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The Absence of Snow

By Vince Corvaia

Audrey Hilyard looked up at the billboard as they came off the Biscayne Bay Causeway and entered Miami Beach city limits and said, "God, I hate that friggin' thing."

"What thing is that?" her husband, Bud, who was driving, said.

"You know," she responded with a distinct tone of distaste. "That stupid thing. That sign."

Her husband knew very well what thing, but he placated her just the same. He knew she had to vent every time they passed it.

It was the Coppertone sign, familiar to locals and tourists alike. A little girl in a

It was the Coppertone sign, familiar to locals and tourists alike. A little girl in a bikini looked startled as a black pup mechanically pulled the back of her panties up and down with its teeth, revealing the flesh not tanned by the lotion.

Bud had never asked what her objection was to the sign, presuming that his wife was a bit more prudish than he'd realized. But it had nothing to do with prepubescent bare behinds. Audrey remembered Coppertone commercials from New Jersey, where they had grown up before Bud decided to try his luck selling cars in the Sunshine State. It was her last link to the place she loved, her home, and it had been a precursor to this new life she'd never asked for. Though her parents were dead, all her brothers and sisters were still in Jersey. She knew no one in Miami except Bud, and suddenly he wasn't enough.

They turned onto Collins Avenue and headed north to the Sunny Isles district of affordable beach front motels, each in a different pastel. When they found the Sandy Shores, Bud turned into the parking lot and pulled his four-year-old 1961 Impala into a space close to the rear, a short walk to the pool area. With their towels, sunglasses, Audrey's paperback mystery and, yes, the Coppertone, you never would have known they weren't guests of the motel. That was the idea.

It had been Bud's idea, actually, just as Florida had been his idea. They'd started out spreading a blanket on the open beach beside the Carillon Hotel, but sometimes the sand was too hot and sometimes the sea water was either overrun with seaweed or infested with jellyfish.

"We should go to a motel and use the pool," he said one day. "What are they gonna care whether we're paying for a room? We're wouldn't be taking money out of their pockets."

And right then and there they stood up and shook the sand off their blanket and trudged back to the car to begin their search for a suitable motel.

They spread their beach towels over two wooden chaise lounges near the deep end. Audrey sat back, adjusted the red scarf with the white polka dots serving as a tentative headband around her thick, wavy brown hair and opened her mystery to the dog-eared page while Bud dove into the water and came up flinging water unnecessarily from his short hair. A small plane flew parallel to the shore, dragging a banner advertising the Castaways hotel and night spot.

the shore dragging a banner advertising the Castaways hotel and night spot. Bud had never taken Audrey anywhere to enjoy the night life of the beach. "Too expensive, he said. Who needs it? Leave it to the snowbirds."

The last time he used the word 'snowbirds' tears had come to Audrey's eyes. That's what she wanted to be. She thought she could enjoy Miami more if she knew she would be returning to North Bergen, especially in the winter. She didn't drive, so she could afford to miss snow with the aching passion with which she often remembered it.

By three o'clock, she was wearing her blue bathing cap and swimming slowly back and forth in the deep end when the motel manager, burly, deeply tanned, and smoking a large cigar, entered the pool area and blew a piercing whistle.

"Time for the entertainment, everyone," he yelled. "We ask that you please leave the pool for the next fifteen minutes. After the show, we'll be serving hot dogs and hamburgers over by the sea wall."

Free food. That's why Bud never had Audrey pack a picnic lunch for them. That's why he insisted on returning to this, the first motel they had tried out, even though to Audrey's mind it was overrun with rambunctious, splashing brats weekend after weekend.

She dried off beside her chaise and said to Bud, who was already seated, "I can't take this clown crap. I'm going to walk on the beach."

She took off her cap, shook her hair loose and walked past the shallow end and the barbecue spit to the wooden steps leading down to the sand. Behind her, she could hear the children scream with laughter as one of the motel employees, dressed as a clown in a turn-of-the-century bathing suit, walked out to the edge of the diving board and proceeded to execute a series of near-pratfalls that kept him out of the water until the big finish.

On this particular day, she was standing at the edge of the shore, letting the cold sea water lap at her ankles, when a man in a snorkel and face mask rose from the tiny waves and plodded toward the sand in his fins.

He removed his mask and snorkel and when he was about ten feet away

He removed his mask and snorkel and when he was about ten feet away from Audrey she saw that he was a muscular young man, dark black hair softly falling into his eyes with the carelessness of a bachelor. With a flicker of recognition she saw that he closely resembled her high school sweetheart, Michael Vaston. He was a football player, her first love and she was crazy about him. But back then she'd wanted to travel and Michael would never have left their home town. She married Bud because she believed that he would make something of himself and change her life. The stranger that stared back at her now was like the ghost of what-might-have-been. He was in his early thirties, at least five years older than she.

Somehow she found the courage to say, "See anything interesting down there?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, if that's what you mean." He smiled, and his smile took in his entire face. He walked up to her in his clumsy fins and extended a hand.

"Hi, I'm Harry."

"Audrey...how do you do," she said, shaking it firmly.

"Are you staying at the Sandy Shores?"

She hesitated with a flicker of warm embarrassment flashing beneath her cheeks. "Yes."

"Me, too."

Impulsively, she looked down and saw that he wore no rings of any kind. She almost wished she hadn't.

"With your family?" she asked, hoping to redeem herself.

"Fiancée," he said, and made a face as if he'd uttered a naughty word.

"I won't tell anyone," she said, smiling.

"A...?"

And you?

"I'm alone. My husband and I live on the mainland. I just come out here once in a while to unwind."

"He better be careful," Harry said. "You're much too pretty in that bathing suit to be wandering alone on Miami Beach."

She wasn't so much aware of the words he spoke at that moment as how they sounded. "Where are you from?" she said.

"New York City," he said.

"Oh. Oh, my goodness," she whispered to herself, and all but dropped down, sitting hard on the sand.

He knelt beside her. "Hey, are you all right?"

She started to cry. "I'm sorry. It's just I'm so homesick. I can't stand this place. I truly can't stand it. I'm from North Bergen. I miss it so much."

She covered her eyes with one hand.

"Hey," he said, and moved closer to hold her.

"Please don't," she said.

"Shh." He rocked her gently, and with a nameless ache in her heart and mind, she put her arms around his neck. She could smell the suntan lotion and salt smell on his skin.

Beyond the sea wall, they heard a splash and children's laughter and applause, and Audrey knew it was time to go back.

She stood up, brushing sand off her thighs and her behind. He studied the way she seemed mostly unconscious of the extent of her beauty.

"I'm not a doctor," he said. "I'm just a man."

"My husband will be missing me," she said. "I have to go home."

"Will you be okay?"

She nodded. "Thanks for being here... for bearing witness to a slight meltdown." Her smile was a forced effort. She wanted to keep crying instead, until all of the nameless grief was bled dry and her body could rest.

"I'll be around all week if you get a chance to come back."

"I don't think so."

"Well, just remember, people up North would kill to live in a place like this," he said, standing stork-like as he removed one fin at a time. There was gentle encouragement in his eyes, but also a desire to wipe the heaviness of her sadness off of him like the water. It had the potential to be invasive.

"We're going," Bud said to her as soon as she approached their chaises. He had already draped their towels over his shoulder and had her book and lotion in one hand.

"But what about lunch?"

"We'll stop at Royal Castle on the way home," he said, pulling her by the elbow as he headed toward the parking lot.

He had been standing in the food line as he had every Sunday for the past two months, paper plates in hand, when he got to the front and the young man doling out hot dogs and burgers said, "Key."

"What?"

"I need to see your room key first."

"Is this a new policy?"

"Yes, sir," the young man said, "...just this week."

He dropped the plates into a barrel and walked quickly to their seats.

They finished their mini-burgers and birch beer at Royal Castle and were headed back toward the Causeway when Audrey spoke up for the first time since they had left the Sandy Shores.

"Don't you miss snow?" she said.

"What?"

"I said, don't you ever miss snow..."

"That's a laugh. If I never see snow again it'll be too soon."

They were quiet for a moment. "I miss it," she said to herself.

In the passenger rear-view mirror, she saw the little girl in reverse, the dog's teeth clamping down close to her buttocks.

'I can't save you', Audrey thought.





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The Antiquarian

By Nicole M. Bouchard

She felt that she was an antiquarian of her life, collecting with discernment, pieces of interest at various estimated worths. The pieces might be from the same periods, sharing dates and locations, but certainly they seemed to be sold-off memories of entirely different, separate lives. They were all supposed to mean something, their individual histories tugging at her imagination, but they felt like they belonged to far away strangers who lived in other times. Surrounded by the past everyday, she had nearly forgotten how to live in the present and wasted the moment searching for what would someday seem precious and memorable. What will these things mean to you when I'm gone? What will those things mean after you've left and our page in history is written? She didn't care for anything modern unless she bothered herself to think of how it would be looked at in the distant future. Her mind wandered too often to dangerous corners of the past in her memories, looking back at outmoded friendships and relationships that were only good in the way that they were gone; but still she allowed herself to remember. The mysteries, the emptiness, the ghosts left behind and the pieces you couldn't piece together were the allure the past held in her mind.

