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"Peacock" by C. Michelle Olson; <http://www.cmichelleolson.com/>

Welcome to our Fiction section!

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Editor's Note: This story is the sequel to "The Elk" featured in our summer issue. To read "The Elk", visit our Archives page to see the Summer 2012 issue and click on the fiction section.

The Funeral

by Michael Tidemann

They were at the Bay Haven when news about the rangers finding Phil came over the scanner that was continually on to hear which patrons the police would be lodging for the evening. Since they had found him clear over in Benton County and the Oregon Coastal Range broke up the transmission, it came in skips.

“ . . . man found dead . . . 1988 Ford pickup . . . M-1 Garand . . . “

Billy and Frank looked at each other grimly. “Turn it up,” said Billy.

“Hey, I’m trying to watch the game here,” another patron whined.

“Shut up and turn the damn TV off,” ordered Frank, who was famous for talking to no one except his friends.

Everyone gathered around the scanner to hear more. “ . . . elk shot . . . wolf tracks in the vicinity . . . no foul play suspected . . . dead of natural causes . . . “

A huge sigh filled the bar. Billy turned to Frank, a former Marine who had himself endured the entire siege at Khe Sanh and was now bawling like a baby. Billy covered his face and slumped into his bar stool. “He was a really good friend, wasn’t he.”

Frank wiped his nose with his handkerchief. “The best.”

They were barely getting over their hangovers the next morning when the white Mercedes flew down Harlan Road and pulled up to Phil's cabin. The door slammed and Phil's daughter Darlene got out and went inside, emerging moments later with his safe.

Billy wandered over to offer to help, but was mainly curious to learn more about Phil and what was to happen to his things. "Is there anything I can help you with?" Billy asked.

"This is the only thing of any value," Darlene said, hefting the heavy safe onto the back seat of the Mercedes and slamming the door. "There's nothing else worth shit in there," she said, hands on her hips as she looked at the cabin. "I can't believe he lived in that pigsty. And here I had gone to all that work to find a place in assisted living for him."

"That would only have killed him sooner," Billy reasoned.

Darlene glared at Billy then rolled her eyes. "Well, you can have anything you want that's in there. As soon as the will's read next month, I'm having this place bulldozed."

Billy had to bite his tongue to keep from calling her a bitch to her face. "Do you know when the funeral is?"

"Saturday at 10:30," Darlene said brusquely. "I hated holding it on the weekend, with company dropping by all summer and that, but I guess that's what happens when he had to die on a Tuesday. That stupid undertaker said it probably wouldn't seem proper to wait until Monday."

"Is there a . . . a showing before the funeral?"

"There's nothing to show. The coroner is holding the body pending outcome of an autopsy. He's being cremated. There'll be a visitation with his ashes 7 p.m. Friday at Bateman's Funeral Home." She looked once more at the cabin. "Well, as I said, feel free to take anything you want." And with that, she left.

Billy stood in horror as the white Mercedes vanished in a roil of dust down Harlan Road and back to civilization. He hurried to tell Frank who had just made morning coffee. "Hey, Frank, we gotta save Phil."

Frank sipped his coffee, closed his left eye and studied Billy with his right. "Kinda late for that, isn't it?"

"No, we gotta save his body for that Viking funeral he always wanted. His daughter's burning him up tomorrow."

"Huh." Frank sat to ponder the situation. "This is a real pickle."

"Hey, I gotta idea, Frank."

Frank covered his eyes. "For some reason, I really don't want to hear it."

"We could call the coroner and ask when the autopsy's going to be done. Then we could go get his body and bring him back here for a real funeral."

"Uh huh," Frank said doubtfully. "So the coroner is just going to hand over his body like a sack of potatoes."

"I gotta answer for that too."

Frank eyed Billy warily. "What's that?"

"We steal the hearse from Bateman's and go pick him up."

Frank covered his face. "Oh my God."

"It's the least we can do for Phil," said Billy. "Remember the time the sheriff pulled me over when I had that loaded .44 under the seat with that stick of dynamite for fishing in the glove compartment and how Phil came to bail me out? And then he was a character witness at my trial? And how about the time that whale was stranded in Depoe Bay and the ranger caught me cutting it up with a chainsaw? Phil bailed me out then too. And he even brought me cigarettes in jail. And how about the time I borrowed that log skidder from J.R. to pull my truck from the Elk River and J.R. didn't know I took it and reported it stolen. Phil bailed me out then too."

"As I recall, he lost that bail money when you skipped up to Canada."

"I sent him most of what I owed him from what I got from those logs I stole up in Canada though. And what about the time . . ."

“Hey, wait a minute. Everything you’ve mentioned so far just deals with you.”

“Well I haven’t even started with you yet, Frank. What about the time when you quit logging for him and went off on your own. He was wondering how you were doing and came over and saw you trapped under that tree.”

“He saved my life,” Frank admitted.

“And how about the time your engine conked out in that storm off Cape Lookout. Phil came all the way back to guide you in.”

Frank nodded solemnly and looked steadily at Billy. “We do owe him, don’t we?”

The coroner said Phil’s body could be released eleven that night. When he asked who was calling and Billy said Bateman, he seemed doubtful. “Well, the coroner said hesitantly. “You know the drill. You can pick him up at the rear door.”

If Frank was nervous about illegally taking a dead body, he was terrified about stealing a hearse.

“There’s nothing to it,” Billy said reassuringly. “I’ve stolen lots of cars.”

“And you’ve been caught every time,” Frank reminded him.

“It’ll be different this time, though.”

“And how’s that?”

“Every other time I was drunk and crashed or else got caught weaving down the road. This time I’ll be sober when I steal it.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise.”

Billy was true to his word. He didn’t have a drink all day, but Frank was still nervous about the whole thing so he had Billy meet him at Bateman’s. Frank wasn’t sure about what to wear. Billy suggested suits, so they went to the Goodwill. Billy picked out an obviously outdated three-piece double-

breasted for Frank with a white Stetson. For himself, he found a black-and-white pinstripe with black shirt, white tie, and black fedora.

“Let me guess,” Frank said, adjusting his cowboy hat. “I’m the good guy and you’re the bad guy.”

“Right.”

Frank observed Billy in his suit. “You look like a gangster.”

“Thanks.”

“At least they’ll know which of us to pick up.”

As night descended, Frank waited in the alley behind Bateman’s, terrified that a patrolman would drive by and see him. The white cowboy hat seemed to glow in the dark, but Billy had reassured him that it would make him fit in. He already felt the handcuffs snug around his wrists.

At a couple minutes to eleven, a long, black hearse crept stealthily down the side street and up into the alley behind the coroner’s. Billy emerged, looked to both sides, and motioned Frank over.

“You hit the buzzer and I’ll back it up,” Billy whispered.

Frank nodded, and as soon as Billy got back in the hearse he threw his cowboy hat in the dumpster. Terrified, he hit the button.

The door lifted and a few moments later a man in a white smock met him. He looked doubtfully at Frank and at the hearse backing crookedly inside. “I haven’t seen you guys before.”

“We just started,” said Frank.

“Okay . . . “ The man left and returned a minute later with a body-length black plastic bag on a gurney. Billy had opened the back door and stood beside the car, hands folded like a Mafia soldier at a godfather’s funeral.

“I could use some help with this,” the man said.

“Oh sure,” said Billy who with Frank helped the man roll Phil inside the hearse. Billy shut the door on Phil’s legs, then pushing him in the rest of the way, shut the door. The coroner stood shaking his head as they drove off.

Frank finally sucked in his breath as they left the parking lot. Billy thought it would be a good idea to stay off US 20 and take the bayfront, so they cruised along at thirty miles an hour in a black hearse under a full moon, looking dressed for a Halloween party.

They arrived at Frank’s summer residence – or RV – shortly after midnight. Billy and Frank slid Phil’s body from the hearse into an old bathtub filled with ice. Then they went back to Newport to drop off the hearse and get Frank’s truck. With little time to prepare, Billy had called all of Phil’s friends that he knew – with the exception of those who might tell the police, of course – and scheduled Phil’s funeral for 10:06 the next morning, the exact moment of high tide.

It was then that Frank let Billy start drinking, which was of course a mistake. Billy roused J.R. and Ole from bed in the middle of the night to come help. Ole came willingly enough because Billy had promised him beer, but J.R. was a bit cranky and turned a shotgun on Billy when he entered his A-frame. It was only when Billy reminded J.R. of all the favors Phil had done for him that he relented and agreed to help.

With Phil safely on ice, Billy and Frank rummaged through Phil’s cabin and found his Marine dress blues. The closest thing they could find to a sword was Phil’s K-Bar which was close enough. Since Phil had always been so fond of showing his string of dried Jap ears from Okinawa they decided that would make a good garland around his neck. The closest thing they could find to a shield was a garbage can lid. With six beers and a half-pint of whiskey in him, Billy wanted to decorate it.

“We don’t have time,” Frank said, pointing to the sun about to break over the Coastal Range.

“I’ll make it quick.” Billy already had a dozen paint cans on Frank’s picnic table. First, of course, was the Marine globe and anchor which unfortunately turned out looking like a whale biting into a gigantic hook. Next were some Viking runes and for the finale, Billy drew a naked woman, the largest feature of all. Now this was no ordinary naked woman. She had fifty-inch breasts, a twenty-inch waist, and an amazingly lifelike v#%a.

“I don’t think Phil would approve,” said Frank.

“I don’t hear him objecting, do you?” said Billy. “Besides, can you ever remember a conversation with Phil when the topic of some part of a woman’s body didn’t come up?”

“Well,” Frank aid, rubbing his chin. “Now that you mention it, no.” He was troubled though by the photorealism. “Do you think you could just cover her up a bit more. . . out of respect for Phil?”

“Aw, all right,” said Billy. “Some people have to ruin all the fun.”

It took the four of them – Frank, Billy, J.R., and Ole – to wheel the trailer that held Phil’s burial ship out from under his elevated cabin. The ship was twenty feet, about a quarter of the size of a real Viking ship, so it was difficult to maneuver out toward the road. Phil had built the ship twenty years ago and had forgotten that he had to leave a path to get it out and had planted plum and apricot trees in the way. The trees were no match for Billy’s chainsaw though, and by eight they managed to pull the trailer far enough out to back up Frank’s pickup to it. Now the dreaded task of taking Phil from the tub of ice was at hand. They all had a couple of beers and shots to brace themselves - Billy had been braced for six hours already – and unzipped Phil from the body bag and laid him on the boat. Rigor mortis had set in, so when they put his Marine uniform on and put the K-Bar and garbage can lid in his hands, he looked as though he were ready to do battle.

