



MOSAIC

a compilation of creative writing
by The Cartel Collaborative

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Introduction

It's All About Connection. That's how this project began. From the moment I decided to get serious about doing this 'writing thing,' I believed that becoming a writer was to be a fairly solitary enterprise. I kept this image in my head of working alone in a dimly lit room, pounding away on the keys of a terribly abused typewriter. On one corner of the desk would be sitting an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts, and on the other, a glass of Scotch. There was a very 'Hemingway-esque' feel to this vision, and so for many years I labored on this way in pursuit of my dream (well, not so much the smoking thing, I'm asthmatic, but the glass of Scotch, hell yeah!).

I'd get home after work and make a beeline straight for my computer. My goal was to transform writing into my real job. So, every night I'd write page after page, story after story. The journey I was on required paying my dues, building my resume, and learning the craft. This became my way of life. This became my religion, a devoted artist in search of my big break. You know what happened? Nothing. Nothing happened and nothing changed. There were no big breakthroughs. There were no grand successes, and no strangers clamoring to get my autograph. In all those countless hours alone at my writing desk, I discovered that writing could be incredibly lonely, often unproductive, and very rarely was it glamorous. I will, however, admit that over time, I developed a real affinity for the taste of Scotch.

In the spring of 2014, I enrolled in an online writing course called “The Story Cartel” led by Joe Bunting. It centers on the principle that a writer looking to establish a successful career needs to build relationships and form alliances with other writers. Rule number one in the course is that your story is meant to be shared. Without sharing, without connecting, even a great work of art has very little value. The entire point of the Story Cartel class is to help writers get comfortable with sharing their stories. The program teaches you the techniques and methods involved in learning to critique other writers’ work as well as building an understanding about how to read what others have written. The goal is to establish trust and build communication between colleagues. Associating with other writers in this environment was something that I had almost no experience with. Interacting in such a vulnerable way brought with it a wide variety of fears and apprehensions: uncertainties about my writing abilities, the fear of rejection, even a sense of dishonesty in daring to call myself a writer. I felt that I lacked the proper credentials and the prospect of sharing my work with total strangers sent chills down my spine. I was terrified that I would not be taken seriously among my peers.

But through the course assignments, I discovered some really good writing by other members of the Story Cartel. I also received some incredible feedback on my own material. Each lesson I gained more and more confidence, and with that confidence I became more comfortable in my writing skin. Then I came to the lecture entitled, “It’s all about connection.” Joe told us that writers throughout history had often formed alliances in order to support and strengthen each other’s work. The point was illustrated with several examples. While living in Paris, Ernest Hemingway joined Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound to become part of “The Lost

Generation.” J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were members of The Inklings, a literary community around Oxford that met regularly at the local pubs to act as a critique group for one another’s writing. In the 1940’s Jack Kerouac, along with Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Lucien Carr formed The Beat Generation.

These examples were a revelation to me as a writer. Seeing how such legendary names had been transformed once they established these connections made me feel less timid about my own situation. The lesson helped me to see that, without the benefit of different viewpoints, a lone writer can lose the capacity to perceive clearly what he or she has written. Isolated writers run the risk of becoming stagnant if not given the benefit of diverse perspectives. The facts showed that being a contributor to a trusted cartel is not only priceless, it’s an imperative. The ideas and evaluations that a writer can receive from his or her peers provides the real key to growth as a writer.

It was at that moment that I came up with the idea of asking the rest of my classmates if they would be interested in collaborating on something together as a group. I proposed a project where all our different styles might come together to create something new and unique. We had been talking about building relationships and collaborating for several weeks in The Story Cartel, why not actually put those teachings into practice? The responses I received were overwhelming. Ideas poured in from everyone. Once the boulder started rolling there was no stopping it. This book is the result of those efforts.

Mosaic is the compilation of the works of nine members of the Story Cartel class. Each writer has a unique background. Every member is at a different point in his or her writing career. Some

already have several published works on their resumes, while for others this is their first exposure to the publishing process.

The term *Mosaic* describes art created by the assemblage of smaller pieces. This collection is the product of a writing *community*. Individual talents and effort came together to create a single work. The camaraderie and the relationships that were formed out of the process happened naturally, even effortlessly.

I am as proud of this project as any of my own singular efforts. In fact, I may be more proud because of what this book represents to me. For six months we worked together on *Mosaic*, the stories, the layouts, the whole thing from beginning to end. We did everything as a unit. The variety and depth of scope actually ends up being a microcosm of the much larger literary landscape that exists today.

The whole point of *Mosaic* was to elevate each writer's skills to another level by working together as a team and helping each other overcome our own fears and obstacles. I believe we have succeeded in that goal. We came together as writers in ways that I would have never been able to achieve by myself sitting alone at my desk. The benefit of collaborative efforts, especially for new writers, is that, as a member of a team, strengths are enhanced and weaknesses are offset. A poet can help give a rhythm and form to a fantasy writer's ideas. A mystery writer can help create suspense and tension during a historical writer's recounting of events. Everyone is connected. Every writer can add an extra something to another's work which may, in the end, set that work apart from the competition.

—James Lee Schmidt

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January 2015

The Poem, In Conversation

BY STEF GONZAGA

Four hours we've argued
Whether horses should graze or birds should perch,
Whether the father should weep or the mother should
dance,
Whether the I should speak or the you spectate.

For hours I've stared
At these blotted fingers
How they fumble with syllables,
Choosing enough lines

This incessant banter
Between space and form.

At times you refuse to speak,
Leaving me with blankness
Underneath the lines and blots
Of the pen, when in fact

Your silence is laughter,
The creases leading to symbols
That may blossom into finished work
Or turn back into empty shells

Scattered across the page,
Pathways forged between the cracks.



Play Well

BY JAMES LEE SCHMIDT

Don't mess with my weekends. Everybody understands exactly what that means. You better be dying or dead to disturb my time, and the second one can probably wait until Monday.

I've got baseball on my mind. Five days of complaining customers and bitching bosses and all I want now is to watch Kansas City crush St. Louis.

My sister's number pops up on my phone before I'm halfway to my car. I let it go to voicemail. Whatever she needs can wait until I've had my morning coffee.

Almost immediately, however, it starts ringing again. *This must be serious. She knows better than anyone not to bother me on a game day.*

I barely get my ear to the phone before I hear, "Zac! Can you watch Jess for me today?"

"Um. No," I say bluntly.

"Please, I'm desperate. Today's Tara's bachelorette party and I'm co-hosting."

"So take Jess with you."

"Take a six year old to a bachelorette party? Are you serious?"

"Maddy, The Cardinals are in town for three games. The frick'n Cardinals!"

“I know, but Jess was supposed to go to Wonderland today with some neighbors and one of their kids got sick last night so they had to cancel. I’ve got no one else to call.”

Her plea causes me chuckle and panic at the same time.

“Are you kidding me? Wonderland? Kids make me uncomfortable. All that screaming, and yelling, and crying. I’m getting a headache just thinking about it. “

“Jess was so looking forward to going there today and she is going to be devastated now if she can’t go. Look, you said yourself the Cardinals are in town for three games. Help me out today and tomorrow’s game is on me, primo seats behind the Cardinal’s dugout. You should really be able to give them hell from there.”

I remain silent for a bit until finally my sister says, “It’s for your niece, Zac.”

You played the guilt card, the Ace of Spades. I’ll remember that, little sister.

The conversation Jess and I had during the ride over to Wonderland has all the flavor of a rice cake.

“Are you ready to have fun at Wonderland?”

“Yes.”

“How’s school?”

“Fine.”

“Were your friends jealous to hear where we were going today?”

“No.”

Ten dollars and twenty-five minutes of my life are what it cost me to be ushered to a parking spot somewhere near Egypt. It will be a complete miracle if Jess and I ever manage to locate the car again before sunset. I paid ten bucks to park a mile away and carry Jess piggyback in the summer heat. What a sucker.

I check my phone. It's barely ten in the morning. I'm already wheezing and sweating like a pig in a bacon factory. The little bit of rain that came down last night is just enough to kick the humidity into high gear.

As we approach the park, vendors waiting in ambush assault us with carts full of T-shirts and trinkets. Like pied pipers, they sing out to the children, but I understand their tune perfectly. "Welcome, come drop a couple hundred bucks on popcorn and soda while we peddle cheap Chinese toys to your children."

I do my best to block Jess's view and usher her through it as quickly as possible. I see several adults, who have failed to escape, lugging huge effigies of Baxter Bear into the park.

The closer we walk to the main gates, the more tightly packed everyone gets. Soon we are elbow to elbow. The smell of perfume and deodorant can hardly mask the smell of sweating bodies. I look down to make sure Jess is still beside me, and see she is pinching her nose and trying to hold her breath.

A new bronze statue of the Wonderland characters stands at the entrance of the park, I still recognize most of them from the last time I wandered through these gates as a child. Bunny Beebop, Baxter Bear, even Professor Prospero, the great magician, are on it. All of them are depicted with huge smiles as they beckon people into the park. As we file past, I catch the dedication at the bottom of the base.

"Welcome all, to Wonderland. Behind these gates, a world of magic and wonder await you. Have fun, laugh often, and play well."

Play well? There're lots of incentives to do so at the prices you're charging.

I overhear part of an argument that has broken out between two women over a breach of line etiquette, one accusing the other of cutting in. *Play well, you dumb twits. Doesn't anybody read the signs anymore?*

An attendant relieves me of another fifty bucks at the gate. We are squeezed through a turnstile that's hardly big enough for Jess to fit through, much less my two-hundred ten pound frame. On the other side, the impatient line of people shoots out and scatters like buckshot from a shotgun. They rush off—down the pathways, desperate to be the first in line at some of the rides.

I make my way towards the large map at a fork in the path. Scanning the elaborate illustration, I recognize many of the rides and playlands from when I was a kid. It looks like Wonderland hasn't changed much in the twenty-plus years since my last visit.

I see “The Python” is still on the map. I remember the day I finally found the courage to ride it for the first time. *I'd like to ride that again, but it might be too advanced for Jess.*

Baxter Bear is walking around, shaking hands, and taking pictures, even on this muggy day. I've got to hand it to him. He has to be sweating his furry butt off, and yet he still manages to stay in character. He throws a high-five up for Jess, but instead of hitting his hand, Jess moves to hide behind my legs. I give a high five just to show props for his effort.

Over my shoulder, I hear the whooshing sound coming from the “Fury of the Amazon.” Any water ride is going to be popular today. I know that later I'll find myself desperately wishing to get in a boat, under the comforting spray and cool mist that has always surrounded it. *Mark that down for later.*

I can't seem to find Professor Prospero's Magical Carnie on the map. That's a shame. Jess might have enjoyed that. Professor Prospero might be a hundred by now, but that man could put on a magic show. His performances would have made the Vegas magicians envious.

Then I spot an old enemy still on the map. “The Bullet.” We used to call it the “Spew-It.” It was the Bullet that ended my Wonderland excursions. The day Wonderland decides to decommission that

ride, I will gladly show up with cutting torch in hand just to partake in its demise.

When I was thirteen, a kid named Todd Bickman dared me to ride “The Bullet” in front of everyone at Kristen King’s birthday party. Both of us had a crush on her, and I didn’t want to look like a wuss in front of half the school, so I accepted. Friends cheered me on as I waited in line pretending to be unconcerned. When it was my turn, the attendant escorted me to one of the gigantic cylinders and buckled me into my seat. I remember him asking me if I was scared, but I honestly don’t recall my answer.

He told me, “The trick to surviving the ride is to pick a point directly in front and just stare at it. Don’t try to look around, just concentrate on that point.”

Then with a wink he closed the door and locked me in. I trembled so hard I was sure the people outside could hear the rattling coming from my pod. Within moments, I was flying around and around and up and down. I tried to pick a point to focus on, but there wasn’t anything in that pod that stayed still enough.

Supposedly, The Bullet is designed to make you feel like you’re in zero gravity like an astronaut does. All I remember is running to the nearest trashcan and hurling like a fire hose. I felt so bad I couldn’t even walk without falling over. They had to call my mom to come get me. My friends still give me crap about it.

As my eyes pan back and forth, I spot some rides I figure Jess might like.

“Hey! How about going on the Krazy Kars?”

She just shakes her head.

“What about the Flying Dragons ride? Your mom and I loved going on that ride when we were your age.”

She glares at me.

“C’mon, I know you like dragons. I’ve seen you watching that dragon movie on your iPad all the time when I’ve come over.”

She shakes her head more forcefully this time.

“Come on kid. This has to be a two-way street, or it’s going to be a long day.”

“I want to go home,” she yells at me. “I want my mommy.”

I feel frustration, aggravation, and consternation rise all at once. *Third base line isn’t going to cut it now, Maddy. This is turning out to be more of a ‘seats behind the plate’ type of day.*

“Jess, I already explained this. She’s not there. She went to a party for her friend Tara and then she and her friends are going to dinner.”

“I want Mommy,” she tells me in a small voice. “I promise I won’t play with their barrettes.”

“It’s a party for big girls. Mommy’s friend is getting married and there won’t be any kids there, and it’s bachelorette, not barrette.”

Jess stares down at her shoes.

I steal a quick look at my cell phone for the time.

Just another five hours and forty-seven minutes to go.

We both stand at the Wonderland map in silence.

I turn around toward the Wonderland train. Its route around the entire amusement park chews up about thirty minutes. Mentally and physically the train fits the bill. It lets both of us see what there is to do, and a breeze might cool us down. We both agree to give it a try, and twenty-six minutes later we are both feeling a bit better as the train pulls back into the station.

Next I take her to the Nimble Gnome, which is a roller coaster for little kids. It barely gets six feet off the ground, and the whole ride only lasts about three minutes. When Jess says she doesn’t want to ride it again, I’m glad. After an hour or so of similar rides, Jess has had enough. I get us a couple of small sodas (another seven

bucks), and we choose a table with an umbrella to get out of the sun's heat.

In a detached sort of way, we watch everyone around us having a great time. I make up my mind that, if we're still not having fun in one more hour, we'll just go back to my place to watch TV until my sister calls. *At least I'll catch the last few innings of the baseball game.*

"Hey there! What's with the two long faces?"

I follow the sound of the voice. I look up to see Professor Prospero standing before us. I wasn't even aware of his approach. Judging from the look on her face, Jess didn't notice him either.

We remain like stumps for a couple of seconds before we acknowledge him. I jump up and nearly shake the man's arm right out of his shoulder.

"Professor Prospero! Wow! What an honor to meet you," I yell out. "I thought maybe you might not be here anymore because you weren't on the map!"

"Still here in the land of Wonder," he smiles and rubs his shoulder. "Forgive me, but I couldn't help but notice that the two of you don't seem to be enjoying yourselves very much. So I have to ask myself under what condition would I see such sad faces out on such a wondrous day?"

The professor turns to Jess and asked, "What's wrong, my Little Dove?"

I remember how he always called girls Little Doves and the boys Maestros. Ever since I heard him do that, years ago, I aspired to be called Maestro, and now Jess was being called Little Dove right away. *Color me jealous.*

Jess hadn't said ten words all day. Now, as soon as he asks the question, she won't stop talking, and she is really rattling me out.

"Uncle Zac makes me ride baby rides because he says The Bullet got him sick once. And he keeps saying how things cost so much

money. And he whispers mean things about people in line, and he hates how hot it is. And all the time he is busy looking at his cell phone, and ...”

She hardly takes a breath as she paints a less-than-pretty picture of me. I can feel myself turning redder by the second and not because of the sunburn I’m getting. A few people begin staring and making gestures in our direction, but the Professor sits quietly, rubbing his glasses with his handkerchief as Jess gets all our family laundry out in the open.

I try to defend the situation to him, doing my best to explain how I’m not a total ass.

When I finish, he replaces his glasses then throws the handkerchief into the air. It disappears without a trace as we watch. The Professor leans over to Jess and whispers into her ear.

“I might have a solution to all this if you’re willing to help me, Little Dove?”

He stands up from the chair and takes Jess by the hand. “Jessica? Have you ever done any magic before?”

She shakes her head.

“Never? Ever?”

She laughs. “Never, ever, ever, Perfessor,” she replies in her best pronunciation. She has already taken to him in a few brief moments. I’m the one down sixty-seven bucks, and all he did was make a handkerchief disappear.

“Then will you assist me in my next show?”

“Yes!” she yells out so loudly that it startles me.

Immediately the three of us are heading down the walkway at a rapid pace. Jess and the Professor laugh and talk incessantly; me, I’m starting to feel like a third wheel, here.

“Magic is the spice of life. It adds wonder to our existence,” he says to Jess. “From the moment I saw the two of you, I could tell

you were magical people.”

We speedily arrive at the professor’s massive Vaudevillian circus tent and everything is just as I remembered it. Huge spires with flags rise from the poles, and all around are old posters showing Professor Prospero performing amazing feats. We follow him in through the door flaps.

“Please take a seat, Uncle Zac,” he tells me. As he leads Jess up on stage, he says to her, “You and I have a show to perform.”

I sit up front and wait as people begin filing in for the show. It doesn’t take long to get bored, so I take out my phone and pull up the scores from the ballgame. The Royals are getting hammered, and I start to feel a bit better. *At least I’m in a cool place instead of out at the ballpark watching that debacle.*

Anticipation is high as the music begins playing over the speakers, and then the lights begin to dim. A white rabbit hops in from off stage and wanders around like it has somehow gotten loose from its cage. People start laughing as we watch it meander around. Suddenly there is a blinding flash. A lady a couple rows behind me screams and freaks me out. The smoke begins to clear, and the rabbit appears to have morphed into Professor Prospero.

The Professor apologizes for being a little late and for the state of his attire. He removes his cape and begins whirling it around his body. We all watch as his clothes transform before our eyes. In seconds, the Professor stands before the audience wearing an expensively tailored suit and tie. The audience laughs as Professor Prospero makes a point that one of his shoelaces needs tying. He gives his foot a slight shake and the lace magically ties itself.

The first few tricks are pretty standard card or rope tricks, like something you’d find in kid’s magic set from Walmart. The Professor does them to perfection, but there’s nothing I haven’t seen before. Why did I remember the magic shows as spectacular? There’s nothing magical about pulling flowers out of your sleeve or

palming playing cards.

The Professor turns to more elaborate tricks. It's as if he'd managed somehow to tap into my thoughts or something. Disappearing animals, amazing escapes, and incredible stunts defy any explanation. The Professor announces that his next trick will require an assistant. He raises his arm, and a white dove flies out from somewhere behind the crowd and lands right at his feet. The Professor removes his hat and gently places it over the dove. Then he lies down on his belly and pretends to look under the hat, giving the crowd a wink. He begins to lift the hat off the stage and at first we can only see a pair of shoes, and then slowly a pair of legs appear. The higher he goes, the more it seems like someone is being poured from underneath the hat. Finally, Jess is standing on the stage, wearing the hat and a big old honking smile.

The crowd goes wild; me included. Jess takes a bow and then he asks her to assist him in one trick after the other. Most six-year-olds would stand terrified in front of so many people, but it doesn't seem to intimidate her one bit. She is a natural at it.

I watch as Prospero floats her over the audience and through hoops all while she waves and blows kisses to everyone. Jess passes right over the top my head, and I fail to see any ropes or wires. I'm clueless as to how he pulled that off.

Jess is finally having some fun; maybe I am too if I'm being honest.

“For our last trick this afternoon, Jess and I would like to ask her uncle Zac to join us on stage.”

What did he just say? Did he ask me to get up on stage in front of all these people? He must be crazy. I try to hide down in my seat, but a spotlight finds me.

The Professor calls to the audience. “Come on folks. Let's give Zac a big round of applause to get him up here.”

The clapping and hooting of the crowd got louder and without even realizing it, I find myself going up the steps to where Jess and

the Professor are waiting.

The Professor gives me a reassuring pat on the back and then instructs me to take my position over a gold star painted on the stage. “Thank you for helping, Zac,” he says.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Our last trick is about traveling back in time.”

He waves his hands in front of my face, and an old-fashioned pocket watch appears out of thin air. Professor Prospero holds the watch up to his ear and pretends to listen. After a few seconds, he proclaims to the audience, “I think it stopped working,” and everyone laughs. The Professor turns and presents me with the watch. “Zac, have you ever traveled in time before?”

“I’ve been to Greenwich England and I jumped over the Prime Meridian once.” More laughing. If I said something funny, it wasn’t intentional.

“Well, this trick is going to require something a bit more elaborate. The watch you are holding isn’t just a watch, it’s a time machine.”

Now, I don’t believe what is taking place is magic, but I still hesitate. “Look, I love watching Doctor Who on television, but, if you’re looking for someone to time-travel I’m probably not your man,” I say, backing away toward the steps.

“No need to be afraid,” he laughs. “You won’t travel too far back.”

The professor makes a big show of winding the watch; then holds the watch above his head so the audience can see the hands clearly moving back in time. “As long as Zac has the watch, he will see and act and feel as a child does.”

The Professor passes Jess his wand and instructs her to come around and face me. The Professor has me hold the watch up by the chain so that it’s dangling right in front of my face. Then the watch begins to spin on the chain, twisting itself back and forth as the spotlight reflects against its shiny cover. The Professor

positions himself behind me and whispers some words into my ear, something that I can't quite make out. Jess stands in front of me smiling. Deep down I'm praying that the words "Avada Kedavra" don't come spewing out of her tiny lips after listening how she described me earlier. Then the Professor begins to count numbers backward. "Three! Two! One!"

Then Jess waves the wand, yells "Iusus bene," and everything goes black.

The splash of water across my face shocks me back awake. I realize I'm standing over a sink at one of the Wonderland restrooms. As my eyes start to refocus, I find myself looking at the face of a boy in the mirror. I rub my cheeks and watch an image of my thirteen-year-old self follow my every motion. I turn my head, and the boy does the same.

