

The Write Place At the Write Time

Home

About Us

Announcements

Interviews

Fiction

Poetry

"Our Stories" non-fiction

Writers' Craft Box

Book Reviews

Writers' Contest!

Submission Guidelines

Indie Bookstores

Feedback & Questions

Inscribing Industry Blog

Archives

Scrapbook of Three Years

Come in...and be captivated...

Search



"Purple Haze" by Linda Woods; www.moonbirdhillarts.etsy.com

Welcome to our Fiction section!

Featured Stories:

"Red Light. Green Light." by Alexandra Vaezi

"The Third Pernod" by Terin Tashi Miller

"The Coffin Train" by Daniel Davis

"The Five Missing Days- A Parable" by Denise Bouchard

"Wendy Isn't Coming Home" by Martin Crosbie

"Hannah Was Here" by Nicole M. Bouchard

Red Light. Green Light.

by Alexandra Vaezi

He was swimming, thrashing his arms and legs, stroke after stroke, and it seemed as if he'd been swimming forever. He swam until his muscles failed him, but even the loud whooshing of water past his ears could not distract him. He couldn't escape it. He tried all his usual distractions: running, swimming, eating, sleeping, driving, drinking, smoking, screwing, music, but no matter where he went or what he did it loomed overhead. It was guilt, and it was a constant reminder.

He pushed himself up and out of the water and slowly walked barefoot across the hot cement. He opened the sliding glass door and went inside, past the kitchen and down the hallway and into the linoleum-covered bathroom. He showered to remove the stickiness and lingering smell of chlorine. When he caught his reflection in the mirror he froze. He had successfully avoided looking at himself for the past week, but now he stared straight back himself. He looked the same, for the most part; only the yellowing bruises around one eye and alongside his ribcage indicated that any recent trauma had occurred. He traced the edges of his bruises with his fingertips and pressed down on them slowly. For a moment he just focused on the dull pain and closed his eyes, but that was all it took, and his mind was immediately back to that night.

His phone finally buzzed in his pocket, he had been waiting for over an hour. This was it, the summer kickoff party. On the other end of this text message was Blondie, his flavor of the week; that wasn't really her name, but it was how he remembered his girls. He didn't think Blondie was too bright, but she proved that her body easily compensated for what she lacked mentally. He slid his phone out of his pocket. "Party at Kurtis' house. Bring a six-pack, ok? I'll make it worth your while ;)".

He only had an hour to get ready and get to the party, which was on the other side of town. Shave. Cologne. Clothes. Brush teeth. Shoes. Wallet. Keys. He was passing the mirror in the hallway on his way out the door, when he stopped for a moment to look at himself. He ran his hand across his head to smooth out his hair, and he just stood there, thinking how great he looked tonight. A grin spread across his face, ear to ear, as he played out how he thought the night would go.

He got into his '09 Suburban and sharply turned the key in the ignition. The engine hummed loudly throughout the car. He quickly exited the driveway, glancing backwards briefly. He sped at his usual 75 mph and blasted the radio, windows down. He swerved into the gas station, the one everyone knew didn't card for ID. He strolled right in, and went straight to coolers that lined up against the back wall. Corona or Heineken, he couldn't remember what kind of beer Blondie liked. Corona was cheaper, so tonight she was going to like that. He went up to the counter and waited for the cashier to ring him up, tapping his fingers on the counter impatiently. He sat back in the car and pulled out his phone. "On my way" he wrote to Blondie.

He turned out of the gas station parking lot and immediately caught a red light. He pushed on the brakes. If there was anything that he hated it was a red light. That and prudish girls; they were the only things in his life that said no. He sped up between each intersection, hoping to cruise through the end of a green light, but was stopped every time. Either the light was already red when he got there or the cars beside him wouldn't let him pass. He looked ahead and saw his fleeting green light turn yellow and pushed

down the gas pedal. The light turned red and yet his foot did not ease up off the pedal. He was going to make it through this one. And he did.

But they didn't. Screech. Crash. Roll. Thud. Silence. He was upside down when he opened his eyes, and his seatbelt was keeping him suspended in midair. He fumbled to free himself and crawled out the window. The scattered glass shards reflected the neon of all of the street signs; it was beautiful, like colorful diamonds sprinkled across the pavement. He looked up to find a silver sedan smashed through a telephone pole. He ran over and tried to help, but the car was already in flames.

In the front sat two young parents, both unconscious, and in the back a crying child, stuck in her car seat, engulfed in smoke and fire. He lurched the crumpled door open, but the fire took huge gulps of oxygen and threw him backwards on the pavement. He stood slowly and for a moment focused on the thick stream of black smoke coming from the car, trailing upwards and emptying into the sky. He looked back down at the flames, mesmerized. He could feel his pulse throughout his body. A crowd was beginning to gather, and the sound of sirens echoed in the distance.