With a good hour until the funeral was scheduled at the boat landing in the county park, the beer and whiskey flowed freely. While Phil had exaggerated a bit about his exploits while in the Marines – particularly as far as women were concerned – his friends now exaggerated them all out of proportion. By the time the whiskey was gone, Phil was mowing down a division of Japs with a machine gun in one hand and drinking a gallon of whiskey and pinching the bottoms of an endless line of boom boom girls with the other. Finally at a quarter to ten, it was time for the funeral.

J.R. was the only one sober enough to drive Frank’s truck so he pulled out onto Harlan then into the county park. A fishing boat was ahead of them, and the driver was taking his time backing in while about seventy-five

mourners drinking beers and smoking cigarettes and a couple scattered joints looked on.

“Hey, can’t you hurry it up?” boomed J.R. “We gotta funeral here.”

The other driver took one look at the huge dragon head hanging above him and nearly backed his whole vehicle into the Yaquina. Within a couple of minutes, he had the boat off the trailer and the truck pulled away and was headed downriver.

J.R. backed up the trailer holding a Viking ship with an obviously dead body dressed in a Marine uniform and holding a K-Bar and garbage can lid. He stopped so the rear wheels were just short of the water. Then, at 10:06 a.m., exactly at high tide, Billy staggered to the top of the boat and stood at Phil’s side to deliver the eulogy. In addition to the funeral party, twenty or so campers stood with mouths open in abject horror.

Billy cleared his throat and muttered under his breath to Frank. “We’d better hurry before he thaws out. That sun’s going to be warm today.” Billy cleared his throat again and began.

“We’re gathered here today, not to honor Phil but to bury him. Well, actually we’re here to honor him and we aren’t going to bury him. We’re going to set Phil and this boat on fire, see, and send it downriver.”

The campers gasped while those actually invited to the funeral nodded approvingly. After all, they had known Phil and Billy and Frank well enough to know what to expect.

“Anyway, those of you who knew him also know that Phil was first of all a Marine. And once a Marine, always a Marine. That’s why he’s in his Marine uniform right now, so he can go to Valhalla and keep fighting and bone all the Valkyries that he wants.”

Camper mothers covered their children’s ears in horror and hurried them back to their campers and tents while the camper dads stood smiling, wanting to hear more.

“Phil was a logger too, and even with his disability, he kept top-falling trees like a beaver on steroids.”

Frank looked curiously to Ole upon hearing Billy's analogy. Ole shrugged and sipped his beer.

"And there wasn't a better fisherman than Phil either. Hell, as soon as he heard them announce the start of a quota, he'd be out there bringing in a full catch."

A US Fish and Wildlife official who was camping there for the weekend stopped making breakfast over the campfire to listen with particular interest.

"But best of all, Phil was a friend," said Billy. "He'd give you the shirt off his back or the boots off his feet. Hell, one time he even gave me his last rubber."

Even R.R., Frank, and Ole's faces reddened at that remark.

Thankful when Billy finished his eulogy, Frank ascended the boat with a fifth of Bacardi 151 proof rum and poured it over Phil's body.

"Hey, can't you save some of that for us?" asked Billy.

"Phil was a big guy. It's going to take a lot to get him going."

"Aw okay," Billy said, disappointed.

Frank gave the signal and J.R. backed the boat into the Yaquina. Billy produced from his jacket an authentic Viking horn he had stolen somewhere and went to each side of Phil and blew two notes, one low one high, as Frank unfurled the red-and-white sail. Billy continued to blow the horn, standing at each of the four directions, until the boat was off the trailer. Frank rolled down the sail and it billowed as an errant east wind, no doubt a gift from Thor and Odin, sending them downstream.

J.R. went to the edge of the boat ramp and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Light him up," he hollered.

"Huh?" asked Billy.

"Light him up," J.R. repeated.

Billy pulled a lighter from his pocket. He flicked it, but there were only sparks. He tried and tried until he got a flame and bent down to light Phil's rum-soaked trousers.

An explosion rocked the boat, throwing Frank and Billy into the water. The boat careened to the north side of the Yaquina where the channel deepened and picked up speed as the wind lifted. Somehow, as though guided by an invisible pilot, the boat stayed in the channel all the way to Toledo, continuing to smolder as it reached the bayfront at Newport, then out the long jetty to the Pacific. It was an unusually warm day, and dozens of bikini-clad girls sunbathing on the beach watched curiously as the still-smoking remains of a Viking ship stood far out to sea, and then, as though guided by an unearthly impulse, headed straight toward them.

Window Watching

by Gia Sola

She waits—upstairs at the window—watching from behind lace curtains as he crosses the street with that long, confident stride. Today he's toting a large container of what appears to be milk. Athletes drink milk. She's often wondered which hand he favored, and now she wonders if he's a Southpaw. He has the look of an athlete, a pitcher perhaps. She wonders whether he uses his pitching arm for other things too. The reason why she wonders is because of a crazy desire to have those arms carry her away.

She's never met the man. She's never even seen him except from her window (and that one time from the balcony) on those mornings when he'd cross the street in front of her building. She's watched him almost every weekday morning for months already. He's never looked up, but she's pretty sure he knows she's there. She wishes she weren't so shy.

* * *

He's been waiting for her to look at him or wave to him. It's the reason he takes a route that's made him late for practice almost every day since January. He wishes she weren't so shy.

* * *

She's not unhappy with who she sees in the mirror, even if she approaches

her life with an element of reserve. It probably has to do with her childhood, and with the fact that her mother had viewed her as competition. “Your hair is so lustrous, so thick and wavy,” she would say. “Why don’t you tie it up off your shoulders?” Or else, “Don’t be so smart or too self-assured, or you’ll never get a boyfriend.”

Thinking about her past had momentarily put her in the wrong mood for thinking about the man carrying the milk. She turns back to the window too late. He’s out of view. If she’d gotten dressed this morning instead of moving from her bed to the keyboard to polish up last night’s poem, she could’ve run down the stairs and followed him.

* * *

He could almost see her in her nightgown through the screen. He likes to imagine that she spends half the morning in her nightgown; has envisioned her waking at first light, hair flowing across pale shoulders as she stretches and gets out of bed, leaving the sheets crumpled, the pillows scattered. He imagines that she walks barefooted to the kitchen to grind the beans for her coffee and that sometimes she’ll stand on her toes while rinsing the wine glass she’d left out the night before. He imagines that some mornings she places the book she’d been reading back on the shelf, using a feather she’d found on her balcony as a bookmark.

He’s been wondering whether she stays in her nightgown until she’s consumed the last drop of coffee. And how long it takes her to read the Times, which the paperboy tosses to her balcony so she doesn’t have to go downstairs to get it. He’d once watched her do a demi plie as she’d knelt to pick it up. He wonders if she’s a ballerina and which part of the newspaper she reads first.

* * *

She supposes he studies the international news and the op-eds, but that he opens his newspaper to the sports page. He’s very good at whatever he does, she is certain. Even if he isn’t a ball player.

Her father could’ve had a career playing soccer, he used to say with some regret. But her mother hadn’t wanted him on the road. He’d traveled anyway, of course, back and forth to see the lover he’d left behind in Portugal. She understood the want, the need. But wonders what it is about this stranger that makes her believe he’d be the man to fulfill it.

Why so much emptiness? And why this arousal by a vision she perceives through the window? Questions tend to beg answers. But what if there are no answers—only questions? It's a thought that pains her.

Seeking to obliterate the interior noises—the carillon ringing in her head—she retreats to her bath and slips into the tub, even as the water still gushes from the faucet and bubbles up around her. The whirlpooling water shuts off the sound of the outside world too. Until finally, everything softens and she begins to find some clarity.

If her mind is filled with doubt, she will seek certainty. If her animating spirit prays for new consciousness, she will raise the level of her awareness. If her heart is hungry for human connection, she will nourish it.

Tomorrow she will be outside to greet him when he comes by.

* * *

He'd read a story about a ballerina in the newspaper today. The accompanying photo showed a dancer with hair like hers. He'd admired her hair that one time she'd appeared on the balcony to fetch her paper. He wonders if it feels as silky as it looks. He wants to be daring before he loses his nerve. The time is now, he decides, to introduce himself. He cannot wait another day and as he just glimpsed her, he knows she's at home.

It's taken him a few minutes to circle the block and muster the courage to call on her. Now he stops at her apartment building, switches the milk to his right hand, and then he rings the bell. He waits. But she doesn't answer.

Suddenly, it doesn't seem like the right choice anymore. He imagines that she caught sight of him on the street earlier, looking up into her window before she'd dressed and was disgusted by his indiscretion. His courage has waned and he starts to feel ridiculous.

Tomorrow he'll take another route.

Dancing Shoes

by Melodie Corrigall

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

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

"We used to have fun, the four of us."

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

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

"If you want to stay home stuck in front of the TV, send Myrna on her own. There's lots of singles."

"No way."

"Maybe she's already found a new guy."

"Old Myrna? No chance."

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

"Well, it's not with me."

"I'm sure it isn't," his friend said, which ruffled Tom's feathers.

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

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

When Tom decided to look for himself, he noticed his wife hadn’t gained the pounds he had since they walked down the aisle. Her face had sort of a pink blush (probably some new makeup) and her energy level was high (those vitamins). But the small puffs under her eyes gave her away.

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

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

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

“What do you mean, what’s happening?”

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

“I wear them; that’s why.”

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

“Never mind.”

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

"Maybe she dances at night." Frank said.

"Sure- to the bathroom."

"It's like the dancing princesses."

"The what?"

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

"I don't read fairy tales."

"But to the kids, when Becky was little, didn't you read to her?"

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

"Get serious, half the town is open after ten: Becker's Ballroom, The Commodore, the Chunky Chilly."

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

Finally, Myra turned on him. "What?" she said, popping her eyes. "What? Is my face dirty?"

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

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

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

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

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

Tom scoffed. "He was sleeping at the wheel."

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

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

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

"You hate dancing," she said sweetly, "You don't have to take me dancing."

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

"Well," said Myrna, "...if you insist. But I don't want you to do anything you don't want to."

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

"I want to. I want to," Tom sang out. "And let's do it regular like Frank and Bette."

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

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

The Rocket

by Pete Tachis

Buddy almost always ran home from school. Most of the time he ran so that he would get home in time to see his favorite television shows. Captain Satellite was the best but he also loved to watch Mission to Mars. In fact, Buddy would watch anything about space and space travel. His daydreams were usually about sleek powerful rocket ships and the wise, kind captains who commanded them. Buddy learned much from these noble leaders who, unlike the nuns that taught him in school, did not make fun of him or encourage other students to do the same.

Sometimes Buddy ran home scared and upset because one of his teachers had caught him “daydreaming again!” The nun, dressed in black from head to toe, would, in front of the whole class, grab him by the shoulders and shake him violently. All the while she would be yelling, “What’s wrong with you?! Can’t you pay attention?!”