"Son of a..." I whisper.

I notice the bathroom has a full-length mirror right by the doors, and I move over to get a complete picture. The clothes are the same as mine; the hair and eyes are the same color.

Everything is the same, just younger looking.

A man comes over and takes a moment to check his appearance then asks, "You okay there, pal?"

"Uh-huh," I mumble.

"Don't worry there, bud. Your fly isn't open," he says, patting me on the back before exiting.

I find Jess waiting for me just outside the restroom, sitting like a lump, exactly as she was earlier. *It's time for a different approach.* I sneak up on her quietly, and when I'm sure she hasn't seen me, I rub my wet hands all over her face.

"Ew, I just came from the bathroom and I didn't wash my hands. Ew," tormenting her a bit.

“Stop it,” she yells, taking a few swings at me. It’s irritating her to no end, but at least I finally am getting some reaction from her. For good, or probably bad, I continue for a bit longer until her screams start drawing attention.

“Well?” I ask.

“Well, what?”

“What do you think?” I ask as I spin around a couple of times.

She continues to glare until she says, “I think I’m telling Mommy that you’re a poopyhead.”

“Oh, come on. I’m messing with you a little. My hands were wet from washing. You can smell the soap if you want,” I say, holding my hands out.

As she puts her nose close to smell, I seize the opportunity one last time and rub my hands all over her face again.

I take off running up the walkway with Jess hot on my trail. Finally I allow her to catch me at the top, and she gives me her best punch in the arm for good measure. I watch a couple of the Crazy Kars fly by on the track behind her.

“Come on,” I yell as I grab her hand and take off, running to get in line at the Crazy Kar ride. I let Jess go first. Her car is a little yellow convertible that has big eyelashes, while my car is a growling red truck with a big sneer for a face. The buzzer sounds and we take off racing. Right out of the gate, I give Jess a bit of a bump, laughing as I do. She swings her car back around to get behind me, and she gives me a pretty solid tap. A boy in a blue racecar does the same to Jess. But only I can torment my family, so I wait until he pulls out in front of me, then hit his rear bumper and spin him out.

“That’s the way we Blooms roll,” I yell as Jess and I fly past him. We race around the track about ten minutes until the ride is over. At the gate, I wait for Jess but for some reason she fails to appear. I lean my head back in to check if she went out the other way. Suddenly little hands are messing up my face and hair.

“Ew,” Jess yells as she runs away, laughing hysterically. I allow her a few seconds to enjoy her revenge before I catch her.

“That was fun! Did you see me drive fast?” she says excitedly. She gives me a high five then both of us start looking for the next thing to ride. We walk until we see the “Flying Dragons” ride. It’s a kid’s ride, but there’s no line at all, so I take off running with Jess on my heels.

“Come on Jess,” I wave to her. “Come flying with me.”

After a few seconds, the operator approaches. “Hey, there, buddy. I think you may be a little too big for this ride,” he says, addressing me like I’m some half-wit. “Maybe you should go and play with the other big kids, OK?”

He escorts Jess and me out, all under the displeased looks of the waiting parents. As we pass, I give each one an apologetic smile. Right before we are about to reach the exit I notice a puddle left over from the overnight rain. I wait until we are just even with everyone and I hurl myself into the water, splashing all nearby. Jess starts laughing. I grab her hand, and we take off running.

We go on, taking ride after ride. It’s getting pretty hot out, so we go on the “Fury of the Amazon.” It’s a long line, but the wait isn’t too bad. Jess and I get into the very front of the boat. Quickly we are floating down the waterway. Soon the boat starts making a big climb, up a makeshift mountain. The boat gets pretty high up before reaching the top. As Jess and I look over the edge of the oncoming drop, I raise my arms just as the boat hurtles down the slide. While Jess and others in the boat are screaming and yelling, I’m enjoying the cool air. When the boat plunges into the water, the splash drenches my shirt to a soggy mess.

At Buccaneers Cove, we board an old time dinghy and go on a search for pirate treasure. It’s pretty cool, and a man pretending to be a pirate says he’ll trade me part of his treasure for Jess’s hand in marriage. I agree to the trade and Jess screams in protest. The pirate

and I continue negotiating her until finally we relent. He does, however, offer her a little toy ring to keep as a souvenir. When the ride is over, I continue to tease her about getting engaged and tell her how I'm not quite sure how to explain to her mother that she is going to be married to a pirate.

We ride the carousel and the Ferris wheel twice.

We keep working our way up to some of the scarier ones. I convince Jess to go on the old wooden roller coaster called Pick-Up-Sticks. She didn't like the beginning much, but I could tell she was proud of herself after it was all over.

Jess didn't want to try The Python since she was afraid of being upside down. Truthfully, when you're moving so fast, you're right side up before you realize it. As I rode, I felt great.

I have found the fountain of youth at Wonderland, and now I'm ready to face an old enemy one more time.

"I'm going to ride The Bullet," I declare.

It's been twenty-three years since that awful day. My fingers pass over the watch that Professor Prospero gave me, nestled deep in my pocket. How many people get a second chance to redeem their younger selves? Jess follows me up to the line. She smiles and waves while I wait alone on the ramp for my turn. I can't keep my knees from shaking as I edge closer to the front of the line. I try to recall the advice that that attendant gave to me twenty-three years ago. *Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Pick a point and focus all your concentration there. Don't try looking around. Don't close your eyes.*

I work to steady my nerves and then it is my turn to ride. "The Bullet" is just as I remember; bright silver cylinders that look like truncated airplane fuselages shine brightly in the sunlight. As I climb the stairs, I can smell the chain oil and grease of the ride, and I start to get a bit wobbly. A young Wonderland employee leads me to my place. The seat is no more comfortable now than

it was twenty-three years ago. The belts certainly feel tighter than I remember. After I'm buckled in, he gives me the thumbs up and locks the door. While I wait, I think back to that day and Todd Bickman. I swallow hard.

So many things in my life have been affected by this ride. I've moved on, but I never grew. I stopped taking chances and played things safe. The anger rises up inside me.

"It ends today. Today you're going down, Bullet. Today, I own you!"

The motor revs itself up, and soon things start to move. Someone has placed a happy face sticker on the padding directly in front of me. I start to focus only on the sticker as if it was my co-pilot on this journey. I feel the ride begin to accelerate faster. The Bullet begins a slow groan as it starts to tilt and move. I feel the straps of my belt starting to stretch and strain, still focused on my smiling friend. The pod turns and spins, and I begin to hear a little piece of metal bouncing around inside the cockpit. I start to worry that maybe a bolt might have worked itself loose, but the smiling face reassures me.

I feel The Bullet starting to shake as if it could get frustrated. It will not give in so easily. Light flickers and the speed increases. The bouncing metal sound has stopped now, probably plastered up against the wall somewhere. I can feel the G-forces pushing my body deeper into the seat. It becomes harder to breathe, but I never take my eyes off the smiley-faced sticker. "You and me bud," I tell it. "We got this!"

The Bullet is whizzing and whirring, and I hear people screaming and yelling all around me. For all the growling and groaning, I realize that The Bullet is only reputation, not reality. Like any bully, once you decide that you've had enough, they lose their power over you. With one last effort, it tries to unsettle me, but the bully is now powerless. Its terrorizing days are over for me. The whirring starts to slow down, and the angle starts to flatten out.

The rocking becomes an easy swaying. Something catches my eye as it falls in my lap, and I look down to see a shiny new penny resting there. A lucky penny. All that noise coming from a penny! I smile. After a few seconds, the ride slows and then stops. Soon the door is unlocked, and the employee leans over to unbuckle me from the seat. I place the penny back on the floor to bring luck for the next occupant and thank my smiling companion.

I follow the other riders towards the exit. Some don't look like they feel too well, but I've never felt better. I decide I had better check my pockets and make sure my things hadn't fallen out. Everything is there, safe and sound. I take out Professor Prospero's pocket watch so I can examine it more closely. It looks old but in remarkably fine condition. I study its engravings and notice there is an inscription inside the cover. "The secret to life's magic is remembering to work hard and to play well."

At that moment, I feel like someone has doused me with a bucket of water. My body goes all tingly. I notice my reflection on one of the shiny Bullet pods and see my thirty-six-year-old image smiling back at me. "You clever old conjurer," I laugh as I make my way out.

I am ecstatic when I meet Jess in front at the bottom of the hill.

"Are you okay, Uncle Zac?" she asks.

I pick her up and toss her then twirl her around. "I'm perfect," I laugh.

I set Jess down and lean down to talk to her eye to eye, just like Professor Prospero had done earlier, "Did we have some fun today or what?"

She nods. "It was one of my bestest days."

"Well, the Professor promised it would." I hold up the watch so Jess can take a look at it. "I think we'd better return this to its proper owner, don't you think?"

"We should," she admits. "It would be the p'lite thing to do."

We head toward Professor Prospero's Magical Carnie, Jess talking continuously about everything we had done. The noises of the park are beginning to die down, and people are heading home. Jess and I stop to watch the Python as it makes one of the last few runs for the day. As we walk down the hill, Jess suddenly pauses and looks confused.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I think we're losted?"

"I'm pretty certain we were heading in the right direction."

Jess stops to consider this for a moment then runs back to the intersection. I watch her as she scrutinizes each path. She returns, shaking her head.

"What on Earth is wrong?"

"Look," she says, pointing further down the walk.

I follow her arm. I can see the edge of the Krazy Kars track and a few people returning from the Buccaneer's Cove. I turn to Jess with a shrug.

"Look," she yells at me because I obviously failed to observe something properly.

I look once more, and this time I notice Professor Prospero's tent is missing and in its place is a different ride.

We both run down the hill trying to discover where the tent has gone. When we finally reach the bottom, the young attendant informs us, "Sorry, folks. I'm afraid they were the last riders for the day."

We both stand bewildered until the attendant asks, "You guys alright? Is there anything I can help you with?"

I keep scanning the area looking for the carnie tent, certain that we just misjudged the location because of all the people around earlier. "We must have gotten turned around somewhere. We were trying to find Professor Prospero's Magical Carnie."

“Oh, if you’d have been here seven years ago, you would have been standing smack in the middle of it,” he says.

“I don’t think I’m following.”

“Well, this is where the Magical Carnie used to be until Professor Prospero passed away seven years ago. They built this ride in his memory.”

I look at the sign overhead. It reads “The Magician’s Apprentice.” My mouth falls open in disbelief, and Jess grabs me around my legs. I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck begin to rise.

“That can’t be. We were here for his show earlier. He levitated her over the crowd, and he managed to hypnotize me with this old pocket watch so I would think I was a kid again,” I argue, holding out the watch.

The attendant takes a few steps back until he maneuvers himself behind the fence. “Look mister. I’m not sure exactly what you think happened here this morning, but I can tell you that I have been operating this ride every day for the past five seasons. I’ve never heard or seen anything like what you and your little daughter here are describing, but I can tell you, you got it wrong.”

All three of us stand in silence, Jess and I wonder if we spent the morning in the company of a ghost, and the young attendant apparently debating whether or not he should call security. After a few seconds, though, he gives us a smile.

“Hey, don’t worry about it folks. Today was a scorcher, and the heat can play tricks on you out here if your bodies get a little dehydrated. Maybe you better let me ring up Emergency Services and have them come check you guys out to make sure you didn’t get heat stroke or something.”

“Um, no. No, we’re okay,” I tell him. “But you’re probably right about being a little dehydrated. We’ll stop for a couple of bottles of water before we leave.”

“You sure?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah, we’re good. Thanks for all your help.”

He waves goodbye but continues to keep an eye on us as we make our way toward the main gate. We hear the train whistle and Jess says, “We weren’t lost. You and me was in Professor Prospero’s magic show today.”

I give her a shrug. “Well, I sure thought so, but who knows?”

“We do. We were there, and that dumb man can’t tell us any different.”

I think about what she says for a second, and she’s right. Who cares? We had a fantastic adventure today. Whatever happened seemed real enough to us, and that’s all that matters.

We follow a few people out and pass the statue with all the Wonderland characters that we had seen earlier. Impulsively I grab a lady passing by with her family and ask her if she will take a picture of Jess and me by the statue. I hand her my cell phone and then put my arm around Jess.

We take our position underneath the Wonderland mascots. I pull Jess in tight while she smiles and waves to the camera.

“Cheese,” we yell as the woman clicks off a few shots.

I thank the lady while Jess thumbs through the pics.

Gazing up at the statue, I’m amazed at the detail. Baxter’s toes, Bunny Beebop’s two pistols, Space Ace’s flight suit, and Professor Prospero. There he is standing in his top hat and three-piece suit with the flower in his lapel. Even the smile on his face is a dead ringer for the man himself. As I continue admiring the likeness, I notice a pocket watch resting in his hand, just like the one he gave to me today. I pull out the watch and compare the two, detail for detail. They are exact matches, even down to the “Play Well” inscription on the case.

I realize this watch isn’t just a gift from a friend. It was given to remind me of what’s *really* important. My phone starts buzzing and

I see my sister has sent a message saying she is finally back home. I'm about to respond that we are on our way back, when a thought comes to me.

“Hey Jess. Have you ever been to Happy Joe’s Pizza Place before?”

Jess thinks for a moment and then shakes her head.

“It’s the best. For your birthday, they honk these super loud horns, and a barbershop quartet brings you your own cake and sings happy birthday to you. You get to watch as the pizza chefs toss the dough so high up into the air that it almost touches the ceiling. And all over are old games back from when I was a kid that you can play for free while they make your pizza.”

I see her eyes have gotten bigger, and her mouth is open, so I continue. “And you want to know the best part?”

“What?” she asks.

“The best part is an old fashioned soda fountain, with a big long bar and stools that turn and you can spin around. They make the absolute best root beer floats in the entire world there.”

A puzzled look crosses her face. “What’s a root beer float?”

“Your mom never bought you a root beer float before?”

Jess shakes her head.

“They are fantastic! How about we split one over a large pepperoni pizza; we’ll even tell them it’s your birthday.”

Jess is nodding so fast she looks like she’s a bobblehead.

“I think you’re going to love it there. It was one of my favorite places in the whole world when I was a kid.” ■

Within the Brushwood

BY STEF GONZAGA

Leopard sees
Python slither
From where she left her young;
Flexing claws fresh
From the hunt
She tears the scales,
Rips the flesh
Apart.

Python bleeds
A trail
As he descends
Into the dark wood;
And Wind sweeps
Dry leaves
From the empty belly of the den.

She leaves the grave behind.



A New Beginning

BY CHRISTY ZIGWEID

Wyatt Adams looked at his watch. The gnawing hunger tearing through his insides reminded him of his current situation: twenty-four hours since his last meal, homeless for six months, and fifteen dollars in his pocket. He stood in line each day for the soup kitchens, but often gave up his place for a child or a woman with a baby; they needed to eat more than he did. His gaunt six-foot frame hid beneath the only clothes he had, a daily reminder of the accident that took everything from him.

A cold wind ran down the back of Wyatt's neck and he cupped his hands together, blowing into them. Wyatt looked down at his German Shepherd and patted his head. "I'll be out soon with some food," he said.

Wyatt walked into the diner, making his way back to his usual spot as Oakley followed on the other side of the window. As Wyatt settled into the booth, Oakley wagged his tail and sat, watching and waiting.

"Good morning!" The waitress set a steaming cup of coffee in front of him. "The usual today?"

Wyatt looked up as he ran his hand down his goatee. He longed to order a big plate of steaming eggs mixed with green peppers, onions and bacon, a side of hash browns, and pancakes. Instead, Wyatt only nodded in agreement; he wouldn't be getting a luxury

meal today. Fifteen dollars might have to last him a while.

He'd started coming to the diner two weeks ago. On his first visit, he met Jasmine, a single mother raising a seven-year-old boy and working two jobs to put herself through nursing school. Each day since, he came to the diner at the same time every morning, staying to talk with Jasmine as she worked her tables. Their conversations spanned everything from favorite sports to family life. Wyatt avoided talking about the accident.

"You're early today," she said, as she returned to the table with a plate of toast.

Wyatt nodded. "Oakley and I were up early for some stupid reason," he said, as he took a bite of toast.

Jasmine's son, Jayden, walked out the door toward Oakley, who stood and wagged his tail as he saw the food in Jayden's hand.

"I hope you don't mind my son sneaking your dog food from the kitchen," Jasmine said.

"Naw. I know he appreciates it." He watched as Jayden fed Oakley bread.

Jayden giggled as the dog licked his hands, then his cheek.

Jasmine smiled as she refilled his coffee. "Your dog is amazing. He so alert to everything around him and the way he watches out for you..."

Since Wyatt rescued Oakley from the shelter, and especially after the accident, they hadn't left each other's side.

Jasmine returned from her other tables and checked her watch. "I've got to walk Jayden over to the bus stop real quick," she said, as she set the pot on the table and headed toward the front door.

Out of the corner of his eye, Wyatt saw Oakley stand on all fours, alert.

"Jayden?"

The alarming tone in Jasmine's voice made Wyatt look out the

window. Time seemed to stand still as Jayden ran into the street chasing a tennis ball. Knocking his coffee to the floor, Wyatt ran toward the door. Jasmine's eyes widened and her hand flew to her mouth as she watched Jayden run out into the middle of the street. "Jayden!" she screamed.

Jayden was oblivious to the oncoming car. Oakley ran after him, jumping from behind, and pushed Jayden out of the way of the car. Tires screeched as the car hit Oakley's back legs. Oakley let out an agonized yelp.

Cars came to a screeching halt as Wyatt ran into the street. As if in slow motion, he watched Jasmine run to Jayden, scooping him up in her arms and squeezing him. "Don't you ever run out in the street like that again! You could have been killed!"

Jayden cried hysterically, "I'm sorry mommy. I'm sorry!"

Wyatt fell to his knees beside the dog. "Oakley! Oh God!"

Oakley lifted his head with great effort, his eyes pleading with Wyatt. *Oh God! Please don't let this happen. Please! I'll do anything. Don't take my dog from me. He's all I have left.* Wyatt looked up at the sky, then back at Oakley. Cradling Oakley in his arms, he pulled the dog carefully into his lap. Oakley whimpered and tried to move but could not. Wyatt ran his hand over Oakley's head, ignoring the stream of tears falling from his eyes. "It's gonna be okay, buddy."

He looked at the people gathered around, whispering to each other and pointing. "Please get me some help," Wyatt screamed. "I cannot lose this dog!"

For the second time, he watched as a member of his family lay there, helpless.

* * *

Wyatt paced back and forth across the waiting room trying to ignore the familiar smell of damp animal hair and urine. Almost an hour had passed since Oakley was taken back, and Wyatt prayed everything would be okay; he couldn't bear to face yet another loss. He turned as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry about this." Jasmine dropped her hand to her side.

Wyatt shook his head and glanced at Jayden, who sat in one of the chairs reading a magazine. "It's not your fault. Accidents happen," he said.

"I feel responsible for your dog getting hurt. If my son hadn't run out into the street..." she said, her voice trailing off as she looked at Jayden.

"Oakley's just doing what he does best—protecting." Wyatt put his head in his hands. He wanted to be furious at Jasmine and Jayden, but all he felt was numb. It was as if he was right back in front of the house, watching his family perish all over again. Except this time, Oakley wasn't there to save him.

Jasmine stood by Wyatt for a few moments, then turned and walked over to sit by Jayden.

A few minutes later a voice caught his attention. "Mr. Adams?"

Wyatt stood up and greeted the veterinarian.

"Good news. Oakley's going to be fine. But he'll need extensive care." He looked at the chart in his hands. "It, uh . . . looks like you, uh . . ."

Wyatt shifted his weight and folded his arms across his chest, waiting. He'd gotten used to people judging him. It was always written all over their faces, but they knew nothing about his circumstances. "I can take care of him."

The vet looked over the top of his glasses at Wyatt. "The antibiotics and medical bills are going to be expensive and if you can't pay the bill, I'll have to keep Oakley here. When he's better we

will find him a suitable home.”

Wyatt shoved his hands in his pockets to avoid punching the vet in the face. “Look. I understand about the medical bills and the care Oakley needs. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to let you take him from me. I’ll make whatever arrangements I have to. Are we clear on that?”

Jasmine walked over to Wyatt’s side. “I will take care of the bills.”

The vet nodded and closed the file. He looked from Jasmine to Wyatt. “He’ll need to stay overnight. You can come back tomorrow morning to get him.”

Wyatt watched the vet walk away. Jasmine put her hand on Wyatt’s shoulder. He caught her familiar scent of fresh laundered clothes mixed with breakfast smells from the diner. Suddenly, he was aware of his appearance. He hadn’t had a proper shower in a long time. No wonder the doctor thought he wouldn’t be able to take care of Oakley.

“Thank you,” Wyatt said, turning to Jasmine.

“I’ll take care of the bills and Oakley can recuperate at my house.”

Wyatt looked at her. “I can make arrangements for him.”

“How are you going to do that, Wyatt?” Her gaze held his, challenging him. “It’s the least I can do for him; he saved Jayden’s life. I know Oakley means the world to you and if it makes you feel better you can stay with him at my house while he recuperates.”

“You would trust me in your house?” Wyatt asked.

She nodded and shrugged her shoulders. “If I didn’t feel it was right, I wouldn’t have offered.”

“How do you know I won’t steal from you or kill you or something?”

“You’ve been in the diner every day for the past two weeks. I’ve learned enough about you through our conversations that I’m

willing to take a chance. Besides, Oakley saved Jayden's life. I owe it to both of you."

The thought of having a roof over his head, hot meals, and a hot shower felt like Christmas. "Okay."

"Let's go back to my house and I'll make lunch. Jayden's still shaken up and my boss made me take the afternoon off anyway."

