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Welcome to Our Fiction Section!

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The Sailor From Iowa

by Brandon T. Madden

I have a rational fear of water. When I was three years old, my family and I went on a fishing trip to northern Michigan. I almost drowned. I remember that rush of water pulling me under, the cold liquid filling my lungs, burning them, suffocating them, the fear that turned into helplessness as I sank deeper—that is my first memory of being alive. As a result, I freeze up even at the sight of a body of water, be it the ocean or a pond, and that's why I took my machine management job to the landlocked state of Iowa, convincing my wife that our newborn child would benefit from growing up amid waves of corn rather than the oppressive tides of the Great Lakes.

I've known my wife, Samantha, since my first day at college. We've been together for eight years now, approaching our third wedding anniversary. We have a soon-to-be two-year-old son, Tyler, whom she takes care of day and night while I'm away at work. I feel a bit bad for her, because for nearly two years now her life has revolved solely around the baby. What's worse, she grew up in a big city where from her bedroom window she could see skyscrapers and glowing lights at any hour of the day or night. Now, from her bedroom window she sees rows upon rows of corn and, at the edge of our yard, a single apple tree. (The nice thing, though, is that she enjoys making a wonderful apple pie during the fall.)

So when I came home one day and noticed Sam sitting at the dining room table with a book called *Nautical Knots* propped open in front of her, I was both glad and confused. Sam knew, naturally, of my fear of water. We had never vacationed anywhere near the coast nor gone to any sights that involved water. (We only went to the aquarium once, and I was so anxious that the glass might break, I held onto her arm for dear life until we left.) I remember she looked up from her book and told me she'd spotted it in the store window and thought it would be fun to learn knots. I asked her what on earth she would use the knots for, and she replied something along the lines of: "I'll find something creative."

And I felt happy for her, because she had found something to do other than taking care of Tyler.

For the next couple days, our dining room table was littered with five long strands of nylon rope. Sam walked me through how certain knots were used in specific ways. Like how the Clove Hitch was used to tie to pilings or rails and was secure when taut, but easy to untie when you were done. Or how the Bowline—pronounced BOH-lynn—was the king of knots and would not jam or slip in any circumstances. I sat and nodded as she nimbly demonstrated each knot. I remember her saying that she was planning to use one of the knots to hang up a swing on the sturdiest branch of the apple tree, and maybe rig up a pulley system for a basket to make apple picking easier. She started to say something else, but Tyler began to cry in the other room and I got up to take care of it as Sam delved back into her book.

The swing was hung that week, and over the weekend she tried hooking the basket to the tree. She sat on one of the tallest branches as I watched from below. I would've preferred to have the roles reversed, but she was insistent that only she could tie the knots properly. I remember how we laughed as she tied up a bandana around her head and flexed her arm like Rosie the Riveter. Tyler was in my arms, and I said something like, "Mommy is making an apple retriever." I looked past the tree and watched as the ears of corn stood in rigid rows that stretched for miles and miles. I sighed when my wife finally began to climb down the tree.

I should have paid more attention to the subtle changes in the house. Like the fact that we now had a clothesline in the back yard, or that now the apple basket that had once been fixed to a single branch now was strung on a path down from the tree, across the yard, and directly into the kitchen window. But work was busier than expected—one of the conglomerate farms needed to upgrade all their materials, and I was responsible for sifting through all the purchase orders and documentation to ensure a steady flow. Maybe, looking back, I did notice some of these changes around the house, but just chose to not say anything. Samantha was happy and I was beat.

After dinner we would go to the kitchen table, which had now been converted into a workstation for her projects. New strands of colored nylon rope sat on the table along with rough blueprint sketches for new future designs. She continued to teach me new knots she was mastering. Like her modified square knot that was used to tie two similar ropes together

without them slipping around or getting caught in a pulley. Or the more advanced knots like the Fisherman's Bend which was used to secure anchors. I figured as the knots became more nautically focused, the hobby would tire itself out since these specialized knots would never serve their intended purpose—for sailing. (Maybe Sam would even move into a new hobby, like baking or something.) But for the time being, I sat and listened and nodded, supporting her in her efforts. Besides, my clothes did have a certain outdoorsy spring smell to them from drying on the line in the yard. What was the worst that could happen?

I probably should have said something when she converted the clothesline into a conveyer belt that spanned from the laundry room to the edge of our fenced-in yard, and I probably should have said something when she rigged up the baby's cradle to rock gently back and forth from a simple pull on a rope. I definitely should have said something when one afternoon I was greeted at the front door by the twist of a knot and not my wife herself. The house had been quietly transformed into a latticed spider's web. I remember wondering how I was able to overlook the bright neon green, orange, and yellow ropes hanging from handles, doors, and light fixtures. (Or that the original clothesline now stretched from the bedroom window, to the backyard, into the house, up the stairs, and back into the bedroom.)