Yearnings of Yesterday, tucked down a narrow cobblestone side street up from the ocean shore, was the quaint antique shop Lissy had worked at for eight years. Through the open window, she could hear the sound of the waves beating against the rocks as mercilessly as they had for centuries. The nature of time and the nature of nature were impervious; they didn't weaken even if the

evolving hearts of humans did. Sunlight intruded into the shady space like a filtered beam shining in the eye of a sleep-laden creature in his cave. Unwillingly, many of the objects stretched their aching bones and sprang to new life. The older pieces had developed a kind of snobbery in their timelessness and yawned, but refused to look alive. With delicate, quick hands, she ran a cloth over everything and the dust gathered to swirl like a cloud of fairy-godmother magic in the sun's rays. Helena, the shop's owner, was just pulling into the partially-eroded lot in back.

"I know you hate this idea, but I was watching the obituaries this weekend, and I hit upon something. An old woman in her nineties, two adult children living far away, a lavish funeral, a vacant property up on Oak Hill full of priceless antiquities..." Helena took off the scarf protecting her silvery hair and folded it on the counter, her smile widening with each neat triangular fold of the gauzy cloth.

Lissy shook her head at her boss who had an uncanny knack for sniffing out opportunities even amongst the freshly dead. "But nothing's priceless, right Helena? How long did it take you to call them?"

"Two minutes. I had to call the funeral home first."

"No restraint."

"I do people a service. Someone has to come in and take these things off of their hands. It makes them some quick money and saves them from having to store things in a warehouse somewhere. Then we touch up the items and sell them to people who will appreciate them."

"Whatever makes you feel better about it."

"Aren't you interested in seeing what I got?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

Lissy was busy working on the cherrywood finish of a jewelry box from the early 1900's. Victorian. with blushed peach velvet. she liked to envision the woman

who sat at her vanity selecting strings of pearls for an elegant dinner party. The woman with up-spun rich brown hair and naturally rose-hued cheeks slipped on ivory satin gloves, checked her appearance in the glass, and her husband fastened the pearls while stroking the back of her neck. Though they'd been married for some time now, he still looked at her the way he did the day they met in the pouring rain when he held a coach for her. But perhaps she fastened her own pearls. Perhaps the crescent nail marks in the velvet were tiny reminders of her frustration as he looked away in the reflection of the mirror. Perhaps she felt she would rather die than go unnoticed. She hadn't lived a long life, expiring in her early forties from heart failure; the original owners of the piece had told Helena that. Lissy wondered what new significance, if any, the jewelry box with her now-neglected hanging pearls had once she was gone. Perhaps his fingers were long and slender and the nail marks were his, simply abhorring her death.

Each item in the shop had the energies of its former owners attached to them in the likeness of names carved into a tree. They were portals in time, vessels of memories. Touching a possession that someone else had touched and treasured was like reaching across the years to grasp their hand. For days she'd held the ivory-gloved hand wishing to know the secrets behind it in exchange for being the jewelry box's caretaker.

The chimes outside the front door of the shop rang ripe with open-ended promise in their crinkling metal sort of way. A well-dressed young man in his mid-thirties stepped inside. Helena seemed to appraise him like a new shipment of porcelain china. Were there any cracks or missing fragments? He might have, in her opinion, buttoned one more button up on his loose blue oxford shirt for propriety's sake. His khaki pants were flawless, but his topsiders begged some polish. She also didn't care for the way he studied Lissy, her face drawn down and serious at work at the side counter.

"That's not up for sale, I'm afraid," Helena said protectively from behind her hand-painted lime reading glasses.

"What isn't?" he countered somewhat startled.

"The girl."

"Oh? I was actually admiring the piece she was working on. Mind if I have a look around?"

"Mmm," Helena replied with a forced, twitchy smile.

Lissy hadn't looked up or listened to their encounter. She was still with the couple at the vanity back in the 1900's. Truth be told, she had been the object of his fascination, a thing of beauty more ancient than anything in the shop, more ancient than the sea outside the door. Yet to keep out of trouble with the mothering proprietor of the store, he avoided the side counter and took a disciplined walk around the four walled space. He had come in here on the recommendation of a friend who felt that *Yearnings of Yesterday* held the sum of the treasures of historic New England. However, upon closer inspection, he saw the store had antiques not only from New England, but from all over the world. He paused to study a lapis lazuli necklace interlaced with jade. Known for its magical properties for discerning truth, the lapis had always endeared his poet's imagination. Yet for some reason, he was drawn to an unusual pearl brooch that seemed to speak outwardly from its place on the wall. It seemed to be a delicate collector's item and a charmingly rare gift for a woman.

He placed the brooch on the counter alongside its asking price, two twenty dollar bills. Helena gave him a receipt and a bag, but watched warily as his eyes wandered once again to Lissy's direction.

"Ahemmm." The clearing of her throat was louder than she intended.

He looked up at her and smiled, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Tell me, just so I know, while we're here... You're not for sale are you?"

"You couldn't afford me if I was, handsome. Mmm-hmm. Good day."

He winked before he left.

Kevin Wilder had it in mind to give the brooch to the girl behind the counter since he first noticed it. Yes, she probably walked by it everyday, but it would have a different meaning when it was placed in front of her to own. She worked

in a treasure chest but wore none of its spoils. With her nearly waist length wavy umber hair, she was a fitting addition to the shop as though she too belonged to a different time period. He decided the brooch would fit her, even if she pinned it to a scarf or purse. The matter of how to give it to her was another issue altogether.

"Lissy?" Helena called to her.

"Lissy, the store's on fire."

"Just a minute..." she replied absently.

Helena laughed. She hadn't seen anyone quite so absorbed in their work like Lissy Parker. "You just missed Prince Charming's cousin, Prince Cunning. I think he might have walked away with you over his shoulder if you'd bothered yourself to look up and give him the time of day. He bought the pearl brooch. Can you believe it? That's been hanging there for years. I can't figure out what he'd do with a thing like that."

"Perhaps you're mistaken Helena. He might have bought it to impress you."

"I told him he couldn't afford me."

"True enough." Lissy laughed and put down her work for a moment. A quick glance at her watch and she realized that the day had somehow slipped out of her grasp. They only worked until one on Wednesdays.

"Going home?" Helena asked, already knowing the answer.

"I'll probably take a walk down the beach first."

"See you tomorrow, Lissy. Happy hunting for princes..."

Kevin had been biding his time going in and out of neighboring shops. He couldn't believe his good fortune when she stepped out the door, heading for the beach.

She was navigating the rocks as she always did on her afternoon strolls by the surf. Here she could immerse herself in a place that could not be catalogued, it was timeless and unmarked by her black ink pens. It was so awash in memories that no particular one could stick and haunt the shore. Swaying as she walked to absent music, she closed her eyes and freed herself. Other people's happiness and unhappiness couldn't touch her here. The mystery of the jewelry box and the nail marks disappeared. She felt alone, unbound, and no longer herself, simply a particle connected to a universal space that was never and forever.

Above the roar of the waves and wind, she couldn't hear him shyly calling out to her.

A hand reached into her private reverie, touching her shoulder. Envisioning a slender male hand from 1905 reaching out from her imagination to call her back, she cried out.

"I'm sorry!" The voice was vaguely familiar like a sound from a dream... the man from the shop?

Lissy turned around to face him. Instead of explaining her preoccupied reaction, she stared at him in his clumsy mortality as a disturbed goddess might, waiting for an explanation as to why he had stumbled into her watery domain.

"I couldn't help but notice in the store...um...you seemed like you really belonged there. It was striking."

"I looked centuries old with faded edges, broken seams and I smelled musty?"

"No- I meant..." he paused trying to explain himself when he saw her smile. "Ah, you're kidding. Well, what I was going to say is that you're very beautiful and I wanted you to have something that seemed to fit you." He handed her the bag. "Look familiar?"

She lifted out the brooch and held it up to the sunlight. Swirling dusky rose swam easily into the heavenly white and violet as the gray pondered the outer edges. "I've seen it in the store before but I've never looked at it this closely

edges. I've seen it in the store before, but I've never looked at it this closely. It's a beautiful piece."

What she said was less than she thought. How could he have known to pick something that she had missed, a little piece that looked as though it had been chipped off her soul? When she pricked her finger trying to fasten the brooch to her scarf, he reached up carefully, delicately, to fasten it himself. Pulling the sea green yarn away from her throat, afraid it would seem presumptuous to touch her neck, he put the brooch in place and then stepped back to admire her.

"Thank you, Mr..."

"Wilder. Kevin, actually. And you?"

"Lissy Parker. What brought to our little hideaway store in the first place?"

"A friend. How about you? I know why someone would want to work there with all of those pieces everyday, but how did you come to work there?"

"A fascination with the past, I guess. I worked behind the front desk answering calls for the local historic homes tourism office and that's how I met my boss, Helena. I pulled a few favors for her."

"A historic homes tourism office? Wow. That's kind of strange..."

"How so?"

"Oh- I didn't mean that it was strange to work there... I, um..." He was flustered. "The thing is I'm writing a book on haunted dwellings along the east coast... We probably crossed paths a few times and didn't know it. Do you think some of the places you saw were haunted?"

"Maybe. But I definitely believe that people, living or dead, leave an energy behind on their belongings whether it's a house or a something as small as a coveted hairpin. Take for instance our pearl brooch here. How much do you want to bet that there's a story behind this?"