Wyatt hadn't even thought about food until she mentioned it. "Thanks."

Jasmine grabbed her purse and flung it over her shoulder. "Come on Jayden. It's time to go."

* * *

"You'll have to excuse my messy house," Jasmine said, unlocking the door. "By the time Jayden and I get home, do homework, read, eat dinner, and bathe, the day is over and I'm so ready for bed."

"Hell, I'm sure your place is a palace compared to where I've been living."

They entered the apartment. It was small but homey, and not nearly the mess Jasmine had referred to. A bouquet of bright red artificial roses sat in a shimmering vase on a small, round dining table. The refrigerator was covered with Jayden's school work. Medical books and paper littered the coffee table in front of the couch. A silky leopard print shirt and dress slacks lay over the rocking chair by the television.

"Jayden, why don't you go play in your room until lunch is ready?"

He nodded his head and disappeared down the hallway.

"Looks like you've been busy with school." Wyatt walked over, sat on the couch, pulled his stocking cap from his head, and removed his jacket.

“I’m almost done with my nursing degree. I have three more classes until I’m finished.” She smiled. She kicked off her shoes and pulled two glasses from the cupboard. “Can I get you something to drink? I’ve got milk, iced tea, and blue raspberry Kool-Aid.”

“I’ll take some iced tea,” he said as he swallowed hard. Memories of his daughter drinking blue raspberry Kool-Aid flashed through his mind.

Jasmine brought his tea and sat in the chair opposite him. “I’m glad Jayden didn’t get hit. I can’t imagine what losing a child would be like,” she said, as her face paled.

Not wanting to meet her eyes, Wyatt stared at the wall over her shoulder. He instinctively reached for the bracelet on his right arm. “It’s like having your soul ripped from you,” he whispered. The last time he saw Lexi rushed into his mind.

“I made this just for you, Daddy!” Lexi shouted as she ran down the stairs. “It has basketball beads and your favorite colors.”

He pulled her into his arms, squeezing her in a tight hug. “I love it!”

She giggled while he tickled her sides. He set her back down and she pushed the bracelet onto his wrist. “I love you Daddy,” she said, stretching up to kiss his cheek.

Wyatt blinked, then shook his head. The glass in his hand fell and shattered on the floor in front of him.

“Wyatt, I’m sorry if I said something to upset you.”

“You didn’t,” he stammered. “It’s, um...I’m so sorry about your glass.” He stood, grabbing his jacket and stocking cap. “I shouldn’t be here. I’ve got to leave.”

Jasmine blocked his path. “You don’t need to leave.”

“I don’t need you to take care of me.”

“Why not?”

Wyatt sucked in a deep breath, calculating his words as he

looked at Jasmine. “Because I am supposed to take care of it. I am supposed to be the one who fixes everything. I am supposed to be the provider.” He hadn’t realized he was yelling and lowered his voice. “I don’t need anyone’s help.”

“If you walk out of here right now you will lose Oakley forever and you know it.”

Wyatt’s hands fell to his sides. She was right.

“Why don’t you shower and I’ll get some lunch going. I’m sure you’re hungry.” Jasmine motioned down the hallway. “There’s a bathroom down the hall, second door on the right. There’s fresh towels in the closet.” She walked into her bedroom and returned with a clean pair of jeans, socks, and t-shirt. “My ex was close to six feet tall too. I just found some clothes of his the other day. Guess he forgot about them.”

Although he was unsure of his choice to come here, let alone stay, he would be crazy to turn down a warm shower and clean clothes. Finally, he relented. “Hey, Jasmine? Thank you.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

As he shut the bathroom door, he came face to face with his reflection in a mirror the size of the whole wall. He ran his fingers through his long, greasy hair then turned away, disgusted.

Pulling the shower curtain closed, he let the hot water rush over his body. It had been at least a week since he’d last showered and washed his clothes. He washed three times, watching as the dirt and grime slid down the drain.

He felt like a different person when he stepped out of the shower. At least now he could tolerate his reflection in the mirror. The clean clothes felt strange. He was used to the worn fabric of his other clothes. As he reached down and picked up the old clothes, he felt a pit in his stomach and threw the only belongings from his former life in the trash.

* * *

“Wyatt? Can you play video games with me?” Jayden stood in the hallway, dressed in Avengers pajamas. “Mom said I could play a little longer.”

Wyatt nodded and walked back to Jayden’s room. As he sat in the oversized bean bag, Wyatt felt like a kid again. For one night, he didn’t have to worry about who passed him on the street. Tonight he wouldn’t have rocks thrown at him while people laughed and called him a loser. He didn’t have to hold Oakley close for fear someone would steal or hurt his dog. Tonight, he had a full stomach and clean clothes.

They played for nearly forty-five minutes before Jasmine returned to the room. Leaning on the door frame, she watched Jayden and Wyatt. “It’s time for bed, Jayden. You have school tomorrow.”

“Awww. But Mom.”

“Don’t ‘but Mom’ me, mister. I let you stay up an extra half an hour. And we have to get up early.”

Wyatt stood and headed toward the door as Jasmine tucked Jayden into bed.

“Wyatt? I’m sorry about Oakley. I’m glad he didn’t die,” Jayden said.

“The vet is taking good care of Oakley. He will be just fine. I’m glad you’re not hurt.”

Jayden closed his eyes and burrowed down under his covers. Jasmine kissed him on the forehead and walked out of the room with Wyatt. “Thank you,” Jasmine said, as she closed the door.

“For what?”

“Letting him know it was okay.”

Wyatt shrugged. “I’m just glad everyone is okay.”

She set two bottles on the table. “Can I interest you in a beer?”

Wyatt reached for one, nodding his head. He raised his bottle

and took a sip, feeling the cool liquid slide down his throat. “I don’t remember the last time I had a drink.”

Jasmine took a drink of her beer and leaned back in the chair.

“I’m so grateful for everything you’ve done today,” Wyatt said.

“I owe you.”

“Stop saying that. You make me sound like some kind of charity case.”

Jasmine blushed. “I know you aren’t a charity case.”

Silence filled the room. Wyatt set his beer on the table and leaned forward. “The streets haven’t always been a way of life for me, you know.”

It was evident by the expression on her face she’d wanted the answer to that question ever since she met him.

“Six months ago, I watched my house burn to the ground, my wife and daughter trapped inside. By the time I got there, the house was engulfed in flames. I tried to save them but it was no use. They were already gone. Oakley pulled me from the fire. He’s never left my side except for today when he saved Jayden.” Wyatt stared at the table in front of him. “I did freelance work as a computer programmer. My life, my job, all of it, perished in that fire. The money I saved was enough to pay for funeral expenses. My wife always said life insurance wasn’t necessary. ‘We won’t ever need it,’ she always said. I had three hundred dollars left in my savings account after the funeral. As of today, I have fifteen bucks in my pocket. I go to the job center every day, but there are no jobs right now. I refuse to be on assistance because there are people who need it more than me. I couldn’t get assistance without a job, anyway. So here I am.” He leaned back on the couch, his eyes burning as he kept the tears back, his head fuzzy from the beer.

“Hey, God doesn’t give us anything we can’t handle, right?”

“I’ll help you get back on your feet. I may not be able to do a lot,

but maybe we can help each other out.”

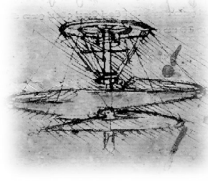
“Thank you for believing in me enough to trust me.”

She smiled. “I had a feeling about you from the first time I met you.”

“Well, I want you to know I’m grateful for everything,” Wyatt said.

* * *

That night, as Wyatt settled under the warm covers in the darkness, a peace flowed through his body. For the first time in a long time, he felt hopeful about the future. As he drifted to sleep, he saw his wife and daughter, their hands outstretched. Lexi’s soft voice rang in his ear, “*It’s going to be okay Daddy. Everything will be okay.*” ■



Leonardo

BY MARGIE DEEB

It had been over five centuries since Luigi, Leonardo's guardian angel, had ushered the great artist into Paradise. And in those five centuries Leonardo had done nothing but sit in the garden gazing at hummingbirds. "The zenith of all flying machines!" Leo frequently exclaimed, startling Luigi out of a long stretch of silence.

Luigi was distraught, for it was his job to ensure that Leonardo progressed to higher planes. As all angels know, in order for humans to progress, they must first recognize their earthly failures and accomplishments. But Luigi couldn't get Leo to pay attention to anything but the birds. In five centuries Leo had not left the garden once.

Today Luigi would make another attempt. And today he would not fail, for he had new bait to dangle in front of Leonardo.

"Leo," he said, louder than he had intended. "I have something special to show you."

"What could be more special than this?" Leonardo held a yellow zinnia in his outstretched hand. A buzzing hummingbird inserted its bill in the center of the blossom.

"I want you to witness your greatness, how it's reverberated into the 21st century."

"Luigi, you know I don't care about that."

“But Leo, there is more! I have...I have a surprise.” Angels were not supposed to tell a lie, and this was not one, not exactly. For when they got down to 21st century Earth, wouldn’t everything be a surprise? Leonardo, who loved surprises perhaps as much as hummingbirds, agreed.

The next moment they stood on a cobblestone street in front of a large, ivory colored building. Leonardo gazed around. An impressive rounded archway framed a set of wooden doors. People bustled about wearing clothing unusually tight and revealing, and Leonardo knew he’d landed in a time hundreds of years beyond his own. Then he noticed something peculiar. Most of these people walked or stood silently bowing their heads over a small, rigid, light-producing instrument that they held with one thumb-twitching hand. Just as he turned to inquire about this oddity, Luigi pointed to the letters on the building. “See, Leo?” he exclaimed, “For you they come from all over the world!” Smiling, Leonardo read the words Museo di Leonardo da Vinci.

Leonardo gripped Luigi’s elbow and they suddenly found themselves in an immense, dim room. Surrounding them were large, angular, wooden contraptions. A light beamed down on each, illuminating levers, wheels, cranks, pulleys, and skeletal wings, casting a kaleidoscope of intersecting geometric shadows across the floor. Leonardo instantly recognized these long forgotten friends: inventions he had conjured from his imagination. There were models of machines for threading screws and carving files. Models of flying ships and armored cars. Revolving bridges, sea dredgers, and winged spindles. He leaned in close to a mechanical loom. “Yes, indeed!” he laughed, clapping his palms together. Hovering over a human-powered wing-beater, he shouted, “Uffa! This is too short!” He grabbed at a stirrup but his fingers passed through it.

They entered a room of drawings and manuscripts. Enlarged diagrammatic reproductions featuring studies of architecture,

religion, anatomy, and flight covered the walls. His hand went to the side of his face as if it had been slapped. “Oh, mio Dio! This was not intended for the eyes of others!” Luigi’s hand pressed his shoulder. “Relax, old friend. These that are but scrawlings on parchment have touched all of humanity.”

After hours of browsing rooms and halls brimming with his creations, Leonardo turned. “Grazie, Luigi. I am more than delighted that the world has thrived on my visions! But now I crave the buzz of my hummingbirds. Can we...” He stopped as he spotted the tail of a line of people coiling out of sight. “What is this?” He peered curiously. He’d not seen this many people in the other rooms of his museum. He darted off, determined to discover what had captured the interest of so many people.

“Wait!” Luigi ran after him. “You are right, it is time to return to the garden!”

But Leonardo hurried down halls, charged through an antechamber, and spilled out into a wide hall reverberating with laughter. The line fed into a mass of people facing inward to an obscured central focus. He fixed his vision to that center and passed straight through the physical bodies, a specter on a mission.

There, in the epicenter, he saw it: what people waited hours for, the source of both their impatience and laughter. Leonardo stood in front of an easel displaying a large framed reproduction of the Mona Lisa. Except something was wrong. Very wrong. He gasped: She had no face. Above her shoulders, a perfectly shaped oval had been cut out of the canvas. At that moment a teenage girl scurried behind the painting and stuck her face through the oval void. Another girl ran past Leonardo and stopped directly in front of the painting. She held one of the illuminated instruments out in front of her. “Smile!” she cried. The face in the oval – the one that should have been Mona Lisa’s – squealed. He heard a faint click. The girls dashed together and huddled over the instrument. Bursting into

convulsive giggles, they traipsed off through the crowd. He stood motionless, his eyes wide, his mouth open.

Luigi materialized by his side. “I am so sorry, dear Leo. I did not want you to see this. Please, brother, do not...”

Leonardo abruptly raised his palm. Luigi held his breath.

Tilting his head, Leonardo studied the illuminated instrument in the hand of the person now planted in front of the painting. He leaned forward and squinted. He saw movement. Movement that mirrored the new face smiling above Mona Lisa’s shoulders. He could hardly believe his eyes. It was as if the instrument framed, captured, and miniaturized what was occurring immediately in front of it, creating a flat, animated replica. He looked at the painting, and again at the moving replica. Back and forth. Each time another person’s face appeared where Mona’s had been, he inspected the two scenes. He noticed a gestural pattern: when the person holding the instrument tapped the replica its movement stopped, and the image became as fixed as a painting. The person then shoved the instrument into a pocket or bag, and strolled out of sight.

Leonardo clasped the sides of his face. “Genius,” he hissed. He then threw his hands up, tilted his head back, and shouted “Genio!”

Luigi had learned to expect the unexpected from his extraordinary charge, Leonardo da Vinci, but even this confused him. “What do you mean?”

Leonardo shook his head. “All of my physical life I reveled in the power of the mind– its capacity to imagine and to vision and to create.” He lowered his eyes and twirled the tip of his beard. “Now that I am no longer corporeal, I can create anything I want with a mere thought.” He sighed. “But this, Luigi,” he pointed to the faceless Mona Lisa, “This is what I miss the most.”

“What?”

“The ridiculous! It has been too long – painfully long – since I have reveled in the ridiculous.”

* * *

That night, within locked museum doors, Leonardo stepped behind the painting and stuck his face into the oval while Luigi took photos. One after another after another. In one photo Leo crossed his eyes. In another he squinched them shut. He bared his teeth like a lion. He snorted like a pig. He mimed crying over a broken heart, raging at an ungrateful patron, and flirting with a young pupil. And after each theatrical display he shouted “Again!” to Luigi, who, despite possessing the patience of an angel, began to grow quite bored. After each “click” Leonardo ran around the front of the painting to Luigi who showed him the picture. He slapped his knees, bellowed “One more!” and scuttled behind the painting. He positioned his face ever so carefully.

This time Leonardo slowly slid his eyes to the left and mimicked the most enigmatic smile he could muster. ■

Unsettling

BY STEF GONZAGA

Cold wind—
A short, sudden gust
That speaks volumes—
A change in motion

No one was around
To see it caress the nape of my neck
And plant a kiss
Disguised as a sweet chill.

My hands freeze mid-sentence
I fear what this will lead to,
How I'd take to standing under graying mango trees
Flooded pipelines, white gravel

A glimpse of cruising clouds
Their gray blanches the morning glare—
Take hold of the palm leaves
Before it returns.



Daniel the Draw-er Makes a Friend

(Excerpt from Daniel the Draw-er)

BY S. J. HENDERSON

“Did you make any new friends at school today?” Mom asks, smiling at me as she wipes crumbs from the counter. Every day it’s the same question, and every day I give the same answer. They say adults are supposed to be smart, but maybe no one told Mom.

I grab the carton of milk and take a gulp before she notices, then wipe away my milk moustache with my sleeve. Today I feel dramatic, so I puff up my chest and place my hands on my hips like a superhero before booming, “Annie is the only friend I need!”

If I owned a cape I would make sure it flapped in the breeze behind me the whole time, but capes weren’t on the shopping list for school clothes this year. Mom looks disappointed. I’m disappointed, too. Capes are cool. Not as cool as samurai swords or skateboarding dogs, but still pretty awesome.

“Daniel. Annie is a nice girl, but it’s not healthy to have only one friend.”

Parents always say stuff isn’t healthy for you. Candy bars aren’t healthy. Staying up all night watching television isn’t healthy. Now being friends with Annie isn’t healthy. Unless Mom means the time Annie sneezed right in my face and I ended up sick in bed for two

days, I don't understand how having Annie as my friend can be bad.

"Really, Daniel. What if Annie moved away? Then you wouldn't have any friends."

"She's not going anywhere. She told me so."

Her face grows serious. "Promise me you'll at least try to talk to the other kids."

"Yeah, yeah." I roll my eyes, but make sure I turn my back to her first. Mom hates it when I roll my eyes. Only she can roll her eyes and get away with it. "What's for dinner?"

"Meatloaf, your favorite!"

Gross! I stick out my tongue and make a gagging noise.

"I was going to warn you that Tommy's in the living room waiting for your sister, but since you're being a smarty-pants, maybe I won't . . ."

Tommy. Ugh.

My sister Lila's latest boyfriend, Tommy, is the worst one yet. He plays in a band and has just enough hair on his chin to make it look like he's super-glued a caterpillar there. Tommy also likes to call me "buddy" and punch me in the arm. I figure he can't remember my name. When we first met, Tommy called me Fritz for an entire day before Lila finally put a stop to it.

I tiptoe down the hall past the living room door, but knock into the coat rack with my backpack. Like a hungry lion, Tommy pounces, jumping over the back of the couch and directly in front of me. Great.

"Bud-dy!" He punches me in the arm, as always.

"Ow!" I whine. Before he can hit me again, I slip off my backpack and hide my arms behind it like a knight with a shield.

"What's up, big guy?"

I try to answer him, but it's kind of hard since he's put me in a headlock, his skinny forearm pressing into my windpipe. Up close, Tommy smells like microwave burritos and cat litter. He rubs his knuckles on the top of my head and I yelp. When the torture portion of our meeting ends, he lets me go and acts like nothing ever happened.

“Lila says you're a draw-er.”

I'm pretty sure he means artist, but my head and arm still hurt so I keep my mouth shut.

“Uh, I guess so.” I shrug.

Tommy smiles, making the caterpillar wiggle. “Well, keep practicing, buddy. Maybe if you get good enough you can draw a cover for *Revenge of the Lunch Lady*.”

I back around him so I can keep an eye on his hands. “Yeah, okay. Thanks.” Like that'll happen.

Revenge of the Lunch Lady is the name of Tommy's band, and their biggest show so far had been at the bowling alley. No one had been able to hear them over the thumps of bowling balls and crash of falling pins. That's probably for the best.

The rest of the way to my room, I think about Mom's words, *What if Annie moved away?*

It's impossible to imagine life without my best friend. While all the other girls at school dress in pink and smell like flowers, Annie always smells like peanut butter and wears her brother's old jeans. Back in kindergarten she ate an earthworm and that's when I knew she was the one.

The other kids tease us and say we're going to get married when we grow up. They make kissy noises when we walk past together, but that's gross. I don't want to kiss Annie. Annie eats earthworms, after all.

Mom's being silly. Annie's not leaving.

Once I reach my room, I sit down at my table and get to work. Dad put my table in front of the window so I can look out and draw nice pictures of trees and birds, but mostly I use the window as a launch pad for paper airplanes and plastic parachute men. Instead of trees and birds, I draw a lot of animals and super-awesome machines nobody else has thought of yet. My favorite is a robot named Pi-zzabot that can bake a pizza and do my Math homework at the same time. I drew a toaster that can tie shoes and smear peanut butter on bread for Annie, too, but I still think Pi-zzabot is better.

Today I want to finish the animal I've been working on for a few days. I mean, I guess he's an animal. His head is round and soft like a teddy bear, with shiny black eyes, but he's no ordinary teddy bear. Once I finish, the rest of his body will have long tentacles like an octopus. It's going to be awesome.

In the middle of drawing Octobear's third oozing tentacle, my pencil lead snaps off. I growl and fling my wounded pencil out the open window before I realize that was my only pencil.

Lila's in her room with her door open when I stomp by. She leans in close to the mirror on her dresser and dabs at her eyelashes with a tiny black brush. Girls are weird. You'd never catch me poking myself in the eye with anything to look pretty.

I poke my head into her room. "Hey, you got a pencil?"

She stops and looks at me with the brush hovering near her eyeball. I flinch and look away. Just because Lila is my sister doesn't mean I want her to become a cyclops or wear a patch over her eye.

"No, Daniel," she replies. "I do not have a pencil."

Who died and made her an English teacher all of the sudden?

She probably needs to help poor Tommy out, not me, since he can't even come up with a better word than "draw-er". I stalk away, taking back all the nice things I'd ever said about her, which weren't that many.

I want to ask Mom about pencils, but Tommy and his fists still lurk in the living room. Octobear needs more legs, but if Tommy punches me one more time my arm's going to fall off. Without my arm, it'll be hard to draw.

The only other place to look is the attic. I'm not supposed to snoop around up there because Mom says I make a mess. This one time I found a bunch of brand new action figures Dad hadn't even opened yet. His face turned purple when he found me playing with them a few days later. Since then, the attic has been off-limits for me. Octobear needs me, though.

It takes a while, but I find a box of old art supplies buried under a fake Christmas tree and a bin of my old baby clothes. The stuff inside the box is mostly junk. I push aside a stack of paper with brown water spots and small containers of dried-up paint until I feel something smooth and wooden. The wooden thing ends up being a case, and when I open it there's a half-used pencil wrapped in green velvet. Yes! Why anyone would put a plain old pencil in a box like that, I don't know, but Dad is weird and keeps his toys in boxes, too. With a shrug, I toss the cardboard box to the side and hurry back down to my room.

I finish drawing the last of Octobear's limbs and start on a cat who will have a jetpack on his back when Mom calls me down for dinner. The meatloaf is extra dry tonight and Dad talks for a whole ten minutes about some market on Wall Street, wherever that is. As soon as I choke down the last awful bite, I run back to my room,

ready to send a cat into orbit.

Only one problem: there's a cat on my desk and he looks kind of familiar.