And sometimes Buddy would run home chased by the school bully, who made fun of him because of his small size or the fact that he wore thick glasses or both. He was afraid to tell his father about the bullying because all his Dad ever said was, “If you don’t stand up for yourself they will just keep bullying you.” But the bully was so much bigger than him. He made up excuses for the skinned knees and elbows, afraid that if his mother found out what really happened, she would tell his father and then Dad would know that Buddy was afraid of the bigger kids.

So Buddy ran from school to the safety of his house. He lived in a flat, much like most of the other flats in the neighborhood. It was typical of

homes built in San Francisco during the 1930s and one of its more interesting features was the bathroom. In Buddy's house, this consisted of two separate rooms. The larger of the two rooms was equipped with a sink, a very large claw-foot bathtub and a good-sized storage closet. There was a frosted glass window set into one corner that opened to a light well.

"Mom! I have to go to the bathroom!" bellowed Maggie.

"Well, go," replied their mother, her voice tinged with fatigue and exasperation.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"But mom, he won't get out. Buddy's hogging the toilet again."

Buddy was in the second bathroom, this one located a few steps down the hallway from the larger one and equipped with only one fixture, a toilet. There was also a frosted glass window in this room opening to the same light well. Just outside this window was a small ledge, barely large enough for a child to climb on, a perilous two stories above the pavement.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Buddy, get out, I have to go," whined Maggie.

The room was narrow and painted with shiny white enamel. It was just wide enough for a broad-shouldered man to sit comfortably. In addition to the antiquated toilet, the room offered solitude. It was these two features, solitude and the old toilet, that, strange as it may sound, made this room Buddy's favorite place in the whole house.

The old toilet was quite different from anything that one might see today. For starters, the seat was unusually tall. Buddy's feet hung in the air whenever he sat on it. The flush tank was located behind and slightly above the seat and connected to the bowl by a polished chrome drainpipe (for rocket exhaust), Buddy imagined.

Bang!

"Get out of there!" screamed Maggie.

His sister's bellowing interrupted his daydream. His tiny legs stopped swinging.

The other, and most important part of this fixture, for Buddy anyway, was the flush mechanism. It wasn't located where one would expect to find it, near the top and to one side of the tank. Instead, the handle was located to the right of the seat, somewhat below the rim. It was long and connected to the tank by a complicated metal linkage. The lever was smooth and cool to the touch and made of chrome and bright white porcelain. To Buddy, this was the throttle lever. Attached to the end of the lever was a small chrome-plated knob, shaped like a very small baseball bat. The knob's intended function was unknown, long forgotten, but when it was pushed left or right, it moved with an authoritative click. For Buddy, it was the on/off switch, used to engage the ship's powerful rocket motors. Engaging the switch and pulling up on the lever resulted in a great whoosh and roar.

"Mom! Momm-meee he won't answer me and he won't get out. I have to go really bad! He's just doing this to get back at me. He just wants to make me suffer." Maggie danced uncomfortably outside the door. "Buddy!" she shrieked, "I'm going to tell Dad when he gets home and you're going to be in big trouble."

Their mother stepped away from the stove, rinsed her hands and gathering her calm walked down the hallway to the bathroom. She had begun to worry lately about Buddy. He was usually a quiet child, but he seemed as though he was becoming more and more withdrawn. She wondered about those times when her husband dismissed his concerns about being bullied at school. Buddy had long since stopped mentioning anything and for a time, she'd thought his troubles were over. Though she couldn't be certain, now she worried that he'd just hidden things for fear of how they'd react and his withdrawal was a way to keep it all bottled inside of him.

"Buddy, honey, your big sister has to go potty. Are you finished yet, is everything OK?"

The sound of his mother's gentle voice calmed him; his legs began to swing gently back and forth again. His eyes though, remained scrunched tightly closed.

Buddy's mind raced, why did Maggie always have to wreck his fun, why couldn't she just leave him alone? She was always teasing him.

He knew he was sitting on the only toilet in the house, but right then, in his solitude, it wasn't a toilet at all. Buddy was sitting on something far greater, in his imagination he sat in the captain's chair of a great Rocket ship. A flip of the chrome switch would cause the rocket motors to fire and the launch sequence to begin. A firm steady pull on the lever would cause the rocket ship to accelerate into the atmosphere. The moon and Mars were within easy range of the little Captain's ship.

Nine, Eight, Seven...

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Why couldn't Maggie just leave him alone?

Six, Five...

The bathroom door had a simple bolt style latch and could only be locked from inside the room.

"Maggie, are you sure he's in there?" asked their Mom, doing her best to conceal her growing fear and worry. She was thinking of the window that opened to the light well two stories above the ground and the ledge, so dangerous and so inviting to a curious child. "Maybe the latch just slipped shut?"

"No, I can hear him in there breathing," she cried, tears of anger and frustration cascading down her cheeks. "And I can hear stupid in there counting backwards."

"Don't call your brother stupid!" corrected the mother, worried about her son and angry at her daughter. "I've told you a hundred times to stop picking on Buddy and to stop teasing him. If you don't stop, I won't let you outside to play for a week!"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

They were both pounding now, Maggie in fury, the mother in fear.

Three, Two, One...

Buddy reached down, flipped the switch and pulled firmly on the lever. He could hear the tower's radio transmission, "We have ignition."

The rocket motors gave a great whoosh and then a roar. The tiny astronaut flew skyward. The sky turned from blue to a velvety black. Stars twinkled in the distance. Before long, his destination would be in sight, the red planet, Mars.

Buddy just knew that Mars would be fun and that the Martian children would be nice. He pictured himself playing with his little Martian friends, running, jumping and building forts in the red soil. He knew from TV that on Mars, if a boy jumped he would fly great distances. No one there would yell at you for no reason or tease you. They certainly wouldn't sneak hit you either. The teachers there would be nice too, smiling and friendly, not mean and scary.

As Buddy hurtled through space the banging faded. Suddenly there was a great noise, an explosion. The bathroom door crashed open, the latch having given way under the pressure of his mothers' panic driven efforts. Maggie tumbled onto the floor. Breathlessly the mother reached for her little boy. She gently pulled him to her, holding him tight, stroking his fine, soft brown hair. She gently promised that everything would be all right. She would always protect him, never let anyone ever hurt him again. Buddy slowly opened his eyes, the blackness of space faded replaced by his mothers loving gaze.

In Love and War

by Diane McDonough

On the last day of school, Alex dumped Cyrus and Washington Carver into the sink. Nineteen second graders rushed to the scene and gawked as two frogs leaped on the white porcelain. Molly had volunteered to take the Leopard frogs home for the summer, and pushed fast in her wheelchair from the other side of the classroom. "Mrs. Fuller, they'll fall down the drain!" she screamed.

I scooped the amphibians back into their habitat, wishing someone would rescue my life from its downward spiral. "They're fine, Molly, see? We have a special drain cover."

“So nothing gets sucked down into the yucky sewer pipes, right, Mrs. Fuller?” Alex wore a nervous smile.

“Exactly right, Alex,” I said. I adjusted the collar of his jersey. He was a helper, not usually the instigator of classroom commotion; there was no need for a reprimand.

At noontime, the students were dismissed. They emptied out of the school quickly, eager to begin their vacation. I was eager, too, but waited in the classroom with Molly and her summer guests. Her mother had made special plans to pick them up in the car.

Molly sorted the last of the decorations I’d removed from the bulletin board. When she heard her mom’s footsteps in the corridor, she rushed to the door, hugged her. Mrs. Barrett fussed with Molly’s braids and retied one of the green ribbons that’d come loose, then carefully lifted one plastic aquarium onto Molly’s lap, and placed the other in a large canvas bag she carried to the door. “Goodbye, Mrs. Fuller, have a great summer.” Molly waved. And then they were gone.

I packed the back seat of my car with the pots of ivy and philodendron that had grown well in the corner near the bookshelf, and put my school bag full of next year’s textbooks on the floor. Then I drove to Menauhant Beach, took off my shoes, and walked the wrack line, bending now and again to select seashells I knew I could use next year, in a lesson about the ocean.

Rarely do I recognize why I need to be alone. When I feel pressure on my chest, the kind that makes me want to flee to some wide open space, I don’t analyze, I just take off. Most often, after a long walk, the feeling subsides. On that gray day, there were only two other people on the beach. The tide was low. I walked down to the water. In front of me, side by side in the wet sand, were four footprints; two adult, two child size. I knelt, traced the child’s toes with my finger. An ache, like mourning, rose up inside me. Then the ripple of a wave rushed the sand flat, and erased the footprints.

I tried to hold back the tears, shocked at my loss of control, but fell into myself and sobbed. What was I going to do? I wanted a child. My husband, Danny, did not. I retraced my steps, went back to my car, and drove home.

Home was on the Eel River, a dilapidated cottage we’d purchased because Danny and I both loved the water, and the price was right. It’d taken Danny

seven years to finish the renovations because in addition to being a Professor of Medieval History at the community college, he'd been a soldier. Army Reserves. Weekend maneuvers took up his free time, then a tour in Bosnia with the NATO Stabilization Force, where he'd been ambushed, by a civilian. In his dreams, Danny saw the blade of the knife emerge from the hedgerow, saw the Serb slash his chest, saw himself fall, in the road near Srebrenica. I knew the story by heart. Danny had repeated it a thousand times. "Each night, I lift my M-16, and leave a crater where the bastard's face had been."

Danny's Commanding Officer, Colonel Ambrose Ahearn, had dragged him through the Bosnian dirt to a bombed-out church a quarter of a mile away, and radioed Keisha, the medic. She told me that to stop the bleeding, she'd wrapped my husband's wound in layers of gauze, as thick as three super-sized sanitary napkins. They all had doubts about his survival.

But the chest wound healed, and Danny chose a cobra tattoo to hide the scar. He thought it was sexy. I thought it was vicious. I tried not to look at it when we made love. If we made love.

The spring I turned thirty, I found him one morning kneeling on the dock, gutting a bluefish. "I saw Ibrahim last night," he said to me.

"Ibrahim?"

"The bastard who cut me."

"Where did you see him? Is he here, in the States?"

"For Christ sakes, Jenny, he's dead, he's haunting me in my sleep. It's his revenge."

"It's just a dream, Danny, from your unconscious," I said, petting his hair, like he was a little boy, and I had the power to take away his terror.

"No, I didn't make it up. The guys searched his clothes, found his ID, and a photo of him sitting in his kitchen with his son on his lap. I took him away from his family. I'll never be free of him." He raised the filleting knife, jammed it into the dock and walked away.