"I don't know. I'm more of a ghost-believing man and these ghosts, specters, or

"I don't know. I'm more of a ghost believing man and these ghosts, specters, or whatever you want to call them hang on to places more than things."

"Then how did you know the brooch suited me? You don't think that a fragment of some woman's residual energy told you that it matched mine? It's almost like a faded fragrance pressed into a pillow. You know who slept there first."

He appreciated the flash of passion in her eyes. "How about this- if you can prove that there's a story behind that brooch, I'll include it in the book to eat away at my research about frequencies. If not, you put up with me for a free trial month and even if I mess up during this time, you still agree to go out with me a few times. Fair?"

She normally didn't like wagers, but this one intrigued her. Either she would uncover a story that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end or she would let this stranger produce the same reaction.

"Fair."

Helena shook her head when Lissy entered the shop the next morning wearing the pearl brooch pinned in her hair. "Who has no restraint now?"

Lissy paused, leaning on the counter with a playful expression in her sapphire eyes. "Helena, tell me everything you know about this piece. There has to be a record somewhere right?"

"I don't need to refer to a record to tell you all I know. For someone so obsessed with her work, you should know the answer to this yourself. It came from the same source as the jewelry box only it arrived here a few years prior to it. Same owner, same household, same time period..."

Helena's voice faded out as Lissy unbound her hair, pulling the brooch out into her hands to examine it. Steering herself toward the side counter, she pulled open the glass doors to the jewelry box. The small crescent scratches in the velvet. Turning the brooch over, she ran her thumb over the gold half-circles on the back of the setting.

Kevin was glad when she called, breaking his writer's block as he stared at a pile of articles and a blank computer screen, but his enthusiasm faded when she explained that it had to do with the origin of the brooch. He waited on the rocks of the beach for her, brooding over his possible defeat and her possible loss of interest in him, until she got out of work at five.

"I'm not sure, but you may have lost." Her voice announced her presence as she ambly climbed down to sit beside him.

It astonished him how she had balanced herself with the heavy jewelry box in the protective circle of her petite arms. Settling the box on her lap, she opened the glass doors and removed the brooch. Her explanation of the pressed curved marks in the pale peach velvet was to him, surprising enough, but when she suddenly started to bang the antique brooch on a neighboring rock, he was floored.

"Good God, woman! If you don't like it, don't wear it!"

She smiled and explained that she saw an unusual space between the setting and the large pearl. On the fifth collision with the rock surface, the setting came loose. A tiny silver key tumbled out and fell between the rocks. Both leaning down fast to retrieve it, their foreheads collided. Laughing and holding his head, he allowed her smaller hand to fish down and feel out the key. He hoped she would give him a trial month of her time even if he lost his sad bet.

Now she'd discovered a hidden key too small for most locks, but the glass doors didn't lock and there didn't seem to be another visible opening.

"What if the key doesn't go to the box? What if it goes to something completely different that we'll never find?" His defeatist skepticism was evident.

"You're supposed to be the one who believes in the 'strange' occurrence and I can't imagine that fate would go so far as to have you give me this brooch when I was working on unraveling the mystery of the box for it to end here."

She saw the disappointment tilting his features downward into a concentrated frown. In an effort to remedy them, she whispered, "Don't worry. I'll give you

down. In an effort to remedy them, she whispered, "Don't worry... I'll give you a trial run anyway, but you don't have an unlimited messing up allowance. Three strikes and"-

"I get the picture." He smiled and leaned over to take the box from her lap and investigate it himself. With a vested interest, he would look harder. In the process of leaning over and lifting the prized antique, he paused to kiss her lightly on the cheek. She hadn't expected it and turned suddenly so that they brushed lips for a moment by accident.

Respectfully, he drew back, knowing what discovering the missing piece of this puzzle would mean to her. With skillful carpenter's hands, having spent summers working with his father, he examined the box at every angle feeling along the edges for a break in the wood.

At the risk of dissolving her hopes, he revealed his findings. "Nothing. I'm sorry."

She nodded. Perhaps she would never discover the answer. Yet the present sat before her as opposed to an illusive mystery. They agreed to go to out to dinner the following Wednesday.

Though Helena didn't typically allow the antiques to leave the store, Lissy took a liberty with the jewelry box. With it set upon her oak kitchen table, she and the box could stare out one another's secrets. She couldn't let go. Something she couldn't understand called to her. With careful hands, she scanned the interior again. This time her fingers felt a looseness of the velvet adhered to the upper left corner. As much as it pained her to cause the object any harm, she began to peel it back knowing the risks involved if she discovered nothing. She didn't truly want to test Helena's capacity for forgiveness, but an insatiable curiosity quelled her better judgment.

A small door in the bottom slowly revealed itself. A keyhole small enough to match the key rested at its center. Unconscious of time, Lissy turned the silver key inside the lock. Yellowed paper folded down inside its shallow coffin of wood gladly stretched up after nearly a century of neglect to reach her inquiring fingertips.

It was late in the evening. She slipped the key down inside the tiny pocket between the setting and the pearl. She knew he wouldn't find it here. William wouldn't do something so trivial as to rifle through her jewelry once she was gone. He would leave her personal items untouched, a shrine to the idea of a good wife. Taking care to fold the travel papers small and neatly, she placed them inside only to wrench them free again. Unfolding it once more to let the ink press her skin, she sat still as though her body could absorb the words scrawled on the back of them as her mind had and give her strength. 'It's you...it's you... It has always been you...' She repeated the words out loud and imagined standing in front of him in her ivory gown, stroking his hair as he pressed his head to her torso, leaning forward in a sitting position from his black leather chair, murmuring in their shared desperation... William didn't understand a man like that. A man who was driven by passion... William had forgotten her. She wished she could forget him. She thought to ask him before she left, 'How does one forget to love?'

The papers were her freedom. Her ticket to go from one life to another. She planned to keep them safe here along with the ring Jeremy had given her until they left together for Paris. She ought to have folded down the velvet more neatly. She ought not to have underestimated her seemingly absent husband of eleven years who always looked away in the reflection of the mirror as she readied herself at night.

The scrawled writing on the back of one of the papers mentioned a ring.

It was a message no one was meant to find, dated close to her death. It wasn't her husband who wrote it because the signed name didn't match the one attached to the record on the jewelry box. Yet Lissy knew that she had died of heart failure, not grizzly murder from a jealous rage.

She called Kevin despite the lateness of the hour. He was still awake working in front of the light of his computer screen.

"The obituary would be public record as would the address. It should be in the shop's files, right?"

There was something charming about a man who took her obsession seriously.

There was something charming about a man who took her obsession seriously enough to meet her at eleven o' clock at night to hunt down answers.

They climbed the rocks toward the shop in the ghastly bright moonlight, the jewelry box in Kevin's arms, the papers in Lissy's careful hands. She let them into the shop, convincing herself that since she had a key to the shop, what they were doing wasn't technically wrong. Wasting no time in looking up the record in the store file for the antiques, she came upon the address from the estate where they came from. Even with her extensive knowledge of historic homes, the address meant nothing to her and she felt as if her heart had suddenly become a flattened bed sheet once cracked high in the air looking like an ethereal cloud descending, then lifeless with no air underneath. Kevin bit his lip and stood behind her saying nothing for a few moments.

Finally, with his voice seemingly removed and eerily quiet, he explained that he knew of the estate.

"It's one of the houses I'm covering in my book. I've been there. I've heard the stories about her. They closed down the tours because of what people saw. Unassuming tourists and local history buffs would get a hell of a fright in the main suite when they saw a washed-out form of a woman sitting by the window, papers in her hand, pearls twirled in her fingers... And him. They've said that he stands over the bed staring not at them, but past them as if his eyes are searching out a shadow that lay there before. I think I know what happened to the ring... There's an emerald glint in his hand before he disappears. They appear at separate times and never look at one another."

It never occurred to him that he might feel this way. He had always loved her, but there was something raw, ragged, and brutal now that he knew how he had driven her to the arms of another...

She saw the love that she had wanted so desperately in his eyes. The shock of it all invaded her body as though she could feel his pain. In the deepest fathoms of her imagination, 'I love you' never sounded like this; the boulders crashing down as the mountains knelt in guilt before an emerald sky... It was more than she could bear. Her hand fell before she could touch him.

"So the husband discovered the papers, the message, took the ring from the

So the husband discovered the papers, the message... took the ring from the other man- that's the reflected emerald light. He confronted his wife and her heart failed... She wanted her story told." Lissy felt cold, relieved and saddened all at once.

Without explanation they put their arms around one another knowing that they'd both been right. The story was piecing itself together and Lissy, like the brooch, like the woman's ghost, had hung in place for years waiting to be truly seen by the right man. In his arms she vowed to no longer live in the past. No longer would she measure her life by things to which she assigned meanings. The question would be- *What do I mean to you now?..never mind idealizing me once it's too late and we're gone.*

Picture Frames

By Jeremy Trimble

In the picture I was in the middle, Evan was on the left, with Liberty to the right. Sunbeams warmed the park. Libby's mouth was open, laughing, her white rows of teeth vivid against her glossed lips. Her canines were elongated, and sharp. My lips were parted too; I remembered the aches in my cheeks from smiling too much. Evan was grinning at the camera, his face colored like a cherry, embarrassed at Libby's joke, a colorful speculation on just what Evan and Emily would be doing that night.

