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by Marget Datz: <http://www.margodatz.com/>

Welcome to Our Fiction Section!

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Pie

by Richard Luftig

They always run out of pie at Donny's Café. I'm not talking about at suppertime. I mean at noon, sometimes earlier. Folks say it's the best pie in Indiana.

The regular customers know to order their pie before the main entrée. Patricia, the waitress, brings it to your table right away and then it's your job to guard it from would-be thieves who'll steal it when you leave for a moment to go to the bathroom. Tougher still, is not to scarf it down while your main order is being prepared in the kitchen.

I once asked Donny, the gray-haired owner, who looks like he's been eating the restaurant profits, why he just doesn't just bake more pie. "If I make it, all you people do is eat it," he said. You might think that answer weird until you consider that Donny has an unlisted number so customers don't bother him with trivial issues like take-out orders.

To tell you the truth, I wasn't a regular. I'd stop in for lunch on days I could get away from the office but the place was always packed, and I didn't like sharing a table with strangers. Eating alone in a small town usually has one of two consequences. Either someone asks if they can share your table so they don't have to wait to be seated or, even worse, they feel sorry for you and sit at your table as an act of Christian charity.

But being recently divorced has a way of forcing you out of the house.

Mary and I met in college. She was an environmental activist worried about the carbon footprint we were leaving. To tell you the truth, the only footprint I ever thought about was my shoe size. Still, she won me over to the cause less by her zeal and more by her sexy smile, cute ass and red hair. I admit at first our relationship was all sexual—I wanted one and she didn't—but I kept at it with a persistence that I never showed in the classroom. Eventually, we both got something out of the deal: I began sleeping with her and she got me to picket polluters. She graduated Cum Laude, I by the skin of my teeth. But she saw possibilities in me that were invisible to everyone else and we married six months later.

After five or six years we began to drift apart. She gave up her dream of going to med school to follow me around the country as I tried to make it in the business world. She never said that she blamed me as the cause of giving up her education but I knew it all the same. Sprinkle in my disappointment at not making it up the corporate ladder and her wanting children while I didn't and the seeds of discontent were sown. Still, I never stopped loving her.

All things being equal, you could say that our breakup was my fault. Infidelity usually is. I met Sharon on a business trip in Indianapolis. I had drifted into pharmaceutical sales as an afterthought when I kept getting passed up for promotions in the corporate world. The good news is that I worked myself up to assistant district manager for Central Indiana. The bad news is that I hated what I did for a living.

So, when Sharon became interested in me it was like a jolt of electricity. We started seeing each other for furtive lunches where no one knew us or to a movie. Hell, once we even went bowling. Now, just to make it plain, we didn't have sex. We never got past hot kissing and heavy breathing. Maybe it was guilt, but we just never advanced to sleeping together. I realize now that I was still unfaithful. At the time, though, I didn't think of it as infidelity but more like not being completely *in* fidelity.

When Mary discovered the affair, she hit the roof. I don't know exactly how she found out. Women have special radar about these things.

“Nothing happened,” I told her for at least the twentieth time.

“Nothing,” she dully repeated.

“We didn’t have sex.”

“Was that her choice or were you just impotent?”

“That’s not fair.”

Mary slammed her cup down on the kitchen table. “Not fair? I’ll tell you what’s not fair. You slinking off on dates behind my back with some tramp. You not believing enough in our relationship to confide in me that you weren’t happy. You lying about where you were, who you were with, and what you were doing. Those things are what’s not fair.”

At about the fiftieth argument, we were both pretty burned out. I was tired of the whole topic and Mary’s anger had morphed into dull resignation. By the time the divorce became finalized, we were amicable and sickly adult with each other. Since there were no kids and I had my job in town, Mary decided to let me buy out her half of the house. She sublet an apartment near South Bend and continued her career as a medical technician.

Which is how I came to learn some ugly truths about being alone. First, I hated it. I missed Mary like hell. I was hit with realizations about here that I hadn’t appreciated; how her sacrifice of giving up medical school to say that she believed in me. She continued to have faith in who I was and what I could do even when I didn’t anymore. In her eyes I was more than just a mere pill salesman who never achieved his aspirations. I had wasted all my time complaining and living with regret. I had been so selfish as to not give her the one thing she really wanted—a baby. And that left me with the second realization—the loss of all that could have been. I guess it’s true what they say, that you never really miss somebody until they’re gone.

I also learned a little, dirty secret about supermarkets. They’re rigged in favor of large families. These stores have an annoying habit of packaging everything as if either there are ten people in the family or one person with the appetite of the Fat Man in the circus. And, even if that wasn’t the case, I just couldn’t get enthused over cooking for one, reading the paper at the table while having the radio on for company. So, given the fact I didn’t cook

much when I was married; I cooked even less now that I was single. The bright side, though, was I hardly had to clean the stove.

Which is how I found myself being a regular at Donny's. In fact, I even learned the secret meaning when the waitress would ask if I wanted "mode" with my pie. Newbies had to ask what that was, but I knew it was Indianian for ice cream.

It was a Saturday around 11 A.M, maybe a year after my divorce, when I came into Donny's for a late breakfast or an early lunch I wasn't sure which one I was going to order. Donny serves breakfast all day, I guess for those customers who have been out late drinking the night before and don't get their engines going until afternoon.

I knew one thing, though. I wanted pie. So you can imagine I was pretty ticked off when I saw that every last slice, regardless of flavor, was gone.

"Yeah," Patricia said as she poured my coffee without me asking for it. "We sold out by nine."

I guess that was the deal-breaker because I strode into the kitchen to hunt up Donny. Believe me, that was not my style, and it broke the unwritten rule of the place. Customers stayed at their seats and Donny worked the kitchen. If he wandered out into the dining area, he was fair game to be complained to or complimented. Otherwise, customers knew their place. Hell, I was surprised we didn't have assigned seating.

But I wanted pie. No, after the week I had at work on my dead-end, kiss-up-to-doctors job, I *needed* pie.

I walked around the counter and pushed open the swinging doors that lead to the kitchen. The dining room went dead quiet as I made my way into the forbidden area.

Donny was alone at the prep counter flipping burgers and prepping plates with lettuce and tomato. That little swivel thing where waitresses attach their orders was filled. Obviously, this was not the best time to confront Donny, but I didn't care.

“Donny,” I shouted. Between the fan, sizzle of the deep fryers and the radio blaring country music, I guess he didn’t hear.

“Donny!”

He looked up, surprised. Maybe shocked was a better word.

Stephen!” he growled over the din. “What are you doing back here? This place is off limits to diners. Get out front where you belong.”