One thing I did notice was the fact that our bed sheets had been hanging outside for over a week now, but not on the clothesline. Rather, as I looked outside, I saw they were rigged between the widest branches of the tree, swelling and billowing in the wind, almost as if they were sails. And when I looked harder, at the small wooden platform my wife had lashed at the split in the tree trunk, and the pulley system that tugged on the more pliant branches, angling the sheets to catch the breeze, I realized—they *were* sails. I didn't have to ask her. I already knew. Where was she finding all this nylon rope?

The apples on the apple tree remained untouched, some of them even falling to the ground to rot, but Samantha spent more and more time jerry-rigging sheets onto branches and adding more pulleys, baskets, and nautical gear to her homemade sailboat. Eventually a wooden wheel was added to the center of the platform where the ropes connected together, wrapping around the spokes. Branches no longer looked like branches but synchronized sails as they caught the wind and billowed. I remember looking out from the bedroom window as she stood in the tree. A zephyr of

wind moved across the corn field and caught the sails in an updraft and for a moment, I thought she and the tree would pull anchor and soar into the air. It actually looked breathtaking.

Eventually I lost track of which rope pulled which opened that cabinet or shut that door or locked which lock. (It occurred when I found out that the oven door and television could both be opened by the same line, except with a pull from a different angle.) I remember telling my co-workers how my house had been transformed, and they all nodded. One guy said that his wife got obsessed with knitting, and he had to tell her enough was enough when she started to make them underwear. Another said his wife got obsessed with opera, and he had to draw the line when she wanted to hire opera singers to perform in their backyard. They said that this is what happens to new mothers from Iowa. (What about new non-Iowan mothers?) What else can they do when they are stranded in the middle of nowhere? they said. Their best advice was to end it quickly and end it smoothly. Like a weed that's overgrown in a garden, a quick clip and pull. I remember asking if there was another way. Not, they said, unless you learn how to navigate the ropes.

*

So that's why I'm here, walking to the apple tree—now makeshift sailboat—in my backyard to tell her enough is enough. But as I see her hoisted up in the tree, with our son in one arm, leaning out on the branches as she tightens the bed sheet sails, I can't help but feel guilty. I see her beaming with a smile I haven't seen since college as she looks out at the waves of corn that stretch on for miles and miles.

She waves at me and I wave back, because I don't know what to say.

Bio- Brandon T. Madden is a recent graduate of Michigan State University. He has recently been published in graduate and professional journals including *S/tick*, *River and South Review*, and *Flyover Country Review*. His first novel *V.S.A.* was published in 2011. He hopes to one day become a competent writer. For more information please visit brandonmadden.webs.com

If Wishes Were Candy

by Philip Goldberg

A young woman, having just celebrated her 20th birthday, graced the glossy black and white snapshot; its edges curled slightly. Adorned in a one-piece bathing suit, the young woman excited the eyes. Posed on the beach, sand at her feet, she appeared joyful, confident.

The photo felt slick between her bony fingers as she gazed at it through eyes glazed with age. She felt a smile coming. It stalled. Her lips remained straight, thin, dry, as she clutched the photo like life so dear. After some reflective moments, she placed the photo back in the purse pocket, which she had reserved especially for it.

At 83, Marge Collier sagged back in her armchair in the living room. Wistful, she returned to the moment when the picture had been snapped. A moment in time captured. A piece of one's life preserved for posterity.

Carl had taken it. An early date between them, a prelude to a long life together until his heart had betrayed him. And death had taken him as easily as he had snapped the picture that afternoon so many years ago. But it had been a happy day. One that outshone any pain, any loneliness the loss had bequeathed her.

She focused on the bathing suit. How she had fretted over finding the right one. How she had shopped for days. On a rack at Gimbels, she had found it. Fire engine red with white polka dots and white lace trim, the bathing suit danced before her eyes, hypnotized her. Right off the rack, it felt perfect between her fingers, silky and soft. On her, it looked fabulous, fitting her delightfully, hugging her deliciously, accentuating her curves in a manner that would make any Hollywood publicist proud. Certainly it had kept the smile on Carl's face that day.

Her husband, the bathing suit, the camera (a boxy Kodak Brownie Hawkeye Bakelite) were long gone. Bittersweet memories. Even her two children, Tommy and Sandy had scattered to different states, each having raised families of their own. The grandchildren now had families, too. The oldest great grandchild, Eliza, entered college in the coming fall.

Marge closed her eyes at the magnitude of it all. Seconds of thoughts. Years of life.