I put our triad's picture back, and glanced to my phone. The LCD said it was almost noon; Evan was supposed to call. It had been a while since he and I had gone to an arcade and shot at zombies, vampires, or terrorists. One corner of my lips rose as I considered the aches my shoulders would suffer as I held the plastic guns for too long. The other corner started to rise when I imagined the game's gigantic speakers spewing out noises that would intermix with other games' sound effects, creating an excited cacophony.

Polygonal screams are funny. I used to own a vampire game; to regain life I didn't eat magical mushrooms or collect golden rings. Instead I would have to wander around dungeons filled with monsters, searching for victims. These

women would scream, shackled to walls, moaning, begging to be released. With the right button the vampire would lift his hand and the woman's blood would be telekinetically ripped from her neck, streaming through the air and down my avatar's throat. I leaned back and chuckled. Later Evan and I would be sniping, not feeding.

Questions about Evan's night flickered behind my eyes. Before he'd gone out last night, he'd been in a fight with his girlfriend. Something about their not spending enough time together; college could do that to couples. But his girlfriend was a very hot creature, so many gentle curves matched by an innocent smirk smile. I used to wonder if her hair felt as soft as it looked or how sweet her lips would taste.

My phone started singing, "La Cucaracha" with its high-pitched beeps and squeals. Without looking, I grabbed it, clicked it on and held it to my ear. "Duuuuuuude!" I waited for the customary response but it wasn't coming.

"Nathan," came the quiet reply.

"Libby?"

"How are you?" My brows crinkled as I answered that I was okay. I asked her what was wrong, she responded just barely beyond a whisper, "Nathan, do you think you can come over?" Her voice threatened to crack. It was so quiet.

"Of course." I grabbed my stuff, wallet, keys and phone.

Halfway to Libby's apartment, Evan called.

Whatever Libby wanted or needed, it might have been private. "Duuuuuuude," I declared into my phone, making a turn with one hand. "How's it going?"

"Hey." He wasn't as quiet as Libby, but I'd expected more energy. We were going to hit the arcade, pretend to kill. Where was the violent love?

"How's it going?" He answered.

After a few seconds of my confused silence he asked if he could meet up with me around one-thirty at the usual place. I agreed as I pulled into one of the parking places outside Libby's apartment complex. A pause before saying goodbye, I asked, "You okay?"

"Fine." His voice was flat.

We hung up. If he had broken up with his girlfriend he'd probably want to bury his feelings for her in pixilated bodies.

The True Love apartment complex was massive. Several parking lots were spread out like oil slicks. The place was cheap, that's why the place was packed with students. Walking along the pavement, I admired some oaks half-hidden by planked fences. Their roots had crisscrossed the lot, ripping cracks in the pavement.

After a couple of quick knocks her door swung open revealing Libby in all of her studiously perfected splendor that never managed to snag me. She was wearing a smile, slightly crooked with its right side stretched a little higher. The whites of her eyes were tinged with pink; allergies made that happen every spring. Despite the darkened blotches beneath her eyes, their bright green still shimmered, pricked by delicate pupils. They were the black holes some physicists thought would lead to another, more heavenly dimension. I didn't know about that. She was Liberty, shrouded in the mystical neutrality of a female friend. Libby.

"Hey. Wanna come in?" Her tone was pleasant.

I bit my lower lip; sometimes Libby needed time.

I stepped inside; the first room of her apartment was the living room. Magazines on attracting men covered their coffee table. I sat down while Libby went back to the kitchen. With her to my back, I flirted with the idea of turning on the T.V. Instead I decided to grab one of the magazines. I sifted through it until I found a quiz on what kind of sexy I was. Libby usually took a while to get ready so the last time Evan and I had to wait we'd filled it out. I was cute sexy. ~~He was nice sexy. It all hinged on what kind of skirts we liked to wear~~

He was pretty sexy. It all hinged on what kind of shirts we liked to wear.

"How'd the party go?"

No response. I turned around; Libby was bracing herself against the counter, like she couldn't hold up her own weight. My brows furrowed. Ten feet away, through her black-rimmed glasses, I wasn't sure if she was crying.

"It, it was okay," she finally replied.

I couldn't see her eyes; they were locked in front of her face, pointed downward. Her hair had fallen like a curtain in front of her face. "I'm fine," she whispered. Then louder, "I'm fine." She flicked her head back up, turned toward me, smiling. She came back to the living room, a Diet Coke in her hand, and sat on the little couch a few feet away.

"So what're your plans for today?" I asked. Watching her was like trying to pierce through one of those Magic Eye books. There was an obvious smile on her face. There could have been a hidden message, some momentarily secret image.

"Oh, you know me, I'm just going to sit around and rest. Maybe watch some T.V. I've kind of got some stuff on my mind." I squinted first at her, and then at a magazine on the coffee table, and then at my watch.

"What stuff?" I'd meet up with Evan in a little while. "Anything interesting?"

"Did you know Evan was at the party? Yeah, he got pretty drunk."

"So he didn't make up with Emily?"

"No, he was pretty mad." Libby's eyes got shiny. "The fight got worse I guess. He showed up. It didn't take long for him to get hammered." She was half whispering; I didn't think her roommate was around.

My finger had an itch that only a trigger could scratch. There were zombies somewhere not being killed by me.

"I don't know," she paused lamely.

"What happened?" The itch receded.

She scooted down, away from me, then swallowed, "I, I'm not really sure. I was concerned. Evan looked really hurt, he was sort of crying." Another tear broke from her other eye; it ran down her cheek like a shooting star leaving a glittering stream. "We went somewhere quiet. I don't really remember where, he said he wanted to talk. He said he was scared." Her eyes were glazed, staring at memories. Scrunching her face, crushing the images into compact sounds, she kept going. "We were in a dark room; as we went in, a couple was leaving. The guy was almost carrying her; she sort of stumbled, hobbling. I don't know, maybe she was fine."

One. Two. Three. Four. Seconds wandered by, hobbling like broken ants. Libby's lips trembled, shuddering against invisible walls. "Evan and I went in. It was dark; we sat down on the bed. He leaned on me, I put my arms around him and he started to cry. For a while it was okay, but then," she layered her hands over her face, "...he kissed me. I let him, even if he smelled like vodka. It felt nice. He was warm, and it had been a while since I'd been held. His arms were strong, hard, like a guy's should be. Then they held me down." Her voice had sunken into monotone. "He was on me and I didn't know what to do. I heard myself screaming, but he kept going." Her body shook; my mind was whitewashed.

The tears dripped through her fingers, still covering her face. Moving slowly, I got up, stepped over to the couch and slid myself next to her. Libby, one of my two best friends was gasping, shuddering. She couldn't see me. I placed my hand on her shoulder, still hearing her whimpering. She jumped like my hand was ice or magma, orange with heat. Her back went straight; she leapt up. Before I could register what had happened, any of it, a punch crashed into my face. It wasn't a girly slap; it was a fist crashing into my jaw. "Don't touch me!" she screamed.

"Get out! Get out! Get out!" my best friend howled at me. Suddenly my jaw wasn't the only thing stinging. A beep cut through the daze, my watch. Without looking, I knew it was one thirty; I stood up, felt a trickle of blood at the corner

Looking, I knew it was one thing, I stood up, felt a trickle of blood at the corner of my lip, and left. Closing the door, I got one more glimpse; her face was back in her hands, she was whimpering, "I should have been stronger."

The roof of my mouth started to taste like bile, my breathing went rapid and my heart started trashing behind its bars. With ignition, my car's radio started singing at me as the engine rumbled. I pulled the car out of the parking space, backed out and slammed onto the road.

Evan. The bastard. On the way to the arcade, my shock absorbers learned to hate me. Luck protected me by keeping the cops away; road rage was my wake.

It was confusing; it was double vision, seeing the streets blur by, while hearing Libby's sobs and watching her lips contort with pain. The few minutes at her place kept rambling through my skull, like a song stuck on repeat. While screeching across an intersection headed by a yellow light, I rediscovered the blood trickling between my lips. Like salted copper, I licked at the wound, sliding my tongue along the little gouge. Libby's braided pigtails, melodically feminine voice and pink nails all lied; she was strong.

In the parking lot, I kicked the brakes, shoving them as momentum pulled me. One hand stabbed the seatbelt release; another tried to tear open the door. Outside Evan was leaning against a light post. He was staring over my shoulder. They looked glazed too, dazed. I marched up, each stride pricking little holes of impatience in whatever control I had left. Images flashed; he held her down, by her shoulders. One yank tore off her shirt; a well-placed punch to the stomach kept her from screaming. Marching forward I narrowed my eyes trying to block it out. My heart thumped against its cage, when I opened my eyes the two visions still wrestled in my brain. Half spring day with lazy birds chatting on the telephone wires, half shadowed room clouded with control issues.

Evan turned to me, like maybe he could see me. He went from confused to resigned in the span of an exhale.

"Emily and I are done."

I stopped and held my breath, my gripped fists uselessly dangling at my sides

I stopped and held my breath, my gripped fists uselessly dangling at my sides.