The fire department came and extinguished the flames, but it was too late. The police department came and asked him questions, but he lied, and they ruled it an accident. The ambulance came and took him to the hospital, but his pain was no longer just physical. He was told repeatedly how lucky he was throughout the night. Nurses, doctors, police officers... it seemed as if every time someone walked in or out of the room they called him lucky. It made him nauseous. He didn't feel lucky with a family now dead because of him. He didn't feel lucky with Blondie still texting him that night about why he didn't bring her beer. He didn't feel lucky when he read their obituary in the newspaper. He didn't feel lucky; he didn't feel anything, except guilt-overwhelming and inescapable, guilt.

He opened his eyes. Back in his linoleum-covered bathroom, he was still touching his now yellowing bruises. He opened the medicine cabinet to grab his toothbrush, but his eyes were immediately drawn to the orange plastic pill bottle labeled Vicodin. The doctor had prescribed them for his

two broken ribs, but he hadn't touched them; the sharp pain that came with every breath was the only thing that assuaged his guilt. But now his ribs were healing and soon he would have to find another way of soothing his guilty conscience. He looked back at the bottle, unscrewed the cap and poured the chalky white pills onto the cool counter. He stared at them for a while, then shoveled them back into the bottle and returned it to the cabinet.

He opened the adjacent door into his bedroom. The smell of dirty socks and stale crackers filled the air; he'd have to clean up eventually, he thought, but not today. He got dressed then went into the kitchen. He opened the fridge, but there was only beer, expired milk, and a moldy orange. He wasn't surprised; the groceries weren't going to buy themselves. They could wait though; he wasn't up to cooking dinner tonight. He grabbed his wallet and walked the two blocks to the bus stop.

When the bus into town opened its doors he stepped up, slipped a dollar to the machine, and sat in the seat right behind the driver. A few stops later he was at the mall, the first appetizing place he passed. He entered through the department store entrance; he knew going through the food court was faster, but he liked going the long way. He was just passing the men's shoes department when he saw the security guard. The rent-a-cop was standing straight, scanning the floor, boots shined and hair buzzed. This one took his job seriously. He was now passing the men's watches; gold, silver, and diamonds. *These must be pricey*, he thought. He trailed his hand along the display glass and right when he knew the guard would see him, he grabbed a watch and ran- just slow enough so that he knew he'd be caught.

The Third Pernod

by Terin Tashi Miller

It was different now. He knew it because he was beginning to think about what it would be like having children to look after and showing up for work

until retiring, and, eventually, dying.

The drink was different, too. And he was drinking it in Spain, where he now lived. It was similar to the drink he'd had that night in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, but it was not the same. Now, in Madrid, he had drunk absinthe. And he had drunk enough absinthe now to know that when he had been drinking Pernod, he had thought it was absinthe, just as when he'd thought he was a writer, he was only a student. And when he thought he was living his life, he was imitating someone else's life.

"The Third Pernod" was like seeing a print of Goya's "dark paintings," while the third absinthe was like being in The Prado and seeing the originals.

Stevens Point was a spot near the Plover River in the middle of Wisconsin's woodlands. He had lived that time in that place as though he were already a writer, not a student. He bought double-breasted suits from the Salvation Army store because they made him look bigger, and because Gertrude Stein, he'd either read or someone had told him, had said people should buy art instead of wasting their time spending money on clothes.

He knew enough to know how to, he thought, "look" like a writer, "act" like a writer, "be" a writer - without writing. He said what he believed he should to be taken seriously about being a writer. It was before he'd read Prevost, before he'd read Turgenev. Before he'd read Balzac or Conrad. It was before he'd ever walked along the Seine or the Boul Mich in Paris, and before he'd ever lived in Madrid as he did now near the Plaza Santa Ana, and had tasted cassoulette, or "Trucha a la Navarra," or Jerez de Manzanilla.

It was long before he'd ever had the vivid "waking dream" experience of absinthe, which he knew he was now having after having too much at Casa Puebla the night before. Before he'd sat awake staring at the ceiling - or were his eyes closed and he lying on his back - watching his thoughts unfold in images as if on a bright night vision screen in front of him. His tongue was numb. His ears were warm and numb - as if he had his fingers in them. And his body either moved in jerks, or not at all, like when you wake up but

your limbs have fallen asleep. And it seemed as though the Green Fairy herself, or was it his past, was sitting on his chest.

He'd met a friend, a poet, at the college in Stevens Point. He and the poet, a kid from another small Wisconsin town, talked about writing and literature as if they'd done it all their lives.

