasing their tangy sticky scent to drift with the homey scent of earth and moist brown leaves.

Fire crackles on the stone hearth chasing away the frost biting the air around the cabin; crystals gather on window's edge framing the cold outside.

White dancers show off with the music of the wind, drifting down on the wooden deck snuggling together against the bite sweeping in from the north.

Buds stretch into the weak sun, the cold of the earth fading in the day, green gaining confidence against the gray and brown covering the earth.

Color explodes, purple lupine against green, twittering in the tender breeze sweeping up from the south, red buds bloom flooding the earth with regal color.

Heat climbs the hills drying the grass leaving it brittle; sun burns the spring from the ground, melting the last of winter's snow from the peaks.

Yellow grass bristles against the southern wind, the last of the wild flowers brown in the sun, wet heat hovers day and night praying for a front from the north.

Days grow shorter and the wet heat changes to cool fog, trees shed their summer foliage in showers of crimson, gold, and chestnut.

Pastry Balls

By Vicki Wendt

SETTING/CHARACTER PAGE

SETTING: Takes place in a kitchen of moderate size so there is room for table. It could take place in any city in the U.S.

CHARACTERS: Danielle – Slightly ditsy, enjoys cooking, slightly homey type but works a full time job; age 20 – 30 years old.

Megan – Bit of a smart mouth with strong opinions. A career woman, knows what she wants; age 20 – 30 years old.

Amber – A sweet tempered young woman who tries to be supportive of her friends; works full time; age 20 – 30 years old.

Lights up.

(Danielle is starting to put a platter on the table set for three people.)

DANIELLE

Ladies....dinner's ready.

MEGAN

(Enters)

Good, I'm starving.

DANIELLE

Want one?

(Hands Megan the platter.)

MEGAN

What is it?

DANIELLE

It's called....don't know....just one of my creations.

MEGAN

Oh, no, not another one...Hey Amber, want to go out for dinner?

AMBER

Aren't we eating in tonight?

MEGAN

Not anymore.

AMBER

(Walking in)

Didn't Danielle make dinner? Oh no....she didn't?

MEGAN

(Hands the platter to Amber.)

Oh. Yes, she did. God only knows what it is. So, you want to go out and eat? Or stay in for this?

DANIELLE

Hello, I'm right here.

MEGAN

And so you are. And no, I don't want one of your creations.

AMBER

Me neither.

(Hands the platter to Danielle.)

DANIELLE

I'm getting a little offended if you want to know...

MEGAN

It's not you who should be offended, it's us.

AMBER

Sweetie, don't be upset, it's just that...

MEGAN

Your creations can turn out...

AMBER

Rather interesting!

MEGAN

Interesting, my ass.

AMBER

Megan!!!

DANIELLE

Well, at least I try. I think it's important to have a home cooked meal every night. Do you know how many nights a week you two eat out? Come on, give it a try.

(Hands the platter to Amber.)

AMBER

I haven't kept track...

MEGAN

Every night when we know it's your turn to cook.

AMBER

Hush... that's not true.

DANIELLE

Thanks a lot. Could have saved myself a lot of time and energy and not cooked at all.

MEGAN

We can dream.

AMBER

Stop it, Megan. Danielle, sweetie, we do enjoy your cooking.....for the most part...well sometimes. It's...we never know what's going to be waiting for us.

(Amber hands the platter to Megan.)

MEGAN

Road kill usually.

DANIELLE

Well, excuse me, Miss I-can't-boil-water-without-it-burning.

MEGAN

At least I know I can't cook.

(Hands the platter to Danielle.)

DANIELLE

I can cook.

MEGAN

If that's what you want to call it.

AMBER

You can cook very well Dani, like your lasagna, that's absolutely delicious. Course, we can't have lasagna every night of the week.

MEGAN

Not if we want to continue to fit into our clothes.

AMBER

(Takes the platter from Danielle.)

Okay, look, why don't we sit down try it? It definitely smells.....

MEGAN

Say it, I dare you.

AMBER

Well, interesting at the very least.

MEGAN

Chicken.

(Sits down at the kitchen table.)

DANIELLE

(Takes platter.)

Oh, good, I know you two are going to love it. I was watching the Food Network.

MEGAN

God help us.

AMBER

(Sits down next to Megan.)

Please, let her finish.

DANIELLE

Thank you Amber, at least I know who my real friend is.

MEGAN

Friendship has nothing to do with the quality of your cooking. Please continue.

DANIELLE

What?

AMBER

Food network...tonight's dinner...

DANIELLE

(While she's talking, she places several pastry balls on each plate.)

DANIELLE cont'd

Oh, yeah, food network...that's right...I was watching that one show – oh shoot – oh, oh, that's it, "Almost Home Made."

MEGAN

I can only hope you got the recipe for this creation from that show?