"Three good years gone." Sunlight glimmered off his eyes. "Ever get punched in the stomach?"

Tightening my fingernails into my palms again, "Ever punch someone in the stomach?"

"I didn't think it would end. Even when I went to that party, how the hell could I know? How could I know that that would end it all? It's my fault, all my fault. Why'd I give in?" His hands were in his coat pockets, he looked like he was shivering in the warm light.

"Why?" I repeated.

The second of two best friends stood there. He looked at me, a smirk dashed his lips. He pulled one hand from his pocket. There was an eagle tattooed on his wrist; he started to flip a coin. Both of his lucky quarter's sides were scratched, scarred by intersecting lines. Back in high school, he'd sharpened its sides over the course of summer school P.E. The longer someone flipped that coin, the scarred liberated trust in god and eagle, the more likely blood would run.

That half smirk endured, "Why? Could I say because Liberty's hot? Sculpted legs... Great, round breasts. They've got that wonderful curvature, the shape to make a guy wonder how firm they'd really be. They remind me of Emily. That ideal form." His eyelids fell like prison shutters for three or four seconds. Opening up he continued, "But she's not like Emily. Emily and I were friends too; we didn't hurt each other. What the fuck could she have expected this would do? Liberty had to know what last night would do! She had to know! Fuck!" Growling at the universe, his sneakered foot smashed into some gravel. He stopped, his chin against his chest, "Why didn't I push her away when she kissed me? I told her no, but I didn't stop. I said Emily's name, but I didn't stop. When Libby unclasped my belt, I didn't punch her; God forgive me."

When he nodded, patted my shoulder and walked off, I stood there. Pause. On the other side of the oceanic parking lot, cars roared along. The birds were still lazy, their chirps back-dropped by traffic's buzzing roar; the air smelled like exhaust. Trees next to the arcade's entrance waved in a breeze. I didn't feel

exhaust. Trees next to the arcade's entrance wavered in a breeze I didn't feel. My lips moved, asking if it was my fault.

Love Me, As Well

By Michael Weems

"It's my turn now," said Annie. She turned slowly away from Dan and removed her gloves.

Dan's attempts to gaze over her shoulder were quickly thwarted as she turned back to him, presenting him with a small envelope.

"Remember the rules," she continued.

Dan tentatively took the card, looking into her blank expression for any clue of what would be detailed within the note that lay inside. In return, he only received a hint of a smile, developing gradually from her lips. Annie had been waiting for her turn ever since Dan created the game. He wasn't sure he liked being on this side of anticipation. It had been fun to watch her guess and follow his clues but now his mind raced as he waited for her to walk away and the game to commence.

His memories clouded. Dan had found his own clues to be ingenious – tracing a note in the snow that had fallen onto her windshield. Annie had to run outdoors to make sure his message wasn't erased by freshly fallen snow. He watched from his apartment across the street as she kneeled on the hood of her car, frantically scribbling.

"You're on the clock, buddy," Annie reminded him, her once hint of a smile turning into a sarcastic grin.

Dan nodded and extended his hand to take the card, knowing that once he touched it, that by his rules he would not be able to contact her for twenty-four hours.

“Come on,” she prodded, “...you can do it. Just take the card, keep your eyes open, and I’ll see you in a little while. Or will I?” She made no attempts to hide her laughter or pure enjoyment of the moment.

Dan stood before her, wide-eyed, now at the whim of his much smarter and more clever mate. In a quick moment he took the card and immediately placed it in his back pocket. Annie stood on her tip toes, inches away from Dan, and kissed him lightly on the nose and then his lips. Without a word, Annie strode away lazily towards the town’s center. Dan waited for her to turn around and hoped for one last glimpse to decipher any lingering clues he could gather.

Normally, Dan would’ve enjoyed this act – being able to unabashedly gaze at her legs and the natural sway her hips provided as she moved about his apartment. He would feign sleep just to watch her move in natural light – sauntering around his apartment on a Sunday morning in sometimes nothing more than a t-shirt. Lately, Annie had been astute at his attempts to gaze at her. When pressed for an answer, Dan simply admitted his astonishment at how beautiful she was. Annie shrugged off his reply as cheap flattery and let the moment pass. What he meant to say was just how awestruck he was with her. Dan lived in simple amazement at her beauty, grace, and sense of humor, but his inability to express this was deeply set into his level of self confidence. In his mind, these superfluous poetic words he wanted to express would woo Annie and put him on par with just how she made him feel. When he tried to let them out, he became tongue-tied or created new words. His flustered attempt to compliment her one late night in bed came out as “prettyful” causing Annie’s laughter to make the mattress shake and her sides ache. “You amaze me,” she giggled as she stretched her arms and legs simultaneously in her own cat-like way while looking into his eyes. In that one comment she had achieved what he had tried to do, without even using big or imaginary words.

Dan created the game as a last ditch effort to put them on an even playing

field. At first, he felt like the notion itself had elevated his status. A single post-it note placed strategically in Annie's wallet was all it took to get her imagination running. Her voice message placed on his answering machine contained the curious tone he'd anticipated.

"Daniel, what are you up to?" she purred. "Am I really going to have to wait until I get home for a clue?"

Upon opening the door she was greeted with yet another post-it note, simply indicating 'banister'. The initial goose chase brought her to the hamper, the mailbox, and finally to her lap top. She opened the email as he peeked around the corner, happily gazing at her wide eyes. Once she had finished, she closed the computer and without looking at him remarked, "I'm in." She proved to be even more astute than Daniel anticipated, picking up clues at a rapid pace. Her intensity and competitive nature led her to put any other tasks aside and focus intently on his hidden message. Dan scrambled to keep up with her, rashly inserting additional steps just to buy time.

In the last hour, Annie slowly stepped into Mason's Bar. Her last hint, found underneath the toaster, instructed her to find the final puzzle piece here. Her final clue, inevitably turned out to be Dan. He sat alone at the bar with a drink ordered for her.

"My twenty-four hours are up," she said with a gloating tone. "Here I am."

He silently nodded and motioned for her to sit.

"Didn't think I'd figure it out did you?" she asked.

Dan motioned his drink to hers in a toast. She raised her glass to his and with an arched eyebrow.

"Vodka, Danny?" she asked. "I haven't had vodka since I got really sick that one time..." She paused and held the drink close to her almost as if it were a precious doll. "Our first date," she said, moving her glass to clink with

a precious doll. Our first date, she said, moving her glass to clink with his.

Once Annie had disappeared from sight, Dan immediately ripped into the envelope, pulling out the note and tossing the envelope mindlessly aside. He hesitated, envisioning twenty-four hours of Annie's wildest tricks and was sure she'd send him up and down town. Dan hadn't anticipated Annie wanting a turn in his game. He folded the card back and forth mindlessly in his hands as his nerves took hold. He removed his glasses to wipe them on his sweater, yet they unexpectedly slipped and fell into the snow. Blindly he crawled towards where he estimated they had fallen. He scanned all around but the glasses had disappeared. He sat still and the snow fell all around him, slowly covering his hair, sweater, and pants. A serene feeling overcame him and he decided to simply sit and watch the snow. The only noise came from a few cars passing in the distance and he realized that his heartbeat and breathing came much more slowly than usual. His glasses had only fallen a few feet to his side and he picked them up, again brushing them against his shirt, only the snow collected there only made them worse. He sat up, shaking the snow from his sweater and his short, graying hair and finally wiped the glasses dry. He inched closer to a street light to read the note.

As he read Annie's delicate cursive, the panic returned. The calm, slow steady heartbeat and feeling of control flew away. The note simply read 'One if by land, two if by sea.' His memory landed, then flew from any possible explanation within moments. He thought of dates, clocks, American History, special places in town and his leads all fell flat. He stood quickly and stuffed the note into his pocket, hoping it might provide some insight later on. He looked both ways down the empty street and as he started to pace, realized he had been sitting on the envelope. Dan carried it over to a trash can and as he crumpled it, suddenly froze. He opened the small ball he had made of the envelope back up to see a small notation on the front of it, where a stamp usually resided. It read 'Any lightbulbs yet?'

"Damn it!" he shouted.

Damn it! he snouted.

His pacing took on a longer stride as he pondered her scribblings and as he stood beneath his apartment he noticed one light on. Panic set in again wondering if someone had broken in. He quickly took out his phone and pressed the number one speed dial for his home phone number. Annie's voice immediately came onto the voicemail.

"Hello," it started, "...to anyone calling for our dear Dan, rest assured he will be back shortly and will return your message ever so promptly. However, if this is Dan... Congratulations! You truly are a smart cookie and I applaud your putting the pieces together so quickly. I also have to tell you that I'm not as clever as you, and this game will be a true struggle to keep up with your wit! I mean, who would've thought to assign numbers to each letter *in reverse!* I think you're going to win but it's fun to try right? I really have no idea what 'one if by land, two if by sea' means. I made that up to be cryptic and throw you off the trail long enough to record this. Danny, I know you don't always think I notice the little things, but I really do. I like when you make up words. I can't help but keep about my business when I catch you gazing at me, but it's not that I don't care. I do. I just feel so beautiful and special when I see that look in your eyes, I really just don't want that to stop. And I can't tell you how touched I am that you still think about our first date. Getting sick on vodka and having you hold my hair back. Great first impression right? But here we are. Daniel Rivers, I love you. In the interest of spending a little more time together tonight, I say we call it a draw. Deal? Oh wait, I can't tell if you're nodding or not. Or can I?"