I guess my need for peach pie trumped fear. “How the hell can you run out of pie at nine in the morning?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard what I said. What respectable eating establishment runs out of pie before the lunch hour?”

Donny lined three burgers on one long, steel utensil and flipped them over onto the grill. “First of all, in case you haven’t noticed, this isn’t a respectable establishment. It’s a goddamned, greasy-spoon diner. Second, I don’t have any help. It’s a one-man show. I make the pies when I come in at three in the morning. When we run out, we run out. I don’t have time to make more when I’m cooking for the breakfast crowd.”

I set my jaw. “Still, you can’t just run out every day. There has to be some better solution. You know as well as I do that people come in for your pie.”

He slid the burgers on the open rolls on three plates, squirted the sandwiches with his special sauce and added fries. “Tell you what. If you feel that strongly about pie, why don’t you come in and help me make them?”

This was not the reaction I expected. “What?”

“You heard me; you want pie and I need help making it. You can come in on weekends and help me bake.”

I considered the offer. “What’s in it for me?”

Donny stroked his two-day stubble of beard. “You call ahead on my private

phone and get pie reserved for when you dine in, and I give you three to take home each weekend you work. You can gorge yourself to your heart's content."

"Jesus, Donny. I don't know how to make pie. I have a hard enough time boiling water for rice."

"It's not rocket science," he said. "You follow the recipes. Besides, I'll be there to help you."

He paused. "Just one thing, though."

"What's that?"

"You give the recipes to anyone, I get to kill you."

I hoped he was joking. "Okay," he said, "it's put up or shut up time. You in or are you just going to bitch about my running out of pie for the rest of your life?"

I considered the ramifications of my answer. I would have to get up in the middle of the night on my weekends to bake. Still, I hadn't been sleeping all that well since the divorce and welcomed any diversion that might add some interest to my mundane life.

"I'm in. When do we start?"

And that's how I ended up being the assistant pie guy at Donny's Café. Since Donny didn't have to make all the pies himself, he even let me start a little later so I could sleep in. I guess he liked the idea of help because later he hired an assistant cook and spent more time in the dining room schmoozing with the regulars.

One Saturday morning about eleven, the place was pretty empty. I was finishing up the last of the pies when the doors swung open and Mary appeared in the kitchen. To say I was shocked would be the understatement of the century.

"Mary," was all I could say, which was pretty stupid considering we both

knew her name.

She shook her head in amazement. “I don’t believe it. Donny said that I’d be surprised if I came into the kitchen, and he wasn’t kidding.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I guess I could ask the same of you.”

I started to recover. “I asked you first.”

“I came back to town to see friends. I had some time to kill, so I came in for lunch. Of course, I ordered pie right away—raspberry to be exact. I know how Donny runs out early. I was surprised to see an assortment still available. I snuck a taste before my sandwich arrived, and it was better than I remembered.”

She looked at me up and down. I must have made one hell of a sight in my white pants, shirt, stained apron and paper cook’s hat.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I complimented him on the pie and he said that he didn’t make this batch, that he had a new assistant that I might want to meet and for me to go into the kitchen.”

I studied her for the first time since she came in. She was dressed in a pretty blue blouse and dark slacks. The necklace she was wearing highlighted her pale throat and complimented her hazel eyes. She looked good. No, actually she looked very good. A lot like the girl I had married right out of college.

“You look wonderful,” I said. “You’ve lost weight.”

She smiled. “Thanks. I wish I could say the same for you. You look like you’ve been eating a little bit too much of your own creations.”

I laughed. “Guilty as charged. Have to taste each batch to make sure that no one out front gets poisoned.”

She gave me a quizzical look. “So what are you doing here? You never cooked when we were married. You never wanted to come within fifty feet of the oven. Why the change?”

I considered the question and shrugged. "I don't know. Donny didn't appreciate me bitching about him running out of pie all the time and dared me to start baking for him. It turns out I like it. Even more of a surprise, I'm a good cook."

Mary studied my face for a long moment. "Seriously. Why?"

I thought for a moment. A joke would be nice. I had always been ready with one to deflect having to talk about how I really felt about things. Instead, I decided to give her a real answer.

"I'm not exactly sure," I said. "All I know is that making pie makes me feel like I'm whole, like I'm creating something that people actually want, like I'm making some sort of small, if unimportant contribution."

I saw that she didn't understand, at least not one hundred percent.

"Think of it this way," I continued. "I get to create something, make something real, tangible, something that I can feel, smell and taste. I've never been able to do that selling drugs to doctors. I make a sale, who cares, except the company's bottom line.

"Plus, if I screw up a batch of dough I get to mix it up again, try it again. I get another chance, a do-over. It's not like every other thing I've screwed up in my life, one shot and I'm out."

She looked at me softly. "Like our marriage?"

"Like our marriage," I repeated.

There was an awkward silence between us. I was mentally preparing for anything that she might say; anger, sarcasm, telling me how she still hated me.

"I miss you," she said. "To be honest, seeing my friends wasn't the only reason I came back. I wanted to know how you were getting on."

If had to bet the café I didn't own, I wouldn't have wagered on her saying that. "I miss the hell out of you," I said. "I'm lonely and sad about the way things ended between us."

I felt myself tearing up; something I never did before I got into this baking business.

“I’m sorry.” This time I really meant it.

Mary seemed embarrassed. She picked up her purse from the stainless steel table. “It was good to see you, but I have to go. My lunch is getting cold and if I know the folks around here, someone stole the pie off my table.”

She walked to the door then stopped and turned. “Would you like to have dinner tomorrow?”

I was floored by the question. And pleased. “I’d like that very much.”

I thought for a moment. “But where? Every place in town is closed on Sunday. Even Donny closes at one.”

“How about our house?” she said. It didn’t escape me that she had used the pronoun *our*.

“That would be nice,” I said.

She smiled. “Great. I’ll bring some groceries and cook us something. Your job,” she said, with a laugh, “will be to bake pie for dessert.”

She walked back out into the dining room. I remembered that I had three pies in the oven and two more cooling on the rack.

It wasn’t until an hour after she left that I realized that I hadn’t asked her what kind she wanted.

No problem, I thought. If it would help get her back, I’d bake an assortment.

Bio- Richard Luftig is a professor of educational psychology and special education at Miami University in Ohio now residing in California. He is a recipient of the Cincinnati Post-Corbett Foundation Award for Literature and a semi-finalist for the Emily Dickinson Society Award for Poetry. His stories have appeared in numerous magazines including *Bloodroot*, *Front Porch Review*, *Silkscreen Literary Review*, and *Pulse Literary Journal*. One of his published short stories was nominated for a 2012 Pushcart Prize.