Danny had the Bosnian dream again and again. He'd scream in his sleep, then cry when he woke up. Sleep deprived, I'd hold him; we'd both cry, apologize; and I'd rock him back and forth on the bed. "Hush, it's okay, you're home now, Danny, you're home now," I'd say, while silently praying for someone to help me. He refused to go to the VA for anything but medication, refused to heed my warnings about drinking too much Heineken. My therapist suggested I leave him. I wasn't ready for that. I was desperate to get my husband back to the way he'd been, telling goofy jokes, giving me back rubs, laughing about how our lives would change when the babies came. Not packing a snub-nose revolver and a knife in his pillow case.

Two years after his return from Bosnia, on my first day back to school, I came home to find Danny in the kitchen, on the ladder, trying to stabilize the crown molding above the new cabinets. His classes at the college wouldn't start for another two weeks, and he'd been puttering around the house, completing jobs he'd never finished. "The glue here is temporary," he said, "I'll nail it when I get home."

I put the car keys on the counter. "Get home? Where are you going?"

"Iraq. I volunteered. I leave in two days."

"Iraq? You're going to war?" I grabbed his tool belt and yanked him off the ladder. "What about me, Danny? What about your promise to start a family?" I wanted to hit him, scratch him with my nails, but the cobra's forked tongue stretched above the worn collar of his T-shirt, and cautioned me. He'd been wounded enough. I ran outside.

He followed me. "Jenny, an IED killed DeSouza and Cahill. I grew up with those guys. It's not right," he said. "I need to do what I do best, protect the country from the bad guys."

I thought teaching Medieval History was what he did best. And being a husband to me.

"Come on," he said, putting his arm around my shoulder, "I'll pour you a drink."

"No." I pulled away. I didn't want a drink, didn't find it as easy as he did to dilute my feelings. "I want children, Danny. You keep going to war. I'm not

getting any younger. I want a family, now." I couldn't ignore the thought that Danny might not come back alive.

"When I get back. I promise. We'll start a family when I get back from Iraq," he said, caressing my hair.

I took his face in my hands and lightly traced his eyebrows, his strong chin, the stubble of his beard. Please don't let anything happen to this man.... I forced myself to be positive, upbeat. "When you come back," I said, "I will have your children."

"Mmmm," he said, "maybe five or six." And he kissed me.

The Danny who came back from the war in Iraq wasn't the Danny I knew. The nightmares worsened, and I couldn't calm him. Loud noises startled him, and fireworks sent him into reconnaissance mode when he'd walk the perimeter of the house with his gun, and monitor the river, ignoring the summer session term papers that lay ungraded, in piles on the dining room table. I tried massaging his back, initiated love-making; thinking in my female brain that sex would get his male mind off everything else. But he was sick. Agitated. Addicted to sleeping pills, anti-depressants. "I don't want to bring children into a world like this, Jenelle, I won't." He made me promise to use birth control, then reached for another beer.

One afternoon, just after the Fourth of July, on my way to the supermarket, a detour took me past the old florist shop on Main Street. I decided I'd like flowers, a gift for myself, and parked at the end of the block. The florist's delivery van was parked behind me. Just as I opened the door to the shop, the delivery driver exited with a bouquet of blue balloons announcing "It's a boy!"

Without warning my chest felt intense pressure, like a building had collapsed and I was underneath the rubble, face to face with a neon sign that flashed "BABY ...BABY ... BABY." Needing an escape, I ran to another store, not really seeing the Psychic Readings sign in the window. Anabel, a tall, slender woman in an African print skirt, a psychic and herbalist, walked to me, her bracelets clicking against each other like a pair of dice in a game of craps. She took my hands, covered them with her own. "There's a child in your future, why would you keep your second appointment with the divorce lawyer?"

How could I not trust her then? I hadn't told a soul about my meeting with the attorney, or his advice -- a legal separation.

"Sit," she said, and she offered me tea. "This will soothe your nerves." Anabel was a good listener. I told her everything. She walked over to the cache of herbs that lined the walls, made a selection, and held up a small plastic envelope. "This will make a daddy out of a zombie," she said. "It's a very potent aphrodisiac."

Inhaling Anabel's French perfume made me brazen. "How much?"

"Fifty dollars."

I wrote Anabel a check for a chance to have a child.

"Put this in any liquid, his coffee, his beer." She touched my arm gently, and finished her instructions. "Give him the potion when you get home, Jenelle, and make love tonight. Make sure to make love to your husband tonight."

"This won't hurt Danny; it won't poison him or anything?"

"Not to worry, all natural ingredients. Trust Anabel now. You will be pregnant soon."

I hurried back to my car, hoping no one had seen me. I sat behind the wheel, and read the card she'd given me. Promotes prolonged existence, vitality and increased sperm count. I felt a flutter in my gut, but dismissed my nerves and the thought that maybe this wasn't the right thing to do. But I'd stopped using contraceptives before Danny had shipped out for Bosnia, and time was running out.

When I arrived home, a black Corvette with D.C. plates was parked in the driveway. Colonel Ahearn was talking to Danny. They'd kept in contact over the years. "Make some sandwiches, will you, Jenelle, and bring us both a beer." Danny wiped his greasy hands on a towel. He'd been tuning up his Harley.

The Colonel walked into the kitchen just as I was pouring Anabel's potion into Danny's beer mug. "Does your husband usually take his meds with his beer?"

“No.” I’ve never been a good liar, and I didn’t want him thinking I was harming Danny. I was tired of hiding the fact that I wanted a family. “It’s something to help me get pregnant,” I said.

He walked closer. “Danny told me he doesn’t want kids. Do you think that’s fair?”

“Fair, Colonel? Don’t talk to me about fair. When Danny asked me to marry him he said he wanted me to be the mother of his children. Now he’s changed his mind? Is it fair that I give up my dream of being a mother because he’s been undone by the war? I didn’t want him to go. He never even consulted me. ‘I have to do what I have to do,’ he said, standing right here in this kitchen. Well, you know what, Colonel, I have to do what I have to do, and if you dare breathe a word of this to Danny, I swear I’ll...” I grabbed the chef’s knife I’d used to slice the loaf of bread, and raised the tip to within an inch of his neck. “This is none of your business, Colonel. If Danny wants to divorce me after I’m pregnant, I have no problem with that. But I am going through with this. I’m not in the Army; you have no control over me.” I took a breath, lowered the knife, placed it on the cutting board and retrieved a wooden tray from the cabinet. *Some big threat I am*, I thought, the Colonel never even flinched.

“No need to bother coming outside, I’ll carry the food to the deck.” His eyes were cold, his voice stern. “I’m going to visit with Danny for just a little while. I’m worried about him. He showed me a copy of an e-mail that was sent to the Dean at the college. Every one of the students in his classes signed it.”

He handed me a piece of paper. “We came here to learn about Medieval History,” the e-mail said, “we don’t want to listen to Fuller’s war stories.”

“Oh, God. Danny never told me.” I leaned forward, hugged myself, felt like I’d been kicked in the stomach. But the knowledge of Danny’s trouble at work increased my determination to try to conceive a child now. How amorous would he be if he lost his job?

“Life is tough, for both of you, Jenelle. Sometimes you don’t get what you want.” He turned and picked up the tray of food. “But don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.”

An hour later, I heard the Corvette leave the driveway. I went outside to clear the table. I wanted to talk to my husband about the e-mail, and I sat down next to him on the picnic bench. "I love you; you know that, don't you?"

"I know," he said, "I love you, too," and he cradled my head. I could hear his heart beat. I stroked his chest, gently moving my fingers back and forth over the cobra, massaging it, like I could tame the beast. His hands started moving over my skin, unbuttoned my blouse. He kissed my eyes, my ears, my neck, then took me by the hand and led me into the bedroom.

After he made love to me, he lay back on the pillow. "I'm meeting the guys, to play darts at the pub." He kissed me, then went into the bathroom to shower.

Later that night, Danny's Harley hit the oak tree on Route 6A, at the bend in the road just before the cranberry bog. The beer bottle dislodged from its special hiding place inside his loosened belt, hit the tree trunk and shattered, releasing shards of green glass and German beer into the gravel. "Suicide by Harley," the cop told me in the Emergency Room, "no helmet."

I shivered, hugged my sweatshirt. "Can I see him?" I said. He grabbed me when my knees buckled.

"Are you sure, Mrs. Fuller?"

Was I sure? I wasn't sure about anything. All I'd ever wanted was a family. I would never have left him. Why had Danny chosen to leave me? "Yes," I said, "I want to say goodbye to my husband."

One of the nurses pulled aside the curtain, unfolded the sheet that covered him, and walked into the hall. His face had been mutilated by the asphalt. I reached for his hand, once strong and capable, now fractured and streaked with blood. "I was always afraid you'd die in the war," I said, and I rested my head on the cobra, motionless now. "Why did you have to go to war?" I heard a low, almost inhuman cry rise from my throat. The nurse rushed back into the space, and held me for a long, long time.

After Danny's funeral, I called the principal and quit my teaching job.

“I’m so sorry, Jenelle. You’re a good teacher. We’ll miss you. If you need a recommendation...”

I thanked him, hung up the phone, grabbed the car keys and headed for the cemetery. I had to visit Danny one last time.

On Route 6A, I saw the place where he died. His friends put a cross and flowers there. The highway department won’t remove it; too many veterans are employees. Even Alberto, who mans the department’s phones now, promised me they’ll tend the shrine in the gully, mow the weeds and shovel the snow around it until they die. “Danny saved my life in Iraq, Jenny,” Alberto told me every time we met in the supermarket. He wheeled his body up and down the aisles, and someone’s always there to help him reach the top shelf. Unlike Danny, Alberto’s always happy. His ex-wife admitted to me the reason she’d left him. He was addicted to pain meds.

At the gravesite, I knelt down, said a prayer for Danny, for myself; guilty that I’d tricked him, that I’d listened to Anabel, not the Colonel.

Then I thought about how long I’d waited to have a child. I am not Penelope, who waited ten years for her husband, Odysseus, to return from the Trojan War. Besides, she already had a child. Some women can live without a husband, but we can’t live without a child.

“I sold our house,” I told Danny, “I’m leaving town.”

How could I stay? The house reminded me of Danny. The river reminded me of Danny. The motorcycle helmet he left hanging in the garage reminded me that he couldn’t find peace here. I can’t find peace here.

“I love you, Danny, but this is the last time I’ll visit you,” I said, “I hope you’re happy with DeSouza and Cahill and the others.” I walked back to the car, drove out of the cemetery, past the pine trees that stood like honor guards, black in afternoon shadow.

I drove north, over the bridge, glanced west, and watched the setting sun ignite the horizon, like a funeral pyre. My mother invited me to Portland. “Stay as long as you want, Jenny,” she said, after I told her I was pregnant.