The cat stands up and puffs his snowy fur. "Hey, pal," he says.

I rub my eyes then look over my shoulder towards the stairs where the rest of my family is still talking about James Bond or something. I knew this day would come—Mom's meatloaf has finally driven me insane.

"Not gonna answer me?" He closes his yellow eyes and shakes his head. "That's fine. But do me a favor, kid?"

My mouth hangs open. I try to speak but the words get stuck inside of me.

He turns to the paper lying on the desk next to him and I see an empty space where his back should be. With his paw, he pats my cat drawing on the page.

"Finish drawing me."

I slam the door behind me and run downstairs as fast as I can. Mom said she wanted me to make new friends, and now I guess I have. ■



Wood Carver

BY ANN STANLEY

The room already looked better, with the last dusty layer of carpet removed to expose the ancient oak boards underneath. It would be a job to repair and finish them, but they'd be beautiful. This would be the third room Tracy remodeled in the seventeenth century former rectory house she and Mark had bought northeast of Manchester; she'd already finished the kitchen and living room.

She rolled the last layer of carpet against the wall, then crawled from one board to the next, carefully running her hands across each one, to find those she needed to replace. In the outside corner, two boards next to each other had pieces chipped out of the middle of their edges. When she rapped them, they sounded hollow and moved a little. Curious, she put her fingers into the holes on either side of one of the boards and tugged. It came up with a pop.

She pulled up the other board and saw a wooden box sitting right below the level of the floor. After lifting it out, she tried to open it, but the lid wouldn't budge. Once she shoved two flathead screwdrivers under the lid's edges, she discovered why; it had been sealed with a ring of wax. Slowly, it came free, exposing a bundle of thick, ivory colored paper bound with a blue ribbon.

In her office, she removed the bundle and untied it. The first sheet looked worn, as if someone had handled it many times. Its old-fashioned calligraphy was difficult to read, but, with a little effort, she made out the words.

*I am a Sheaf of Paper inches from the Fire
I am a Sapling with an Ax swinging towards it
I am a Glass Bowl, falling towards the Ground
Yet I cannot stop hoping that Someone will save me from the Fire
that the Woodcutter will choose a different Tree
that the One who dropped Me will catch Me*

*For I am not Guilty
I am not the One They seek
I could never commit the Crime for which they condemn me to Death.*

This was crazy. Who wrote this poem? Who had hidden this box? She set the page aside and examined the next one. The handwriting looked the same as the poem's. The date surprised her. The house had been built in 1678, but she hadn't expected to find anything from that era.

April 6, 1714

*Dearest Mother and Father,
I hope this finds you well. I am settled, happily, in my new Town. I understand that you arranged this Apprenticeship as punishment, but it suits me. The Master Woodcarver is a kind man, who makes beautiful pieces, and treats us well, us being two Apprentices and a Journeyman. The food and*

sleeping arrangements, although not what I am used to, are tolerable.

I have made the acquaintance of the man next door, a Farrier. He seems a good sort, as does the linen and wool Trader who agreed to bring this post to you. Since the Trader often travels the road between York and Manchester, he will carry letters between us for a much smaller fee than the Post.

I pray you will someday forgive me for leaving the Church and allow me to return home, but I cannot take back my words. My reasons for Dissenting remain. I do not need to repeat them herein, although I remind you that I did not accuse you personally of corruption. I find you blameless.

Although I am sorry this led to our estrangement, you will surely find John more suited for the Clergy than I, seeing that he is of firmer disposition and more accepting of authority.

Know that I am always available if the need should arise, you have only to ask.

*Your ever devoted Son,
Nathaniel*

Tracy set the letter on top of the poem and exhaled hard, realizing that she'd been holding her breath. Just like Nathaniel, her brother Sam had been kicked out of her own family because of religion.

She leaned back in her chair, remembering that awful day. Sam, home from his first semester at the state university, had refused to attend the Christmas Eve service. The rest of the family was dressed in their best, ready to leave, when he came out of his room wearing

jeans and a sweatshirt.

“I’m not going,” he announced. “I can’t be a hypocrite. I don’t believe in this Christian myth anymore.”

Their father struck Sam across the face and ordered him to put on a suit and tie. Sam obeyed, but the next morning the fighting began. All day her father and mother screamed at Sam, until her father told him to pack a bag and get out. Tracy sat on the couch the whole time, still as a statue, curled in on herself, while words flew and her only brother left carrying only a daypack. Her parents stood in the doorway, shouting, “You have gone to the devil. Until you recognize Jesus as your Savior, we want nothing to do with you.”

Then her mother turned to her. “And you, missy, with the big ears, don’t you dare talk to him or you’ll be out the door, too.”

The sound of the garage door jolted her out of the past. Mark was home. Excited to show him her discovery, she ran to greet him. “Honey, come. You have to see what I found.”

He smiled at her. “Give me a minute.”

She stood impatiently while he set his briefcase on the floor and removed his coat.

As soon as he hung it on the peg in the hall, she gave him a gentle push towards her office.

“Don’t I get a kiss?” he asked, but she’d already slipped past him and picked up the box.

“Amazing,” he said, after she’d explained her find and he’d read the first letter. “Whoever stored these knew how to protect them from mice and mold. Look at how thickly they coated the inside of that box with wax.”

“Who do you suppose saved them? His mother? But why did she hide them?”

“So his father wouldn’t know she had them? In any case, these

look valuable. We should give them to the University.”

“We will, but I want to read them first.”

She had planned to work on the floor after dinner while Mark debugged a computer program, but instead she went into her office and picked up the next sheet from the box. The handwriting, with its long f-like s’s and its odd wording, was difficult to parse, but she soon got used to it.

Nathaniel had written the next few letters one after another, much like a diary, covering both sides of the paper with small letters. She figured he’d done this in between the trader’s visits, so he could save money. Dated weekly at first, then less often as the months passed, he wrote lively stories about his work, the room he shared with the other apprentices, and the town. His descriptions of the horses, the crowded streets, market places, taverns, and tiny living quarters were so vivid Tracy almost smelled the rank odors of sweat and bodily fluids, tasted the beer in Fox’s Ale House, and felt the welcome breeze coming off the Irwell.

She also felt his pain. In every entry, he begged his family members, mainly his father, to write. As time passed, his pleas for a few words, just to know they were okay, seemed more and more desperate. Poor Nathaniel.

And poor Sam. Early on, he’d sent her a few emails, but, since she was living at home until she finished her degree in interior design, she’d been too afraid of her parents to open them. Besides, she had been under the sway of their church. She hadn’t been able to understand how anyone could stop believing in Jesus. It seemed ridiculous now, but, until she’d moved to Boston, met Mark and moved to England, she’d really thought that Sam had sold his soul to the devil. She still believed in Jesus, but she’d grown comfortable

with the variety of beliefs professed by her friends and her husband.

It no longer mattered to her that Sam was an atheist, she missed her little brother. Did he miss her, the way Nathaniel seemed to miss his family?

When she crawled into bed next to Mark, she whispered, “I want to find Sam.”

Mark rolled over and pulled her close. “You will. I’ll help you.”

At five, Tracy woke up and couldn’t go back to sleep. She wondered how to contact Sam. Her parents certainly wouldn’t know, even if she dared ask them. She no longer had his email, since she’d lost her student account when she graduated. How could she find someone with a common name like Sam Johnson in the morass of the internet?

Restless, she put on her coat and went out to the lane, thinking she’d take a walk to calm herself. She couldn’t see the stars or the moon, and could barely make out the damp pavement, but she walked anyway, breathing in the scents heightened by yesterday’s rain. The damp crept into her bones, chilling her, until she began to shiver and turned around. Trees emerged in the pre-dawn light, their empty branches making patterns against the sky, where the edges of puffy clouds hinted the rain might be done for now.

The kitchen light lit the last few steps to the front door. Mark had made coffee; she smelled it before she even stepped inside. She felt a burst of pleasure at the thought of spending the next hour with her husband.

He already had his computer open on the kitchen counter, one hand on the track pad, the other holding a mug. He set the mug down and gave her a long kiss.

“Were you worried?” she asked.

“Nah. You hadn’t fled in the car. I figured you were outside thinking things over.”

“What’re you up to?”

“Wanted to see if I could find Sam before you returned, but I didn’t even have time to start.”

She peeled off her coat, laying it over the counter next to him, then poured herself a mug of coffee, and stood behind him to watch.

Half an hour later, she patted his shoulder. “It’s no use. There are a million Sam Johnsons out there, all vastly more famous than my brother. We need to try something else.”

Mark closed the laptop. “Let me take you to breakfast. I don’t need to be at work for another couple of hours.”

After Mark dropped her off, she took one of the loose boards to a specialty wood shop in Manchester, to see if they could make some matching pieces to replace the bad ones. By the time she got home, it was already mid-afternoon. She sat at her desk and picked up the next letter.

September 21, 1714

Beloved Brother,

I hope this finds you well, John. Your recent letter was received with great relief on my end, seeing as I had heard nothing from anyone at home. After the angry words you witnessed, I am not surprised to learn Father has forbidden all contact with me.

It cuts me deeply to learn that he does not read my letters, but hands them unopened to Mother and orders her to throw them into the Fire. I feel terrible that she must resort to subterfuge in order to read them. How little we know our parents. I would never have suspected her capable of deceiving Father.

Now that you are back in York I promise to write frequently, expecting that you will share my letters with Mother when you visit.

Be Well, and Work Hard at Your Most Important Studies.
Nathaniel

Look at how thrilled Nathaniel had been to hear from his brother. Surely Sam would feel the same way, if only she could figure out how to find him. What about social media? She hated it, but her brother was tech savvy. He was probably all over it.

In the meantime, she needed to do something physical to deal with her anxiety. When Mark came home, she was on her hands and knees on the floor, using a putty knife to repair it.

“Wow, you’re really making progress,” he said, pecking her cheek.

She stood, rather creakily, for a real kiss. “Facebook,” she said.

“Good idea. I’ll get you set up and make dinner.” Mark knew that she’d never used Facebook, because she was afraid members of her parents’ church would harass her.

He showed her how to get on, then left her to set up her account. She hated answering personal questions but she did put in her high school, hometown and college, to make it easier for Sam to find her. She searched for Sam, but, again, there were too many others with his name, often without pictures, so she sent friend requests to a

few high school acquaintances and cousins, and gave up.

“How can you live on this thing?” she asked. “It’s exhausting.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m just used to it.”

After they ate, she read more letters. Nathaniel only wrote every couple of months now, briefer messages, mainly mentioning the shop and his progression from an errand boy to preparer of boards, to finally being allowed to do some of his own carving. The most exciting thing happened in mid-1715, when riots had broken out between the Dissenters, who generally supported the new king, and the Anglicans, who generally opposed him. Anglicans attacked Dissenting churches. Nathaniel wrote that he felt torn. He didn’t like the new king, but he couldn’t bring himself to return to the Anglican Church: *It would not be safe here for me if I told either side of my views, so I say nothing and spend my free hours improving my craft. I pray tempers will cool soon.*

She read for another hour and almost wished she hadn’t.

August 28, 1719

Sir,

It is with a heavy heart that I write to beg for your assistance in a matter of the utmost urgency. For I have been accused of murder and will go to trial if my accusers can raise the money. I fear they will succeed for tempers in this part of town are high.

I understand you have not forgiven me, but please do not cast me out forever. I am still your Son, despite what has passed between us. I beg of you to put your enmity aside and come to my aid.

You know well that I could never hurt a child or anyone for that matter, but these townspeople do not. I am nearly a

stranger to them, a Dissenter, and an unmarried young man, therefore suspicious.

If you would but speak for me, they would look harder for the monster who has done this awful thing and leave me to my work.

Always Your Devoted Son,

Nathaniel

She dropped her head in her hands. This situation brought up all the terrible scenarios she'd refused to consider for years. She pictured Sam in trouble: beat up, drugged, in jail, or dying penniless under a bridge. Why hadn't she tried to help him? What had been wrong with her that she hadn't even read his emails, or answered the phone when he'd called? How could she have been so thoughtless and cruel?

Mark came into the room and laid his hand on her shoulder. "Honey? You okay?"

She shook her head and pointed at the letter. Mark leaned over for a minute, then he straightened. "You're upset about a man who lived three hundred years ago?"

She laughed. "No, silly. About Sam. What if he's rotting in jail somewhere?"

"I doubt it. Why don't we sit down together and read the rest of these letters. It'll take your mind off your fears." He brought a chair from the kitchen and placed himself next to her.

September 10, 1719

My Beloved Brother John,

I thank you with all of my heart for writing to enquire about the murder and for agreeing to pleade with our Father to

stand for me. I fear greatly for my life. Since I last wrote, an angry mob came to hang me, and it was only due to a warning from the Farrier next door that my Master and I managed to bolt our door and hold them off until calmer heads prevailed.

Perhaps you recall the girl who liked to watch us work. Two weeks ago her father came looking for her, as he often did. Since his daughter had not been to our shop in several weeks, he continued his search. Late evening he returned. She had not yet been found. I went with him to scour the streets and fields until it became too dark to see anything.

With first light we resumed our search. Some of us were headed east, into the fields, when we heard a shout. They found the girl's body near the river, her throat sliced. I ask you, who would do such a horrible thing to a child? Not I, you know it well, but the Constable found a piece of blue cloth from her dress caught on a corner of a table in our shop and seized on me as the most likely to have committed this crime, being now the oldest Apprentice and a Dissenter

Nevertheless, I do not understand how they can accuse me, seeing as I spent the day of her disappearance working in the shop, surrounded by others. What have I done to deserve suspicion? I work hard and lead a good and upright life.

I beg you John, convince Father to put away his anger and come to my aid. They will listen to Him, as a clergyman. If You do not defend me, I am terribly afeared I will be convicted of this murder, though I am innocent. Please, please, I beg again do not let me hang.

*Your ever faithful Brother,
Nathaniel*

Tracy's heart raced. How could such a terrible thing happen? If it were Sam, she'd go to him in an instant.

Mark put his arm around her. "Maybe this wasn't such a great idea. It's made you worse."

She took a deep breath. "No, no, it's okay. I've got to remember that he isn't Sam."

"Who is this dead girl?"

Tracy looked through the earlier letters, until she found the passage. She and Mark read it together.

The young children in our part of town run wild, their parents too busy to mind them. Once they reach the age of five or six, they are sent to school or put to work, but before that they are in and out of the shops and the fields and forests beyond. It sometimes seems impossible that they escape injury when they dash between carts and around the horse and mules, but they are fast.

Often these children come into the shop, spend a few minutes watching us, then run off. Yesterday, one of them stayed for hours, a beautiful girl, all rosy cheeks, blond curls and blue eyes. She begged to help. I showed her how to make a curl of wood. She practiced until her Father came for her. He is a Teacher. He said he found her helping the Baker last week and the Printer the week before. She wants to know everything. You would like him and his daughter.

"What a wonderful child," Mark said. "I hope we'll have one like that some day."

"Not if she's going to be murdered."

"Now why would that happen? Calm down, love. Let's read some more. I want to know what happened."

She laid her head on his chest. "I'm just worried about Sam."

He kissed the top of her head. "I know you are, but there's nothing we can do right now. Come on."

The next piece of paper from the bundle had been folded and worn until it was nearly illegible. Tracy smoothed it flat. They took turns making sense of the damaged words.

It is too late for me. I have been tried and found guilty of Manslaughter. I shall go to the Gallows in a few months, unless God or man intercedes on my behalf. Oh, Mother, how my heart aches. Why have you abandoned your oldest son to this undeserved Fate? Have I not been a good Man? Will you not beg of my Father to speak for me? Is he still so angry that he would let me hang?

Remember when I saved Mr. Robert's puppies from drowning? Or when I made broth when you were ill? How I loved my younger sisters and watched over them to keep them from harm? These are not the doings of a murderer.

No one here will stand for me. All I thought were friends believe me guilty, save the Trader who carries this letter. They shun me. I could not believe the Trial. None would admit to seeing me in my shop all the day of the little girl's death, not even my Master. The Farrier next door even spoke against me, calling me names I do not deserve. With one little piece of cloth, caught on a table, a little boy's confused words, two angry parents, and a multitude of lies, the Jury convicted me.

How this decision must have weighed on Nathaniel's mother and brother! She put her hands to her face and moaned. She'd been so weak, standing by while they sent her brother off into the cold, without any resources, and never reaching out to help him. "Oh, Mark," she said. "How could I have been so awful to Sam?"

Mark pulled her hands off her face and held them between his own. "You were young. You have to forgive yourself." He released her and kissed the top of her head. "Let's finish reading. Tomorrow's Saturday. We can sleep in."

"If we sleep at all."

February 15, 1719

Dearest Father, Mother, Sisters, and Brother,

I write to say goodbye. I pray that God will forgive You for the bitterness You expressed in your letter. Your words cut me deeply. You are wrong that I must have done this deed: the Town Officials do not care if they have the right man. They need my death to prove they have done their job. So here I sit in Prison, grateful only that I am on the top floor, safe from floods. My room is full of bugs and rats and my own excretions, with only a mealy piece of bread twice a day. I imagine everyone in town believes my guilt, or does not wish to be associated with a dead man, for only the Trader has come to see me. Those I once called friend have stayed away. After much haggling, the Trader agreed to bring you this last letter, but only after raising his price manyfold.

My heart weighs heavy in my chest, knowing that everyone I've ever loved despises me. If only I had one kind word from you, it would ease my Last Days.

On the day of my death, the Parson will arrive an hour before dawn to hear my confession. Then I shall hang, while Whosomever did this awful deed goes free and will, I fear, murder again.

I remain, despite everything, your ever Faithful and Devoted Son. I forgive you for everything which has passed between us. I enclose a poem I composed during the days of waiting. You

will recall how much I loved the poetry of the Masters.

May God keep your souls,

Nathaniel.

“Oh, my god,” Tracy said.

Mark squeezed her hard. “Bloody hell. I never thought they’d hang him.”

“I don’t like this.” She hid her face against his sweater.

“I love you, Tracy. No matter what happens, I’m here for you.”

“I know you are. I wouldn’t have married you, if I didn’t know that.”

“Good.” He reached over and turned to the next page.

November 28, 1719

My dearest Brother,

As you can see, I am still very much alive. Your Petition for my release was successful. The Judge agreed with You and Mother that the Jury made a mistake, especially since another man killed a child whilst I rotted in that vile Prison. In exchange for a Pardon, I agreed to Transportation.

Please inform Mother and my Sisters. Perhaps it is better if you do not speak to Father.

I cannot begin to tell you of my gratitude and my great relief. I only wish two things, that I could say goodbye in person and gaze upon Mother’s face once more, and that they had pardoned me sooner, for I spent a many a long and sleepless night anticipating what, thankfully, never came.

Tracy whooped. She turned to Mark with a big smile, but then she frowned. “What does transportation mean? It clearly isn’t some science fiction thing.”

“They used to call it that when someone was sent to the New World to be an indentured servant.”

“Oh, right. I know a little about those.”

Only one sheet of paper remained. Dated in 1722, it described conditions in his new home in Pennsylvania.

I was much afeared that I might end up doing hard labor in the Indies when I agreed to Transportation, but instead I am Indentured to a fine Cabinet Maker. Once my Contract ends, I shall enter his shop as a Journeyman.

So that was it. Nathaniel had survived. Maybe Sam had, too.

“Think you can sleep now that Nathaniel’s saga had a happy ending?”

“I’ll try.”

In the morning, she woke late. Mark was already sitting on a kitchen stool at his favorite counter spot, typing on his laptop.

“Any luck?” she asked, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

“Maybe. Come see if this is him.”

Instantly wide awake, she rushed over. “Let me see! What makes you think it might be him?”

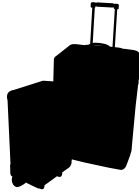
“He’s from your hometown. Looks a lot like you.” He rotated the laptop so she could see it more easily.

Tracy leaned over and whooped. “Oh, my god! It’s him! He’s okay. Thank you, thank you, thank you.” She kissed her husband hard on the lips, then danced around the kitchen. “I’m making pancakes to celebrate. Can we contact him?”

“Not sure yet. He’s working for a startup in California, but they don’t list personal emails. Probably the best thing is to email his company.”

Late Monday afternoon, her brother called. After a few tearful minutes of reconnecting, he said, “I’d love to see you. How about I get a plane ticket and fly over as soon as I can?”

“Oh, yes! Yay!” After they hung up, she set the phone on the counter and whooped. ■



Plus or Minus One

[BY LEE J. TYLER](#)

She hears the echo of her scream as she awakens; it bounces around her bedroom in time to her racing heartbeat. Wiping her eyes, she lifts the now sodden pillow and carries it out to her laundry room. *How many times has she done this?*

Nothing is safe to watch, it seems to her. Before bed, Jane had watched a sweet romantic comedy filmed in the late 90's. The female lead turned around to talk to her love interest, and the towers were perfectly aligned between the two sparring characters. Jane had spilled her drink on the remote while hurriedly changing the channel to the Home Shopping Network. She wasn't a fan, but it alone was safe.

Now, leaning against the cool of her washing machine, she peels off her t-shirt and throws it in a basket. Her dog, Doby, rests his head on her feet, and she bends down to rub his ears.

"Well, I might as well stay up, right Doby?" He cocks one ear and looks at her expectantly. She grabs a robe and heads to the back door, with Doby right on her heels. Once she opens the door, he runs out to the backyard sniffing as if picking up SOS signals from any who might have crossed his domain.

After showering and donning her uniform, she splays out her hand and runs it along the color-coordinated clothes in her closet. If only she had a job where she could wear what she wanted to

wear: bright colors, mix and match outfits and a new outfit each day! *It's the little things in life*, she thinks, ruefully.