Editor's Note: This piece is an innovative take on the Biblical conflict between Cain and Abel that was said to have stemmed from a dispute concerning which brother was to take which sister (Abel's twin sister is Climna and Cain's twin sister is Labuda) for a wife.

The Struggle

by Brittany Maloy

My husband finally touched me. And it was only a passing brush against my upper arm. It had been a solid week since he had even looked at me.

“Do you love him?” Abel asked.

It had only been a brief embrace. Discouraged. Avoided unsuccessfully. Why, oh, why did Abel have to happen upon us in that very moment?

The walls of our hut were thin and I did not want anyone to overhear us. “He is my brother,” I hissed.

It all begins and ends with family. They gather around to welcome. They gather around to usher out. And in between, they shape and mold each member. Escape is impossible. Their influence etches deep sarcophaguses of who they think you are. You wear the mantle without feeling it. It rests upon you, an identity mark. You cannot scrape it away. You are born with it and you are condemned to wear it from birth.

I blame this classification. It was not me. It was not my fault.

Cain with his strong will, Cain with his unruly passion for adventure, Cain, the less meticulous and obedient was always unfairly cast as the troublemaker.

I am Cain's twin sister. We reflect each other in appearance, but our souls are mirror opposites. Cain always rambled around wild, impulsive, engaging. He was the leader of all adventures. I wandered in the empty fields of the peacemaker, the one to still babies' cries, the one who idly waited and watched or was watched as the idol. The boys' God to worship. Cain or Abel's prize.

Like must mate with like. Despite the fact that Cain and I had shared our mother's womb, our parents watched, catalogued and classified. It was determined that my temperament matched Abel's. Cain seemed more like stormy Climna, Abel's twin.

Abel was pleased, Climna, resigned, I obeyed and Cain raged. Time does not heal all wounds or offenses. Sometimes, it only breathes gusty air on the flame that hops the fire ring, wilts grass, blackens trees, and eventually angers its way to the village, consuming everything.

Months after our marriages, Cain still pestered me with confessions of love, his conjectures of my own feelings and the worthlessness of his wife.

"Do you wish you belonged to him rather than me?"

In the moment of horror, Cain had curled his arms around me. *You and I belong together. It has always been that way. From the beginning.*

"No, no," I'd told both brothers. Now I turned to my husband and touched his face. "Of course not." It was right for me to be with Abel. I admired Abel. But I could not hate Cain.

"Why didn't you fight against him then?" He took my hand from his face and hesitated as if undecided. Would he push my hand aside completely or hold on to it? "That night—when I found you two—"

"I didn't encourage him, Abel."

He hungrily pressed my fingers to his lips and kissed them.

I gave him the answer he desired, but my body felt cold. I still felt Cain's anguish heavy on my skin. "He's in agony though—so unhappy."

Abel raised his eyes to mine and dropped my hand. "You do care for him, then." His sandals scratched across the floor mat as he wandered toward the opposite corner of the hut.

"He's my brother." My voice grew louder. I quieted. "Do you want me to hate him?"

"Maybe." Abel wandered from one corner to the other, keeping his eyes on his feet.

“Maybe? Don’t you feel any pity for him?”

”No!” he shouted. I was sure they would hear him on the other side of the village. “No! Never! Why should I? He has a wife. Climna is a good woman, a pleasant mate. She carries his child. He has his land. And yet he thirsts for more—that which he cannot have. That which is already mine.” He glared at me, his chest heaving. I felt the weight of his hate and could not decide if it was aimed at Cain or at me. “But then, are you really mine?”

I didn’t like the direction this was headed. “How can you say that? Of course I am yours!” I came toward him, but he brushed past me. “I love you, Abel. I love you as my brother and as my mate. I am happy with you. But do not ask me to hate Cain. You must forgive him. You know about his impetuous ways.”

Abel snorted. He had renewed his deliberate pacing on the other side of the hut, away from me. “And you defend him,” he said more to himself than to me.

“Please, Abel.” I didn’t know what I pleaded for. For resolution. For peace. For his forgiveness.

“Don’t, Labuda.” He headed for the door and was gone before I could respond.

It seemed that Abel took all of the light and air with him when he left our hut. My knees gave way and I slumped in the corner a short while, a crumpled rag. He would return soon. We would talk things through. I would make him understand. Things would be better. There was reason to sit there for the rest of the day.

I slowly returned to my feet and continued to my duties. I gathered our clothing and headed down to the river. When that was finished, I returned home and draped the wet clothing over low-hanging tree branches near our hut. By then, the sun had made its descent in the sky. I started a fire and cooked dinner.

Abel did not return home. My mind reviewed our last conversation again and again. I could have told him that I hated Cain and that I never wanted to cast my eyes upon him ever again. The lie would have been a balm to Abel’s wound. I shouldn’t have sympathized at all with Cain. But I hadn’t

realized that I was dealing with an unreasonable, emotional Abel. I had never seen him like this before.

When the sun extinguished its light and the evening meal was cleared, uneaten, I lay down on the sleeping mat, but determined to stay awake until Abel returned. I did not realize that I had dozed. When a vivid dream took shape in my mind, it seemed real. Abel returned to our hut, but he did not look well. Then thick blood bubbled and seeped from his lips and dripped onto Cain's face who sat on the mat below Abel. Cain began lapping up the drops of Abel's blood that landed on the mat. Once Cain had tasted them, he sat up, and tilted his head back, his mouth opened and ready. Abel's blood now gushed and cascaded out of his own mouth, filling Cain's mouth until it overflowed and spilled out the comers.

I woke with a start, whimpering like a child. The hair around my face curled with sweat. I groped the sleeping mat next to me and found it empty. I scrambled to my feet and went to the door, drawing the animal skin back to let the dim light of the half-moon in. I peered out for my absent husband, my Abel. The dream still lingered, heavy on me like fog. He was not there. Why had he not come home? Where was he? Lighting a torch, I hurried out into the darkness, searching.

I didn't know where to go, but found comfort in my moving feet, peace in my frenzy. The torchlight created a glow a few inches before my face, blinding me to anything outside the small circle of light.

"Abel! Abel!" I followed the familiar paths leading out to the sheep's grazing pastures.

At the top of a long sloping hill, I spotted something up by the rocks. I hiked in that direction, stumbling once or twice over loose dirt and ground. On one stumble, I dropped the torch in the sand. The light extinguished. I froze for a moment, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

When I could finally make out the dim outline of the mound by the rocks, I pulled myself up and carefully crept toward it. It didn't move like an animal would, but it did appear to have fur. I couldn't make out a head. Once I was in reach, I grabbed the soft fur and lifted it, finding below Abel's usual pile of supplies.