Tommy would arrive soon. His second wife, Ellen, would accompany him. After all, he needed company on the six-hour-plus trip, a second driver to

relieve him, a voice to keep him alert. She knew what not having that felt like. She also knew that shortly after their arrival, the movers would show up.

Her fingers edged the clasp of the purse, smooth and cool, itching to unsnap it, to retrieve the photo. Instead she turned stoic. Her eyes steeled over and stared at a bare wall of the living room. Cracks revealed themselves where framed pictures, paintings and a mirror once hanged. Ghostly tracings of these items showed themselves, having been spared the sunlight that had faded the paint on the walls.

She peered around the room. Studied it as if it was a chamber in a museum. The space, she recalled, had once been alive with people, voices, laughter, shouts, tears. Now it accommodated only silence. Moving boxes filled the area packed, stacked and ready to go (accomplished by the movers yesterday).

An urge possessed her, a need to get up. She rose from her chair and felt the strain, the exertion of the muscles in her lower back, her thighs, her calves. A raspy sigh rushed through her lips. Standing still for the moment, she regained her equilibrium before stepping to a hall mirror, off its hooks and leaning against the wall. Glancing, she caught her reflection: short gray hair, a face elegantly lined, a body thinning as if eroded by time. Yet her eyes still held the blue they always had. Striking blue. Cobalt blue. Two orbs that still captured the light as if they were precious gems. At this, at last, she smiled.

A white fog clouded her eyes. A sudden sensation of spinning dizzied her. Her legs wobbled. She thrust a hand against the wall and braced herself. The feeling passed, the fog dispersed, the wobbling ceased. Her balance reclaimed, she stood erect. Relieved. Her pulse strengthened. Her heart slowed. Her mind cleared.

Had she not collapsed again a month ago, she'd be staying here still, in this room, in this house. In her mind, this was the ultimate truth. Of course, if wishes were candy... She recalled the saying from her childhood; something her mother had said whenever she wanted something she could not have. For a moment, she struggled to remember the rest of the adage. She couldn't. Soon she would forget what she had just called to mind.

She had argued with Tommy, with Sandy. But three fainting spells in less than a year made her protests weak and thin, as faint as her pulse had been when she found herself on the supermarket floor. All those concerned faces focused on her: employees, shoppers, ambulance attendants, nurses. It still unnerved her. And after all she had said, debated, argued, she lowered her head and grew silent, somber like a petulant child embracing remorse.

Turning away from the wall, the mirror, she faced the front window. Early morning light slanted into the room, tangling her in its glow while brightening the hardwood floor. The oak in the front yard stood tall, its leafy branches wide, a giant sentry protecting the house. Some starlings swooped down from the sky and balanced on the tree's branches, exercising their voices against the dawn's gentle breeze.

Witnessing the starlings, she recalled when one had flown through the open living room window a few weeks ago and landed on top of her armchair. Her surprise quickly became laughter. Then eeriness overcame her, sparked by something her mother had told her when she was little. Something bad about a bird flying into the house, but she couldn't recall what it was. Slipped her mind as fast as the bird had entered the house—like some many things over the past decade. Was it an old wives tale? Perhaps. Sensing the urgency of the moment, she flailed her arms, waved her hands and chased the bird out through the open window, slamming it shut with a clack that rang of finality.

She shuddered at the memory. Looked around to gather her bearings. Fifty-nine years she had lived here and that had been the only time a bird had flown into her home. Almost six decades inside these walls. The oak had been here longer. She nodded at the great tree and accepted its gently swaying branches as a nod back.

Turning from the window, she caught a whiff of pine. The strong scent had greeted her when she had stepped into the house for the very first time. The sweet aroma retraced its path through her nostrils and unbridled warmth consumed her. Sometimes when this occurred, her cheek remained dry. More often an accompanying tear found its way to her cheek as it did now. With a hand (was it trembling?), she wiped the moisture away and returned to her chair.

Not long after, Tommy and Ellen arrived. Each leaned over and kissed her on a cheek.

In lieu of a greeting, she said: "I still can live on my own, you know."

"I get it, Ma," he replied. His voice tired but weighted with compassion.

Ellen chimed in: "Mom, Comfort Corners is such a wonderful place."

Marge opened her pocketbook, oblivious to her current daughter in-law's endorsement.

"Yeah," Tommy said. "Your room there is beautiful. There are lots of activities there, too."

"More than I need," she said, cutting him off. "More than I want."

Silence.

Tommy's face tightened, reddened. He turned to the stacked boxes, feigned checking the packing, occasionally glancing at his watch as if to speed up the arrival of the movers.

Watching him, Marge said: "Don't know why you hired movers. Most of it is going to you or going away."