Dan felt a soft tap on his shoulder and turned to see Annie, smiling and rosy cheeked from the cold. Annie pounced on him, making him fall in the snow. The two lay together and kissed as the snow fell around them. Dan stuffed his phone in his pocket and laughed at her ingenuity.

"Still love me?" Annie asked pulling him up to his feet.

"Wondertastically," said Dan with a smile. Annie smiled and took his hand, leading him back upstairs into his cozy apartment with the one light shining.

The Measure of a Life

By Nicole M. Bouchard

As one man once told it, there was an ancient time when God walked amongst civilization, taking notes, hypothesizing, studying and testing his most complex creations much like a scientist might. He believed that there was much fine-tuning to be done in how humanity was supposed to work.

When people saw him, they saw the very unassuming shape of a thin old man in white robes. He was neither handsome nor ugly, but rather comical looking in a gentle, jovial way that made you want to smile. There was nothing outwardly majestic or ethereal about him, unless someone happened by one circumstance or another to catch his gaze. In his eyes there was STILLNESS. Large and quiet, there were black skies around his pupils littered with stars and clouds of violet, blue and gold. The STILLNESS extended back before anything, before anything at all existed, and it went far forward into the future long after it had all ended. Upon seeing this STILLNESS, people didn't feel anything. Not in the apathetic sense, but in the sense that they were not happy, sad, or angry. No emotions touched them. No efforts of emotions, even positive emotions, strained on their bodies. Their thoughts stilled completely, frozen for a moment, and the most exquisite, beautiful nothing of peace enveloped them. It was the strongest peace they would ever feel on earth. The utmost relief and rest they could ever aspire to. Then God would smile at them when he knew they'd felt it enough, and he'd break the gaze, moving ever onward in his work.

One of the main choices that tugged on his mind at that time was the

measure of a human life. In a very subtle way, he called all of the existing civilizations and migrating tribes together in one place. Some traveled many miles on foot in the desert, others floated on crude ships across oceans, but they all came. Even members of different faiths came because they believed that God in name, was a symbol of divinity. Once everyone had settled, he spoke his offer quietly. He didn't need to raise his voice for every single man, woman, and child on earth to hear him. "I offer you immortality. An indefinite length of life for you to enjoy the wonders of being human. Anyone willing to accept this step forward." Not a single foot hesitated. Pleased that his creations liked this idea, God instantaneously granted them immortal life knowing that he would watch and wait to see how it suited them.

Everyone on earth at that time was relatively young so this concept worked for the first hundred years or so. There was a great king deeply in love with his queen, and he vowed that no amount of time was enough to spend with her. Their kingdom reveled and thrived in their deep affection. He called his beautiful dark queen his stripe of sun, instilling his soul with the miracles of light. Yet in the eightieth year, he stopped reaching for her hand when they sat together upon their golden thrones. In the ninetieth year, they stopped dining together. The queen preferred her meals taken in the privacy of her quarters. By the hundredth year, the king had forsaken his stripe of sun for a pale drip of moonlight to instill his soul with the miracles of darkness. The kingdom divided in half. The heartbroken and enraged queen declared war. The great civilization warred against itself, each side wounding, breaking and attacking the other. Yet no one died. No one won. The wounded didn't heal, nor did the old have eternal youth. They simply had the torture of continuous life when they no longer wanted it.

God shook his head solemnly from his observations. *No, no this will never work with such fickle creatures.* To amend the situation, he granted death to the ones who desperately called it out and gathered up the survivors and the remaining inhabitants of other civilizations together again. This time, he introduced the idea of a short life. The people could decide when they wanted to die. To help them make this decision, he suggested that they

make a list of all the things they wished to accomplish in life. However much time those things took to be done and fully enjoyed would determine the length of the life. Stepping back once again, God went to observe.

After the brief age of immortality, humans made very precise lists of how much they wanted to enjoy and exactly what things they felt they needed to do before they died. Some were a touch overzealous, but this new change had possibilities. Some of the great male warriors overestimated the time they would need to accomplish great feats so they added to their lists. Others underestimated the time they would need and chose to live longer. This particular group who underestimated the time they needed drew ridicule. Those generating the criticism thought to prove themselves superior by accomplishing their lists exactly on schedule. This mutated into an awful competition of humans trying to outdo one another by doing everything ahead of schedule, dying at a competitive rate. The strongest men of the tribes were in a contest of who could die faster. With few to provide for them, the tribes grew weak and civilizations were dying out in the ridiculous spirit of arrogant competition.

This time, God was even more aghast. Humans were being frivolous about the gift of life.

Once more, he called the remaining members of the human race together. He stressed the beauty, the importance, and the spiritual joy of life. He was weary, but he still wanted the humans to take part in choosing. Thus, he did not stress a long life or a short life, just a meaningful one. Judge the length of a life by its worth. He asked everyone to think truly, about what length of time to enjoy all the wonders of the world would make them happy. How long to love, be loved, labor in the fruit of the harvest, breathe beneath a blue sky, watch a sunset...

A boy lingered in the wide-open space after everyone else had left to ponder this decision. "Sir?" he called. "I have my answer already. I know how much longer I want to live."

God was curious about this young boy who was brave enough to address him directly. "Alright, son, tell me what you amount of time you've chosen."

The boy with the wavy dark curls dancing across his forehead oozed with an inner confidence about his choice. He smiled with no doubt in his heart and said, "Five minutes."

God stepped backward in utter shock. "Five minutes?! How could an innocent child like you want to forsake all of the joys you could come to have in life?! Have you lost faith in the world? What difference would five minutes make to you that a whole life couldn't?"

The boy didn't seem to mind that God seemed so surprised. He wouldn't be shaken. "It isn't that I've lost faith. It's because of my faith in you that I believe I only need five minutes more. But I also need a guarantee from you so that the five minutes will be worth it."

Wanting to learn more from this child he created, he urged the boy to state his request.

"I need you to guarantee that I win the race in my village. The race takes four minutes to complete. In the remaining sixty seconds, I'll be able to know what it feels like to be truly accepted and respected. If I could run that race knowing that no matter what I do I'll win and feel that kind of acceptance, I'd feel all that I could ever want to feel."

God knew then that he couldn't let humans decide the length of their lives. He would create Fate to write it out for them and leave free will in the mix in case of emergencies. But to the boy, he said that he would do as he'd

asked.

The boy had a broad smile on his face as he took his place beside the other children for the race. God waved, watching from the sidelines and winked. The sound of metals smashed together sounded the take off. Instantly, the boy felt a cool powerful wind stream up the inside of his body from his toes to his waist. His soul felt the relief it needed. No insecurity, doubt, even a shuffling of his feet could stop him. He would win.

When he broke through the thin strip of cloth at the finish line, he threw up his arms and jumped up in the air. Everyone flocked to him with praise, gifts and embraces. They lifted him above their heads. When his happiness reached its highest point, he caught sight of God waiting patiently apart from the crowd. With the flush of exhilaration still in his chest, the boy made his way through the crowd over to where God was standing.

"Thank you!" he said panting. "I'm ready now."

God knelt down a little to meet his eyes. "I know that you think that this is the most you'll ever have out of life, but I know it isn't. You'll grow into a man, fall in love, raise a family, make true friends, serve your village and die a beloved, respected man. Most of the people here at this race don't truly know you, love you, care for you... There is better and I want you to live to find it. When you're an old man and it is your time, I'll visit you again, and you tell me what you think of life."

The boy did grow into a man who worked hard, fell in love with a kind woman, and raised a beautiful family. He even traveled to see exotic places and united surrounding tribes. As he sat upon the cliff over looking the ocean at ninety-two years old, God came and sat cross-legged beside him.

"So?" he asked. "Was it worth staying?"

The old man laughed. "It was worth staying. I saw, felt, and learned amazing things that I never would have if I'd died at eight years old. I'm eternally grateful that you gave me this chance and didn't allow me to toss away my life."

"I'm glad," God said as they both rose to leave and walk into the light. "I'm curious... Which time in your life did you feel the utmost carefree joy?"

"That five minutes," the man answered.

God laughed to himself. He acknowledged that like a parent, he would love his children unconditionally, but he would never fully understand them because though they were a part of him, they were not him- they were growing on entirely different planes of existence.

The Importance of Education

By Pat Greene

Part One

Kilteely, County Limerick, Ireland

It was two day's before Pat Murphy's eighteenth birthday and he had a bitter falling-out with his father. Tom Murphy was a very strict father- a bit too strict at times. Pat was the oldest child of a family of five. He had three brothers and a sister Mary, who was just a year and a day younger than him. Tom Murphy's own childhood was one of strict discipline and many times he had heard it from both of his parents, that if he didn't like it, he could up and leave any time the inkling came upon him. Deep down inside, Tom knew that he had raised a good son in Pat and he was proud of the man that his son had grown up to be.