I replaced the animal skin covering. It was foolish to be out in the dark alone without so much as even a torch or a weapon. But it was unlike Abel to leave his supplies on the hillside for the night, and the abandoned materials renewed my concern.

“Abel! Abel!”

The only answer I received was the wind.

I sat back down near the pile of supplies and hugged my knees to my chest, praying for my Abel. I lay down, curled next to his supplies and pulled the supply covering over my body. It was the closest I could be to him.

What had happened to Abel?

The sky glittered and I lost myself in the thick white streak of clustered stars overhead. A twig snapped somewhere in the foliage. I bolted upright and sniffed the air. My eyes explored the darkness, and I strained to hear any other noise. Another small crack and a little rustling made me jump to my feet. I dug through Abel's supplies and discovered a jagged blade. I slowly climbed the rocks behind me and moved into the dark trees on the hillside.

Weaving in and around the trees, I spotted a rumpled pile of thick earth and leaves. I wondered briefly if it was some other supply pile when I noticed the form had hair. I took a few steps toward it. Attached to the hair was a pale, exposed, bent neck. My knees gave way and I fell to the ground. The weapon slipped from my hand and I crawled the rest of the way to the body.

It was Abel, his twisted body against the base of a tree trunk, his face distorted, swollen, and discolored. A clot of dark blood matted his hair on the back of his head. I reached out and touched him. He was cold and stiff like dry uncured rawhide. An unearthly wail filled the air. I realized that it came from my mouth and ascended into the heavens like the forever tendril of incense smoke. My grief went with it. When I closed my mouth, I found myself filled with anguish. The pressure was unbearable. It was all I could do to capture my next breath.

I recognized death. I had witnessed stiffened birds on the ground. Once, I had discovered a lost lamb, dead and frozen as if it had been winter. I was familiar with the open-eyed empty gaze. Something was missing from my

husband. This was his empty, left-over husk. I grabbed his arms, gingerly touched his face and smashed my palm into his chest waiting for warmth, for that incessant beating.

I buried my face in his shoulder and cried. "Please, Abel. Get up. Get up now. Take me home. Please take me home. I'm so scared. So scared. So scared." My words gave way to sobs.

I heard a sound again, a slight rustle. Fear dried my tears in an instant, and a sense of danger made every hair on my body rigid. Something was out there. Maybe it was the something that had done this to Abel. I searched the ground with my hands and reclaimed the blade. I crouched, ready to bolt, but hesitated. I could not leave Abel there. Then he would be alone and exposed, and I wanted to protect him from whatever it was that had harmed him.

I reminded myself that noises were common at night. It could be an animal or the wind. I let my weapon drop as I looked back at Abel's body. I leaned over and touched his face. He was so cold.

I tipped over and lay down next to him. Curling around his unyielding body, I hugged his shell close while tears salted paths down my face. I stayed there weeping, each long, slow moan releasing some pressure of mounting grief.

The soft glow of dawn woke me and illuminated my surroundings. Abel's chill would not allow me to convince myself of anything but the horrifying truth. I needed help. I could not transport Abel's body back on my own. I hated to leave my love there all alone, but I had no other choice. I struggled to my feet and found my way back into the village. No one stirred yet.

"Help me! Help me!" I burst into my parents' hut.

"Labuda?" Mother's voice croaked.

"What is it?" Father asked.

I explained what I had found and grabbed their arms, pulling their bodies up. I encouraged them upward and onward while I told the story. They followed me to where I had left Abel's body, but he was no longer there. The leaves and underbrush were a little more matted there than usual, there

was some smeared blood, but other than that, there was no other sign of him.

"He was here. I know it. I saw him. See his blood?" I darted around between bushes and rocks, searching wildly.

"It may just be an animal's blood," Father said.

Mother caught my shoulders in a small hug. "Did you and Abel quarrel, my dear?"

I hung my head. I had forgotten about the argument. Guilt nested a new place in my chest. Pieces of knotted hair covered some of my face. "Yes, but...he did not come home last night."

"Are you sure?" Mother gentled my hair and pulled me onto her shoulder. I felt safe and comforted in her embrace. Everything would be well. She would fix things for me somehow.

"You said you slept half the night in the forest," Father said. "Perhaps he came home then."

My mind felt cluttered and confused. Maybe Father was right. I leaned on Mother.

My parents huddled around me and took me home. My feet became immovable when we approached my hut. I felt terrified of what we would find. Or wouldn't find. As long as we didn't enter the hut, an irrational hope still lingered. He could be alive and only sleeping inside. Maybe it had all been a vivid dream.

"You go first, Adam." Mother kept her arms wrapped tightly around me.

Father took a few firm steps forward, shifted the door covering and looked inside. He stayed in the doorway too long.

"What is it, Adam?" Mother called.

He slowly turned around. "He's...not here."

Within a few short hours, Father had arranged and grouped my siblings into searching parties. I stayed behind in my hut, watching the shadows on

the walls shift and change with the rising sun. My siblings had come to my door one by one, offering comfort and words of encouragement. I kept my eyes on the receding shadows. I knew what I had seen earlier. Abel was dead.

As the sunlight tilted and shifted left, the growing shadows emphasized the bumps in the reedy, mudded walls. Then there was another clapping outside my door. Someone requested an entrance. I did not answer and the person clapped again.

"Labuda? Are you still in there?"

It was Cain.

I got to my feet. "Yes, Cain. I'm here."

He pushed aside the door covering with one hand and slid into the hut.

"Have you found him?" I asked.

He nodded.

My heart pounded and I wadded the robe by my hands into my fists. "Where? What happened to him?"

"At the bottom of a ravine. It...it appears as though..."

"What? What?" My voice rose in hysterics.

"He must have fallen."

I cocked my head and narrowed my eyes. Cain stood crooked in my sight. I tried to clear my thoughts and distinguish reality from nightmare. "No. That isn't right..."

"By the time we got to him, some animal had already...well, it hardly even looks like him anymore."

I clung to Cain's lie out of fear and wilted at his description. The idea that some beast had torn my Abel apart and had dined on his flesh made me heave. My mind still swirled in confusion. Only a few truths anchored firmly in my mind: Abel was dead; I had discovered him; his death was not an accident; someone had taken his life. He had not simply fallen against a

rock in the forest. The back of his head had been completely crushed until it was a concave bloody mess. He could not have received that kind of wound by simply falling. And I had not found him at the bottom of a ravine. He had been on the hillside. I knew Cain lied; I knew it, but I needed to believe him.

Cain's face crumpled like a little child's, and I felt his pain.