"We need somebody to move it, Ma."

She nodded, her head a succession of tight, tiny movements. In her hand, she clutched the photo freed from her wallet. Facing Ellen, she cooed: "Dear, have I shown you this picture?"

Ellen glanced at Tommy, who shrugged as concern blushed his face.

"Yes, Mom, you have. Many times," she said.

Surprise. Confusion. Marge's face displayed each. Her eyes flitted about as if seeking confirmation somewhere in the room of her daughter-in-law's claim. Finally, she muttered: "If you say so, dear. If you say so."

Ellen broke into a smile, nervous at its edges, before looking away.

The movers came. Boxes were piled into the truck. Furniture followed. A rug flattened and wedged behind the sofa. With everything packed, they slapped shut the truck's back door, got in the front cab and drove off.

Marge stood in the vacant room. Its emptiness crowded her, smothered her, overwhelmed her. Fifty-nine years she drew in one long breath. She held it one...two...three...four...then slowly released it as if it were her last. Her eyes grew small: two sorrowful slits. She placed a dampening hand in her son's. Letting him walk her, she left the room small step after small step. She stopped at the front door and breathed in one last whiff of fresh pine. No tear rolled down this time.

She departed the house.

Tommy shut the door with a soft touch. No thwack. No smack. Just a click.

Marge followed him to the car, and with his help entered on the front passenger's side. Silent and still she sat as Ellen took the back seat and Tommy took the wheel.

She glanced at the house one last time. Some shingles at the roof's edge needed replacement. The façade cried out for a fresh coat of paint, new windows and a new front door. All, she knew, were no longer her problem. No more.

The car pulled away from the curb, from the house, from her street. She ignored it all, looking straight ahead. Her hand gripped her purse as tight as she held her lips. Tighter.

Hours later, she sat on the edge of her bed in her new room, in her new home. A cozy space, although she hardly noticed. Tommy and Ellen had set up the room and had only left less than an hour ago. She inhaled deeply but all she smelled was lemon-scented disinfectant emanating from the bathroom on her right.

Voices, some laughter, even a song sung off-key pierced her ears from the hall beyond her closed room door. Through the curtained window on her right, daylight dwindled.

Grunting, she rose. Her pocketbook dangled from her arm. Before the room's dresser, she stopped and placed the bag on the veneer top. She clicked open the pocketbook, removed her wallet and withdrew the photo.

Looking at the snapshot, she heard waves crash, the light-hearted music of a carousel's calliope, squeals of laughter. The salty sweetness of seawater

swam up her nostrils, bathing them, soothing them. Summer sunlight kissed her bathing suit clad skin, which almost shimmered in the photo.

She had stared at Carl, who stood a few yards away; the camera had covered part of his face. The viewfinder fixed to his eye. The lens focused on her.

"Cheese," he said in a playful voice.

She heard the click. And her smile grew warmer than the summer breeze as she watched him lower the camera. Only his smile now aimed at her.

"Miss Collier, Miss Collier, Miss Collier," the attendant said, having just entered the room after her knocking went unanswered.

But all Marge heard were the waves crashing like an urgent whisper upon the sand, as she followed Carl to the water.

Bio- Over 30 of Philip Goldberg's short stories have appeared in both literary and small press publications, including *Straylight*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Byline* and *Foliate Oak*. Three of his stories have appeared in "Best of" collections and one was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

The Pull

by Pamela Hill

Taylor developed a slight tremor last year when she'd heard Stetson jumped off the bridge. She'd just seen him the day before, sitting on her porch laughing and drinking a beer. People in town still talked about Stetson, whispered about forest spirits swaying on tree limbs over the creek. Jumper's Creek had a pull they said, a pull that summoned them like a siren's song to sailors.

Taylor wanted to find Jumper's Creek—no, she needed to find it and drove down bumpy dirt roads, crunching gravel under tires until grit turned to patches of broken asphalt and blacktop. She located the Jumper's Creek Bridge on a two lane road in the middle of nowhere and parked the truck at the first clearing near a trench a quarter mile from the bridge. She swung open the door and jumped down from the truck cab, booted feet landing in

briar, then hiked toward the creek as doves cooed in the foggy morning distance.

She remembered last week's foggy morning when she'd taken a break from the office where paperwork spilled from her desk to the floor. She strolled near lake side shops and restaurants. A bird circled close, down in front of her, low, then fluttered up and flew away. A few more steps and she realized it had skimmed to get a closer look at its mate, dead on the sidewalk after hitting the restaurant's glass window.

She shook her head as if she could fling the thought into a tree and slogged on through the forest's weeds and broken branches, tripped climbing over a dirt embankment and fell into a dense thicket. The fog was dissipating as she lay in twisted vines watching a formation of white birds above the trees and wondered if spirits did that, move about in echelons. She crawled out of the vines and brushed off her jeans.