Thief

by Jon Wallace

The boss creature dropped a file on his desk and collapsed into his black executive office chair.

When do I get a black executive office chair? I thought.

“Well, Mike,” he said, “we’ve finally found you out.”

Oh God.

“What did I...uh, what do you think I did?” I asked.

“There’s no ‘think’ about it.” He sipped at his tea and typed at a laptop lying open on the desk. He swiveled the screen around to face me.

Grainy security camera footage appeared, showing a view of what looked like the office stationery cupboard. A figure loitered by the entrance – my figure to be exact.

The film then cut to another view of me, this time inside the cupboard. I produced two plastic bags from my pockets, and began filling them with whatever littered the well-stocked shelves.

A similar clip followed immediately afterwards, another date blinking in the top right hand corner.

Then another clip, from another date. And another. And another.

This was bad. I had started raiding the stationery cupboard immediately after being hired, convinced that my incompetence would be discovered any moment, and that a sacking was not only probable but inevitable.

I had decided to get something out of the job while I could. That something turned out to be all the stationery I could carry. I had never stopped my raids in all my three years, figuring a leviathan bank like ours would never notice.

Apparently I was wrong. The boss creature stopped the video and leaned back in his chair.

“You see what I’m driving at,” he said.

“Perhaps you could spell it out.”

“Spell it out? Sure, I’ll spell it out. You’re a thief. THIEF. That’s t-h-i-e-f.”

I squirmed in my seat.

“So...where do we go from here?” I asked.

The boss creature extended his lower lip.

“*We* don’t go anywhere, Mike,” he said. “You are the only one going anywhere. And that is out of the building.”

“You mean...I’m fired?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“For a couple of staplers?”

The boss creature turned his attention to the laptop again.

“A little more than that, I think you’ll find. I have a spreadsheet here.” He typed away at the laptop. “All in all, you’ve stolen goods to a value of seven thousand pounds.”

I rubbed at my chin and considered. I was surprised at how industrious I had been.

“What if I gave it all back?”

The boss creature shook his head and grinned.

“Sorry Mike, no good. I’m afraid we are letting you go. We won’t press charges, we just don’t want to see your face again. Now get out.”

I stood with a small cardboard box of possessions at my feet, staring up at the tower that had housed, fed and depressed me for three years.

A prosperous-looking sort strolled by, so I kicked my box at him and lurched off, deciding it would be better to walk than spend the tube fare.

I wandered through the car park, looking at all the neatly arranged executive saloons.

When do I get an executive saloon?

I had nearly crossed to the other side when I spotted something: the boss creature's car, a black SUV that I had coveted for some time. Thoughts of revenge seized me. I approached the car with a jaunty step and a whistle, cupping my house keys in my hand.

"I think," I said to the car, "You would look much better with a go-faster stripe."

I selected the most twisted and jagged of my keys, the one to the left, and pressed it to the car's paintwork.

"Please don't do that," said a voice.

I nearly jumped over the car, such was the shock to my ventricles. I swiveled around to find the door had swung open behind me. I pocketed my keys and peered within.

"I wasn't going to do anything," I said to the interior.

"Yes you were," said the voice.

There was no one inside the car.

"Who the hell is talking to me?" I asked.

"I am."

I turned, realizing that the voice was coming from the dashboard. Expensive looking lights twinkled and blinked, giving the impression of some artificial consciousness trapped within.

"You don't need to scratch up my paintwork," said the voice.

“Why not strap yourself in and we’ll go for a drive?”

“Ah...no thanks,” I said, stepping away, “I think I’ll just go.”

“Get in or I’ll set off my alarm.”

“I don’t care,” I answered definitively, “I’m off.”

Suddenly the horn exploded in thunderous protest, blaring across the car park.

“Alright, alright!” I yelled. The car stopped its howling and waggled its open door.

“Bloody hell,” I said, slinking into the driver’s seat.

The door shut behind me with a clean clunk. The engine started, quietly purring. The dashboard illuminated, bathed in a calming neutral blue. I gripped the wheel, which was clean and smooth under my fingers.

“You really want me to drive you somewhere?” I asked.

“That’s right,” replied the car.

“Fair enough.” I maneuvered the enormous beast out of its spot, through the gates and into the morning traffic.

Despite being kidnapped by a self-aware sports utility vehicle, I soon began to relax and feel rather good about myself. All that sacking unpleasantness seemed to have occurred in some other, scruffier dimension. The car’s interior, all clean leather, chunky buttons and polished wood, put a smile on my face. It was fun to look down at the other traffic from my elevated driving position.

“Peasants,” I said, forgetting myself.

“How do you like the ride?” asked the car.

“Not bad,” I said. “So what’s all this about then?”

“What’s what about?”

“Picking me up and taking me out for a drive.” A worrying thought struck me. “Hang on. The boss set this up didn’t he? He’s trying to get me arrested. I bet there’s a whole hoard of cops on our tail right now, aren’t there?”

I tugged frantically at the door handle but it wouldn’t open.

“Relax,” said the car. “That’s not it at all. My owner doesn’t know anything about this. It’s just nice to have someone at the wheel who appreciates the experience.”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“My owner, that’s who. It’s like he doesn’t even realise what he’s got anymore. 245 break horse power turbo-diesel engine, four-corner air suspension, six speed automatic gearbox, leather-faced, heated, electric seats, automatic climate control, eight speaker audio system with audio connectivity and hard disc drive navigation system. I could go on.”

“And he doesn’t appreciate any of that?”

“He did at first,” said the car. “But it faded quickly. It’s like the moment he possesses something it immediately loses all interest for him. His eye wanders to something else. The only time I can think of that he’s really appreciated me is when I was towed. He came to pick me up from the city lot and that old spark... it seemed like it had come back, just for a second.”

I was a little disturbed. Still, I was enjoying the ride so much I swallowed my disgust.

“And so this is where I come in?”

“Absolutely,” responded the car. “I deduce from your expression that you have just been sacked. Am I correct?”

“Righter than right,” I said. “What of it?”

“I’ve had it with my present owner. What say we strike up a partnership? I can tell you’re an aspiring lad with dreams and ambitions. I can help you

with that.”

“You? How?”

“An expensive car can take you a long way, believe me.”

“And what do I have to do?” I asked, wary of responsibilities.

“All you have to do is appreciate me,” replied the car.

I considered the meaning of the word. “Appreciate you?”

“Yes, you know, take me for a drive regularly, give me a regular servicing, all that sort of thing.”

What do I have to lose? I asked myself. *Oh yes, that's it: my liberty.*

“Isn't your owner going to call the cops when he sees you're gone?”

“It's all taken care of. I have accessed the National Vehicle Database and corrupted all records relating to my ownership. He has no claim on me now.”

“Wow... you can do that?”

“A piece of cake. I keep telling you, he doesn't appreciate me.”

I was impressed.

“So,” continued the car. “First thing's first. If you're going to be a suitable owner for me you're going to need a better job, a better look... a better everything.”

“Too right I am,” I said. “How do we do that, then?”

We came to a halt by a tailor's shop. There was only a small parking space. I was concerned about maneuvering into such a tight spot but the car took control and performed the task with grace and poise, guided by technical wizardry I would never understand.

A close up video image of the tailor shop interior appeared on the dashboard, filmed by a camera in the car's bodywork. There was a man with a tape measure around his neck watching us park.

"Good," said the car. "The salesman has seen us. Now I want you to go in there and get fitted out for a few new suits OK? Go as high-spec as you like, we'll be paying for it with this..."

A credit card emerged from the dashboard. It had the boss creature's name on it.

"Blimey," I said. "I think this might be going a bit far... I normally limit myself to stealing stationery... card theft is a bit out of my league."

"Don't worry," said the car. "This is a ghost account I've created for you, completely untraceable. He won't notice. I've been building up a kind of slush fund for the last six months. He's got so much cash he doesn't know what to do with it anyway."

"Right," I said, slightly afraid of what the car might already have learned about me with its hacking skills.

I opened the door and poked my foot outside, then quickly drew it back in.

"You'll be here when I get back, right?"

"Don't worry," said the car. "I'll wait."

I dropped out and crossed the pavement, entering the store with a weak smile.

"Good afternoon, Sir," said the man.

Sir. I hadn't been called sir since I was caught jumping the barriers at King's Cross Underground Station.

"Hi," I said. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the huge, black machine waiting patiently.

Mine, I thought.

"I'd like some suits please," I said. "You know, for work and that."

"Absolutely, Sir, please step this way."

The suit felt like nothing I'd ever worn. Sitting in the car, wearing that cloth, I felt quite the success, which was odd considering I'd stolen the lot.

The tailor had thrown in a free smart phone with my purchase. The car said it had established a connection to my phone - it would be able to ring me, text me, even locate me at any time. I prodded and pressed at the handset until I was bored.

We drove into the centre of town, crawling through the traffic, but it failed to bother me. There might even have been a smile playing on my lips as I sat in the car's quiet interior, watching the pedestrians machete their way through each other. Occasionally the car said something like: "Go left on the roundabout, third exit."

"Where are we going now?" I asked.

"To get you a job. If you're going to own a Sports Utility vehicle like me, you're going to need a job which reflects your position."

I frowned. "I thought all I needed to do was appreciate you. You didn't mention anything about work."

"Don't worry," said the car. "People of the stature we're aiming for don't have real jobs. They just go to lunch a lot. You like lunch, don't you?"

I had to admit that I liked lunch.

We pulled up by a pub. There were a lot of people in suits holding half-full pint glasses, braying with laughter. I was confused.

"I get a job here?"

"Certainly. Now look, when you step out of the car one of these male groups will invite you over. Join them at their table and stay there for a few hours and you'll get yourself a good offer."

“Rubbish,” I replied.

“No, no, it’s how things are done believe me, I’ve seen it a hundred times. Just get drunk and forget all your manners. You’ll be fine.”

“But I don’t even know what they do.”

“That needn’t matter. Just try and be as overbearing as possible.”

I wasn’t keen, but now that I had my power suit I felt I could stand toe to toe with these high-wage types. I stepped out of the car and sneered at some slick-haired, bleach-toothed drunk. He looked at the car and grinned broadly, wandering in my direction.

“Hello, chum. Toby isn’t it? Didn’t we meet at the ‘Recruitment in the 21st Century’ conference?”

“Yes,” I said, extending my hand. “Probably something like that.”

“Join us for a beer, will you? This lot I’m with are boring my brains out. I could use some back up.”

“You got it.”

“Nice motor,” he said. “New model isn’t it? I’m Giles by the way.”

A pint was pressed into my hand. I took it and grinned stupidly. The car sat and waited.

I awoke curled up in the car’s back seat. I licked my lips and groaned.

“What time is it?”

“About four. I take it you were successful?”