"I just..." He dropped his head into his hands. "The last things I said to him were so awful. We argued. I said things I hadn't meant. And now he's..."

I remembered my own final, bitter conversation with Abel as well, and I shared Cain's misery. I lost the strength to stand and fell to my knees. I crawled over to him and peered up into his shadowed face. I caught my breath, and fear's long spidery fingers collected my heart. I saw something of myself reflected in his appearance. He fell to his knees before me and pulled me close, crushing me against his chest. I found it hard to breath and relished the suffocation. Cain's desperate fingertips dug into my back and I welcomed the feeling of physical pain to accompany my inner wretchedness.

He kissed my lips, my neck and my forehead, murmuring that he was sorry. He was apologetic in my hair, regretful in the cleft of my neck, remorseful down the curve of my breasts. I welcomed the distraction from grief and fell back onto the mat with him. I placed my pale hands on Cain's tanned chest, wanting to fight but wanting to submit. Cain was forbidden, but I was lost without Abel, and feared being all alone, vulnerable, uncertain. I knew I should feel guilty, but there was no more room to feel anything, only heaviness and numbness, the way my legs felt after standing in a frigid spring river too long.

Cain was a jumble of movement and words. I was a still and lifeless stone. When he finished, he caressed my face, peering down into my eyes. Did he see the emptiness behind them?

"I carry Abel's baby," I said, monotone.

He placed his hand on my flat abdomen and looked at me, his face twisted in misery.

"I have lain with my sister's mate." I finally focused on Cain's face and realized that I had wanted him all along, that I had always enjoyed his body

close to mine, his warm breath panting at my neck. It was never that I had not loved Abel. It was that I had loved them both. Abel had pulled me toward the eternal good. He stood for the polite restraint our parents had always taught us. He glowed with the goodness of God and Eden and the heavens. As long as he lived by my side, I remained his partner, his equal in all things paradisiacal. Now that he was gone, his light extinguished, I was left wholly to myself. In Cain's presence, I absorbed his lust, his ferociousness, his evil, and it strengthened me, sickened me.

"All is well, Labuda. You are mine now. It is as it always should have been. You have always belonged to me."

I accepted the words. I thirsted for justification of my twisted deviation. I swallowed Cain's story of the recovery of Abel's body even though I knew it to be false. I brushed aside the small, sharp needle feeling in the corner of my mind that Cain had something to do with Abel's destruction.

"But Climna?" It was a plea. I needed Cain's strength and rationale to ease my discomfoting thought.

"Climna never wanted me, not really. She never needed anyone."

But I still remembered my sister's blush at the mention of Cain before they had been paired. Climna had glowed when she spoke of him, although she tried to cover it with contempt. Climna had always stirred up arguments with him, enjoying the emotional, heated response they drew. Her appearance was appalling, her manners, coarse. The arguments were the only way she had known to get his attention.

I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing the thought from my mind, smothering my guilt.

"We will run away." Cain's voice hurried. "Together." He went to the door and peeked outside. "They are coming. We must go now."

"Where will we go?"

"Away." He came to me, took my hands and helped me stand. "God has stolen your mate from you. Your child cannot be raised fatherless."

A new pain swelled up within me. My child. Fatherless. Climna's child. Fatherless.

"Come."

I let him pull me from the hut and lead me out into the wilderness.

Bio- Brittany Maloy has had her work appear in *Garbanzo Literary Journal* and has had prior short stories and poetry place in statewide competitions. She has also written a novel and is currently under contract with a literary agent for that piece.

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Houdini

by N. H. Porter

Stirring her morning coffee and watching the cream pinwheel into the black brew and change it to tan, Chris daydreamed about running out the door, getting in the car and driving until she ran out of gas. She shook her head, chastising herself. There was nothing wrong with her life; she loved her family and had a lovely home, great friends and a successful career, but she found the metronome of her days stultifying, the seconds tick-tocking into minutes, then hours, then years. She was always tired; her commute was too long, her job had become routine and she dreaded going into work. Her children were grown, and now their lives were busy and far away. She missed them and longed for the time in her life when they needed her more than anyone or anything else. She wondered if everyone felt this way, suddenly empty as retirement loomed closer and closer, and that the life they had been living seemed no longer valid. How different things were when she was newly married. She and Brian talked about everything and were so happy that they used to sing to each other. Now her relationship with her husband was as predictable as the meatloaf they had every Tuesday—good and filling, but unexciting. She glanced across the breakfast table, expecting to see Brian hidden behind the morning newspaper as usual, but instead she found him looking at her.

"You know," he said, "I used to be a magician when I was a kid. I thought I'd be the next Harry Houdini. I was always practicing stunts, undoing knots and escape tricks. My specialty was ropes and padlocked chains."

Chris's eyes widened in surprise, and she wondered if her husband could have sensed the thoughts of her own escape.

He took a sip of orange juice and then wiped his lips with a napkin. “I used to get my brother and sister to set up a circus in the backyard. We had booths with games: a penny toss into juice glasses, a ball pitch to knock down soda bottles and a dartboard with crayon-colored pictures of prizes they could win with a dart toss—pencils, stickers, a piece of bubble gum. We’d set up a stage and put on a show, too.”

He laughed, “We’d charge two cents. I remember once how Tony Heffernan only had a penny and he ran home and back again with another in order to pay. He’s a judge now; I can’t believe we didn’t just let him in.” Brian shook his head, remembering. “Anyway, Bobby would juggle and be the lion trainer. Spotty, our dog, was the lion, but the only thing he could frighten was his own shadow. Donna would dance and sing her favorite song “I Think I Love You” by the Partridge Family; I used to tease her about being in love with David Cassidy and she’d get so mad she’d stick her tongue out at me. I would be the last act because I made myself the star of the show. I’d perform my magic, of course. I was pretty good at pulling coins out of the air and card tricks, but what I really wanted to be was a famous escape artist.

“I checked out books from the library about escapology. I read everything I could about Houdini. I learned about misdirection and fake props. To get out of the ropes I learned to expand my chest, pull back my shoulders and hold my hands slightly apart so that there would be extra room. The ropes would look like they were tight, but they were actually loose. The best thing I learned though was that when I was using chains and a lock, the trick was to have a duplicate key in your mouth.”

“You never told me any of this,” said Chris. She thought she knew everything about him. That there was nothing else they could learn about each other.