Occasionally she heard a gush or the whoosh of some predator bird, but the forest was quiet except for leaves flapping as filtered sunlight caught her eyes. Slow movement of tree limbs and flights of grey fowl were the forest's overture. When she imagined spirits whispering conversations as the wind moved and murmured, she hesitated, realizing the creek had never been approached from that dense angle, not by humankind.

She struggled back over the embankment and walked the narrow blacktop toward the bridge looking out for feral spirits as branches swayed and bounced in the distance.

The railing, weathered and cracked, stood high. She was certain the county manager won his second term by hiring a contractor to raise the bridge's railing height. But the pull was stronger than wood.

Taylor's boots clicked on the frame bridge, a foreign echo. She ran her fingers along the rough and splintered railing, took a deep breath, jumped up and got a grip, hoisting herself high enough to lean over the edge, legs dangling. She looked down over the railing at the creek below, a dried up creek it was, full of reeds. "A long way down," she said to Stetson, as if he were a spirit watching her. Her eyes searched the reeds as she felt the pull, though distant. "How could you do this?" she said.

Her head felt a swirl and she lowered herself back down to the bridge's surface. She ran the quarter mile back, panting as she reached the truck and drove through the forest with tremors until she found her little house in the lake side town where she lived at the edge of the forest.

As usual, stray and abandoned cats gathered round the back porch, waiting. She filled a bowl with water and two dishes with food and bent down and scratched the calico's head. She had once thought about how hard their lives were and grieved as they disappeared one cat at a time. But when the pull followed her home from the creek that afternoon, she experienced disdainful indifference.

Bio- Pamela Hill attended private college in Northeast Florida where she graduated summa cum laude. She currently lives in Florida where two statuesque beauties in the form of highly intelligent felines inspire humor with sudden ninja attacks on her computer mouse while she works on her first novel. Pamela's poetry and prose can be found in *Ping Pong*, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, *Copperfield Review*, *Apeiron Review* and other journals.

Shadows in the Sand

by Michael Tidemann

The roar of surf and cry of gulls lay heavy upon the beach. Ebbing tides left teaming life; sand dollars, kelp, hermit crabs, gulls sweeping into their midst, finding food so they could soar and cry and drift for eternity.

Shadows flickered in the sand—one a strong, right ankle, strengthened by years of marching and leading Marines in the jungles of South Vietnam and later the deserts of Iraq and mountains of Afghanistan. The other was a prosthetic—metal with wood fitted into a shoe coursing through the sand, the surf, marching through kelp and gulls, marching to the roaring surf as though it were a distant echo of the drums of war.

Gunnery Sgt. Ret. Phil Davis adjusted his faded green USMC ball cap and peered down the beach where the surf cast mist clouds all the way from the beach to the point and towering Cape Lookout, a silhouette shaped like a sleeping bear in the pre-dawn glinting over the Coast Range like the glimmer of a sea-gleaned pearl. The smell of sea life and ocean was rich and rank, waking his senses to its abundance. And he was here, at least most of him, awake and alive to enjoy it.

Most of his life he'd given to the Corps—the better part of it anyway—and they'd given him his life back again with a disability to comfortably live out the rest of his days—or as comfortable as he could, one mangled foot left moldering somewhere in Afghanistan after an IED had blown him and three other men and their Humvee into the air and insurgents had peppered it with bullets. Cpl. Hodges had managed to cut loose with his .249 SAW and Phil had nearly emptied the last clip of his M4. Only then was he able to cradle Hodges' head in his lap as he bound a tourniquet around his own stump and radioed for air support. By then, all the insurgents were dead, along with Cpl. Hodges and Sgts. Ramirez and Koske. For some reason, he was the only one left alive.

The tang of salt and ocean life along the beach, the golden halo of the sun rising above Cape Lookout, the constant roar of surf, and the incessant cries of gulls reminded him of his former life. There had been a girl then. He'd just gotten out of basic and had a few days leave before heading to Pendleton when he'd met her at Balboa Beach—Joann—tall, blond, blue-eyed, high-cheeked, and Nordic in every aspect. Her voice was like water, not the roaring crash of surf in his ears now but more like a stream, steady, soft, reassuring. The first thing he noticed about her was her leopard print bikini strolling down the beach. But when she turned and smiled it was her eyes that held him, blue eyes matching the deepest waters of the Pacific. The same ocean where he walked now along in Oregon. The same ocean that quite possibly still held a few molecules, a few atoms, of her essence.