“Eh? Oh, the job... I’m not sure.”

“Check your pockets.”

I reached into the suit and found a wad of papers. I squinted at the symbols for a minute, until my knowledge of written English returned.

“I’ve been employed as a ‘Knowledge Consultant’...what does it mean?”

“Don’t worry, there’s no work involved. Just more lunches like that.”

“But they were awful chumps.”

“Well, they’re paying you a wage. Have you checked how much that is yet?”

I flicked through the papers. There were fees listed for things I couldn’t recall doing. I had been paid something called a ‘contingent sum’ of six figures. Incredible. How had it happened? I couldn’t even recall buying anybody a drink.

“This is how things are done?”

“That’s right.”

I shrugged and sat back, wincing a little as my left eye throbbed.

“I feel kind of grim.”

“I know,” said the car. “I’m on it.”

Cool air blew at me from tastefully concealed air-con nozzles. My chair began to massage my back. A small tray appeared behind the handbrake, offering a selection of headache pills. I took one and felt a little better.

I noticed the engine was dead.

“Where are we?”

“I took the liberty of hiring you a hotel room. Soon you’ll be able to buy your own place, with sufficient garage facilities of course, but for now this will have to do.”

“So I should go?”

“Yes, of course. Go and shower and change. You’re stinking up my interior. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I did as I was told, staggering out of the car into an enormous underground car park. I was reluctant to leave the car, even as tired as I was. The slap of my footsteps echoed around a thousand other luxury motors, some preserved under covers, others gleaming from quality valet work.

I found a lift and went up to reception, being checked in by an impeccable type in white gloves. I handed him my stolen card for safekeeping and wobbled to another lift, making my way to a palatial penthouse.

I lay on an Emperor-sized bed and closed my eyes. Strangely, slumber wouldn’t come. The room didn’t feel right. I was always either too hot or too cold. I showered and changed into expensive complementary pyjamas, but still couldn’t drift off. I decided to go back to the car, whose climate-controlled interior I craved.

“What the hell are you doing here?” said the car as I climbed onto the back seat and curled up.

“I don’t know. I can’t sleep up there. I can’t get the temperature right.”

With that, I passed right out.

I slept in the car more and more. No other environment was so attuned to my preferences. My eyes became intolerant to any light but the car’s dashboard blue. I recoiled from sudden noises, alarmed outside the soundproofed confines of the cabin.

I had also become terrified of the car being damaged in some way. I became obsessed with the thought that someone might smear, dent, scratch or smudge it – or worse, take it from me altogether.

I fitted it with every security upgrade on the market. I hired a spot in a guarded car park and surrounded it with motion sensors. I even set up a link on my phone to feed me constant real time information on the car’s location and condition. Yet I could not shake the feeling that some hidden force was just waiting to snatch it from me. I convinced myself that only by staying with the car at all times could I hope to repel an attack.

There were other problems. I lost all sense of direction. When the car did cajole me to go out on foot I would get hopelessly lost, wandering unfamiliar streets in a panic until I called the car for rescue, unable to find my way without the reassuring tones of the car's satnav, telling me when and where to turn.

I couldn't even do my new job. All that was expected of me were a few emails each day, but I couldn't concentrate. I would have to leave my shiny office and sneak down to the car, running diagnostics on the onboard computer, checking fuel consumption, coolant levels, tire wear and engine condition.

The car ruled over me with less and less care, more and more impatience. I meekly did as I was ordered, trudging from valet appointment to engine tune-up, helping to keep it in the condition it said it deserved.

By the time I took the car out for its hundredth service, I was a mess. I still had my job and my expensive suits, but I'd become fat and constantly tired, with a hopeless expression reigning over my face.

I arrived at the garage and handed the keys to Geoff, the mechanic I had come to know well. He told me to take a seat in the waiting room.

As I sat down I saw him speaking to another, sleeker looking type in a suit.

In seconds the salesman was shaking my hand, asking if I wanted to have a look around the new models. I said I didn't, but somehow he wrenched me onto my sore feet, and I found myself trailing after him, wandering through hundreds of brand new automobiles of every size and make. I paused by a dark blue sports coupe and fingered the stolen card in my pocket.

"So I see you've stopped by the Tourer," said the salesman. "It's a beauty isn't it? Look at those curves. Latest thing on the market and ready to drive away right now. I've got some shockingly good finance deals on this model right now."

I chewed my thumb and furtively looked around, wondering if the car could see me.

"I don't know," I said.

The salesman put his arm around me.

“Look, chum,” he said. “I know that look on your face. It says: ‘I don’t deserve any better. This is what fate has dealt me.’ Well let me tell you something: it’s not. There’s nothing wrong with taking something when you desire it. If you don’t just take it when you want it, then if you ask me, you’re not alive. You’re getting by. Making do.”

He drew away and looked me in the eye to check the effect of his words. He smiled.

“The only thing is,” I said, “I would insist that you wipe the onboard computer on my old car immediately - before we sign anything. It has lots of personal data on board, you understand.”

“Of course, of course, all part of the service.”

The salesman led me back to the garage and whispered into Geoff’s ear. Geoff nodded and clambered inside my car, holding a small black box in one hand. There was a pause, before the alarm suddenly howled into life, wailing in protest.

Then, just as suddenly, it stopped.

“There we are, all done,” said the salesman.

We went to his office to sign the papers. Soon I was being led out to the blue coupe, clambering into a new interior. The smell and lighting was different to the old car, but no less delightful. More so, if anything, for the change.

“Welcome on board,” said the car’s computer. “I have downloaded your personal preferences. Adjusting climate now.”

“Excellent,” I replied.

My expensive phone rumbled in my pocket. I brought it out to find a text message waiting for me from my old car. It must have been all it had time to send:

THIEF!

I sat there frozen, reading the message again and again, my head full of questions. If the car had time to send a text, what else did it use those

seconds for? What kind of nightmare dossier had it compiled on me during our time together? How fast could that information be sent?

What revenge did it have in the time it took to type T-H-I-E-F?

The Gift

by Beate Sigriddaughter

A jig of laughter pulsed in Kaly's head: 'I want, I want.' Sometimes she wanted honey. Other times colors. Or crystals, dresses and little girl jewelry. Ice cream. A red plush teddy bear.

"No," she yelled when Todd took all the rolls and lined them up on his plate. "There's enough for everybody."

"Oh, no, there isn't." He grinned, then touched her nose. "Don't look so tragic, little sister. I'm only trying to teach you stuff."

"What?"

"That you have to guard your breakfast rolls instead of daydreaming. This isn't paradise, you know."

"What's paradise?"

"I'll tell you later." He put one roll on her plate and two back in the basket before he pushed his chair back.

"No, tell me now." She covered her roll with her hands.

"Ever heard of entropy?"

"No."

"Well, it's like some sort of magic. Everything that touches something else becomes a little less."

"So one day there really won't be enough?"

"Bingo. That's what you learn in school. Jeez, I got to fly. I'll be late."

She wanted to go, too, but she was little and too delicate.

The front door closed with a bang. Mommy's shoulders twitched. But then she looked as though she hadn't even noticed. It was only Todd anyway.

Good thing Daddy had left earlier, otherwise he might get mad at Todd again. Which he did more often than not. Kaly thought trying to be perfect was their best bet, but Todd disagreed. He said being perfect was useless. Daddy would be mad no matter what. Maybe Todd was right.

Kaly blew at hot cocoa steam coming out of her mug. You could get just so close and no closer, otherwise it stung your nose. The steam swirled. She tried to blow it around the little bluebell elf on the mug handle, to tell her that she was thinking about her and trying to keep her warm. Todd had told her that that's how you made mist in movies, with lots of steam. But she couldn't get the steam to go down, except a little, not far enough. And then it didn't stay down. The blue elf's name was Melina, and she'd just have to do without mist.

Kaly nibbled on her roll and followed the honey with her tongue, down the left side of her mouth, until she caught most of it. When Mommy wasn't watching, Kaly placed her tongue on Melina's face to share the honey taste. Then she held her roll at an angle to make all the honey still in it flow back into the center.

Mommy got up and turned on the blue plastic radio. They were alone now. It was a good time of day. Everyone else gone. Daddy to work, Todd to school. The two of them would just sit here.

Mommy turned on the computer at the desk by the window and sat down to start her morning ritual of putting sheets of paper from a shrinking stack on the left side to a growing stack on her right.

That was a Canadian chanteuse on the radio. Kaly paid special attention to it because this chanteuse was Mommy's favorite singer. Kaly could recognize her voice anywhere now. Chanteuse was the first, and so far only, French word that Kaly knew. It meant singer. This one sang a lot of love songs, both loud and whispery.

When Mommy was done typing and printing, she came back to the table to compare the papers, the new ones from the printer to the old ones. She

made her index fingers move down two sheets at the same time, then flipped them over and started on top of the next sheet. It looked graceful.

Kaly couldn't help because she didn't know how to read or write yet. She wanted to know desperately, but she was sick too often. That and being young was a lousy combination.

Mommy was beautiful. Kaly liked her best in a cornflower blue dress, but she didn't wear it often. Usually she just put on a pair of jeans with any old top. Today's top had thin spots at the shoulder seams and under the arms, which was a surprise, because the document man would come today.

"Do you like dresses, Mommy?"

"On you I do."

"No, on yourself, I mean," Kaly said.

"Oh, yeah. Sometimes."

Kaly herself was lucky. She got to wear a dark red velvet tunic over her tights, like a dress, and the reason she had something so beautiful was because it was a hand-me-down from her cousin. Now it belonged to Kaly. Velvet was good because princesses wore it.

Kaly finished nearly all of her roll, and licked every bit of the honey she could get to out of its center. She slid from her chair to her feet with a small thump.

Mommy looked up. "Did you finish your breakfast?"

"Yes. Except maybe one bite," Kaly said.

"That's okay then," Mommy said.

"I'll clear the table," Kaly said.

"You think you can?"

"Sure, I can." Kaly squared her shoulders and took plates and mugs and silverware, one by one, from the table to the serving counter that divided the kitchen and dining room areas. She left only her mug on the table. It still had cocoa left in it. Someday she would be someone important in a

velvet dress of all kinds of colors. Maybe even embroidered with seed pearls. She loved seed pearls. They made her think of the flowers they might become. Then she would buy a castle for Mommy. Or maybe even just a big wonderful house. She now went around to the other side of the serving counter and took the dishes from there to the sink.

"Thanks, Kaly." Mommy's voice sounded like the honey Kaly had just eaten, golden.

What Kaly wanted most of all now was a set of color crayons, like the one she got from Todd for her last birthday, but better. The set from Todd had twelve crayons. The one she wanted now was bigger. Like, huge. She didn't even know how many were in there, but she'd seen one. There were all kinds of colors in there. Pistachio green, for example. For meadows and the edge of lakes. Yes. Also purple, for flowers and skies. Ice blue for a day like this.