Forty-five acres and the milk from twenty-six cows, was a hard way to try and raise a family. Tom had inherited the farm from his father and it was common knowledge that he was rightfully going to pass it along to Pat when the time was right and fitting. Pat never quite took to liking the farmer's life, with the same enthusiasm and passion that his father seemed to have for it. Pat went along with tradition, that the farm should rightfully belong to the oldest son and he accepted his birthright inheritance without much of a fuss. John-Jo was the youngest son and he was the same as if you cut the head off his father. He had all the mannerisms of Tom and there was no hiding the fact that John-Jo was Tom's favorite. John-Jo could talk to his dad in a way that Pat could never even dream of. Pat always thought of his father as being more of a boss to him than a dad. At times Pat wanted to tell his father that he should give the farm to John-Jo and he knew that if he did utter such a suggestion, his father might not be all that disappointed. Pat could always be certain though, that he could never have such a blessing from his mother.

Theresa Murphy loved and doted on all of her children equally but she had a very special place in her heart for Pat. They were both Libra's and it mostly seemed that both of them were thinking out of the same brain. Theresa had always known that there was something very special about Pat and it was never hard for her to see so much of herself in him. Pat's heart was pure and filled with kindness and he would give you the bite out of his mouth. He had a patience for the elderly, even in his childhood people noticed his fascination for old people. There was always so much evidence to Theresa that Pat knew and understood life, way ahead of his time.

Pat was always sure that he had the know-how, to be intelligent but it killed him to know that he could not read or write like Mary or the rest of his brother's. Sometimes he would sit by the fire at night and watch Mary and the boys doing their homework and it used to annoy him to no end when he would hear them complaining about it. He wished that it was him there, having to read all of them grand books and then having to write grand stories about the grand books. Pat knew that he would be able to write great stories. If there was a way for him to get the stories in his head down in paper, he was sure that he could fill books with them.

Theresa had complained vehemently when Tom decided that it was not feasible

for Pat to go to school any longer. There was too much to do around the farm and Tom could not afford to hire help so Pat was kept home from school and eventually Theresa stopped complaining. Over the years there was not much that Pat had come to dislike about his father. It never really upset Pat that his father was always tough on him and Pat was not yet ten years old when he became aware of the fact, that it was not easy being a small farmer and having the responsibility of trying to raise a family on such measly pickings. Of course there was one biting grudge that Pat did have towards his father but it was never his intent to tell his father or indeed anyone else about it. It was something that Pat had always believed would go with him to the grave but on that fateful October day, tempers flared and things got said and the secret blurted out of him with all the venom and rage that had accompanied it inside him, for all of those years.

Tom was never much of a morning person and Pat would normally know to stay well clear of him until the cows were milked and the calves were fed and then it was time for breakfast. Tom loved to eat. He was not a big-statured man by any means but he could eat for the giants. Pat had grown to be a much bigger man than his father but there was no way that he could keep up with him at the table. The newspaper was on the table when they both came in to sit down for breakfast. Pat took the paper and he was able to comprehend both from the picture of the wrecked car and the few words that he was able to decipher, that there was a fatal accident in Tipperary the day before. Tom loved his newspaper and it annoyed him that Pat had taken it from the table. Tom asked Pat for the paper and Pat, lost in his own bid to find out who got killed and not noticing that his father was annoyed at him, told his father to wait a minute.

Tom had no patience and it annoyed him even more to watch Pat sitting there thumbing through the paper. Tom smirked loudly enough for Pat to hear him and then he asked Pat what he was doing reading the paper anyway? That was the first time that Pat had ever heard his father speak of his affliction. Pat threw the paper at his father and he threw it so hard that the pages came loose from it and there were pieces of it strewn all over the kitchen floor. Tom was totally shocked with his son's outburst of anger. Pat had never displayed such anger in front of anyone in his entire life and especially not his father, a man that he feared as a child and now that he was all grown up, the thought to disrespect his father would never cross his mind. Pat snrang from the table and made a

beeline for the door. Just as he opened the door he saw his mother standing in the yard and she was talking to Billy Ryan the postman.

Pat closed the door and he might have left it at that, only for hearing his father complaining about the paper being all over the floor. The fact that his father did not even seem to have an ounce of regret for his horrible and distasteful remark propelled Pat into another bout of anger and he darted around the floor picking up the paper and balling it up in his hands until he had the entire paper in his grasp. At that moment he saw his father looking at him to see what he was going to do with the paper and without a moment's hesitancy he walked boldly towards the range that was brightly burning and he threw the paper on the hot coal's. Tom leapt from the table and tried to salvage the paper but it was too late. At that very moment Pat knew that the devil was done and there was nothing for him to do now but let his father be assured of a thing or two, just in case he was not aware.

Tom was just about to open his mouth to voice his anger over the cremated newspaper, when Pat let go a barrage of pent up anger that was easily twelve or thirteen years in the coming and he did not stop until he was well and sure that the least of his father's problems would be his damned newspaper. Theresa and Billy Ryan heard everything from the yard and it was Billy who stopped Theresa from going into the house until the shouting had stopped. Billy came into the kitchen with her and was shocked to see such anger on the face of Pat but somehow he felt that he should go to Tom, as Tom looked like was ready to tumble over and spill on to the floor. Pat dashed through the door, out across the yard and he never stopped walking until he was well beyond Judy Webb's crossroad.

It was now late in November and still Tom and Pat were not speaking to one another. They avoided each other at all costs. Of course the work was always done but somehow they managed to carry out all the chores of the day, without ever once having to brush shoulders with the other. Tom would still go in for his breakfast each morning but Theresa on the request of Pat would bring his breakfast out to the outhouse. John-Jo was angry at Pat for saying the things that he said to his father and if it was not for the big mouth of Billy Ryan, the cycling gossip, John-Jo would have been none the wiser, of the events of that morning and he would only know that Pat and his father were not on sneaking

nothing and he would only know that Pat and his father were not on speaking terms.

Mary was ever-the-wise woman and she played her neutrality role to perfection. She loved her father and it hurt her deep down inside to know that her father could have made such a cutting remark to Pat and not have the credence to say sorry and admit that he was wrong. Pat was Mary's favorite brother. He was always kind and respectful to her and he was always there to listen to her; she confided in Pat her deepest thoughts. Mary was always a great student and her teachers were full of praise for her- some of them telling her that she was the best student ever to pass through them in their tenure at the school. Mary had always known though and never doubted that Pat was the most intelligent person in their family. Mary wondered if her father and Pat were ever going to speak to each other again and when Pat told her and swore her to secrecy that he was going to head to London after the New Year, she was not sure whether to believe him or not.

Pat had never before thought about going to London and when there were times that he did not see himself as a farmer, he thought of himself as being a construction laborer for one of the big contractors in Limerick City. He thought about getting a room there and then he could come home on weekends. He was not sure where the idea of London came from but now that it was out for review and it was not just Mary that he had told- he had also told Mike Donovan and PJ Gleeson, his two best friends. To not go now after telling them that he was, would be huge jolt to his strength of character and Pat's pride would never allow him to get in the way of character. He had decided that he would leave for London on January 7th which would be on a Monday and that would give him Sunday night to say good-bye to everyone and the start of a new week should be good medicine for the jump-starting of a new life.

Part Two

Camden Town, London

Dora Brittles was annoyed that Pat kept calling her Mrs. even though she had told him on numerous occasions that it would be OK for him to call her by her God-given name. Pat just didn't feel comfortable calling her Dora; after all, she was old enough to be his grandmother and right so wrong grandmothers

was old enough to be his grandmother and right so wrong, grandmothers should always be addressed as Mrs. Dora was for the most part a kind landlady but she had strict rules about and pertaining to the men that she rented her rooms out to. No smoking in the bedrooms. No drinking anywhere within one thousand paces of the house and if you ever come home drunk, don't come home. No women in the house and if she finds any of them dirty magazines under her nice respectable mattresses, the magazine and the dirty devil that purchased it would be out on the street.

Dora ran a clean house and she made it her daily business for to keep it a respectable household. Pat had been living under Dora's roof now for sixteen days and he was a model boarder except for the Mrs. thing. Breakfast was between six and eight o' clock and if you were late, you went without. Pat would always have left the house long before the first tea was poured and he would be down along "The Holloway Road" hoping to be picked up by some subby or anyone that was willing to offer him a day's work. Every morning he would wait down there until he was sure that all prospective employers were well gone and then he would take to walking through the various streets and calling in on different establishments and asking them if they were hiring, but no one ever was. He would return back to the boarding house each evening around eight. By that time he would be able to jump in the bathtub without having anyone coming to the door and making him hurry through his nice hot steamy bath. He loved just lying there in the tub with the hot water and it's radox bubbles bringing such a welcome relief to his tired feet. He formed a habit of talking to his feet and assuring them that if he could not find work the following day, he would board a train at Euston Station and pride or no pride he would haul his backside back to Ireland.

The cold of London was something that he had never experienced before; but then again, maybe it did get that cold in Ireland... but when a man gets cold in Ireland, he can sit in close to a roaring fireplace, take off his shoes and socks and roll up his trousers and toast his shins till they get so hot, he has to go over near the door to let them cool off. London was nothing like Pat had imagined it to be. How could a place be so crowded with people and yet have you feel like you are all alone in the world? People could pass you in the street without looking at you and it never seemed to bother them or care in the least bit who or what you were and what problems might be plaguing your life. There were days when Pat felt so angry towards all these people who came back to Ireland from

when Pat felt so angry towards all those people who came back to Ireland from London and would boast that you could pick money up off the streets and that a man could never be out of work in London.