They were drawn to each other as would any attractive young man and woman be; he taut and fit and she slim and curves in all the right places. They didn't need to say anything to each other. Their eyes did all the speaking that was needed. And when they did finally speak they talked of making a life together—maybe even a family.

And then the war came—the war for which he and the Marines had trained. Then came her opposition to his role in it. *What can I do. I'm a Marine*, he said. And the wall was drawn between them. He chose a path of fighting for his country, of saving the South Vietnamese people. She went to Berkeley and led protests against the very war in which he fought. When he came home, heavily decorated, she didn't recognize him. And he no longer recognized her drug-enhanced gaze, unkempt clothes, and patchouli-drenched lifestyle.

Oh, he still pursued her, caught her a few times even, but she always ran away. Ran away from him in L.A. Ran away from him in New Mexico. Ran away from him even in a car that she crashed in a snowy farmer's field mid-afternoon December 13, 1984.

He'd been training recruits at Pendleton when his mother called him about it. *I have some bad news, Son.* Time passed now like the slap of surf in his ear. They said she had been on drugs.

She was beautiful, lying there in the casket. How could she be dead, as perfect as she was. The funeral director smiled and nodded at what he took as a compliment and folded his hands together as any proper undertaker would before the service began. Afterward, her father, the minister who had conducted the service, handed him a locket Phil had given her thirteen years before. *I thought Joann would have liked you to have this.*

No, oh God no, he thought. He had wanted her to have it. But all he could do was clench on to it as they shoveled earth on her burial vault at the cemetery that overlooked the farm where he had grown up, a half-mile to the west. A necklace he had worn ever since she had died, still even now, next to his dog tags.

She had been his last love, his only love if he were truly honest with himself. Oh, there had been women. But they were just women—stopgaps to keep him sane as he drove through life like a drunken man in a rain squall.

And so now he was here, walking an Oregon beach empty except for a willowy, dark-haired figure drifting from out of the mist. As she came closer, her loose-fitting dress showed her shape and shadows, hair billowing in a seawind that rose as the sun lifted boldly, melting the mist. Her dark eyes met his—eyes so dark her pupils and irises were the same color. Her slightly curving lips and gently rounded chin suggested a smile about to erupt as her brows lifted as her eyes held his, nose crinkling as she smiled.

“Hi.” He stopped to look at her. All of her. Because she was beautiful.

She smiled until she saw his prosthetic, then tilted her head in sympathy.

“Pardon me, but I forgot to put my foot on this morning. I seem to have left the original somewhere in Afghanistan.”

She crossed her arms against the chilling mist and laughed. She was so beautiful it was ungodly. "I'm Victoria," she said, as though that would help him forget.

And it did. "I'm Phil."

Her full name was Victoria Koronis, and she was from Macedonia and working as a doctor in Portland.

He turned from the way he had been headed and walked beside her. Together they darted in and out of the surf that chased them as they strolled along the beach, every fifth wave chilling their ankles as the sand sifted under their feet. Their shadows joining in the sands.

He would never forget Joann. Never.

But with Victoria, he had a chance to begin again.

Bio- Michael Tidemann is a journalist and adjunct college English instructor living in Estherville, Iowa. His fiction has appeared in *Struggle*, *The Longneck*, *Black Hills Monthly Magazine*, and thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org. His nonfiction has appeared in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Overdrive*, *Snowmobile*, *Writer's Journal*, the *Des Moines Register*, and other publications. His author page is available at amazon.com/author/michaeltidemann

Everyday Joes

by D. Scot

Every writer knows of the suffering, fear and anguish that comes with writer's block and the loss of inspiration. But what happens to the ideas that cannot find authors to inspire?

"I can't do this anymore," Jo whispered as she slumped to the ground letting her shoulders drag against the curved, cement wall of the overpass. A hypodermic needle dangled briefly from her arm before falling to the pavement beside her hip. Her fingers scrabbled at the rubber strap that bound her upper arm as she watched the man next to her.

“Don’t give up, Jo,” his voice slurred as he jabbed his needle into a vein in his arm and pressed the plunger. “This time.”

He always believed this time would be The Time, that each plunge of the needle brought him closer to the transformation.

He believed the needle would rescue them from the vagaries of life as a fragile idea. Everyone here felt as he did and expressed the same joy and faith in the needle.

But when the needle jabbed her arm, Jo felt only pain, heard only the hissed intake of her breath. She was not connecting. There was no author, no Hunter S. Thompson, no Ayn Rand, no William S. Burroughs waiting on the other side of her needle. Jo knew her face mirrored the faces of others around her. Faces that were a kaleidoscope of morphing, luminous, countenances. They existed in a state of constant change until an author found them and transformed them into something real. Only the eyes out of all their features never changed. They were slate gray holes that reflected nothing, not love, not anger, not joy, not life.