She walks to the foyer to gather her purse and keys which she always leaves in the same place. “*A tidy home makes a calm owner*,” she hears his voice. He had a saying for everything. As she grabs her keys from the plate on the foyer table, her hand slowly moves to the buttons on her answering machine. She pops out the tape and picks up a well-worn twin. Placing it in the slots, she pushes the lid closed and then presses play, “Hey Doodlebug! Thought I'd call to make sure you're not causing a student uprising at Columbia. Call me and let me know they haven't kicked you out yet.”

The twenty-minute drive to the airport goes by fast as Tarzan, her trusty Jeep, zips around traffic, her auburn hair tossing in the wind. The radio is up so she can hear the music. “And we're back. You're listening to WMUZ. Let us be your Midwest muse with all music, all the time. Well, almost all of the time. A short PSA, there will be a fund drive for our local firefighters this coming Tuesday at the ...” Suddenly, this day slips into another bright morning thirteen years ago.

She walked out of her poly sci class at Columbia University, skipped down the steps and out the door to a beautiful September morning in New York City. *Every Monday should be required to be this beautiful*, she thought.

Her father was standing outside, wearing his favorite outfit: black pants and red turtleneck tucked in under his protruding belly.

“Dad? Hi! What are you doing in the city?”

He smiled and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She fit

perfectly between his elbow and his large hand. His heft is what gave him his nickname, Mac.

He didn't say anything, only smiled and squeezed her again as they walked side by side.

Jane looked up at him, "Oh right, don't ask. You didn't come to the city to see just me, right?"

"Nothing's gonna keep me from seeing my favorite little girl."

"Your only girl, Dad. It's easy to win that category." Jane giggled. "So how long are you in town?"

"Just for a few days. I thought I could steal you away for an early dinner and a movie. How does that sound?"

"Sounds great! What are you hungry for?"

After dinner, they sparred playfully as they walked back to her place; a continual conversation of opposing viewpoints to sharpen the mind.

"There is no factor for the provable existence of God in scientific formulas, Dad."

"Ah, here we go. You sound like me when I was in college. Which professor gave you that line? And, by the way, that is where faith comes in."

"No professor, Dad. It's your daughter's scientific mind at work. That's why you're paying CU all the big bucks, right?" She swept her hand toward the buildings as they walked past.

Mac laughed in the slow, guttural waves Jane had grown to love. "I should've baptized you before you started talking, since once you started talking you haven't stopped!" He reached around and lifted her off her feet with one arm.

"Hey, no fair. Pick on someone your own size, Daddy!"

The next morning, she was at a cafe near Battery Park where they had agreed to meet after his meeting in the World Trade Center. The streets and cafes were filled with people milling around, enjoying the beautiful weather.

An odd shadow passed over her, blocking out the sun. She would think of that shadow later as nothing short of Death Incarnate.

A boom and screams everywhere she turned. She looked up and saw billows of smoke and flames coming out of what looked, from her perspective, to be the top of the North Tower ... where her father was.

She vaguely remembers scenes from the rest of that month. She plastered his picture all over New York and stayed at the makeshift memorials unable to move from them. As if he might come out and find her gone, she daren't leave.

The honking horn of the car next to her yanks her back to the present. She swerves Tarzan back into her lane. *Get a grip, girl*, Jane thinks.

Walking out of the employee lounge, Jane rolls her eyes as she clips the tag on the official airline uniform. It reads, "Hi, my name is Jane." She bobs her head to one shoulder and back, silently making fun of the sophomoric name-tag.

She has always wondered where she would be if she hadn't dropped out of Columbia. Today, she feels her lack of a diploma more keenly as she readies herself for another day working a job more far more draining than fulfilling.

Since working at the airline ticket counter, she has deconstructed most of the human race. They are all derivatives from a terrorist's face. Not a beard? Plus one point. A sports ball-cap on the head?

Plus one point. Turban on the head? Minus one point.

Not that she's a bigot, it is just her training.

She sees one hundred times the amount of people in one day that 99% of the rest of people see, so her skills are at maximum capacity. She's even got it down to looking not in their eyes but at their bags and their shoes.

You can tell a lot by a person's shoes

It is her *job* to analyze the bags, especially which ones passengers check or carry on board. Jane has become an expert at categorizing people by their shoes, clothes, suitcases and carry-on bags. She is the first line of defense.

Strangely, it is here at the hub of the airlines that she finds the people most uniform. Occasionally, there will be one that stands out from the rest. But, like in an audience at a theatrical performance, The One melds into the many to form one animal. No one wants to stand out, in looks or action, for whatever reason. Was the mass of humanity turning into two factions in her mind? One safe and the other not?

She doesn't mean to simplify people like that; it is merely necessary for her job: whatever, or whoever, stands out is a clue for further investigation. A bag with no owner, just like what happened with the bombing in Atlanta, is a clue. Unfortunately, no one knew to look for it then.

She does enjoy the people that she works with, however. She used to like going out with them, but she and Cynthia were the only single women; there was always pressure from the group to fix her up with someone who was never right. More likely, she realized a long time ago, it was she that wasn't right, would never be right again. She would always be broken.

She takes a deep breath as Cynthia at the ticket counter next to her comes over to complain about her latest boyfriend. Cynthia spends all of her time flirting with men.

Jane wishes she didn't have to listen to Cynthia. She'd rather be home with Doby and a good book. Instead, she has people in her face trying to change their ticket and acting as if not being able to do so were the end of the world.

Jane finishes entering the current customers' information and directs them to Gate 22.

She looks to her left to see Cynthia grab an overstuffed duffel bag and place it on the conveyor belt. The girl has not given the item a single glance as she now leans a bit too far over her counter to give the man directions to his gate.

A ticket is placed on the counter above her keyboard. Jane does not look up until she needs to check the identification material again. "Hello, and welcome to Worldwide Airlines. How are you today?"

Charlie, the Top Flight Lounge concierge for WWA, whispers in her ear, "Jane, really need you for a sec."

"Pardon me, sir." The man leaning on the counter just raises an eyebrow. She would bet her savings account he was wearing topsiders.

"Hi Charlie. Whatcha got there?" Charlie holds up a lounge pass for one of the Top Five flyers, Mr. Ishimoto, who is her personal favorite frequent flyer as well.

"Mr. Ishimoto said he needs something from the briefcase he left at the quick check-in lane but when I looked there were two cases. He said you would know the password." Charlie's face formed a question mark, the eyebrows raised, the mouth a perfect small O.

"Charlie, he's as old as you!" She winks. "Give me that." Jane takes the first briefcase from Charlie and punches in 5-7-5 to open it. The question mark turns into an exclamation. "Wow, how did you figure that out?"

"Easy, Charlie. He's a renowned Haiku expert. Please take this to him and put the other in Unclaimed Luggage."

Jane grabs Charlie's arm and quietly describes the duffel bag she saw Cynthia put on the conveyor belt and asks him to get security to run it down. Quickly she turns back to Mr. Topsider. As the man tries to get a window seat on a packed flight, Jane notices a young family of three. The mother and father, clearly still in love, are in awe of their little boy, who looks about two years old. Love is such a mesmerizing emotion that it is hard to turn away once it's spotted. Jane finds it difficult to do that now. She can only smile and soak up as much of their interaction with each other as she can when they reach her station.

At lunch, she runs through security holding out her I.D. and waving at familiar faces until she reaches her favorite restaurant, right next to Gate 20. It has the best food and great service. Finally, she can disappear into a book and need not talk to anyone. She cranks her iPod and streams music to drown out the ever present 24-hour announcements at each gate and throughout the airport. With the music flowing and her eyes on the page, this is the highlight of her day.

Today she chooses her favorite: veggie stew and a brownie. The sugar will get her through the rest of her shift.

Just as she finishes her stew, her book crashes from the table. She feels the blast before she hears it. She is sent reeling from her chair and lands against something hard.

She gazes at the rubble all around her. Gate 22 is now open to the sky. The large plane leans strangely on the tarmac, so out of proportion she becomes nauseous trying to right it in her mind.

Her eyes scan the terminal: The ramp to the plane is smashed and twisted. The guards and gate agents near the ramp lie dead

from the impact of the blast. She sees security guards running toward the disaster. A strangely familiar smell fills the air.

Jane jumps up before she can think better of it and runs ahead of them—straight onto the twisted ramp. She is grateful to find a man kneeling against the ramp’s wall, alive, crying while hugging his child’s lifeless body. This man, who would have received a one-point deduction in her system just for living, becomes the truest example of a human being to her. She keeps her eyes on him as if he was a refuge from all of the chaos around her. Nothing seems more real, truly innocent and full of love than this man, even in his grief ... *because* of his grief. He turns his head to look at her with imploring eyes, as if asking for a miracle but knowing none existed. They hold the gaze for what seems an eternity, a place in time with no time.

She looks at the manifest in her hand, still there from before lunch yet covered with dust seemingly hundreds of years old, and runs onto the plane. Once inside, the guards still behind her, she kneels next to the first people she sees. Their name is on this list. She had checked them in, but she did not recognize them. She kneels and pleads with the God she once denied. “No, no, no! Please, no!” The pleading turns into giant tears and a sort of keening sound. She does not recognize it as her own. Then she notices the names of the family she had checked in, so much love; father, mother, child. All smiling and eager for their trip.

She doesn’t think about her next action. She moves her hand and withdraws it quickly; another body lies behind her. Even in the most devastating situations, habits stay ingrained: she looks down at his shoes.

She immediately remembers him, a businessman carrying a big, stuffed teddy bear. He had checked the bear onto the plane. This man was the one person who had made her laugh all day long. He had said the bear was his lucky charm and he never left home without it. This man had a story, yet now could not tell his tale.

This was the worst of it, Jane thought. There was one thing in this world that did not discriminate; death was the final arbiter of fate and no one was spared. Not the terrorists, the businessmen, families, or her father. In the end, Death won. A hollow victory, she imagined. But it is better to tell your tale before you go. We all matter. Our lives matter. And yet, for Death, they do not. The proof was here before her eyes.

She howls, then places her head on her knees. The pain is too much. Her body feels molten, unable to move from this hell; her soul is shattering into pieces.

The rumbling of feet as the guards hit the ramp must have been moments later but seems an eternity.

She hears the boy before she sees him, great gulps of sobs behind two empty seats. She has to get to that child and shield him from all of this. She kneels next to him and holds his gaze, tears streaming down around an open mouth, eyes seeing what should never be seen. Slowly, she reaches to grasp him, and he clasps his arms around her neck. *Dear God, help us.* She stands with him, his legs dangling, head buried deep in her shoulder.

The two of them move through the crush of security and police swarming the plane. All she wants is enough strength to pull the boy through this. That is all that matters.

Jane still works at the airport, but now she sells clothes in her personal shop. No two are alike. Vibrant colors, textures and designs run throughout each weave and dye. “Made by hand” is stitched onto the tag.

She had to cut back drastically at first, but eventually the money the store pulled in was enough to cover all expenses, salaries and a more than adequate nest-egg for the future. Though the money

doesn't affect her much; it is the people she meets and the time with loved ones that she values the most.

The daycare center for the shop owners is nearby, letting her see little Aaron whenever she wants. After long waits and mounds of paperwork, the adoption of the little boy she had found on the plane was finalized. She kept his last name, found in the manifest and records, just in case any of his extended family ever decide to look for him. She has searched far and wide but never found any of his family in the U.S. or abroad. It is heart-wrenching to think that one day someone might claim him, but searching for relatives was the right thing to do.

Jane had a huge sale at one point in the first year of business that became so hectic, she rang up a man's items and stopped, realizing she had not even welcomed him. She looked up and smiled into the kindest face she had ever seen.

"I was wondering if you might suggest a pair of shoes to go with this outfit?" he said. He was polite and his voice was low and smooth. She smiled before speaking, knowing he would not be a difficult customer. She knew how to spot them now: all she had to do was look deep within their eyes. ■



Bees

BY S. J. HENDERSON

The inside of my head swells with the buzz of bees.

Bees. In my head!

They swarm in my ears when the loud things happen. I can't see them, but I feel them crawling around inside my skull with their sticky yellow feet, sampling my taste with a hum of satisfaction. They swoop around the empty spaces, causing my brain to shrink back against itself in fear. It's not long before the bees come to an excited decision regarding the perfect location for their new hive. Their frenzied attention turns to the space just above the hollows of my eye sockets and the tippy-top of my head. I don't want bees living inside of me.

If I press my hands hard enough on the top of my head the buzzing quiets, but it comes back as soon as I stop. If I hit my head on the wall or the floor, the bees still. I imagine the banging squishes them into a blob of striped goo inside my skull. Dead bees are slightly better than live bees, but they're still dead in my head.

My mother cries out with tears blurring her eyes when I kill the bees. Her touch is light as a feather against my bruises, but it does not calm me. The bees like her concern and stir back to life.

I will hurt the bees again when Mom isn't watching.

The final bang of my head brings me to my knees. I lurch

forward until part of my weight rests on my palms. Back and forth, I rock my body. Back and forth, and back and forth. If I clench my eyes tightly, it feels like I am the captain at the helm of a great ship. The bow of my vessel rises to meet the crest of a challenging wave with a thunderous slap, then slips to the hollow before rising again.

No, the ocean is too big and I am small. Plus, bees do not like the water because the fish lurk in the shadows there. The insects grumble mutiny, and I am afraid. I cannot be a captain.

I continue rocking, no longer thinking of the sea and hoping to lull my buzzing captors to sleep. Sometimes when I get into a good rhythm, my eyelids become heavy as if they are made of iron and I fall asleep, too. A few feet away lies my favorite blanket, and I stop moving long enough to reach for it and wrap myself in its familiar cocoon. I pull the folds of fabric snug around my shoulders and tummy and almost smile. The pressure against my skin makes the bees halt their work.

Though I'm still on my knees, the side of my head and my shoulders rest against the floor now. The only way I can continue rocking in this position is to swing my butt back to my heels and then forward a little. It is not enough movement to bring the bees to their slumber, so I begin to sing them a lullaby.

Louder, they demand, pounding their bee fists against the cords of my optic nerves. I raise my volume several notches.

Not loud enough! Up I go, matching my volume to theirs until my song becomes the whine to rival the wail of a fire engine. My mother attempts to pull me into her arms. She wants me to stop singing to the bees, but she believes it's that simple—to just stop. The bees will not sting *her* in her cerebral cortex if I stop singing. I'm the one who will suffer their wrath.

After several minutes, Mother surrenders and leaves me to the rhythm of my odd melody. There is no time to stop and tell her thank you. I must keep rocking.

Sleep finds me and silences the bees. While I dream, the bees may decide to creep away through the openings in my ears or the long passage to my nostrils. Or they may stay, rising with me and yawning and stretching their tiny legs in preparation for more building. I never know until my eyes flutter open and I listen for them. I always hope today is the day they decide to leave my head in search of faraway flowers or the unsuspecting heads of other people. Every once in a while, they do leave.

Today I dream I have wings and I float along on the warm currents of the breeze. The hum vibrating from my core is soothing and low, a bass line to the chirps and clicking all around. Each time I land to steady my breathing, I taste the surface beneath my golden toes. One moment, I dally over the powdery petal of a daisy. The next, I drink in the sticky sweet of an apple core browning in the sun.

So many senses, so little time.

Awake, I would be forced to shut my eyes or ball my hands into fists. My ears would need covering to block out the chaos of nature. I would spit to rid my mouth of the taste of the flower, and retch from the decay of the old apple. But not in my dreams. In my dreams, I possess the freedom and fearlessness of a winged thing. There are bees in my head and in my dreams.

The inside of my head swells with the buzz of bees. ■



The Passing

BY BRIAN RELLA

The trail to the cave crested the hill, and Griffin stopped to breathe in the crisp morning air as a bead of sweat traced down his forehead and skipped off his brow onto the ground. Looking back, he took in the view of his village below, watching a shadow creep across the fields and huts, muting the colors of late summer. Smiling, he turned back up the path, and headed toward the cave to see his father.

Inside the cave, a flickering fire cast dancing shadows on the walls. The air was dense and humid, adding weight to each breath. Cale was at the far end of the cave, his graying hair and beard glistening in the firelight. Griffin watched as Cale brushed stray hairs from his deep-set hazel eyes and blew on the limestone where he had chiseled lines into the soft rock. Cale picked up a wooden cup of paint and flint and colored the scores, bringing the glyph to life. When the glyph was finished, Griffin watched him put down his tools and massage his fingers.

“Father?” Griffin called to him.

His father nodded toward him and returned to his hammer and chisel, intently focused on the wall. Griffin sighed internally and sat, patiently waiting for his father to finish. While he waited, he read the story his father had been carving into the walls.

The walls of the cave were alive with images of the passing, the

journey each chief of the Saarondoah had to take before becoming leader of the tribe. Griffin recognized many of the scenes on the wall: the symbols of his tribe, the mountain where his grandfather lived, the dove, and the magical white stone in the forest under the mountain. Other images were foreign to Griffin. His father had been teaching him about these since he had come of age several weeks ago.

His father put down his tools and motioned for Griffin to join him. “The blue planet,” his father said, pointing to the wall. “What is this one?”

“Earth, Father. The planet we live on.”

“Good,” his father said. “And this red circle here. What is it?”

“The red planet, Mars. The fourth planet from the Sun.”

“Good Griffin. And this one here?” His father pointed to a planet surrounded by rings.

“Saturn, one of the ringed planets, sixth from the Sun.”

“Very good, Son.”

His father was preparing Griffin for the passing. The lessons about the planets and stars were called “astronomy”. Although Griffin had memorized everything his father had told him, he did not fully understand what he was learning. Nor did he understand how only his father and grandfather knew these things. Griffin had tried talking about his lessons with his friends, but they just laughed at him, so he only discussed this knowledge with his father.

“And this white circle,” his father continued. “What is ...”

Griffin cut him off. He had been over this a hundred times already and knew the questions before his father could finish asking them. “The vessel. Where the man in white lives. Father, we’ve been over this many times already. Can I ...”

His father waved his hand at him. “Griffin, you will continue reviewing until I say otherwise,” his father said sternly. “Now, let

us talk of the new abilities you will have after the passing. You will be one with all the animals of the Earth. With practice, you will see through their eyes, feel what they feel, speak to their minds, use their abilities, and inhabit their bodies.”

Griffin had no idea what his father was talking about. *Speak to animals’ minds? Inhabit their bodies?* Why had he never seen his father do those things? Sometimes he wondered if his father was mad; but he went along with the lessons anyway, knowing his father believed every word that he said and felt it was important for Griffin to understand as well.

His father continued, “You must respect and honor the creatures we share this world with. You must honor the laws of the gods and live in harmony with all the inhabitants of the world. Remember, Griffin, this is the responsibility of the chief.”

“I will remember, Father.” *But I don’t understand any of this.* “When will I be chief?”

“When it is time,” his father said.

“When will it be time?”

His father faced him. “Not long. Your grandfather will send the dove for us. Look deep within yourself and you will know: the passing is near.”

Despite all the teachings of his father, the passing was still a mystery. Griffin never got a complete answer to any of his questions. Over the years, he learned to let go of his frustrations with his father’s elusiveness. Sometimes it’s easier to let the answer come to you than it is to seek it out.

Griffin thought he’d seen something gloomy behind his father’s eyes lately. He felt Cale was holding things back from him. The frustration of not fully knowing clogged his mind with questions and made him uneasy.

“Father, I see the sorrow around your eyes. What aren’t you telling me? Tell me everything and maybe I can help,” Griffin pleaded.

His father stared at the cave wall again. “The world as we know it is dying away, Griffin. Other tribes have turned their backs on the knowledge I am sharing with you and have chosen a dark path. This wall, our story, is here as a guide to the source of our knowledge and how to find it again if we lose our way. You will find all your answers when you speak with your grandfather and go through the ritual. Be patient.” He picked up his hammer and chisel, presumably searching the wall for the next spot to start carving.

Griffin’s grandfather, Eron, was another mystery. He had retired to the mountain years ago, passing leadership of the tribe to Cale when Griffin was just a baby. He was a hermit and all that remained of him were the tall tales that circulated among his friends and family.

His father turned back to him, and Griffin saw his smile had returned. “Let me finish and I will join you at dinner,” he said, placing his paint-stained hand on Griffin’s shoulder.

Griffin nodded reluctantly and left the cave.

* * *

That night outside their hut, Griffin, his father, and his mother, Mala, ate around the fire in silence. Griffin could not stop thinking about what his father had said. *What did he mean the world as we know it is dying away?* He was distracted and did not notice the crowd of people coming toward them until they were nearly in front of Cale’s home. Different tribal symbols distinguished a group of five men within the crowd. The men were from the Baalin tribe across the lake.

His father put down his plate and waited, expressionless. The Saarondoah villagers murmured to one another and formed a half circle around the group of visitors as they stopped in front of Cale’s hut. Griffin saw Saarondoah warriors among the villagers, their

distrustful eyes focused on the group of Baalin.

A young man about Griffin's age with long black hair pulled back in a braid and a burn scar on his cheek stepped forward. His stern look and chiseled features were the embodiment of a warrior. Griffin looked closely at the young man. There was something familiar about him. The burn on his cheek ... Griffin's mind made the connection and the memories came back to him in a rush.

The young man was Abimilech, the son of Jerobal. Jerobal was chief of the Baalin tribe. Years ago, the Baalin and Saarondoah had lived together in the village on this side of the lake in peace and harmony, until the Drengalis attacked, burning their fields and homes, killing their men, women and children. Griffin was just a boy, but he remembered the fires spreading through the village.

Griffin remembered being trapped inside as the fire raged through his home. He clung to his mother's leg, screaming for his father. Cale burst through the flames and snatched Griffin and his mother out of their hut before the hut had been engulfed in fire.