“I’d forgotten about it until now. The dreams of childhood are sidetracked by life, I guess. Back then, I wanted desperately to believe that magic was real, but I knew that it was an illusion, just like the tricks I performed. There was still part of me that thought, perhaps, some of it could be—I don’t know—supernatural. I should have known better. About once a year, I would talk my mother into taking me to Boston to a magic shop where they sold all kinds of gimmicks and tricks, even some of the equipment that professional magicians use. Seeing the mechanics of stage magic should have disillusioned me and convinced me that it was a sham. After all, I

bought lots of that junk, the paper flower bouquets and silly little pranks, like the black eye telescope. Once I got a fake mouse. I'd throw it at Spotty and he'd attack it as if it was the real thing. He never learned; I could do it over and over again; it still makes me laugh. But it doesn't take much to fool a dog."

Chris stirred her coffee again, then took a sip and cupped her hands around the warm mug. "It doesn't take much to fool people, either," she said.

"True. That's part of magic too—setting expectations so that people see what you want them to. Anyway, I knew very well that magic wasn't real, but I still believed in it. I remember this one time. It was at our circus. My mother had a large trunk and I decided to use it in my act. It had a strong latch that could be opened by a pin on the inside. It was so simple and obvious that as I practiced all the week before the show, I always propped the lid of the trunk open. I never tried the trick with the lid closed.

"On the day of the circus, Donna tied my hands behind my back with rope, wrapped me in chains and a padlock, and put me into the trunk. She closed the lid and I heard the latch click. Only then did I discover that the trunk was airtight. I was able to get my hands out of the rope, but I was having trouble with the lock and getting the chains off. I got nervous and dropped the key I had hidden in my mouth. I was wedged in and my position prevented me from reaching the bottom of the trunk to get it. I couldn't stand up without raising the lid and although I could reach the pin to open the trunk latch I couldn't manage to push it in. I tried everything I knew without result. By this time, there wasn't enough air for me to yell for help. I was desperate. I started to panic; I couldn't breathe. I thought I would pass out. I remember praying to Houdini for help; I pleaded with him to tell me how to get out, to intercede and give me a hand. I thought I was going to die."

Brian paused for a moment, picked up his juice glass and drained it. He said, "I have always wondered whether fate is like a pinball game, where one action can cause us to ricochet into a different path of life, or if it's like a ledger where somewhere our destiny is written down as soon as we are born, absolute and irreversible. Or is it just serendipity—a matter of timing and luck?"

"I've always thought we made our own fate; that we have to take the consequences for our own actions," answered Chris.

“But could there be something more? Is fate the only influence on our lives?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like how I got out of the trick,” said Brian.

“What did you do?”

“I don’t know. Nothing I hadn’t tried before. All I know is that at the last possible moment I heard the latch click open. I burst out of the trunk and I was free.”

“But how?” asked Chris.

“I don’t know. What explanation is there except that Harry Houdini heard me?”

“That’s impossible.”

“So tell me, how did it happen? It couldn’t have been a coincidence. Was it magic or fate?”

Chris reached across the table and squeezed his hand as if she never intended to let it go. “It must have been both,” she said.

Bio- N. H. Porter lives and writes on Cape Cod. After a career as a computer programmer and analyst, she has finally been able to write full time. She currently has a novel in progress.

Dancing Shoes *(originally featured in the autumn 2012 issue)*

by Melodie Corrigall

Tom laughed indulgently when his friend Frank apologized for having only a quick pint. “Bette and I are going dancing tonight. You and Myrna should join us.”

“No way,” Tom said. “It’s been so long since I went dancing with Myrna that she doesn’t even bother to ask any more. If I weakened now, we’d be back at square one.”

“We used to have fun, the four of us.”

True, in times gone by Tom had waltzed his wife around the floor but only with a view to whirling her into his arms permanently. Since the wedding march ten years earlier, there was no dancing for him. Now he only marched.

Fact was he was more a military man than a dancing man. Not military in the sense that he had been in the army, although, as a high school cadet, he had paraded around a muddy field one summer. He was a military man in the sense that he liked order, insisted Myrna iron his drip-dry shirts, and keep everything shipshape. Imagination was, to him, a potion best left in the bottle. He had no patience for anything with the least whiff of fantasy or fancy. Second fact was he only did things that served a purpose and now that he and Myrna were hooked, dancing served no purpose.

“If you want to stay home stuck in front of TV, send Myrna on her own. There’s lots of singles.”

“No way.”

“Maybe she’s already found a new guy.”

“Old Myrna? No chance.”

“Last week at the supermarket, she had a flushed, in-love look.”

“Well, it’s not with me.”

“I’m sure it isn’t,” his friend said, which ruffled Tom’s feathers.

A few days earlier, their neighbor with the barking Collie had called over the fence to Myrna, “What are you up to? You look great.” In reply, his wife giggled in a way Tom hadn’t heard in ten years.

What was going on? Recently, everyone who saw Myrna commented how good she was looking—their son said it, her best friend noted it, and now even Frank who hardly noticed any woman over 30—which Myrna was far past—was joining the chorus.

When Tom decided to look for himself, he noticed his wife hadn’t gained the pounds he had since they walked down the aisle. Her face had sort of a

pink blush (probably some new makeup) and her energy level was high (those vitamins). But the small puffs under her eyes gave her away.

Of course, the idea of her having a suitor was crazy. Myrna and he worked in the same cramped office and she wasn't out of his sight for more than 30 minutes during the day.

And her age was showing... He confronted her about sneaking a nap before supper; he couldn't understand how she needed more sleep. Regular as clockwork, they both bunked down at ten. Tom had a solid routine that involved a facemask, earplugs, a sleeping pill and loose flannel pajamas. Myrna refused to follow his routine. "I sleep fine and I like the feel of my silk night dress."

"Looks more like a day dress to me," he grumbled. "And what's happening with these slippers?"

"What do you mean, what's happening?"

"I knew they'd be impractical when you suggested them for your Christmas gift. It's only March and they're worn out."

"I wear them; that's why."

"For an hour a day in the house, hardly enough to wear them down like that. I should write the company. Where is the bill anyhow?"

"Never mind."

Tom had grumbled to Frank about the slippers, they weren't cheap—bought at that new boutique on 5th Street and three months later they were in tatters.

"Maybe she dances at night." Frank said.

"Sure—to the bathroom."

"It's like the dancing princesses."

"The what?"

"You know that fairy tale where the princesses sneak out and dance all night?"

“I don’t read fairy tales.”

“But to the kids, when Becky was little, didn’t you read to her?”

“Myrna did the reading. Anyhow what would be open after 10 at night?”

“Get serious, half the town is open after ten: Becker’s Ballroom, The Commodore, the Chunky Chilly.”

Although he scoffed at the idea, that night Tom studied Myrna carefully. He observed her as she chewed her chicken, scrutinized her as she brushed her teeth and hung around the door when she answered a phone call (“just a salesman,” she said, but obviously a chatty one).