And they were all named Joe. Jo. Joe, jo, joe, jo...joe...jo. Here under the bridge, in small rooms, walking along sidewalks, sitting in bars, she must have met hundreds. Out there she knew were thousands, perhaps millions, of them milling about and every last one was a Joe. Everyday. Twenty-Four-Seven.

“So close. Try...try again.”

“No. I can’t do this anymore,” she ignored Joe’s pleas and the brush of his hands as he tried to push her needle back into her hands.

She looked down the street into the mist that drifted above the pavement, spilling in and out of the light puddles under the lampposts until darkness swallowed everything. That might soon be her fate, to be swallowed by darkness. Unless she found that key to spark her transcendence. But what was left for her to try? Everything, the pills, the alcohol, the cigarettes and the sex failed her. Nothing lived up to its promise to find her author. Pushing to her feet, Jo stumbled through the puddles of light until the gasps, the moans, and the weak cries calling her disappeared in the dark.

“Jo! Jo! I can feel it! Jo! Come back! Come back! Try again! I can feel it! Come back...come back.”

*

“At last, the smell of fresh-brewed coffee,” Joe smiled and inhaled deeply. Nothing beat the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee.

Closing his eyes, Joe reached for the mug that rested on the table in front of him, stopping his hands mere millimeters from its rounded handle.

Today would be different. “Today I will drink real coffee and I will be transported into the pages that are my destiny.” Joe did not look down at his mug. Because if he did and he found it still full of that warm, gray gel that was their unfulfilled essence, then Joe knew that he would walk out the door and follow the lights into the mist. But today was not the day for walking.

Would it be now? All he needed was to drink. Around him he heard the clink of dropped mugs and the muttered curses of failure when they failed to find a Gertrude Stein, a Voltaire, or even a Dave Barry at the bottom of their mugs. Joe allowed himself a fleeting smile. He remembered the time he rushed for a drink only to swallow warm gel. Because, what if? What if today was the day?

Jing-a-ting-a-ling!

“Welcome to ‘Cup of Joe’,” Joe greeted the newcomer, a Jo, with a smile.

“Is that coffee? Real coffee? I know I smell coffee,” Jo said.

“You do,” Joe frowned, still refusing to look into his mug. “Only it is not always coffee. In fact, I can’t remember the last time anyone had real coffee.”

“They told me not to come here. They said this was the last stop. Only...it just smells so rich.”

“It’s the Cuppa, Jo,” He answered and raised his hands before she could ask the obvious question, *What is a Cuppa?*

It never varied. "It's what we are."

"What we are? I am not..."

"This is our essence," Joe picked up her mug and thrust it into her hands.

"Our essence?"

Joe's smile slipped as she poked at the gray gel with a finger. Steam had risen from his mug, he felt it when he pushed Jo's mug into her hands. But when he looked there was no change in its contents, still a gray gel. "What a miserable cycle. Hope. Anger. Despair."

"What're you talking about? What are they doing?" Jo asked.

All the Joes around the room closed their eyes and took quick sips from their mugs. After a few moments a Joe's eyes would snap open and scan wildly around the room then refocus on their mugs.

"It's our essence. The gel. It is our potential. Unchanged until an author calls to us. Only then will we have that coffee, that glorious drink that will deliver us to our author," Joe closed his eyes and forced a smile as he rotated his hands until they rested on edge, mere millimeters from his mug.

"But the aroma. I smell real coffee," Jo insisted.

"As I said. A vicious cycle," Joe murmured.

But now he no longer saw the mug or the coffee in his mind's eye. What was the use of continuing to wait? Was the wait any better than walking out that door?

"The only thing I'll miss is the bell's jingle," Joe muttered pushing away from the table. When he left there was no chime from the bell hanging above the door. No happy jingle rang for a Joe that surrendered to despair.

"Joe! Come back!" Jo cried as he stumbled out the door. She started to stand up, started to chase him out the door, but remembered her mad rush away from the bridge. Joe was not coming back and his leaving tested her own resolve.

Do nothing or walk out the door and become nothing? Jo slumped back into her seat. Outside the puddles of light waited. They would keep her company as she followed the mist into the dark. Placing her hands on the table, she pushed herself to her feet rocking the table slightly and causing some of the liquid to splash from Joe's abandoned mug.

"Coffee? Is it coffee?" Jo grabbed the abandoned mug and raised it closer to her face and inhaled. "Coffee. Fresh, honest-to-goodness coffee."

Closing her eyes she touched the rim of the mug to her lips.