DANIELLE

Uh, no.....

MEGAN

So what's the point?

DANIELLE

I'm trying to tell you, if you'd quit interrupting.

AMBER

Please Megan, let her finish.

MEGAN

(Symbolically zips her mouth closed.)

DANIELLE

(Sits down.)

Thank you. Okay, so, like, I was in the grocery store and I remembered how she said that you can take ingredients already cooked or in cans or jars and whatever, you know, already prepared, everything doesn't have to be from scratch. So I headed toward the pickles after I picked up a jar of artichokes.

AMBER

Pickle and artichokes?

MEGAN

You asked.

DANIELLE

But I stopped at the meat counter and got to talking to the butcher and he mentioned fresh liver...

AMBER and MEGAN

Liver!?!

DANIELLE

Yes, liver. It's really good if it's cooked right.

MEGAN

(Acts like she's going to stand up to leave.)

I'm out of here.

AMBER

Please sit down.

MEGAN

(Settles back in chair.)

Doesn't mean I'm going to eat.

DANIELLE

Why? Oh, no, sorry, there's no liver in this.

(Passing the platter under Megan's nose.)

We were just talking about liver and I thought of chicken gizzards.

MEGAN

Now may I leave?

AMBER

Please Megan...so, these are chicken gizzards?

DANIELLE

No. I thought about them and then decided that they wouldn't work in this situation. But, I did buy some for another day, put them in the freezer.

MEGAN

You will warn us ahead of time, right?

DANIELLE

(Gets a bowl of dipping sauce from kitchen counter.)

Very funny....ha...ha...ha. Now where was I? Chicken gizzards. Then I saw the fresh fish, did you know they sell octopus?

AMBER

Octopus? Like in eight-legged-under-the-ocean Octopus?

MEGAN

I'm going to be sick.

DANIELLE

Not in here you're not, but don't worry there's no octopus in them. I picked something out even better.

AMBER

(Picking at one of the pastry balls on her plate.)

Better?I see red coming out of this ball.

DANIELLE

Oh no, didn't it get cooked all the way?

MEGAN

That's it. I'm going out. Want to come Amber?

AMBER

I don't know...Dani went to all this work.

MEGAN

She can come.

DANIELLE

Thanks, but no thanks.

MEGAN

Come on Dani, those things do not look edible.

DANIELLE

Don't let me stop you. I'm not going to force you to eat something you don't want.

AMBER

Come on Megan. Don't do this. She went to all this trouble.

DANIELLE

Like Megan cares how hard I work.

MEGAN

I care. Okay, I'll stay. Just tell me, for God's sake, what's in these little things?

DANIELLE

Forget it. You can either eat it or not. I work hard all day too, and then I come home and try to make a nice dinner and all you want to do is complain and make rude comments about my cooking. Go out tonight, I don't care.

AMBER

Come on sweetie, come with us. We'll go see a movie after we eat.

DANIELLE

Thank you, no.

MEGAN

Okay, look, I'm sorry, maybe I was a little rough on your 'cuisine'.

DANIELLE

A little?

MEGAN

Okay, a lot. But truth be told, I could not eat those things right now if you paid me. They might be heaven on earth, but I am not in the mood to try. Come with us. There's that movie you two have been talking about, we could go see that. I'll pay. And, I promise to try your next 'creation' without any complaints.

DANIELLE

No thanks.

AMBER

You sure?

DANIELLE

Yeah.....and really, I'm okay....guess I'm just a little too sensitive sometimes.

MEGAN

That would be an understatement.

AMBER

Okay, enough! I'll stay if you want.

DANIELLE

No, go on. I'm 'in a mood', but you know me, back to normal tomorrow. But.....thank you for asking.

MEGAN

Okay, let's go. If we leave now, we won't have to hurry through dinner and we'll be able to catch the ten o'clock movie. Sorry Danielle.

DANIELLE

No more apologies. Go on, have fun. I'll just clean up and curl up with a good book. But remember, no complaints the next time.

MEGAN

Promise.

AMBER

Bye. Love ya.

DANIELLE

Bye, bye. Love you too.

(Amber and Megan leave)

DANIELLE

(Picks up her phone and dials. During the following conversation, she slides a previously hidden baking dish into the oven, removes one of the place settings from the table, leaving it set for two and lights the candles for an intimate evening.)

Hi, Nick. It's me Danielle.yes, they're gone... An hour? Great, dinner will be ready... Yes, I made your favorite – lasagna... No, they've gone out for the evening...No, I am not ashamed of you. I just want you to myself a little longer before they realize you exist....No, they're great, really, just very protective. They forget I'm a grown woman...How'd I talk them into it? It was their idea; didn't have to ask them at all. Oh, and I made those strawberry cream cheese pastry balls you like so much.

(Picks up a pastry and pops it in her mouth.)

Lights out.