Finally, Myrna turned on him. “What?” she said, popping her eyes. “What? Is my face dirty?”

“Can’t a guy look at his wife,” Tom said, trying for one of his charming smiles, now somewhat rusty.

“It sounds crazy,” he said to Frank. “But could she be sneaking out at night?”

“The way you sleep, she could be driving a tank through your bedroom. When we were in Vegas, we played poker at the end of your bed and you never noticed.”

That did it. Action was required. Friday night Tom planned his first reconnaissance to survey the field. Once Myrna dozed off, Tom moved a chair from the corner to the hallway and hunkered down. It was hard to keep awake. When he thought dawn had finally arrived, he checked his watch to find it was only 11:49. The next time he woke, it was morning and his neck was so stiff he looked lopsided. Myrna was still sleeping but he noticed her slippers had moved to the end of the bed.

The next day, Frank told him about their friend Manny whose wife was divorcing him. “Said he was pulling her down, she wanted to spend the money they got from the house on a long holiday.”

Tom scoffed. “He was sleeping at the wheel.”

“Guess so. By the time he noticed something was up, she already had Mark Becker for a lawyer.”

“Mark Becker?” cried Tom. Even he knew that Mark was the best divorce lawyer in town. If Becker got his hands on you, he would clean you out. Time for serious action. “The best defense is an offence,” he called to Frank as he headed out of the pub.

That night Tom sailed in the door with a pot of mums, purchased at the corner store and still with considerable blooms. “Let’s go out dancing,” he said to his wife, sweeping her, broom and all, around the hall.

“You hate dancing,” she said sweetly, “You don’t have to take me dancing.”

“I don’t like dancing generally,” he agreed. “But dancing with you is something special.” He got that line from a men’s magazine at the dentist. You could use it for anything.

“Well,” said Myrna, “...if you insist. But I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to.”

The specter of Mark Becker hung in the door as Tom remembered that Frank Weatherbea had had to sell his vintage motorcycle.

“I want to. I want to,” Tom sang out. “And let’s do it regular like Frank and Bette.”

He pulled out his wallet—he was on a roll—and shoved a wad of money intended for lottery tickets, into Myrna’s hand. “You’ll need new slippers,” he crowed, “Yours are worn out.” Who could leave a hubby who was so generous?

Myrna hurried into the bedroom and returned with a Christmas-wrapped box. “Those worn down slippers are old ones I got from my sister,” she said happily. “I saved the ones you gave me in case you changed your mind about dancing,” she continued with a wink. “And you did.”

Bio- Melodie Corrigall is a Canadian writer. Her stories have appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Litro UK*, *FreeFall*, *Six Minute Magazine*, *Mouse Tales*, *Subtle Fiction*, *The Write Place At the Write Time* and *Switchback*.

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In Vino Veritas

by David Van Houten

The tall, slender man wrenched off the nametag that read, “Michael Allen, Most Conscientious.” He grimaced at the high school yearbook honor written on it and wondered if “Biggest Pushover” would have been more appropriate.

He knew he shouldn’t have returned to his hometown, but now it was time to confront what he’d been avoiding. He climbed out of his car and walked up the sidewalk he had traversed many times early in his life.

The familiar red oak door flew open, and there he stood, “Todd Reed, Smoothest Tongue.”

“Michael, what’s up?” Todd embraced Michael, who tensed at the unasked-for touch. “You find me okay?”

Michael’s countenance was a blank slate as he said, “Twenty years, but I still know the neighborhood.”

“Good, great.” Todd hopped back out of the doorway. “Come on in, man.”

Michael had a sudden desire to scurry screaming from this all too recognizable house, but instead, he took a deep breath, marched in, and hung up his coat in the coat rack by the entrance. *How can he still be so perky after all these years?*

As Todd led Michael into the living room, he said, “I’m so glad I ran into you at the reunion. Why haven’t we kept in touch?” He motioned for Michael to sit down on the black leather love seat.

Michael perched on the edge of the sofa like a sprinter at the starting gate, ready to bolt, and mumbled, “I hadn’t even planned on attending, but I had business in town I needed to take care of.”

“I’m so glad you did. Look, I’ve got steaks grilling and some white wine chilling. I remembered whites are your favorite.” He elevated his eyebrows in inquiry.

Michael's expression was noncommittal, but he grunted.

"Super, let me get you something to drink."

When he departed, Michael looked around the room. I can't believe he had the audacity to move in here. He clenched and unclenched his fists until he felt his blood pressure drop again.

"Here we go," Todd said upon reentry. "I hope it's okay to begin with a red so we can save the white for dinner. It should be good, it's from Australia."

Australia? Really? Were they out of wine-in-a-box? Michael closed his eyes. *No, you told yourself you'd give him three chances.*

Shrug.

Todd took this for a yes and extracted the cork to pour them each a glass of wine.

Michael prepared his tongue for the repulsive flavor onslaught of the Pacific and took a sip. It was all he expected and worse. An internal war was declared and waged across his face in a brief moment with the winning side draining the offensive wine. *Whatever it takes to survive this visit.*

Todd only took a taste while Michael poured himself some more. "Since you dislike reds, I was worried, but I guess it's satisfactory after all?"

Chug, chug, chug. Another empty wineglass.

Todd let out a surprised chuckle. "You've definitely changed." He took a drink. "So, how are things going with you?"

Another shrug.

"You never were much of a conversationalist." Todd beamed at his pal. "Remember that chick in college you were so shy around? What was her name?"

"Teresa," Michael replied through gritted teeth. He replenished his glass.

"That's right. Teresa. You wouldn't say anything whenever she was around. I wonder whatever happened to her."

Stunned disbelief reigned across Michael's face as he took a swallow of the repulsive liquid like an athlete testing a twisted ankle and slumped back on the sofa in disgust. *That's one...not counting the wine.*

Todd sipped his wine and said, "So, how's your family?"

Michael choked on the mouthful he had just imbibed. He coughed and sputtered for a moment. Finally, he breathed a deep, ragged breath and croaked, "Okay." He cleared his throat and finished off another glass. *That's two.*

"I'm happy to hear that." Todd sat back. "Your family always treated me decently. I've anticipated repaying the favor someday."

Michael looked down at his white knuckles and forced himself to ease his grip on the wineglass stem before it snapped. "Didn't you say something about steaks?"

Todd leapt up and said, "Oops, I almost forgot! Grab that bottle and head out to the patio. I'll be right behind you."

Turning red, Michael picked up the now-empty wine container. "Oh, um, we're nearly out."

"You lush. Don't worry, I'll get you another." Todd laughed as he walked back to the kitchen.