Bio- D. Scot is a graduate of The Ohio State University and a former newspaper reporter, having worked on daily and weekly newspapers in three States. He is presently an At Home dad in Ohio. When not engaged in his children's activities, D. Scot is most likely to be involved with bringing to life fiction of varying lengths and genres.

Faces

by Melodie Corrigall

I knew my door was locked; I'd heard the click. While my custodians sometimes ignore my dietary preferences, they are vigilant about securing the exits. If I escaped, which I was determined to do, I'd be pursued like the brown fox, although, unlike the fox, not these days, quick.

Now that their charge was incarcerated for the night, my wardens were imbibing like parent-free teens. Hearing my name bob up in the sea of cackles, I struggled towards the door. By the time I got close enough to hear, the partiers were onto another topic. Just as well. It's infuriating to hear yourself talked about in the 3rd person by those who control your life. I resented it when I was five and I resent it now that I'm 85.

Since hearing their whispered plans for my future, I had developed a counter strategy. I was determined to witness, for the last time, my reflection in the Lake. To hang between air and water, leaning as close to a kiss as I could without succumbing. Like the carefree child I once was, I would fill my mouth with marble-sized pebbles and spit them one by one into the Lake. The ripples would transform the water and my image would dance with its remembered partner. But that dance could only happen if I broke free and reached the Lake.

Crouched in the corner of the room rubbing my arthritic legs, scenes of adroit detectives opening locked doors with a paper clip or a credit card chuckled at my ineptitude. As a youth, I could open a car door with a wire coat hanger but cars and life are more complicated now.

In any case, with the posse poised outside, there was no use thinking of immediate escape. If I made it out the door, I would be walking into my captors' hands and a rigorous interrogation. My plan was to get up at first light, as I had decades earlier, to escape and then, as silent as mercury, head for the water.

Water is my favorite element. In her many guises, she offers escape from the ordinary. In harsh moments her pounding muffles the din of life, in quiet moments she tantalizes us with the mystery of what hides below her surface, and most sublime, in peaceful moments she reflects our faces and summons us to our home shore.

I spent a fitful night, moving from side to side, seeking some fleeting comfort. Finally first light came, the dawn chorus, still reliable, urged me to action. After cautiously jiggling the door handle to no effect, I tried the window: a successful escape route 80 years earlier. I am almost as scrawny as I was then although my caretakers shove food at me as though worried that momentarily UN inspectors will come by to check my health status.

I dragged a chair to the window and struggled onto it. I was counting on my guards, having enjoyed a late night of carousing, being out for the count. If they did wake, I hoped that my groans and clangs would be passed off as forest noises.

The small rectangular window opened to the side and had no grating. I chose to go feet first, risky but possible. Then legs dangling over the bushes below, I teetered and collapsed like a soggy tea bag into the prickly blackberry maze.

Gasping and stinging from the hostile thorns, I struggled to focus on breathing deeply, a calming strategy learned in childbirth classes, decades before. "When in doubt breath out," they had said. Well, I was in doubt.

I finally summoned the courage to roll and lurched into the open. My exposed skin stung like flesh raw from swarming wasps. Fearing pursuers, I

scrambled to my feet and headed for the water. In my panic, I headed in the wrong direction, righted myself and struggled down the hill.

At the shore, I pocketed a handful of smooth black pebbles. I intended to lie on the dock and fill my mouth with them. Then drop them one by one into my reflection.

When I had done this as a child, I had been caught by my ever-vigilant mother, who snuck up and wacked my head. Gasping in surprise a few stones had caught in my throat to the consternation of all, myself included. I had managed, eyes popping, to choke up the errant pebbles with no harm done. No harm done, that is, except for a short penal sentence. This time at least I would escape mother, now otherwise engaged as a long time member of the heavenly choir.

I lowered myself unto the dock, soggy from winter rain, and slipped a few pebbles into my mouth. They tasted smooth and as dependable as sea-worn shells.

The water served as a mirror but instead of an image of my small eager friend, a wrinkled face with crumpled cheeks greeted me. But when I spit a pebble into the water, the wrinkles transformed into ripples.

“Mother,” a voice screamed, exploding the startled birds roosting in the reeds.

“For god’s sakes, there she is,” someone cried.

I glanced to see the posse heading down the hill, legs pumping. The dog, eager partner in the chase, yapped and twirled in excitement.

I had only a moment to spare. I wiggled forward as ungainly as a seal out of water, scratching my stomach on the rough surface, but joyful to be heading home at last. And then, splash.

Bio- Melodie Corrigall is a Canadian writer whose work has appeared in *Blue Lake Review*, *Emerald Bolts*, *Six Minute Magazine*, *Mouse Tales*, *The Write Place At the Write Time*, *Switchback* and *Earthen Lamp Journal*.
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