After another morning of waiting on "The Holloway Road" and another long day trekking through the streets, Pat found himself outside Euston Station and he needed to use the toilet so he decided that he would go to the toilet there and when he was finished with that, he would get himself a hot cup of tea and he could sit in one of the long benches and drink it in the warmth of the station. While he was sitting there drinking his tea, the idea of going back to Ireland played strongly on his mind. He did not know how much longer he could stay in London, before he would begin to run out of money. The thought of being without money in London did not bear thinking about and it was a frightening thought that made him shudder worse than any cold. He may never have had too much in Ireland in the way of wealth but there was one thing that he could always be sure of... he would never go hungry in Ireland. He thought about going over to the ticket window and buying himself a one way ticket to Liverpool and from there he could catch the boat to Dublin.

A child crying and her mother's reprimanding distracted Pat's attention away from the ticket window and as he watched the mother in her useless efforts to quiet the child, he thought of his own mother and he missed her. Since he had arrived in London he had tried very hard not to think of his mother. She had begged him not to go and for the days leading up to his leaving, he could see her off in corners of the house crying to herself. One night he heard her beg his father to ask him to stay but Tom Murphy never did forget what his parents taught him and indeed if Pat was not happy with the way things were, then leave he could, but there would be no begging or anything of such that would come from Tom Murphy in order to prevent a grown man from doing what he must do...even if that man was his own son.

The child stopped crying and her mother put her back in her buggy. She was looking at Pat and he winked to her and that made her laugh. She had a nice laugh; the kind of laugh that mellows out the thoughts of a son missing his mother. There was a man off to the left, struggling with a cart-load of material that had just tumbled onto the ground and Pat went over to help him with retrieving everything from the spill. The man was wearing a uniform and he told Pat that he was a janitor for the station. Pat asked him if the station were hiring

Pat that he was a janitor for the station. Pat asked him if the station were hiring any more janitors and the janitor said that he was not sure but he knew that there was a toilet attendant's job going and the station manager was finding it hard to fill the vacancy. The janitor told Pat to go see the station manager whose office was up the stairs, over to the right and first door on his left at the top of the landing.

Of all the jobs that Pat had thought about doing, being a toilet attendant had never crossed his mind. He went to the top of the stairs and he knocked on the first door to the left of the landing. A loud, boisterous and raspy voice asked him to come in and Pat stepped inside very nervously. The man might have had a loud and authoritative voice but he looked pleasant and Pat felt that his smile was sincere. He asked Pat to sit down and asked him what he could do for him. Pat told him that he was there to inquire about the toilet attendant's job and the manager's face lit up like a Christmas tree. He stood up from his seat and reached this almighty paw across the table to Pat and Pat reached out and took it. The manager told Pat that he had a good firm grip, which made for a heartfelt and genuine shaking of hands. He went on to tell Pat that you could always tell the worth of a man by how he shook your hand.

The manager produced a few sheets of paper work from a drawer and he commenced to fill out an application form for Pat. Pat told him his name and his age, his current address and the manager asked him if there was someone that could be contacted, if ever an emergency should arise. Pat told him to call Mrs. Brittles, but he was not sure what her phone number was. He said that he would get it for him. The manager gave the application a quick once over and then he slid it across the table for Pat to sign his name to it. Pat told the manager that he could not read or write and the Christmas lights went out and the look of despair on the manager's face as he plopped back in his chair left Pat in no doubt that once again he had failed to bag himself a job. The manager apologized and told Pat that all of their toiletries came to the station in large bulk and Pat would have to be responsible for signing the receipts and if he did not know how to read or write then the station could be taken for a ride by some cunning delivery drivers. Pat shook his hand, assured him that he understood and he left.

Totally dejected and feeling like his life had just been bombed, he made his way down the stairs and out towards the front of the station. How could a man that

down the stairs and out towards the front of the station. How could a man that would apply for the lowest job that a person could ever stoop to getting, not get it and not get it because he could not read and write? He leaned heavily against one of the circular columns to the right of the exit and he stared blankly towards the street. His mind was a muddle of thoughts but not one thought seemed to make an iota of sense to him. It was as though he was trying to locate himself and he was lost so deep inside himself that it would have taken the limbs of a giant to pluck him from such a lowly place and bring him back to this painful place called... reality.

The word "apples" registered in his mind and then he heard "oranges" and "big juicy pears" and his senses came alive to the thought of sucking into a big juicy yellow pear. The man was shouting from across the street from a stall that he had set up there. Pat walked across the street and asked him for a half dozen of his yellowest pears. The man laughed and hollered, "It's far from yellow pears you was raised in Ireland Paddy boy!!!" The man clapped Pat on the back and assured him that he was only taking the Mickey out of him. Pat was not in the least bit offended. How could a man that had just been refused the opportunity to clean human excrement from the toilets of a London train station be offended by a Londoner who had the gall to believe that there were no yellow pears in Ireland? Where did he think Ireland was?...Antarctica?!!

There was seating next to the fruit stand and Pat sat down and took out one of his pears and began eating it. As he sat there he noticed that this man was doing a nice little business for himself. Customers were coming and going in a steady flow and Pat could see that most of them were regular customers because the vendor knew them by name and they called him "Legend". Pat wondered why they called him "Legend" but he supposed that it could have been any number of reasons and perhaps the right reason would be the most inane of reasons. Pat got up from his perch and asked Legend if it cost much to set up a fruit stand. Legend was a little taken back by the boldness of the question and he gave Pat a solid looking over before he told him that he had started out himself seven years ago from a wheelbarrow and a few bags of fruit tossed inside of it. Pat asked him where he got the fruit from and Legend told him that if he was interested, he could go to Covent Garden market early in the morning, get himself a wheelbarrow and throw a few bags of fruit into it and then wheel it to some busy corner and take his chances. Legend was quick to warn Pat, that he better not see him close to his little spot or he would send a few mates over to rough him

see him close to his little spot or he would send a few mates over to rough him up and Pat assured him that it would be too far to push a wheelbarrow from Covent Garden to Euston station. Legend laughed out loud and wished Pat good luck. Legend broke into his chant of apples and oranges and big juicy pears and as Pat walked away from him he wondered if he had the voice that would make people stop and purchase his wares.

At four o' clock the following morning, Pat was at Covent Garden Market and he bought himself a nice blue wheelbarrow. He pushed his barrow through the fruit stalls and he bought a bag of apples, a bag of oranges, a bag of pears, twenty-five pounds of green grapes and six dozen plums. By five o' clock he had left the market and by six o' clock he had found himself a nice little corner to do business from. At first he was a little shy about calling out his wares but after he made the first few sales, he found that he had a real knack for drawing people to his little venture. By ten o' clock he had sold everything. The next morning he bought twice as much fruit at the market and still by ten o' clock he was sold out. Each day his business grew and each day much better than the day before.

Six months went by and Pat was able to afford to lease a corner store on "The Edgware" road- not far from Maida Vale. After five years there he was able to open a supermarket further up "The Edgware" road- closer to Marble Arch. Twenty-five years had gone by and Pat's name was the biggest in chain supermarkets all over Great Britain.

One evening, Pat's secretary told him that his bank wanted to see him the following morning and they had an appointment set up for him at eleven o' clock. The following morning at ten fifty-five, Pat walked through the front door of the bank and he was ushered straight through to the manager's office. The manager, delighted to see Pat as he was the bank's best client, wanted to make sure that Pat was made comfortable during his visit so he offered him a drink but Pat declined the offer, telling the manager that he did not drink. A fat cigar was produced from a gold tinted box on the manager's desk but Pat told him that he did not smoke either.

The bank manager introduced himself as John Thompson. He told Pat that he was delighted to be able to meet with him finally after all the years that Pat had been doing business with his bank. Pat had never found an occasion to go to the bank during office hours. He would drop off his receipts into the night drop

bank during office hours. He would drop on his receipts into the night drop boxes and for everything else pertaining to his banking business his secretary took care of. John Thompson knew that the man he had sitting in front of him was not a man for small talk and he could see that he was already becoming impatient, so he cut straight through to the chase.

"The reason that I called you in here today, Mr. Murphy, is because I want to make life easier for both you and I and a whole lot of other people I am sure! For twenty-five years you have been doing business with this bank and in all of that time you have done all of your business transactions through hard cash! Today I want to issue you a check book and for the life of me I do not understand why you have not used the luxury of a check book up until now!"

For the first time in years Pat was confronted by his affliction, to the point where he had to yet again make excuses for it. Pat was an outright man and he liked it when people told it as it was so he told John Thompson that the check book was useless to him as he was unable to read or write.

He saw how his words had caused John Thompson to sit back in his chair with a look of dismay on his face and his mouth open searching for something that could be fitting to say at that very moment. John did eventually speak and he asked Pat to tell him how a man that had achieved so much could have gone through life without the gifts of reading and writing.

"My God!!" John Thompson exclaimed, "...what would you be today, Mr. Murphy, if you could read and write?"

Pat looked at him and his mind wandered back to an evening many years before when he thought his life had been flushed into the sewers of London.

"I'd be a toilet attendant..." he answered.

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