Michael stood up to saunter outside, but was surprised to find his feet were heavier than normal. *Damn, that wine had a kick like a mule.* He clomped and staggered through the door to the back porch, where he went to the grill and lifted the lid to sneak a quick look at what was cooking.

"Hey, that's a surprise, back off!"

Like a scolded puppy, he shuffled over to the table and sat down. Todd provided him with another bottle. "You fancied it so much, I got you another red."

Todd placed the bottle in Michael's unsteady hands. Michael inspected the new arrival with suspicion, but unscrewed the top and poured them each another helping. Then, he belted the entire glass. Michael's eyes bulged as his taste buds registered the flavor of the new wine. He swallowed hard,

eyes watering, and glared at the bottle. *Is he for real? No one would really serve a cooking wine, would they?* He looked at Todd with skepticism, but then he became conscious of the fact that after the Australian assault on his senses, the brackish wine was only mildly unpleasant. His brain shrugged, and he poured another glass.

After Todd flipped the steaks, he rejoined Michael at the table and said, “Now where were we?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Well, do you recollect that time you got suspended for setting off the fire alarm at school? That was so awesome.”

Michael counted to ten. Then, he did it again. “Something like that,” he said and polished off yet another glassful. *That’s...two and a half.* He massaged his forehead. *Some things never change.*

“Those were the good old days.” Todd let out a contented sigh. “I remember spending time at your house every day. We were like brothers, especially after you discovered your brother John pilfered twenty bucks out of your wallet.”

Michael seized the bottle and poured it straight down his throat while Todd gawked at his antics. “You sure enjoy your wine.” He stood up. “I’ll tell you what, I’ll go get the white I’ve been chilling, and we’ll go ahead and eat.”

In Todd’s absence, Michael finished off the nasty beverage and set the bottle flat after several attempts. *Why won’t I speak? What’s wrong with me? I’m not a kid anymore. Say something!* Tears of frustration welled up in his eyes, but he wiped them away with the palms of his hands when his host reemerged. Todd placed a zinfandel in front of Michael and headed off to get their dinner.

Michael tried to focus on the new arrival. “This is the white?” he said with a surprising amount of z’s in his sentence.

“Yep, pop the cork and pour the wine gar-kon.”

Michael ignored the appalling French and searched the table until he spotted a corkscrew. He fumbled with it for a minute but managed to finally pull out the stopper. He poured two fresh glasses: a splash for Todd, filled

to the brim for himself. He was oblivious to his surroundings, and the only thing that seemed to get through his dull perception was the smell of the crusty blackened steaks Todd situated in front of him.

Michael looked down at the meat and then up at Todd, who smirked like the Mona Lisa. Without warning, rage, years in the making, boiled over and his mouth began to move before he was even cognizant of what he was doing. "What's wrong with you?"

Todd still had a smile on his lips, but his eyebrows betrayed his confusion at Michael's outburst. "What do you mean?"

"What'd I ever do to you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"We were never friends, or at least, you were never my friend."

Todd laughed like a man humoring a dangerous mental patient. "Sure we were. All the times we hung out?"

"Your memories are obviously contaminated," Michael said, his voice growing stronger. "I got suspended even though you were the one who pulled the fire alarm. I heard you confess it to Alan the next day."

"No, you must have misunder—"

"When I went to see the principal, he informed me it was you who fingered me."

"Hold on just a—"

"Plus, my brother didn't steal my money. You did."

"That's preposterous."

Michael shook his head, partially in defiance, but also to clear his head of the wine-induced haze. "It's not preposur...prepostrupuh...persot...Look, I saw you!"

"If that's true, why didn't you say anything before now?" He gave an expression like he had just checkmated his intoxicated acquaintance.

"You never let me get in a word edgewise. You told my mother, and she punished my brother 'fore I could say anything. You were always doing things like that." His volume escalated and his pitch climbed the scale with each sentence.

"That can't be right. What else have I done wrong?"

"Just look at today. You begin with an Australian wine and follow it with a cooking wine. But we ain't cookin', and we sure ain't down under."

"What's wrong with Australian wine?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "Bottles of Australian wine are fine if you need a sturdy weapon for hand-to-hand combat, but that's about it." He jabbed a finger at the most recent bottle, knocking over Todd's beverage in the process. "And then, you offer me a zinfandel, but you identify it as a white."

"It's a White Zinfandel."

"The name don't mean nothin'. It's a rosé." He grabbed the guilty bottle and took a swig to further fortify his chemical courage.

"I didn't realize—"

Michael held up his hand. "Honest mistakes 'cause you're a moron, I get, but you pretend you're concerned about my family when you were the one who forced foreclosure on my aunt's house, this house, just so you could acquire it."

Todd's face was a mask of surprise. "Your aunt's?"

Another gulp. "And don't overlook Teresa." Michael was yelling now. "Poor, sweet Teresa. I wasn't shy. I told you I was gonna ask her to homecoming, but 'fore I could, you told her I was gay. She then disclosed this to the entire university. So, I ask again: What's—wrong—with—you?"

Todd tried to rally. "If I was so awful, why were we friends?"

"We weren't!" Michael cried as he bounded to his feet. "You wouldn't quit stalking me. You even followed me to college, and that's why I've avoided this city like you sidestep responsibility. I can't seem to escape you otherwise. But in a moment of weakness, I accepted your invitation 'cause I

had to see if I'd been mistaken about our relationship all these years or if by some miracle, you'd improved." He pointed at the charred flesh. "But you serve me burnt steak, a god-awful Australian wine, cooking wine, COOKING WINE for Christ's sake, and finally a 'white' you claim is my favorite, but I hate white wines. Between these palate tortures and being reminded of how you always took advantage of me, I'm done."

Michael guzzled the remainder of the zinfandel straight from the bottle and slammed it down on the table. He grabbed the chunk of overcooked leather off his plate and threw it on the ground before storming into the house and presumably out the front door.

Todd sat in bewildered silence for a moment and contemplated this turn of events. Finally, he walked inside to find Michael unconscious on his living room floor. Todd grinned at the inebriated figure, stepped over it, and navigated over to the coat rack.

"Michael," he said with a giggle that would've sent Charles Manson looking for a policeman for protection. He confiscated the wallet and car keys from Michael's coat, removed all the cash out of the wallet, and slid the billfold back in Michael's coat pocket. "You're so easy."

He deposited the money and keys in his own pocket and went to call his best friend a cab before he woke up.

Bio- David Van Houten is currently in a Texas prison on false charges. While waiting for his freedom, he mentally escapes through the stories he writes which have been published in *Foliate Oak*, *The Broadkill Review*, *The Storyteller*, *Nuthouse* and *Conceit*.

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