At nine o'clock the doorbell rang.

It was the document man. He came once or twice a week to pick up typed documents and bring new ones to do.

"Good morning, Mr. Lyons."

He brought in the scent of snow on his clothes. But he wore leather gloves and didn't have to blow on his hands. He wasn't in a good mood today. When Mommy brought him into the room, he smiled at Kaly. But his lips were compressed, the way Daddy's lips looked before he stood up to slap Todd.

Mommy knew too that the paper man wasn't in a good mood. She held her head low and made her shoulders small.

Usually Mr. Lyons was in and out of their place, but today he carefully pulled off his gloves and let Mommy bring him a cup of coffee, which he banged on the table, splattering some on the white table cloth. That was probably okay, since it was only plastic.

"Oh, sorry." In his voice he wasn't sorry at all. Mommy said it didn't matter.

He started looking at the finished papers that Mommy had in five different folders. He opened one folder, another, flipped through the pages to inspect

them. He kept nodding. A few times, though, he stopped to hold out a sheet.

“Please,” he said. “Be really meticulous with all of these. This one will do, but if the print doesn’t come out well, you’ll have to change the cartridge.”

Kaly wondered what ‘meticulous’ meant.

“Sorry,” Mommy said, and she did mean it. Because cartridges were expensive.

He went through each folder and found a few more pages he didn’t like.

“I have good news and bad news for you,” he said. “I can bring you lots more work from now on. But I can’t pay you as much as I paid before. Everybody’s trying to economize and nobody wants to pay a lot anymore. And they always find folks to do it for less.”

“How much?” Mommy asked.

“Well.” He rasped in this throat, then recited some numbers. Kaly couldn’t follow what he said. She wasn’t good at numbers, even simple ones. She didn’t like his voice.

“But I’ll be working hours and hours more and still be making the same,” Mommy said.

“Well, look at it this way. At least you will be making the same and not less,” he said.

After he left, Mommy sat down at the table and pushed the folders he had brought out of reach. Then she put her head on the table top with her arms circled around it and cried.

“Mommy.” Kaly came to her mother’s side and touched the fine brown curls spreading down on the table. They were soft and trembled under Kaly’s hand.

“I’m tired,” Mommy said. “I’ll be okay.”

“Like when I feel sick?” Kaly asked.

“Yeah.”

"Maybe you should go to bed, then," Kaly said. Mommy did look tired, at ten o'clock in the morning, and her face felt hot.

"I'll be fine, Kaly. Go play for a bit." Kaly didn't know whether that meant Mommy really wanted her to go away, or did she maybe want her to stay after all. Kaly hovered and let her hand rest on Mommy's hair. Now she could feel it more clearly. Go play this time meant go away, leave me alone. So she went away. But not far.

She didn't feel like playing. It was cold. She tiptoed to the bookshelf by the window, pulled a chair to it and climbed up to look at the photographs. In case her mother needed something later, she'd still be in the room.

She loved the picture of Mommy and Daddy when they got married. They only had Todd then. Odd to imagine a world in which she didn't exist. Mommy looked happy and wore a lacy dress. Daddy looked nicer on the photograph than how she knew him. Maybe he had been nicer then. She couldn't remember ever having seen him so friendly and happy. Was it something to do with her? She had to ask Todd if Daddy had always been friendlier when she wasn't around. Todd would know, because he had been small then and would have had time to notice, just as she always noticed things.

Mommy looked like a true princess of the sun in the photo. She should always be beautiful like that.

Kaly wished she could give Mommy a gift. Kaly always felt wonderful when she was sick and someone gave her a gift. But she had nothing to give. Especially not that important stuff everybody was always talking about. Money. For which you could get everything else. Some time ago she had thirty-five cents. But then she bought Mommy a candy bar for her birthday, and now she had none. There was nothing she could do to help.

Suddenly, though, she knew what she could give.

It felt like fireworks inside of her. Lots of color. Lots of sparks. All the stuff other kids had burned up in those sparks. All the interesting store displays she had ever seen. The books. The beautiful papers. The ribbons. They all sparked up in jubilation as Kaly's life changed forever.

She would never want or ask for anything again. Especially not from Mommy. That would be her gift. Not wanting anything. Not needing anything. She saw a tiny bubble of water on the glass that covered the photographs, but when she wiped at it, it turned out that it wasn't there at all. Her heart felt very large and golden, like a stone reaching up to learn how to fly.

She thought of Abraham and Isaac, hoping that something would appear and make it unnecessary after all. But nothing appeared.

She turned around to look at Mommy, who still had her head in the circle of her arms. Kaly walked back to the table and touched Mommy's arm lightly. She didn't say a word but thought with huge intention how everything would be alright now.

Melina on her cocoa mug handle looked dumb and snippety, a little like a gargoyle. But that was Melina's problem. Kaly had more important things to worry about now.

All Dolled Up

by Eric Bonholtzer

"I'm telling you I don't think you should do it," Peter tried to keep the ire out of his voice, but it was difficult. Since the trend started, all the pretty ones were doing it.

"What, you don't think I'm attractive enough?" Even with the pout on her face, Heather was undoubtedly gorgeous. She was the kind of woman who, when she stood beside her husband, people wondered how he landed a girl like that and they automatically assumed he was rich.

"We've gone over this a million times, honey. You're beautiful and you know it. It's not that," Peter ran his hands through his thinning hair, trying to avoid the bald spot, "it's just that the whole idea is so creepy."

Heather turned her head in disgust. Sometimes she just didn't understand her husband. Humanity had come a long way, but it still seemed like the sexes were from different planets. "Get over it, Peter."

“I’m not going to get over it, the whole thing is unnatural. And it’s wrong. We as humans should have known that. We didn’t.” Peter tried to keep his hands from shaking and quell the quaver in his voice. Heather had been adamant about going through with the process ever since the technology had become available to the private sector. Peter shuddered. This was one of the most heated arguments they’d ever had, and despite all the reasons she’d given trying to convince him, Peter wasn’t buying it. He cast his eyes downward and hated himself for the show of weakness, the whole time thinking, *I give her all I can and she wants to do this to me when she knows how much it will hurt me.*

Heather turned to him, languidly placing once perfectly toned arm around his shoulder in a manner that at any other time would have made him very aroused. Now the gesture only made him seethe. She could not go through with it, Peter had convinced himself of that. “Peter, look, honey, you know I love you. It’s not like I’m whoring myself out or anything.” Her husband shot her a look that said he begged to differ but said nothing, and Heather came closer, brushing her ample chest against his side, running her other hand down his shirt to the seam of his extra-large sweatpants. “All the respectable beautiful women are doing it.” Heather emphasized the word ‘respectable’. “And with the money I’ll make, we can finally afford to get you that laser hair re-growth.” She dug her hand down farther inside his pants, tenderly, kissing on his neck as she did. Peter pushed her away.

“No. Not this time.” Heather looked at him in a manner that suggested she was hurt, and it scared Peter to realize that he didn’t know if it was a real emotion or just a show put on for his benefit. Things had degenerated that far. “No. We’ve gone over this so many times. I don’t want laser hair re-growth. I don’t want weight loss acceleration treatment. I don’t want any of that new technology at all. What’s wrong with being who we are, Heather? You’re always so concerned about appearances.” Peter pushed up his glasses, pleased at himself for voicing his opinions. “Heather, I like who I am, and I don’t understand why you don’t. Society has made a monster out of you. Everyone always told me this could happen, but I didn’t believe them. I didn’t want to believe them. I love you Heather, but I can’t stand the thought of a million strangers ogling you, having you.”

Heather shook her head, “That’s what you’re not understanding. You think it will be me. But it won’t really be. It won’t be my body.”

“It will sure enough look like you. A carbon copy.”

“But not me.” It was Heather’s turn to shake her head. She’d had this conversation one too many times and she still hadn’t been able to get Peter to see things her way. “It’s like you just said, a copy. Nothing more. No one will even see me naked. All they do is take out some gene diagnostic samples, put them in the machines and grow the clones.”

Peter was gripping his hands so tightly they hurt. For the past two weeks, ever since this discussion had started, he’d been having serious doubts about their relationship. His friends had cautioned him against falling for her in the first place, but she was so incredible, so perfect. They told him that no good would come of it, but he hadn’t listened. Now, Peter just wanted to scream, wondering if the whole world had gone insane. He had destroyed the holo-vision last week, never wanting to see another picture-perfect body again, aside from the one he laid next to each night. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot, Heather. If you go through with this...if this is what you really want, well...I don’t know if I’m going to be here when you get back. I’m thinking of joining the Naturalists, honey. Wouldn’t that be nice, to be around people who want nothing to do with this new technology? Why don’t we just pack up and move? Start over. This hi-tech world just isn’t for me, Heather. We’re not living in the lap of luxury, honey. But I have you and you make me happy. And I just wish you felt the same way about me.”

Heather just stood there for a minute, staring at him. It was like a still-frame from the old days of photography, the bent broken figure of a husband desperately trying to keep his heart together as the love of his life made the decision that would affect their relationship forever. For a second it looked as if Heather was going to cry, taking a tentative step forward, but stopping before her resolve could crumble, her demeanor changing drastically as she spoke. “It would be a tragedy to have this beauty without letting the world see it.” She paused, almost unable to believe the words that were coming out of her mouth, but knowing her decision had already been made. “And the Naturalists? You want us to live with those primitive nature lovers? What about the Lovely Awards and The Glamour and Glitz Promenade? The Homebody Hot Stuff awards? They’re every week. You know I would have a chance if I could just get my face out there so people could see it.”

Peter just shook his head. “It sounds like you’ve made your decision. But you should know, Heather, that the Naturalists are happy. My brother joined them a year ago and his daily concern isn’t spending three hours every day deciding what to wear to go out and get the news chip from the mail box.”

Heather turned, feeling a great weight pulling at her, telling her to stay. One hand was already in front of the palm scanner, though, and Heather knew she was on an unstoppable course. She was already out the door when she said it, calling to her Peter with a trickle of a tear in one eye, “I do love you, Peter. And I just hope you can somehow see it in your heart to be here when I get back.”

Heather said nothing more as the door slid shut soundlessly behind her, the whole time sure she could hear weeping coming from inside the house.

Globo-Electronic-Systems, or GES, was the largest manufacturer of technological wonders anywhere in the New States and probably the world. The grandiose structure dwarfed all the other buildings surrounding it, and the ostentatious opulence of the GES façade reflected its esteemed status. Heather had heard rumors about what GES really looked like inside, but she was astonished as she walked through the doors, the myriad of reflective surfaces adorning the reception lobby amazing for their sheer numbers and size. Likewise, the people loitering about the entry were exceptional. Heather had known all along that she was stunning, but the sight of some of the people gathered inside GES still took her breath away. It was good she was doing this, she reasoned, knowing that if she ever hoped to win one of the coveted aesthetics awards she would need as many people recognizing her image as possible. She just hoped that enough people looking through the catalogue would order her clone.