They'd met in a literature course in which the class was trying to "deconstruct" Oedipus Rex. Both agreed it was possible that Oedipus' mother, being drunk, didn't know who she had slept with when Oedipus was conceived, making it possible that while Oedipus had killed the king, he had not killed his father, throwing a wrench in the oracle's predictions and generally complicating the plot.

The poet already knew more than he about writing. He wrote carefully crafted poems with important obscure literary allusions, just like T.S. Eliot. The poet had even managed to publish some of his work himself in chapbook form.

St. Patrick's Day came around when they were at the height of their shared writing fantasies, and every bar around the main square of the town was filled with a mix of the "townies" and the students. They were looking for excitement, for an adventure, a literary adventure that would inspire them to write well and become famous. One or the other of them had read about Pernod in a Hemingway story, about how it made you feel, about how it was dangerous to your emotional state. They decided to try it.

After a few beers, they went to a bar on the corner. At the bar, as at every bar around the square that night, were groups of students holding beer drinking contests, going from bar to bar drinking shots of sweet, peppermint schnapps and chasing it with a pitcher or more of beer.

The two would-be-writers who thought they already were sat at the middle of the long oak bar and asked as if it were quite normal at a bar in Wisconsin's woods for Pernod.

They blocked out completely the noise of the students at the end of the bar on their right egging each other on and waited to memorize the bartender's reaction. They had read that the first drink of Pernod would make them feel good. They had read that the second would make them feel better and higher emotionally than they had ever been. And they had read, or told each other - he wasn't sure now - that you should be wary of the third Pernod, because it would bring you lower than it had made you high. It would give you a depression like after the death of someone close. It would bring upon you the black haze and difficult breathing, that crushed-chest feeling of depression with a capital "D."

And that was the adventure they wanted to have. While the others in town that night were urging friends to drink beer and schnapps until they lost consciousness, the would-be-writers who thought they knew better urged each other to drink through the third Pernod.

The bartender, a man in his thirties with a large, bushy black beard and black hair parted in the middle that hung down to the brown leather vest on his shoulders, reached below the bar in front of them and produced the now-familiar green glass bottle with its gray and white label and the maker's name, Pernod, in those bold letters. He had to blow dust off it so they could see the label clearly. He pulled out two brandy snifters.

"With ice, or with water?" the poet asked the would-be-writer who thought he was.

"What did the story say?"

"Either way it's supposed to turn milky-white when it's poured."

"It's more pure if you just have it with ice and stir it, letting the ice dilute it over time," the bartender said. He put ice cubes in the snifters and began to pour into the first glass, the one in front of the poet.

"Anyone else ever come in here and ask for this stuff?" the would-be-writer asked, after glancing at their fellow revelers at the end of the bar.

"Just some old guy named Ernie. He hasn't been here for quite a while, though," the bartender said. He was smiling so his mustache moved up at the corners. The would-be-writer missed the bartender's knowing wink, as well as the smile underneath his mustache and beard.

The poet and the would-be-writer faced each other, turning to each other on their stools at the oak bar and clinking their snifters together.

"To Ernie," said the poet.

"To writing," said the would-be-writer.

The Pernod had turned milky as it hit the ice, and went from a sort of golden-green to milky yellow in the snifters.

It smelled and tasted heavily, thickly, of licorice, as if someone had mixed licorice with whole milk. The would-be-writer had tasted Ouzo before, so, like everything in those days, the distinctiveness of the flavor did not impress him.

"Well, it tastes right," the would-be-writer said.

"Yeah. We'll have to be careful," said the poet.

They both felt good after the first one, with their ears a little warm and smiles on their faces as they realized they'd forgotten completely about anyone else in the bar. They had consumed their odd drinks silently, the ice in their glasses making the only noise as they swirled it in the snifters.

"Ready for number two?" the poet asked.

"Yeah. What the hell. That wasn't so bad. I don't think I could drink it fast,

but it beats the hell out of schnapps."

"And beer!"

Again, the bartender poured the liquid over ice in their snifters. Again, it turned color. Again, they toasted writing and each other's work, or future work, and the future they'd have showing the world real literature.

"Whoa. That's something!" said the would-be-writer, as he was halfway through his second snifter.

"What?"

"That," he said, pointing toward the bar's open door, where a tall, leggy girl with long brown hair was walking slowly by with some of her friends, checking into the bar's open doorway to see if they knew anyone inside.

"Wow," said the poet.

The girl's hair bounced against her rear as if it were a tail. The would-be-writer and the poet watched the girl's hair bounce as she and her friends decided to go on to another bar on the square.

"Let's go."

"What?"

"You want to meet her, don't you?"

"Meet her? That's not exactly what I was thinking..."

"Well, you've got to meet her first before anything else," said the poet.