Griffin remembered being on the ground outside his burning home, coughing from the smoke and heat. He recalled Cale racing from hut to hut with the speed and strength of a stallion, leaping through walls of fire, carrying women and children, three or four at a time, trying to save as many people as he could.

Jerobal's wife and son were also trapped inside their burning hut that tragic day. Griffin could hear them crying for Jerobal, who fought the Drengalis on the other side of the village. Griffin watched his father crash through the side of their home to save them as smoke and flames billowed from the front of their hut. Seconds later, Cale exploded through the other side of their hut and onto the street with Abimilech and his mother in his arms as the fire consumed their house. The boy's face was singed and black. Abimilech was reaching toward his mother who lay on the ground, covered in soot, lifeless. The roof of the hut fell in on itself sending a plume of fire, embers, and smoke into the air. Abimilech screamed

and fainted in Cale's arms.

Many others died that day —more Baalin than Saarondoah, it seemed. When Jerobal returned from the battle, he found his wife had been killed. Jerobal blamed Cale for saving his own people and leaving the Baalin to perish. He blamed Cale for his wife's death. The tribes split and the Baalin moved to the other side of the lake. Saarondoah and Baalin had not spoken or traded since.

The memories fresh in his mind, Griffin stiffened as he gazed at Abimilech and his men. Cold, lifeless eyes met his. Their cheeks were sunken and their lips dry and cracked. Their skin was tight on their bones and they had the ghostly look of starvation. Griffin noticed they were also armed.

"We come to speak about new terms for the lands on this side of the lake," Abimilech said.

His father clearly recognized him as well.

"Come and sit by the fire, Abimilech," his father replied, gesturing to the open seat next to him. "Your men look hungry and thirsty. We have food and water for all."

"No. We do not want *your* food," Abimilech said.

Griffin saw pride and disgust in Abimilech's face as he rebuked Cale's offer. Griffin's eyes narrowed as he measured Abimilech. *You would rather starve than eat with us?*

His father said nothing in reply and stared back at Abimilech, his face stony.

"Our fish are gone and our forest is empty," Abimilech said. "Our soils are poisoned and will not bear harvest. You must let us hunt on your land so we can feed our people."

His father leaned forward slightly. "What has happened to your land?" he asked, obviously concerned.

Anger set in around Abimilech's eyes. "I do not know. We are starving. You will let us hunt on your lands," he demanded.

His father's response was calm and firm. "Come back in a few days with your father, Abimilech. Your mind is not right. You and your father are guests in my home. Bring tarpan and carts so we can give you what grain and meat we can spare to help you through this difficult time. Tell Jerobal I will send some men to help your people understand what has happened to your lands."

"We do not have days," Abimilech said, hatred in his voice. "We do not want your food. We can hunt and provide for ourselves. Do you understand me, old man?"

Griffin bristled and his eyes widened as he saw Abimilech's hand move toward the blade at his belt. A fire spread through Griffin as he rose, his hand swiftly clenching his own blade as the Saarondoah warriors closed in around the Baalin. *They mean to attack us?*

His father stood and Griffin felt his father's hand on his shoulder. "Abimilech, listen to yourself," his father said. "What are you doing? This is madness. You come here at night, *armed and demanding* to hunt on our lands. I offer you and your companions food and council. You decline even though you are clearly hungry. Remove your hand from your blade now, or my warriors will slay you where you stand."

Griffin watched Abimilech and his men closely. Their eyes were full of fear and confusion.

"Reconsider your position," his father said. "Do not refuse my invitation." His father's arms went to his sides and he stood waiting for Abimilech's response.

Abimilech did not move. Griffin saw murderous hatred in his eyes as he stared back at Cale.

His father's face flared outrage. "Abimilech!" he shouted. "What say you?"

Saarondoah warriors were poised to strike. They would make quick work dispatching these trespassers. The air was charged, both sides on edge.

Finally, Abimilech released his blade, his eyes smoothed and he stepped back, pushing his men with him. “Very well,” he said, turning and leaving with his men.

As soon as they were gone, rumbblings circulated through the crowd gathered in front of Cale’s house. The warriors shouted cries for war. Others thought Cale should go speak with Jerobal to find out what was happening on the Baalin lands.

Griffin made room for his father to sit down beside him, leaning in to hear his hushed voice. “Griffin, you hear the people’s talk. What do you think we should do?”

Griffin stared at the fire, pensive. His heart thumped in his ears. He was furious and struggled to control his feelings and think clearly.

“Abimilech came for a fight, demanding to hunt on our land. He was not of clear mind and I fear he may try something foolish or try to harm our people. We must be ready to defend ourselves from an attack.

“Our warriors will stand watch over the people tonight. Scouts will follow Abimilech to watch and learn if he plans to attack. If the Baalin attack, we will be waiting.

Griffin paused and looked at his father, seeking validation.

His father’s face was flat. “Are you sure the Baalin want war – or is it Abimilech who wants war? What of the poison Abimilech spoke off? What do you think we should do?” he asked.

Griffin looked at the ground. A dozen war scenarios had played out in his mind, but he had not considered any other aspects of the problems the tribe now faced. He touched his chin.

“I don’t know, Father. Perhaps the scouts will find out if the Baalin truly want war. As for the poison, they must agree to let us investigate what has happened on their lands. What if the poison could spread to our land? What if they brought the poison here tonight? We don’t know what is happening and we must protect the

tribe from whatever has infected the Baalin lands. If they want us to share our food, they must let us on their land to find out where the poison is coming from.”

Griffin paused to let the rest of his thoughts come to the surface. “After we are sure the poison is contained to their lands and cannot spread to ours, we will trade food for short-faced bear and monsei skins. This is a good trade to keep us warm while we hunt later in the winter to replenish the food we gave the Baalin. Perhaps this will improve our relations with the Baalin.”

Griffin paused, waiting for his father’s response.

“War is our last, worst option, but it may be our only one,” Cale said. “Hunger twists a man’s mind. We must be open to dialogue with the Baalin, but be on guard to defend ourselves if and when they return.

“I agree that we must ensure what has happened to Baalin lands will not happen to ours. We must attempt a peaceful dialogue to find out what is happening on the other side of the lake.”

His father looked at him, pleased.

“The trade is a good idea, Griffin,” Cale said. “Well done.”

“Thank you, Father,” Griffin said, his confidence swelling.

Griffin and his father met with the council of elders that evening to set their strategy in motion. Two scouts were dispatched to find and track Abimilech. Guards would patrol the village in shifts throughout the night. Farmers would carry their weapons with them to work in the fields. If Abimilech attacked, the women and children were to flee to the mountains and the men would stay and fight. If the men became overwhelmed, they would retreat to the safety of the mountain and join the women. Griffin and his father would regroup with them later.

After the council meeting, Griffin went about extinguishing the fire. A strong wind suddenly came down from the mountain and breathed life back into the dying embers. Griffin watched as his

father lifted his head toward the wind and a dove descended from the night sky, landing on his father's shoulder. Its snowy white feathers against the backdrop of night created a halo around it, illuminating the dove and Cale's face. The dove cocked its head at Griffin and cooed at him.

"It's time," his father said. "Tomorrow at first light, the dove will lead us up the mountain to your grandfather's. Tomorrow is the passing."

Griffin stared at the dove, his eyes wide as a full moon. His emotions leapt from excitement, to anticipation, and finally to trepidation as the realization sank in. *This can't be happening now.*

* * *

Later that night, Griffin and his father retired to their one-room hut for the night. Griffin could not sleep. He lay in his bedroll, mind racing, imagination wild with fantasies about all that could happen in the coming days. Would the Baalin attack while they were gone? Would their plans protect the Saarondoah? And what of the passing? The sacred ceremony was Griffin's final step into manhood and leadership of the tribe, but he was afraid. There was too much at stake. People could die. The tribe needed Cale to lead them, not him. Griffin's breath felt constricted and he struggled to relax. He felt the responsibility of the tribe on his shoulders and he was buckling under the pressure. He closed his eyes to hide from his own thoughts.

Griffin heard his father get up and go to the fire in the center of the room. Still unable to sleep, he got out of his bed and sat next to his father. Cale was poking the fire with a stick, moving the glowing coals around. He was obviously having trouble sleeping as well. "We have a lot on our minds, don't we," his father said in a whisper. "Have faith. All will be well."

They sat in silence for a few moments, eyes fixed on the fire. Griffin had rarely seen his father worried; he wasn't sure what to say, but felt an urge to break the restless mood. He said the first thing that came to his mind. "Why doesn't grandfather come down from the mountain for the passing?" he asked.

His father hesitated before answering. "He is old and cannot make the journey," he said.

"What does he do up there?" Griffin asked.

"He watches over us and speaks to the gods," Cale said. "You will find out more tomorrow. Let's try and get some rest. Answers await you on the mountaintop."

"My mind is too noisy," Griffin replied.

"Mine, too," his father said. "Sometimes this helps me: imagine the placid waters of the lake in the early morning as the sun rises. See the mist hovering over the lake. Feel the warmth of the morning sun touch your skin. Hold that image of peace in your mind and breathe slowly. Imagine your doubts and fears leaving your body as you exhale your breath. Your mind and body will relax."

They both went back to bed. Griffin tried as his father had suggested, but could not sleep, his mind overrun with anxious thoughts of tomorrow.

* * *

Griffin heard his father moving about the room through the haze between slumber and wakefulness. He opened his eyes and pushed himself wearily out of his bedroll and onto his feet.

"You didn't sleep well," his father said with a smirk.

"You didn't either," Griffin said, taking the satchel his mother packed for him and slinging it over his shoulder. His mother

caressed his face and smiled. “I’ll be fine,” he said to her and smiled back.

“I know you will,” his mother replied. She kissed his cheek and hugged him close to her.

He felt his father’s hand on his shoulder and turned toward him. “Where is the trail?” he asked.

His father replied, “North, through the woods beyond the fields, and up a faint trail to mountain top. The dove will keep us on track.”

As if it heard his father, the dove flew to Cale’s shoulder. Griffin gazed quizzically at the dove. It looked back at him, cocked its head, and flew to the nearest tree limb. Perched there, the dove gestured with its head as if it was asking them to follow.

Griffin and his father reviewed their plans with the council elders one last time, then with a short goodbye to his mother and all who had gathered to see them off, they began their trek north to the mountain, following the dove’s lead.

A short time into their journey, his father stopped and pulled Griffin down behind some small brush. He put his finger to his lips. Griffin crouched, his heart pounding in his ears.

Through the brush, they saw Abimilech and three of his men from the previous night. One of the men knelt over tracks on the forest floor. They were hunting—in blatant violation of long-held treaties between the tribes, and what they had agreed to last night.

Despite his rage, Griffin’s hand moved calmly to his blade. He felt his father’s hand touch his arm. His father regarded him sternly, shaking his head. Griffin stopped moving and they let the trespassers go.

Griffin looked at his father, anger pouring from his eyes. “Why did we let them pass? They steal food from our mouths, and insult us!” He pointed to where the men had stood. “These are not honorable men. These are our enemies! We should have killed them

where they stood!”

“You tell me why we let them pass,” his father said calmly, and started walking toward the dove.

Griffin clenched his jaw, adrenaline fueling his anger. “You thought we were outnumbered and would have lost,” he called after him.

“Is that it?” his father asked, a hint of frustration in his voice. “I had no faith in our ability to kill those men?” His father quickened his pace towards the dove. Griffin stayed where he was and stared at the ground. He didn’t know what to think. He had wanted to kill those men. He had wanted to protect his lands and his father’s honor, but now he wasn’t sure of anything. He stood and trotted after him, his anger receding by the time he caught up. “Please tell me why?” he asked his father.

His father kept walking. “Think it through, Griffin, and you tell me. What if we had killed those men? What if we had killed Jerobal’s son?”

Realization struck Griffin. He touched his father’s arm and stopped walking, feeling remorse at what he had almost done. “Father, I understand now. I would have started a war. I’m sorry.”

His father stopped and faced Griffin. “Killing is easy. Patience. Understanding. Seeing all possibilities and points of view is the hard work of a chief.”

Griffin nodded, but was still suspicious. He did not trust Abimilech. “What if these warriors fill their bellies and make war on our village while we are gone?”

“We have planned for that, haven’t we? The council, our warriors, our people are ready. I do not believe they came for war. I believe Abimilech still holds me responsible for his mother’s death. I am not sure what Jerobal thinks. We will know soon. Put your mind to rest.”

They continued their climb, the angle of ascent increasing, tiring

their legs and feet. The trees thinned, replaced by shrubs tucked into sparse pockets of soil among boulders, struggling to grow in the harsh terrain. They trudged up the mountain all afternoon, one foot in front of the other, slow and steady, following the dove's lead. It was a silent journey full of contemplation and little conversation.

As the sun started its descent, the air cooled, and the afternoon light cast long shadows on the rocks. Snow, in wet, crunchy patches littered the ground. Griffin and his father pulled on monsei skins from their satchels to keep warm.

As the sun slipped behind the mountain's peak, its last rays revealed a small plateau ahead. Griffin saw a black sliver cut into the tawny-gray rock.

His father struck a flint and lit a torch as they entered the cave. The flames licked the walls as the travelers squeezed into the mountainside. At the end of the passage, they emerged into a magnificent cavern. Glyphs, illuminated by the fire in the center of the cave, covered the walls. To the left, Eron, Griffin's grandfather and the patriarch of the tribe, sat in front of the fire, old and fragile.

Eron sat on a worn-out chair set atop a carpet of moss and leaves. Wispy white strands of hair fell about his chest. A profound network of wrinkles accented his forehead; blue eyes and a wiry, unkempt beard adorned his face.

Steam seeped from a kettle on a makeshift stove. Eron raised his eyes from the fire and a smile appeared through the mass of wrinkles and hair under his nose. He gestured them over and Griffin and his father sat down, the three of them forming a triangle around the fire. The dove landed on Eron's shoulder.

"Good to see you boys," he said, his voice raspy with age.

"And you, Father. You remember Griffin?"

"Hello, Grandfather."

"Of course I remember my grandson, though he may not remember me. It has been some time, has it not, Cale?" Eron asked.

Griffin noticed only a few remaining teeth through the old man's grin.

"Griffin, it has been many years since I have seen you. I have relied on your father, and my forest friends like the dove, to keep me informed. They tell me you have grown into a fine young man; a man who honors the land, the people and the laws of the gods. Your father has been a good teacher and you a fine student."

Griffin smiled, embarrassed. He looked down at his feet and his face turned crimson. "Thank you, Grandfather," he said.

They were silent for a moment. Griffin's thoughts made him uneasy as fantasies of what would happen next began to play out in his mind. Eron said, "And now it is time for the passing."

Griffin's breath caught in his throat and his eyes widened with fear. "I'm not ready," he whispered.

Eron smiled sympathetically. "Here. Have some tea."

Griffin took the steaming cup of tea from his grandfather. He brought it close to his nose, sniffed, and recoiled from the pungent smell of the swampy brew.

The cup trembled slightly in his hand as he blew softly on the tea, bringing the cup to his lips, and drinking it in a single gulp. He winced as the tea burned his throat on the way to his stomach.

His grandfather picked up a smooth, flat stone from the side of his chair. Griffin saw strange symbols carved into the stone and watched as Eron brushed his fingers across the symbols and began chanting.

The dove flew from Eron's shoulder to Griffin's. Cale joined in the chanting, their voices rising. From inside his chest, Griffin felt a part of himself detach.

The dove spread its wings, cooed, and flew from Griffin's shoulder. Part of Griffin followed the dove out a hole in roof of the cave and down the side of the mountain.

The full moon drew jagged shadowy shapes across the landscape as he flew beyond his village to a remote area of the forest. Through the blanket of night and pine trees, a radiant clearing appeared in the distance.

Griffin landed at the edge of the clearing. Scanning the area, he noticed a large white stone, smooth and round, jutting from the ground. He walked to the stone and saw symbols carved into its smooth surface, like those on the stone his grandfather was holding moments before. He brushed his fingers across them.

Suddenly, an intense light surrounded him and formed a tunnel that shot straight up into the night sky. The dove flew into the tunnel and soared above him. Griffin looked up at the dove and then felt himself begin to rise. Fright filled him as he left the ground.

Griffin flew higher in the tunnel and more of the land below came into his view. Under the bright glow of the full moon, he noticed a herd of auroch sleeping under trees outside his village. As his attention was drawn to them, he felt a connection—their deep, heavy breath in his lungs, their powerful hearts beating in his chest. He smelled the forest floor where they slept and felt the leaves and dirt under them on his own torso. He focused intently on a bull and could see its dreams in his mind while still being conscious of his own thoughts and feelings. *This is what father meant. I am one with the auroch!*

Exhilarated by his new senses, he shifted his attention to other creatures in the forest. Griffin felt at one with each creature he focused on. He was in rapture with his newfound abilities—until

he realized how high he was climbing. Fear and confusion gripped him. He tried to will himself to stop, to slow his ascent. Grasping at the walls of the tunnel of light, he tried to grab hold of something, anything to stop his rising, but it was no use. Transfixed, he climbed higher and higher until the entire planet came into view against the backdrop of space. *The blue planet, Earth. Father was not crazy.*

Griffin was terrified. He screamed, but there was no sound, which scared him even more. He couldn't change course. He was trapped, encased in this tunnel with no control over where he was heading. Desperation consumed him. He was near hysteria when he heard the sound of his father's voice fill his head. His father was telling him about the passing, his voice calming and soothing Griffin.

He ceased his futile attempts at stopping his flight and slowly, reluctantly, an acceptance of his circumstances seeped into his mind. He resigned himself to his fate, remembering his father's lessons, calming himself with the knowledge that this was part of the ritual. His breathing slowed, his mind stopped racing. He relaxed into his journey.

Fear was soon replaced by awe as he traveled past the moon and toward the other planets in the solar system. In his celestial tunnel, he passed Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, and Neptune, then went beyond them. In the far reaches of deep space, outside his own system, he no longer recognized the planets and stars. His chest tightened and his breath quickened as panic threatened to overcome him once more. He forced himself to remain calm. *I will be OK. The vessel. The vessel will be coming soon and the man in white will be there.* He found a modicum of serenity again and held on to it for the rest of the flight.

As the planets and stars diminished, only the dark blanket of empty space remained. Griffin had reached the edge of the

universe, where worlds and stars did not exist. Only Griffin's thoughts penetrated the dark and quiet of space.

A single round shape appeared on the horizon. *There! The white sphere, the vessel!* As he got closer to it he could see the tunnel of light in which he was traveling passed directly into it.

As the vessel rapidly approached, Griffin did not slow and was about to impact on the surface, but instead, he passed through the surface and found himself inside of it. He stood in a great white expanse of the vessel just as his father had described.

Griffin took in his surroundings. He was in a large room of indeterminate size and shape. He could not distinguish where walls, ceiling or floor ended. He had no sense of space or point of reference to determine if he was up or down, east or west.

Suddenly, the dove flew in front of him, hovered a moment, and fully expanded its wings. Light expanded outward from the dove and enveloped the bird. The light grew in intensity and then flashed. Griffin covered his eyes and when he looked again, a man stood in front of him.

The man was bald with large, black eyes. He was thin framed, dressed in a white shirt and white pants and his feet were bare. Griffin could not tell how old he was. They stared at each other, neither saying anything for a time before Griffin broke the silence.

"I am Griffin, son of Cale," he said.

"I know who you are, Griffin," the man replied. "I am many things to many people. For your people, I am the man in white. This is where what your people call the passing will occur," he said.

"This is the passing?" Griffin asked.

The man in white extended his hand to his right, and an image formed of a planet that looked like Earth. The image grew and filled the room until Griffin was in the scene, standing on a grassy knoll

overlooking a small village, the man in white still next to him.

Griffin saw men working in the fields below them, harvesting summer wheat. In the village, women wove baskets, sewed clothes, and tanned animal skins in the sun. Young children played while adolescents helped their elders. Griffin felt the harmony of this place and was reminded of his village.

Griffin focused on a man threshing wheat and could feel the weight of the flail as the man swung it across the grain. The man's hands tightened around the handle and Griffin felt the chafe on his hands, the strain on his arms, the sweat on his brow. The oneness of the man and the land touched Griffin. It was a feeling Griffin knew from his own work in the fields back home.

He turned to the man in white, about to speak, but the man spoke first.

“A peaceful time,” the man said. “It does not last.”

“What?” Griffin replied. “But I ...”

The scene faded and they were back on the vessel.

“This is how the cycle begins, before darkness comes,” the man said.

Before Griffin could respond, the man gestured and the setting changed.

Griffin did not recognize this place. A river of red ran next to him. Acrid air filled his nose. Trampled grass was colored crimson with blood. Violent energy prickled his skin and raised hairs on his arms. As he reached out with his newfound senses, his heart and mind filled with the hatred, fear, and anger of the men engaged in the raging battle unfolding in front of him.

A man wore a helmet and armor of gold, carrying a shield in one hand and long spear in the other. Griffin felt his blood surge as the man charged the other side of the field. The warrior's face snarled

as he lunged with his spear and stabbed his foe, spilling blood and gore on the ground.

Griffin marveled as he felt his own hands on the spear. His muscles tensed as he thrust it forward and pierced the enemy. Fear turned to triumph and motivation to kill again as he searched for another rival to engage.

As the killing played out in front of Griffin over and over, he turned away.

“No,” the man in white said. “Watch.”

Griffin faced the scene again and watched as endless bloodshed poured out on the field in front of him. Somehow the energy of the battle flowed through him. Every thrash of the spear, every crash of a metal blade against a shield, the flesh and bone of men ripped and broken, the metallic taste of blood in his mouth, and the savage thoughts of the killers in front of him filled his mind and body as if they were his own. *This is war. This is the pain and suffering of man killing man.*

The setting flashed and changed. The grass was green again. A small hut on the riverbank. A woman giving birth to a boy. Griffin watched as the baby suckled his mother, then, as the boy’s father held him in his arms for the first time.