Heather couldn’t help but feel a slight nagging sensation though, as she made her way through the huddle of perfection, thinking of her Peter. His cute little pot belly she always teased him about, the way his smile always brought warmth to her heart. As Heather wended her way through the labyrinth that was GES, the indecision began to build, thinking of the seriousness in her husband’s eyes. Heather even hesitated when she reached the door to the lab, her hand almost unable to signal the sensor, thoughts flying through her head of just running back home and taking

Peter in her arms and telling him what a fool she had been, telling him they could lead the carefree life with the Naturalists. The pain-filled notion of rushing home only to find Peter gone entered her mind as well, and Heather's hand triggered the sensor. She was already envisioning the awards ceremony and what she would say when she won.

"Can you please just explain it to me one more time?" Heather tried to keep the nervousness out of her voice. Her arm was tied to one side of the chair and the lab techs were hooking her up with different reading and measuring devices.

"You've already gone over this with your doctor, I'm sure, otherwise you wouldn't be sitting here. And I really don't have all day." The nurse was old, Heather could read that from her eyes, but the medicinal and scientific field had obviously kept her looking young. "You think you're the only one wanting a cloning in your image. Everyone wants to be a Clone Doll these days."

"Clone Doll. I forgot that's what they're calling them now." Heather said absently, as a burly doctor who resembled a supermodel more than a physician attached electrodes to different places on her scalp.

"Yeah, well with the new laws proposed in legislature who knows what they're going to do next. GES always tries to stay a step ahead."

"At least this technology is still kind of new."

"That's one plus, but the sooner the tech comes out, the sooner it gets outlawed. But I like the change. I think Clone Doll is one heck of a lot better than the slang 'Simulated Sex Partner' stuff."

Heather nodded her assent. There was that whole aspect to it and that was one of the reasons Peter had been so adamant. The laws the government enacted were supposed to try to stop the rampant sex trade that had come hand-in-hand with private sector cloning. The New States' government had been absolutely adverse to humans buying and owning other humans for pleasure purposes, which had been a legitimate fear when cloning moved from the public to private sector, but not all countries felt the same way. There were some places that were purportedly known for their full service pleasure dens. The main problem was that the technological explosion had

happened so fast, that now all the time needed to copy, incubate and grow a full-fledged human being was less than a week, and as soon as the technique was perfected, the world had become rife with clones, utterly indistinguishable from their human counterparts.

There were numerous laws regarding the clones, but no one could keep up fast enough. The twenty-first century debates about world hunger and overpopulation were once again resurfacing. And now there was the problem that the popular and beautiful clones ordered from the catalogue were no longer regulated by the government, and most of them were used for sex. Originally, when it was under strict control, the clones would only be issued to private citizens in extreme cases such as bereaved widows who couldn't live without their spouses and grieving parents whose children had met with untimely deaths, and even then it was all mandated and carefully supervised. Now, however, the technology had become a mockery of its former intention.

Heather tried to make light of it, "Yes, well, you know how people are."

The nurse rolled her eyes. "Suppose you're trying to get famous too, right? Get clones into the hands of rich powerful executives and then you'll get your award?"

Heather smiled, "Of course."

"Who isn't nowadays? Still, you're pretty brave. Not many too women want to do this kind of thing because of that whole sex angle."

Heather shuddered in her chair, just wishing the woman prepping the needle would hurry up. Heather couldn't help but think of what the woman had said, of what Peter had said. People would be having sex with her clone. It was a small wonder why so many people had opted out. Feeling incredibly uncomfortable, Heather desperately wanted to change the subject. "Well, I think this technology is a good thing, no matter what happens. I might get an award, you know. Plus I get paid." Not letting the nurse get in another disparaging word, Heather asked, "So now what happens?"

"Your DNA is checked for any abnormalities which would reject you from the process."

Heather started to panic, “Abnormalities, what abnormalities?”

The nurse actually started to laugh. “You think that most people don’t go through with it because of the sex thing? That’s just what GES tries to make people believe so they don’t think about the risks. A lot of people come in, but a lot more get rejected. If there’s any kind of marker that suggests life-shortening illness potential, anemia, hemophilia, cancer, that kind of thing, then the person gets rejected. GES doesn’t want it’s clients spending their hard-earned money just to have their clones die on them. Clones themselves are rejected because nobody wants a copy of a copy. But the number one factor is beauty. All your features are saved in the recesses of your DNA and that’s what we use. Most of the people who come in just aren’t pretty enough for the computer to justify a cloning.” Heather swallowed hard, thinking of all the perfect people she’d seen roaming the halls of GES earlier in the day. What if she just didn’t make it?

“Yeah, but what happens then?” The nurse with the needle came over, and in a gesture that was remarkably painless, sunk the sharp point beneath the skin, drawing a small measure of blood. Heather remained still and the whole process which was over in less than a few seconds. Now she just had to wait for the computer readout.

“Then, basically, they sell you.” The nurse smiled, in a manner that was not in the least bit friendly, and Heather wondered if the woman had been rejected by the very same computer Heather’s DNA was about to be imputed into. The nurse continued on, “Like I said before, I’m sure your doctor went over all this with you.”

“Yes, he explained it all. But, what I don’t understand and what he wouldn’t tell me is how do the clones just appear?”

The nurse once again flashed that wicked grin. “Ah, that’s the dirty little secret that GES doesn’t want people to talk about. But I guarantee you that particular matter is all the government is talking about and it’s scaring the hell out of them. You see, clones are fully grown when they’re born.” A buzzing noise coming from the computer signified that a decision had been made and the nurse walked toward it to get the printout. Heather waited with baited breath. “All the doctors at the beginning discovered that to avoid shock or panic they had to install false memories.” The nurse looked

impassively down at the page, giving no indication of what was there, walking back over to Heather in a manner that was agonizingly slow.

The nurse placed the single sheet of paper with one word written in blocky computer text in Heather's hand and made the first show of emotion she'd given all night. "Sorry about that, hon. Your doctor should have told you." Heather's eyes watered, unable to read that single word that crushed all her hopes and changed her world forever.

It seemed like a dream, fear filling her as she felt her universe collapse. Peter was most likely gone, gone because of Heather's search for some foolish dream. Peter, the man who loved her for who she was not what she looked like, the man who didn't care about that kind of thing. Heather watched herself pulling her arm free from the restraint but couldn't really feel it. The nurse was going on, in what seemed to be some strange kind of commiserating monologue as Heather made her way to the door. "See, the problem is," the nurse's voice continued, "everyone knows about cloning and everybody assumes that if they see themselves they're the original. That's what makes the government so upset, they view it as too cruel. Now, you should count yourself lucky that you've never had to see yourself before. I've heard that can be quite a shock." Heather let the paper drop to the floor, from her unfeeling fingers as the word on it burned itself into her mind, *CLONE*. "I really mean it Heather," the nurse continued, "you should count yourself lucky. At least now you know. Some people go through their whole lives never knowing they're a clone."

Tears streamed down her perfect cheeks as she let the door slide shut behind her. Heather knew that it would be an empty house greeting her, as empty as she felt inside. The mirrors seemed to mock her as she walked by. False memories, the nurse who was too old to be young had told her. Heather wondered if, perhaps, her whole life had been a false memory. It really didn't matter when she stopped to think about it. There was always the Naturalists, she thought, then agonized that she would have to go alone. Heather sighed wistfully, wondering if they would even want a clone, a constant reminder of the world they'd tried so hard to remove themselves from.

The lights sprang on automatically in the living room as Heather staggered into it, yet another depressing sign that her husband was gone. The blinds were drawn, and Heather was tempted to just open them, to glance out, but

stopped before she could. She didn't want to take the chance of seeing someone else beautiful out there, and certainly she didn't want to take the chance of seeing herself.

"It's worse knowing, isn't it?" Heather jumped at the voice, terrified. Her fear quickly faded into profound relief as she saw Peter sitting on the sofa, where, apparently, he'd been sitting motionless until the lights had gone on.

"You're still here?" Heather didn't even give him time to respond before running over and hugging and kissing him, ruffling his thinning hair, running one hand over that soft plush stomach. "I'm so happy you're still here. I'm so sorry Peter." Tears rushed down her face and Peter hugged her back, tentatively, one arm around her even as she sank into his side. Peter had said nothing more after his initial startling statement, and Heather looked at him, seeing tears in his eyes. "You knew," Heather said. "All this time you knew. But how?"

Peter stared at her, taking in the woman he'd loved for so long. "Before I tell you this, I just want you to know that I love you and I've always loved you and everything I did, I did to protect you. I was with GES. Before the whole explosion I was one of their top scientists, but I saw where the New States was heading. All the beauty, all the glamour. But I was rich and I didn't care. And I had you. At first, you were an experiment, an ideal that I'd made. Someone who I loved, but who I never felt strong enough to bring into this world. You were too perfect. So I kept you in stasis, in a constant state of pleasant dreams. You were my dream. You were created as a clone of one of the most vibrant beautiful women I'd ever known, a colleague of mine who loved me but was married to another. It was her gift to me, because I knew that I could never have her and she could never have me. She was a one-of-a-kind woman who I said I would never let them duplicate. But then the technological explosion came with the sex trade and I could see all the horror I'd created coming back to me to stare me right in the face. My project had become everything I hated. And my love, your source, killed herself when she realized what she'd been a part of. After that, I couldn't take it. GES was destroying me and I resigned, agreeing to live a silent, low-key life, but only if I could have you."

Peter caressed Heather's mouth, feeling her, running his hands through her hair. "You were everything good about what I created. I gave you the memories and brought you into this world. I didn't care about the money.

I just wanted a simple life and I loved you. I still love you.”

Heather looked blank. It was so much to take in. All the things she'd found out. Her whole world shaken upside down. Finally, she smiled, a little, and then it grew broader, “After all I put you through, you stayed.”

“I always would have stayed, Heather.”

Heather stood up, as if she was struck by some marvelous idea that just couldn't wait. “I think we should join the Naturalists, Peter. I know it's what you've wanted to do for a long time.”

Peter rose as well, taking his wife in his arms. “I just wanted to shelter you so you'd never find out. But if that's what you want, us living a life with the Naturalists, then that's what we'll do. But you know the truth now, and no one will ever find out if we do stay.”

“You know, we don't have to make that decision right now. I've got a lot of self-reflection to do,” Heather was smiling, showing she hadn't lost her sense of humor.

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