The scenes changed rapidly and the baby grew and became a boy. Father and son were in the forest, kneeling over a buck they had killed. The father was teaching his son the prayer of thanks Griffin’s own father had taught him. Thanking the gods for their bounty, thanking the buck for his sacrifice to feed the tribe, and honoring the spirit of the buck as it passed to the next life. Griffin reached out with his feelings and sensed the love between the father and his son, the patience, the understanding, the caring, and the pride the man felt at passing on what he knew to his son.

Time advanced around Griffin. He saw strange lands, people of different colors, using weapons he had never seen before, killing each other. As the weapons became more advanced, the pain and suffering grew worse, and the destruction multiplied.

Metal beasts destroyed villages from the land, water, and air. Cities were built, destroyed, rebuilt, and destroyed again. Over and over the cycle repeated itself. Peace and harmony; death and destruction; life and rejuvenation. The pattern was always the same; technology advanced, improving humanity's ability to live, then their ability to kill.

As the events played out, Griffin thought back to his experience with Abimilech the day before. Hadn't he wished to kill Abimilech and his men for hunting on Saarondoah lands? Hadn't he let anger fill his heart and almost overflow into murder in his dealing with the Baalin? These images stirred something deep in him. He recognized his capacity for killing and it terrified him.

Despair and fear gripped Griffin. He wanted to un-see what he had seen. He covered his eyes and cried out, "Enough!"

"No. There is more," the man in white said.

Griffin looked at the man, his heart sinking. "No more, please. No. More."

Despite his pleas, the man in white motioned to his side again. "When there was no turning back from the dark path they had chosen, we punished humanity and cleansed them from the Earth, before their evil could be spread among the stars."

The setting changed again. Griffin hovered in space and watched the sun, swollen and hot, reach out with flaming arms, wrapping them around the Earth, and engulfing the planet in a fiery embrace. Maelstroms of fire and molten earth swirled around the planet until it glowed red. Billions of screams filled Griffin's mind as the Earth

and all its creatures burned.

Slowly the Sun withdrew its arms of flame and the Earth smoldered, blackened and charred. Griffin stared in disbelief and wept.

Comets smashed into the Earth, sending clouds of vapor into the sky. Pinpricks of blue pushed through the Earth's surface and freckled the black crust of the planet. Small pools grew, and became lakes. Clouds formed and rains came. The waters washed away the ash-covered land, leaving oceans in their wake.

Different colors emerged from the water. Reds and oranges, then yellows, browns and blacks and grays. Islands formed and dotted the surface of the planet. Some came together and formed large landmasses.

Specks and shoots of green sprouted from the tawny land. These grew and fanned out until vast green patches covered the Earth's surface. Life, lush, abundant, and overflowing, replaced the scorched, dead world.

The image faded and Griffin bowed his head, with tear-stained cheeks.

"They're all dead? My family? My people? All the peoples of the world, dead? Why? Why did they all have to die? Why am I here? Why was I spared?"

Griffin searched the man in white's face for answers and found none. He felt old and weary. "Your people are alive, Griffin. What you witnessed is humanity's past, before your time," the man in white said.

Griffin stopped breathing.

The man in white's eyes widened as he extended his arm toward the place where the images were before. "We gave humanity another chance. Your people are that chance. What you witnessed

does not have to be your future. Your ancestors destroyed your world by the choices they made, but those do not have to be your choices.”

Griffin felt dizzy, his knees weak. *Ancestors? My people are alive?* “What do you mean? Who cleansed the Earth of evil? Are you a god?” *He said “we”. There are more of them?*

“Lead wisely, Griffin. Responsibility in this new era of man is now passed to you.”

Griffin rubbed the tears from his eyes and the man was gone. The dove flew to Griffin’s shoulder and they were alone on the vessel.

Encircled once again by the tunnel of light, Griffin and the dove were sent hurtling back through space and time, back home. On the journey back, Griffin contemplated what he had seen. The hatred and destruction he experienced seared into his soul forever. The questions about the being who had destroyed the Earth and rebuilt it churned in his mind as he flew back across the universe, back to the mountain where his grandfather and father waited for him.

When Griffin arrived back at the cave, he looked at his father. Cale’s eyes brimmed with tears.

* * *

“Father, what’s wrong?” Griffin was unsteady. *Was it a vision or was it real? Why are you crying, Father?*

“Griffin, you have returned, and now you know what I know and what your grandfather knew. Just as we were once entrusted with this knowledge and guiding our people, so now you are entrusted to do the same. This is the passing. The passing of knowledge and responsibility from one generation to the next.”

Griffin could not speak.

“I will remain in this place until the next passing, watching over the tribe from above, guarding the gateway to the vessel, helping you when you are in need, helping the man in white,” his father said as he motioned toward Eron, who lay on a bed of moss and leaves, motionless, breathless, and at peace.

“Grandfather!” Griffin said, leaping to his grandfather’s side.

Overrun with emotion and unable to absorb what was happening all at once, Griffin sobbed as he laid his head on his grandfather’s chest. “But Father, what does all of this mean? Who...”

Cale cut him off. “Remember and honor the spirit passed to you, Griffin. You are Chief now. I will be here for your questions later. For now, let us pray and mourn.”

* * *

Griffin began his journey back down the mountain to the village, alone. As he approached the fields outside the village, the men dropped their flails and called to each other.

“Look! Griffin has returned! Alone...” Griffin heard someone shout. The men crowded around him as he made his way through the fields and the village, back to his home.

Griffin hadn’t prepared for a reception. He was tired and wanted a warm meal and solitude to reflect on all that had happened.

Murmurs from the back of the crowd arose, jolting him from his thoughts. Griffin saw a group of men making their way through the crowd toward his home. He recognized Abimilech among them.

The group of Baalin men approached him. One of them, head

held high with pride, holding a staff, stepped forward and nodded silently. Abimilech stood behind the man, a small muscle in his jaw twitching with pent up tension. The Baalin were unarmed.

“I am Jerobal, chief of the Baalin tribe. We come in peace to speak with your father,” he said. “Please accept my apology for my son. He has proven he is not ready to lead.” Jerobal bowed his head in respect, but Abimilech did not and his eyes pelted Griffin with hatred.

So much hatred for my family, Abimilech.

“My father is no longer chief of the Saarondoah. I am. Come inside and let us eat and discuss how our tribe can help yours,” Griffin said.

Shock flashed across Jerobal’s face. He quickly recovered his composure and motioned for Abimilech to follow him into Griffin’s home. Griffin heard a melodic coo as the white dove flew above the crowd and into the woods below the mountain. ■

The Door Left Ajar

BY STEF GONZAGA

Body limp,
sprawled—
there is no face left
to hide the mask,
to hide the tears,
the stains remaining.

How my hands refuse
to release their hold on

Love, love for his voice
that burns the thighs
and weakens the lungs

Love, love for the memory
of naked waltzes and cups of coffee
made in his name

What would have been
if our hands had never met.



Connecting Flight

BY MARGIE DEEB

I'm at the gate waiting to board Zone 3. Three years ago I would've been thrilled to be going home. Three years ago Sarah would've been there waiting for me. I instinctively rub my left thumb against the ring I cannot – will not – take off. That was a long three years ago.

People say shit like “Life goes on.” People don't know shit. They just want to make themselves feel better.

Out of the corner of my eye I see jerky movements. I turn and pretend to look through the window at the plane we're about to board, but I'm really trying to see what's going on. She's very old. In a wheelchair. Bright pink shirt. Her claw-like hands rhythmically clutch and release a purse. Her head trembles. God, I hope I'm not sitting next to her. I hate myself a little for thinking that, but why should I? I just want a quiet flight. Old women always want to talk.

Once I'm in my seat, who do you think the flight attendant helps into the aisle seat next to me? Of course. While she's buckling the old woman's seat belt, I steal a quick look. Her eyes are cloudy white, so I guess she's almost blind. I notice the space above them: no eyebrows. It's obvious she's got on a wig. It's a stiff black helmet that doesn't move when she does.

But I was wrong about her wanting to talk. She sleeps the whole time. Her head is down, her breathing steady and loud, her hands quivering in her lap. At least she doesn't hog the armrest or smell like granny perfume.

We're descending and though she's been quivering the whole flight I consider myself lucky she didn't talk to me, not once. The fasten seatbelts light flashes on, the plane whines, and then damned if she doesn't lean forward and turn to me. Damn.

I stare at my tray locked in the upright position. She stares at me.

"I know you don't want to talk, but you will soon." Her voice is low and quiet. And very clear.

I've never heard that one before, so okay. I sigh and look at her. I'm startled. As if I'm seeing her from a distance, she slowly zoom-lenses into sharp focus. Her eyes bore into me. Piercing black pupils. It's like I'm staring a crow in the face.

She sits motionless, yet her face moves closer. Her sharp eyes narrow. "Once was a time you wouldn't have done what you're doing right now. Not with your life. Not with your actions. Not with your thoughts."

"What?" I'm irritated, about to lash out, but she slowly raises her open palm towards me. Stunned by the graceful gesture of such a withered, wrinkled hand, I let her continue.

"You know exactly what I mean."

The plane lurches as the wheels touch down and we're jostled into each other. For a moment my ear is close enough to feel her breath. She whispers, "She's still with you. But you can't know it while you're like this."

I jerk away from her. "Who the—" And she does that thing with her hand again.

"We only have a few minutes. Do you want to fight or listen?"

I'm confused. I want to shove her away. Yet I also want to grab her wrinkled, graceful hands and beg for... for what, I'm not sure.

"You know she sees all of this. Don't you imagine it tears her apart?"

I'm the one who's torn up, I want to scream. Instead I'm silent.

Of course I've imagined what Sarah would think. I've thought what she might say if she knew I'd driven away every friend we had. That my passion for everything is gone. That not a thing in the house has changed since the day she died. I never returned the library books she left on the kitchen table, or moved her spare keys that belong to a car that no longer exists. What would she say about my family telling – no threatening – me that I'd better go back to that grief counselor or they'd have nothing else to do with me? Maybe she'd understand that she brought my life to a screeching halt. I never agreed to a life without her. Would she understand that this unending grief is because I love her?

Or would she say that at this stage, three years after the fact, grief is too noble a word for what I'm doing? Would she remind me, like that counselor did, that people learn to handle devastating loss, work through it, and rebuild their lives?

I look at the old woman, her eyes still boring through me. If there's some bizarre chance this odd bird has something – anything I can cling to that'll keep me from...

"She's right here. And she's been waiting three years for you to realize it."

The words sting. "Ma'am, clearly you know something about me, and I don't want to be rude, but this is just—"

She leans and whispers again. "She's been waiting a long time for you to realize it."

I get up. I don't want to hear another word of what I desperately want to be true, but can't possibly be true. She's dead. No one knows that like I do.

“Ma’am, you have a good day.” Knowing she has to wait for the flight attendant’s help, I excuse myself, scoot past her knees, and shoulder into the aisle where I grab my carry-on from the overhead bin and set it down. When I bend over to pop the handle, she leans toward me.

“Sarah’s body is gone. But Sarah is not.”

Then, just as the line pushes me forward, she calls me a name. I stand up straight, in shock. It’s a name I haven’t heard in over three years. “Mildred.” It was a silly in-joke Sarah and I had, referring to her curmudgeonly old Aunt Mildred. It was the one and only thing she could say to tease me out of my dark moods.

Suddenly I’m thrust forward into the rushing stream of arms, legs, and bags. My stomach twists, my chest tightens. I hear rushing in my ears, and see the flight attendant mouthing “goodbye,” but the sound is out of focus. The stream pulls and pushes me until I heave myself up the ramp and I’m spit out into the gate area where I can breathe.

People buzz around me in every direction. I’m dizzy. I can’t think.

But I force myself to think.

I think *what if she’s right?* All I have to do is listen. Maybe she’s crazy, but maybe she knows things I don’t. When was the last time I cared about listening, cared about anything?

I turn back towards the jet bridge. From the dark opening the flight attendant appears pushing a wheelchair. In it I recognize the black hair of the wig and pink shirt, but it can’t be. Her head totters. Her hands jerk in spasms. Her wobbling face lifts, eyes wide open. They’re filmy and white again. The flight attendant turns the chair and they merge into the swarm of travelers.

As I'm thinking *what the hell*, a wave of warmth sweeps from the center of my chest out to my arms and hands. I feel like laughing. Somehow, it's not my feeling, not my warmth. It feels like Sarah. Like Sarah's laughter. I feel it as sure as when it filled my life for seventeen years. Relief surges through me, and it's not mine either. Now there's a gentle pressure on the small of my back, like a pressing hand, and my muscles relax in recognition. I blink and blink and hold my breath to track the physical sensations ricocheting through my body. It's her. It is Sarah. I feel her. For the first time in three years I feel her. My legs go weak. I quickly scan for a seat and sit. I want to focus. I want to feel every ounce, every twitch of this because I'm terrified it's going to disappear any minute. Like she did three years ago.

But it doesn't. It hasn't.

"Mildred," I hear her say.

I smile.

She's right here. ■

Daily Passover

BY STEF GONZAGA

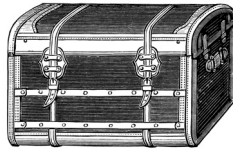
North of my desk: children tossing balls
a chance to make them soar.

West of my desk: final afternoon rays dim
for the eve of summer stars.

South of my desk: mayas perched on burgundy roofs
watching balls of light begin to burn.

East of my desk: mongrels howling, their voices reminiscent
Of a distant wilderness

Here, at my desk, I stare at the clock
How the arrows never stop.



Heritage

BY ANN STANLEY

At first, after Josephine inherited her mother's house, she was tempted to take a match to it. All the hurt and loss from her teens and twenties surfaced, and she wanted nothing to do with the things which had belonged to that stranger.

The letter from the lawyer arrived on the second Tuesday of the year, but she left it lying unopened on the front hall table, sure it had something to do with her mother, who had died in the fall. She bit her lip every time she passed it, then stiffened her already tight shoulders and resolved not to let it bother her. Still, she found herself snapping at her physics students on Thursday. "Do you call this homework?" She flung the papers she'd graded the night before on her desk. "Were any of you listening in class when we covered the material? I doubt it. You could have read the chapter, but no, you did not. I want you to redo it tonight. Be prepared for a quiz tomorrow."

"Awww, Ms. Fondant, please. A bunch of us are in the orchestra. We have a concert tonight," one of the girls said.

"This is a college prep class. Do all of you understand what that means? Don't expect me to coddle you." Josephine pulled her cardigan tightly around her broad shoulders, sat up straight, and glared at the room. Her head throbbed.

The bell rang. The kids filed out of the classroom, their rounded

shoulders conveying their unhappiness with her. After they left, she allowed herself to relax a little and wonder why she'd been so curt with them. It wasn't like her to lose control. It was that damn letter. She wanted nothing to do with it, or her mother.

Sunday morning after Mass, she laid the lawyer's letter on the coffee table in her little living room, then went into her kitchen and made a tray with tea and a pain au chocolat from her favorite bakery. She let her hair out of the tight bun she always wore in public, ran her fingers through it, and carried the tray to the table. Trying to take a deep breath, but feeling like she'd been punched in the gut, she opened the envelope and read. To her great surprise, her mother had left her a house in Pittsburgh, less than one hundred and fifty miles away.

How could she have lived so close and never even called? Did she even know where I lived? Because I never knew where she was, the bitch.

It would be so easy to drive over some weekend and burn it down. The thought tempted her. But Josephine was used to disciplining herself. She would arrange for someone to clean out the place and sell everything for her.

She spent all of February interviewing a variety of people for the job. None of them seemed right. One man struck her as too unreliable, while another seemed too picky. All wanted a bigger percentage than she wanted to give them. Finally, she settled on a pair of women who seemed more experienced and organized than the others. She phoned to arrange their services.

“Hello, this is Linda with Your Right Hand Woman.”

“This is Josephine Fondant. We spoke recently about my mother's house.”

“Oh, yes. The one in Pittsburgh. Have you decided to hire us?”

“Yes. I’d like you to start right away.”

“Oh, dear, I’m afraid that’s impossible. We’re very busy until September, but we could put you on the schedule then.”

Josephine ground her teeth. “You said you were available in April.”

“I’m sorry if we misled you.”

“Never mind,” Josephine said and hung up, an uncomfortable sensation creeping up her spine. She couldn’t stand people who let her down. People like her mother.

To calm herself, she reorganized her kitchen. By the time every cupboard was spotless, she accepted that, if she wanted the job done right, she would have to do it herself. She dropped by the garden shop where she worked summers and told them she’d be in Pittsburgh this year.

In any case, as the flowers bloomed and the days grew longer, her mind filled with a thousand questions about the mother she hadn’t seen since she was sixteen. Surely the house would reveal the woman.

The lawyer sent photos, so she easily picked out the two-story house from the others in the neighborhood. She probably would have known it anyway, since weeds filled its yard. Gritting her teeth, she exited her car and walked up to the front door. When she opened it, she stopped short in surprise. An oil painting of flamenco dancers hung in the foyer over an antique table with a lovely vase on it. Exploring, she discovered antique furniture, oriental carpets, and artwork in every room except the kitchen and a large nearly-empty room at the back of the house. That

room looked like some kind of dance salon, with no windows, a beautiful wood floor, and a wall of little shelves packed with CDs and a stereo. There was an attic, too, with one of those pull-down staircases, but, since it didn't open easily, she left that for later; she was already overwhelmed.

She sank onto the leather couch in the living room and dropped her head into her hands. Her mother must have been rich to buy all of these expensive things and fill this house with them. She also must have spent a lot of time here, to have packed it so full of things. Why, in the twenty-three years she'd apparently owned this place, hadn't she ever picked up the phone and called her?

Josephine pushed her feelings back into the place she'd hidden them most of her life and stood. Time to do what she knew best: organize.

All summer, she emptied closets, chests, and cabinets. She sold large quantities of expensive clothes, textiles, and jewelry. At times, her anger overcame her practicality, and the urge to smash and destroy arose, but she managed to control it. Despite the strange lack of photos and personal effects like marriage certificates and tax forms, she reminded herself that the objects told stories. Ruby red must have been her mother's favorite color, there was so much of it. She must have gone to scores of elegant events, because she had a closet full of evening gowns and sparkly things. She hadn't liked to cook, for the kitchen held few implements and the refrigerator mostly frozen TV dinners.

Going through the CDs, she mainly found Spanish Flamenco and Latin dance music. Josephine imagined her mother holding dance parties, to which she was never invited, and let the hurt wash over her for a few minutes, then suppressed it again. She could easily smash these recordings into bits, but, instead, she sold them.

August arrived, humid and hot. Determined to finish cleaning out the house before school started, Josephine donned her dust mask. She pulled down hard on the latch to the attic stairs and lifted

her feet to give it her whole weight. It slowly creaked open, the stairs descending in a cloud of dust. Her eyes watered and burned but she pulled the latex gloves out of her pocket and climbed through the opening.

A single room ran the length of the house. Weak light filtered into the space through small windows. Cobwebs covered open beams under a slanted roof. Their silvery threads drooped so low they almost touched the floor in places. She flicked the light switch. Bare bulbs attached to the beams illuminated boxes and furniture piled to the height of her chin all the way across the attic.

She opened the closest box. It held plastic Christmas ornaments. She dropped it down the stairs before opening another box. More ornaments. By lunchtime, she'd cleared a five foot space around the attic entrance and hauled everything to her sorting area in the dining room. She was dripping wet inside her yellow coveralls. Dust and spider webs clung to her sweaty face and hair. She showered, drank half a liter of water, downed a sandwich and suited up again.

Late in the day, she pushed an armful of sun-rotted drapes into a garbage bag, and was so surprised to see the chest underneath that she fell on her butt. Collecting herself, she ran her hands over the familiar old wood trunk with its leather and brass fittings.

Suddenly she was a child again, in an attic smaller than this one, lifting the lid to reveal treasure with cousin Regina by her side. When the boys snuck up on them with plastic swords and pounced, all of the cousins dissolved into giggles. Once they calmed down, they pulled out the toy cars, Legos, teddy bears, and dolls Grandmother Rose kept in its spacious interior. The others started playing, but Josephine opened the compartment in the trunk's wall. Their grandmother always hid candies and pennies in it for them. She pulled out a handful and handed half to Regina. The boys punched them, trying to get all the treats. She and Regina fought them off until their grandmother trudged up the stairs and told them to stop fighting and share.

How many times had something like that happened when she was a little girl? Her cousins had lived nearby; their family hadn't moved to Seattle until after Grandmother's death.

With a sigh, Josephine dropped her head on the chest, hoping to catch a little of the jasmine scent Grandmother Rose used to wear, and feel again her grandmother's kindness and love. She imagined burying herself in the old woman's arms. If she could only bring her back to life, she would stop being so lonely and upset. But that, of course, was impossible.

The lid lifted easily, its leather hinges still intact. Velvet skirts covered in beads and mirrors filled the top tray. Again, she was a child. Her mother walked in the front door at Grandmother Rose's in one of these outfits, her arms loaded with presents. Josephine ran to her, and she swung her around and around. Then Josephine ripped the paper off one of the presents to reveal a baby doll in a pink dress with a matching hair bow, exactly liked she'd wanted. She squealed and hugged her mother.

Her mother hadn't stayed long, maybe a few days. After her mother left, Grandmother Rose held her while she cried herself to sleep. How many times had that happened before she'd learned not to get excited when her mother visited? The last time, the day of Rose's funeral, she'd seen her mother park in front of the house, and she'd gone into her room and closed the door.

Josephine shook herself and slid the skirts into a clean garbage bag. The wooden tray lifted out easily to reveal a pile of gaudy jewelry and scarves, which she added to the bag. Some vintage store would love the old clothes; she certainly didn't want them. She lifted out another tray and inhaled sharply. There lay what she'd hoped to find: photo albums. She set them off to the side, not quite ready to face their contents, and finished emptying the bottom of the trunk of a few worn-out slippers, high-heeled dance shoes, and some peasant blouses. Then she reached into the pocket in the lid and pulled out a thick envelope which rustled a little, as if filled

with confetti. It went on top of the albums.

Her hands shook as she ran her hands around the inside wall of the trunk until she found the right spot. She pushed gently and a latch released. A thin piece of wood swung outward to reveal a hole in the side of the trunk. She reached inside. Her fingers closed around the end of a box. As soon as she felt it, she knew exactly what it was.

She raced down the stairs to take the familiar red velvet case into the bright kitchen. The box, worn and shiny from years of handling, brought back a wealth of memories. Setting it on the counter, she carefully pulled up the filigreed latch and opened the case. Her grandmother's necklace sparkled at her.

Lifting it to the sunlight streaming through the windows, she marveled at its beauty. A lacy gold cross held diamonds and rubies. More gems sparkled along the chain. She stripped off her filthy coveralls, wrapped the necklace around her neck and walked up the stairs to the master bedroom where she could examine herself in her mother's antique mirror.

Even though she wore an old tank top, the red, white and gold of the necklace transformed her into a queen, the stones complementing her dark hair and olive skin. No wonder Grandmother Rose had worn it every day.

Josephine sank onto the bed. She closed her eyes, remembering the moment when she'd been exiled for good. After her grandmother's death, she and her mother had moved into a small apartment together, not far from here, in downtown Pittsburgh. Her mother had spoiled her, and Josephine had gradually stopped crying all the time and begun to feel at ease with this mother she barely knew.

But about a month later her mother walked out of her bedroom, wearing Grandmother Rose's necklace. Josephine flew at her, screaming and scratching at her like a rabid raccoon, trying to

remove it. "That's not yours," she screamed. "It's Aunt Lillian's. You have no right to it!" All of the years of upset came tumbling out of her until her voice failed. Her mother pushed her away. "You brat. Go to your room. Now. I will not have this."

Josephine spit at her and turned on her heels, fuming because Grandmother Rose had promised the necklace to Aunt Lillian, a much nicer person than her own mother. Through the thin door, she heard her mother on the phone. "I can't handle her. I'm not cut out for this," she shouted. Josephine covered her head with a pillow. She didn't want to hear the rest.

The next day, her mother, white-faced, put her on a plane to her paternal grandparents. When Josephine came out of the gate with the stewardess, she noticed two stern-looking, thin, grey-haired people and prayed they would not be her grandparents, but they were. "Welcome to Des Moines," they said, but their tone was dry and sharp, as if they'd rather she hadn't come.

She stared at them, trying to find the father she didn't remember in their faces.

"Why are you examining us?" her grandmother said, sharply. "Let's go."

"Will you tell me about my father?" she asked as they walked to the luggage carousel.

"No, we won't. It was sinful and selfish for him to take his own life, instead of facing his troubles like a man. Never speak of him again."

Josephine felt something die inside her. She walked quietly next to them down the tarmac, trying to stay as far away from these harsh people as she could.

At breakfast the next morning, lumpy oatmeal as she recalled, her grandmother laid down a set of rules: no television, no speaking to adults unless they spoke to you first, no laughing, no pants, skirts must end below the knee, she must attend Sunday

Mass and avoid associating with any other children. She shrank into herself, lying on her bed most of the day, reading, or staring at the ceiling, inventing an adventure-filled life with her mother.

At the end of the summer, her grandparents drove her to St. Catherine's Boarding School for Girls and left her there. At first, she hated the school almost as much as their home. Slowly, though, she adapted and discovered she could escape her feelings by studying hard. The nuns were strict but kind. She did her best to please them, so she wouldn't be sent back to those horrid grandparents.

At Christmas, her mother arrived, bearing an armload of gifts and whisking her off to a hotel for a few days, before she left, promising to return for her birthday in April. Another broken promise, Josephine recalled, bitterly. She hadn't seen her mother again until the end of that summer, when her grandparents dropped her off early at school, and her mother took her on a driving trip for a few days. Josephine remembered wasting those precious days explaining why she didn't want to spend another summer with her grandparents.

"They don't want you back, anyway," her mother had said. "It's too hard on them."

Josephine had been relieved. She'd stayed at the school year-round, spending two weeks every summer in Seattle with Aunt Lillian, Uncle Alan and their five children.

She could count on one hand the number of times she'd seen her mother after that.

When she did visit, she swept into the dorm, packed a suitcase for her daughter, and took Josephine out of her classes. Once, they went to Disney World. Another time, they visited Washington, D. C. and spent their days visiting museums.

Josephine shook herself. She'd been sitting on the bed for over an hour. All those memories, yet she was no closer to understanding her mother than she'd ever been.

Hoping they held some answers, she retrieved the envelope and albums from the attic and took them to the antique maple table in the dining room. Opening the envelope, she discovered the reason for the rustling; it was full of newspaper clippings.

The top article was a brief announcement for a dance performance:

Flamenco at the Main Street Theater

World renowned flamenco dancer Theresa Fondant will appear on Thursday, June 15th, along with her troupe and the amazing Geraldo Marcatto on guitar. Don't miss this exciting opportunity to see authentic dances from the Andalusia region of Spain.

Josephine stared in shock at the press release. What was this about Flamenco and world-famous? She flipped through the clippings. Most were in foreign languages: Spanish, Italian, something which looked Slavic. She couldn't read them, but her mother's name jumped out at her from each article, often with a photograph of her mother in an exotic costume, her hands posed upwards, in a flourish. This certainly explained the empty room with the stereo system.

Why didn't I know about this? How come no one told me? Or did they, and I didn't listen?

No, Josephine realized, she had known, but she'd been too hurt and angry to accept that her mother loved dance more than she loved her, so she'd pretended it wasn't true, and made up ugly stories to take the place of the reality that her mother didn't have time for her. It all came back, the way her mother would say that she had to leave, or her aunt would say that her mother couldn't visit, because she had a performance, a rehearsal, or even a workshop. "I'm flying to Spain tomorrow." Or Portugal, New York City, or any place but where Josephine waited in vain for a glimpse

of the famous Theresa Fondant. And of course, the other girls at the school noticed her mother's absence and ragged her constantly. No wonder she'd turned to her books, finding comfort in the certainty of numbers and formulas.

Shaken, she turned to the albums. The one on top held her baby pictures, her parents and grandparents wreathed in big smiles with her in their arms. In the next album, she grew older on each page, and her parents' smiles more forced. There was a shot of her and her mother in black dresses and small black hats at her father's funeral. She stared at that page a long time, but she couldn't bring up even a fleeting image of the day, or of the father who had shot himself before she turned four. It seemed odd that she didn't remember him. A little numb, she opened the third album. She stopped at a photo from her grandmother's funeral and traced the sad faces. The rest of the book was blank, the plastic slots untouched. Her heart ached. Her mother had not cared enough to record those years.

Only the very last page held anything: a collage of photos from her high school graduation. Someone must have sent them to her mother, who hadn't bothered to attend. The ache turned to bitterness. What had been wrong with her goddamn mother that she hadn't even called to congratulate her and wish her good luck?

Upset, she took a break and went outside. Over the past two months, she'd dug out the weeds and trimmed the bushes. Before the house went up for sale, she planned to put in some flowers, but it was too hot to work on the yard. Instead, she walked around the neighborhood, admiring tidy lawns and well-kept houses. Breathing deeply, she went back inside, poured herself a cup of cold coffee and returned to the albums.

The next one was dedicated to her father, with a florid inscription in the front, many photos of him, articles about his suicide, and pressed flowers from his memorial service. Her mother must have loved him, given this tribute. Josephine closed her eyes,

trying once again to conjure him from the past, but the man in the photos remained a stranger.

The last book held the letters she'd written her mother from the time she went to board at St. Catherine's, to the time when she'd given up and stopped writing. There were the photos she'd sent from her college graduation, her first time skiing, and her first dog. Something fell out on the floor. She leaned over and picked it up. It was a half-written letter to her from her mother, dated a week before Josephine had received her M. S. in Physics:

Dear Josephine,

Congratulations. I am so proud of you, even though I have had little part in your life. Forgive me

Then it stopped, as if her mother didn't know what to say. Josephine felt numb. She couldn't fit the idea that her mother had given a shit into the story she'd told herself all her life.

A week later, Josephine drove home to Cleveland to prep for the school year. On Friday night, she donned the necklace and examined herself in her bathroom mirror. She resembled her mother, with the same green eyes, the same dark curls, the same long nose with a bump in the middle. Her chin was softer, but still protruded forward. Seeing her reflection reminded her that she couldn't in good conscience keep the heirloom; it belonged to her aunt.

Why haven't you asked your aunt about your mother?

I was afraid.

Of what? Of the truth?

Yes. Of finding out she never loved me, that I behaved so badly she gave up on me.

You're not a child anymore. Do you really still believe that?

Maybe.

I doubt it's true, but it's time to find out. Call Aunt Lillian.

The first weekend in November, Josephine flew to Seattle. Lillian's wrinkled face broke into a wide smile when she opened the door. "Come in, dear. You can hang your coat in the closet and put your suitcase in the guest room. It's down the hall to your right. I'm fixing dinner. It's almost ready."

Josephine settled herself in the bedroom, slipped the necklace box out of her suitcase, and followed the scent of roast chicken to the kitchen.

Her aunt stood over the stove, her face intent on something in a pan. "Do you mind setting the table, dear?"

"Of course not."

"Use the good china. It's in the buffet," her aunt said.

Josephine walked through the door to the dining area, which was divided from the kitchen by a long, chest-high counter. She hid the box behind a vase on the old-fashioned buffet, then busied herself getting out the china, crystal water glasses, and silver cutlery. She lifted a silver candle holder down from the buffet and drew two cloth napkins out of its drawers. Once the table was set, she leaned over the counter. "How are my cousins?" she asked.

"Regina is getting married again."

"To whom?" Josephine had been so out of touch, she didn't even know Regina had gotten divorced.

“A man from one of her college classes. He popped the question last week. The kids seem to like him.”

“That’s exciting.”

“Yes, I am pleased.” Her aunt plopped on a chair and set her feet on her kitchen stool.

For the first time, it occurred to Josephine that her aunt was no longer young. “How are you feeling?”

“As good as can be expected at sixty-seven. My ankles swell. The doctor says to put my feet up in the evenings.”

“You’re grinning. Is the doctor cute?”

Her aunt dismissed the idea, with a swipe of her hand in front of her face and a quick turn of her head. She laughed. “He’s about fifteen.”

“Auntie! You have a crush on him!”

“Everyone does,” Lillian answered, just as the bell dinged. “Bring the salad and the mashed potatoes.” She removed the chicken from the oven and slipped it onto a serving platter.

They carried their food into the dining room, said a quick grace, and started eating.

“How long are you staying?” Lillian asked.

“Until Sunday. I have to teach Monday morning.”

“That’s all? It’s an awfully long flight for such a short stay. What’s so important that it couldn’t wait until you had more time?”

Josephine stood up and retrieved the box. “This.”

Lillian’s mouth tightened. She wiped her face with her napkin. She stood up abruptly and picked up her plate. “Almost time for my show. We’ll talk in the morning. You finish your meal.”

After breakfast the next morning, Lillian pointed to the box. “Bring that into the living room.”

Josephine followed her down the hall and settled on the couch with the necklace in her lap. She tapped it. “I believe this is yours.”

“No, honey. It belongs to you.”

“But Grandmother Rose wanted you to have it. I was so mad when I saw that Mom had it.”

“I know. She called me. She didn’t know what to do to calm you down so you could listen to her explanation.”

“So she sent me to my grandparents instead?” Josephine’s voice rose. She clenched her fists.

Lillian sighed. “That isn’t why she sent you there.”

Josephine glared at her aunt. “Like hell she didn’t. You should have seen her face at the airport the next day. She would hardly speak to me.” She stomped out of the room, and went into the bathroom. Running water on her face, she willed herself to calm down and control her emotions. After drying off, she took another deep breath, returned to the living room and apologized.

“It’s okay. I understand this is difficult. But listen to what I have to say.”

Josephine picked up the necklace box and walked across the room to the television. She reminded herself that she was here to learn the truth, even if it hurt. “Did she need the money? I had it appraised. It’s valuable.”

Lillian sighed and leaned back. “It had nothing to do with money. Theresa always loved the necklace, from the time she was a little girl. So, after Mama died, I gave it to her.”

“Didn’t you—don’t you—want it?”

Lillian shook her head. “Not really.” She patted the couch. “Sit, child. You make me nervous.”

Once Josephine obeyed, her aunt continued. “For one thing, that necklace is too ornate for my taste. But, more importantly, it’s connected to our gypsy past, and I didn’t want to believe the stories

about our gypsy ancestors. Your mother, on the other hand, loved the idea. She looked like a gypsy, and she wanted to become one. She begged our uncles to tell us about our ancestors over and over.”

“What stories?” Josephine settled into the corner of the couch and let her hands relax.

“According to legend, one of our first ancestors was a gitano, an Andalusian gypsy, named Eduardo.”

“Spanish?”

Lillian nodded. “His wife, Collette, was French.”

“And?”

“Legend has it that Colette met Eduardo while she was visiting a friend in Seville for the summer. He was a gypsy, so it’s difficult to believe they would have ever come in contact, but supposedly they did. He seduced her with his good looks and charm and they fell deeply in love. So much so, that they came up with a plan to end up together. She told him the route her coach would take when she left for Paris, and he and his brothers waited on a lonely stretch of road near Marseille to attack it. They held a knife to her coachman’s throat and tied up Collette and her maid. Eduardo plucked the necklace right off Colette’s neck and took a bag of gold.”

“Wow.”

“When soldiers found Collette and her entourage, they chased after the thieves, but the brothers had too much of a head start. They secured passage from Marseilles to America and rode their horses right onto the ship and into the hold. The ship set sail. The soldiers arrived at the dock soon after. They fired warning shots, but the captain refused to turn back.”

“You mean this might be true? I always thought Uncle Marcel made up tales about swordsmen and bandits to entertain us kids!”

“Who knows? It was such a long time ago. I suspect the details have been elaborated a great deal. Colette’s wealthy husband tried

to have the brothers arrested after they arrived in New York, but they eluded capture. Colette came to Boston two years later, to visit friends, and never went back to France. Right before she was to return, she met up with Eduardo and vanished with him into the wilds of Ohio.”

Josephine thought about the traffic she faced every day on her way to work. Those ‘wilds’ were long gone, themselves the stuff of legends. She turned the tale over in her mind, enjoying the possibility that she had such dashing ancestors. Still, it didn’t quite make sense. “This seems so cloak and dagger. Why didn’t she come with Eduardo in the first place?”

“They thought it was too dangerous. If he was captured or killed, she could claim she was relieved he was no longer a threat, and go on with life as usual.”

“All very romantic.”

“Your mother thought so. I find the idea embarrassing. I’d rather have well-behaved ancestors. Here, hand me that box,” her aunt said.

Josephine reached across the gap between them. Her aunt opened the clasp and lifted the necklace to the light. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? Your mother loved it so much she couldn’t bear to lose it, so she hid it in the old trunk. She told me where to find it. In case something happened to her, she wanted you to have it.”

Josephine made a strangled noise.

“I know this isn’t easy, child, but you should know about her. She was obsessed with our heritage. She learned everything she could about it. She wore flowing scarves and long colorful skirts and pretended to tell fortunes. She talked Papa into Flamenco classes. Eventually Flamenco became her whole world. She traveled constantly, and danced long hours.”

“Why did she have me, then?”

“She—oh dear, how do I say this?” Lillian patted Josephine’s

knee. “Your mother wanted you, more than anything. She loved you, no matter what you might think.”

“But she loved dance more.”

Lillian turned back to her, tears in her eyes. “You don’t know that. She let others raise you because she couldn’t cope. If you cried, she broke out in hysterics. If you had a scraped knee, she fainted. If you were angry, and all children get angry, she’d go in her room and hide. I didn’t understand it, but we urged her to let Mama raise you after your father’s death.”

“And after Grandmama Rose died, why didn’t you take me?”

“We couldn’t. We already had our five, and we could barely manage them.”

Some belligerent childishness rose in Josephine. She pointed at the necklace. “She sent me to those awful people because I had a tantrum over that.”

“No, honey.” Lillian held it up again. “No, they’d already agreed to take you. In fact, it was their idea. They thought your gypsy relatives had let you run wild for too long. You needed a home with simple rules and a regular schedule.”

“How do you know all that?”

“Your mother talked it over with me. I thought they were right, but, by the end of the summer, you’d withdrawn into a shell. They worried the transition had been too difficult.”

“They did? I thought they hated me.”

“Oh, child, how could anyone hate you? No, they were old and set in their ways, that’s all. Anyway, we discussed what to do, and decided to try boarding school.”

“It was certainly better than their home.”

“Each time Theresa visited, you were happier and more integrated into the school. I saw that, too, when you visited us.”

Josephine sighed. This was too much to absorb. “I need some

time alone.”

“If it isn’t raining, you should walk down to the park. It’s just four blocks to the west. Take an umbrella out of the hall closet.”

A slight drizzle greeted Josephine when she exited the building, which struck her as the perfect thing on such an intense day. She wanted the rain to wash away her misconceptions about her childhood, and all the anger and hurt she’d nursed for a zillion years. She found the park and kept going until her aunt’s words started to make sense. Then she turned around, ready to ask more questions.

She waited until Lillian served afternoon tea, with a plate of pastries. They were at the dining room table, using a china tea set with a delicate rose pattern. Lillian, Josephine noticed, liked elegant things and everything in its proper place, even nieces.

But Josephine didn’t want to fit into the china cabinet. She wanted to shock her aunt with her pain, to call her out for glossing over the ugly reality that morning. “If my mother loved me so damn much,” she spat, “why did she stop visiting? Why didn’t I ever see her again?”

Lillian set her cup in its saucer and regarded her niece. “When was that?”

“I never saw her after my sophomore year of high school.”

“Oh, child,” her aunt said, looking concerned. “I didn’t know. Why didn’t you say something to me?”

“How could I? I thought something was so terribly wrong with me that even my own mother wouldn’t visit me. If I asked you and you told me the truth, how could I have lived with myself?”

“Oh, child. I wish you’d asked me this a long time ago. You could have saved yourself a lot of grief.”

Josephine closed her eyes, reliving the embarrassment and hurt of her teen years, feelings which had followed her into the present.

Her aunt pulled her chair around next to hers and hugged her. “There wasn’t anything wrong with you, sweetheart.”

“I tried so hard to become someone she could love.” Josephine began crying, hard. Her aunt sat with her, pulling her close, until the tears slowed.

“It wasn’t your fault. Theresa – well, she never could deal with her mistakes. She’d failed you, and she knew it.”

“She never even wrote,” Josephine stammered. “I wrote and wrote and she never answered.”

Lillian patted her back and waited until the tears slowed. “You never told me. I thought you two had grown closer over the years.”

“I lied.” She dropped her head onto her hands. “I made it all up.”

Lillian pushed the tea cup and saucer into the center of the table. “I would have, too, in those circumstances. Come, I have something to show you.”

Josephine stumbled to her feet and followed her aunt to her sewing room. Lillian reached into a bookshelf and pulled out a photo album. She took it to the living room, and sat next to Josephine on the couch.

“Your mother wasn’t much of a correspondent, but we saw each other every couple of years, sometimes in Pittsburgh or here, but more often in Spain. She spent six months out of the year there, and probably only two in that house she left you. I want you to see these pictures, and hear her story.”

“You said she died in Spain when you called.”

“Yes. In a dreadful auto accident. An oncoming driver fell asleep and smashed into the front of her car. She and her husband died instantly.”

“What husband?”

“Let me tell you.” For the next few hours, they looked at pictures of Theresa, and Lillian told her about her mother. When

she finished talking, Josephine felt as if an enormous load had been lifted off her heart. She could never forgive her mother for abandoning her to the care of others, but at least her mother no longer felt like a complete stranger.

The next morning, while she packed her carry-on, Lillian came into the room.

“Don’t forget this,” she held out the box with the necklace.

Josephine pushed it away. “You should give it to Regina when she gets married.”

“She won’t want it. Besides, Colette gave it to her oldest daughter when she married, and she gave it to her oldest on her wedding day. If Mama had kept to family tradition, she would have given it to your mother, but she loved it too much to pass it on. So it’s yours.”

“I’ve never married.” Her anger and sadness had driven away every man she’d dated. A faint hope arose that she could change that now.

“That doesn’t mean you never will. Before that, though, it would help if you spent more time with relatives and friends and learned how to be close to other people. Obviously, you’re used to keeping to yourself.”

Josephine’s mouth opened, ready to protest, but then she closed it. Her aunt was right.

Lillian smiled. “The whole family is coming for Christmas. Please join us. You can stay with Regina, I already asked her.”

A wave of something undefinable washed over Josephine, bringing a sense that she belonged, that she was wanted, perhaps even loved. “Yes,” she said, and smiled so hard her face ached. “I’ll come.”

“Perhaps while you’re here, I’ll introduce you to my doctor. He’s single.”

Josephine raised her eyebrows. “Isn’t he a little young for an old

maid in her forties?”

“Not at all, dear. I joke that anyone under sixty looks like a kid to me. He went to school with Regina, so he is a year younger than you. I shall invite him to dinner.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Actually, no. You’ll adore him.” ■

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