They left the bar. The cool March air in Wisconsin hit them as they stepped out into it. Their bare ears were warmer and slightly humming. They'd

finished their second Pernod. The girl and her friends were standing at the entrance to another bar.

"C'mon," said the would-be-writer. "Let's introduce ourselves."

They caught up with the girl just as her friends were starting off to look in at another bar. She was lagging a bit behind the group.

"Hi," said the would-be-writer.

"Hi," she said. Her teeth reflected moonlight, or streetlight - something, when she smiled.

"I'm a writer," the would-be-writer said. "And he's a poet."

The poet caught up with them.

"That's cool," the girl said. "I'm Irish. Kiss me."

The would-be-writer was kissing the girl, her hands holding his face to hers, before he remembered his friend the poet was with them.

"What about him?" he said.

The girl took the poet's head in her hands and kissed him in the same playful way. And then she was gone.

"Wow," said the poet.

"Yeah. Hey, let's go back and have the third one, what d'you say?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. If that's what the second one's like, I'm dying to try the third."

"Well, you're the writer."

"And you're the poet."

"But I didn't know it."

Off they went, back to the bar. In the bar, as the bartender saw the boys returning he put up two more snifters with ice and was reaching under the bar for the Pernod as the two took their stools. The stools had been vacant and appeared to be awaiting the boys, as did the bartender.

"How did you know we'd be back," asked the would-be-writer.

"I didn't," said the bartender.

"How did you know we'd want Pernod again and not something else?"

The bartender smiled so that his eyes squinted for an instant, and he poured the thick liquid over the ice so it turned that yellow-white.

The boys drank the Pernod, the third Pernod, much more slowly than the first two. The licorice flavor of it, the thickness of it, made their throats feel tighter. It tasted enough like Pernod's absinthe, he now knew, to pass as a substitute after the real stuff, made from worm-wood, had been outlawed in most of Europe because of its potentially addictive, mind-numbing effects.

"To the old man," the would-be-writer said.

"Sure. To art and literature," said the poet.

They touched their snifters together. The glass touching glass made a faint "click," then they resumed their sipping.

"Some stuff, eh?"

"Yeah. Dangerous. You think we've been hallucinating?"

"Probably. This stuff is made from herbs as well as alcohol, after all."

"Yeah. You can see it in the glass, on the sides near where the ice has melted."

The bar had emptied by the time they'd finished their experiment, by the time they'd dared to go to the limit with their lives, they thought. When the bartender asked them if they wanted to finish what was left in the green glass bottle, the would-be-writer remembered how he felt when he'd had a winning hand at poker at a charity casino night, when he folded rather than make the dealer, a woman from one of his classes he'd had a crush on, pay.

"Na," he said. "Three's the legal limit, and we've had our three. Save the rest for the next time."

"Next time?"

"Sure. We'll be back someday."

"When we're famous," said the poet.

"Probably. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"This bottle will probably still be here," the bartender said, "unless Ernie comes in before you."

They said good night to the bartender - it was about two in the morning - and left the bar. The would-be-writer produced a pair of cigars he'd bought earlier and handed one to the poet.

"How do you feel?"

"Like a writer," the would-be-writer said. "Drunk."

They made it almost past the square and to the area where they lived in different dormitories before the would-be-writer was about to say something and threw up instead, into a trash barrel on the side of the street. The poet made it a little farther before he, too, "got literary," vomiting into the street.

He was now a published writer, living in Spain and drinking absinthe and not pretending anything the night before at Casa Peubla, a small bar in his neighborhood, where he knew he'd drunk too much absinthe. He'd sat at a small wooden table next to a black and white photograph of a disaster—the bunching of mozos, people running in front of bulls in Pamplona, in front of the callejon, the entrance to Pamplona's bull ring.

It was his favorite seat at the favorite bar that should have been frequented by other writers. But it was August in Madrid, which meant all the locals had fled to cooler climes or beaches at least. All those who could afford it. And the city was filled with tourists drinking too much and being too loud and he didn't really want to share his table with them.

You couldn't see the disaster in the photograph. All you could see was the sunlight from the ring lighting up the front of the runners in the archway. He knew that archway. He remembered the smell of the dust, the heat from the July sun suddenly hitting him after the cool shade of the callejon, which came after the run from in front of the corrals. He knew the run. He'd run in front of the same bulls, the Miuras, that were behind the bunch that caused the disaster.

He knew that for many people, the lives of others—especially writers, but most artists as well—were like that photograph. They thought they knew from what they saw, what they read, what they heard or researched or learned, like he and the poet had. It looked like fun, exciting, carefree, dramatic and maybe just dangerous enough to be thrilling. Like kissing a stranger on a street with no commitment, no future action implied. And no consequences.

But what the photograph only hinted at was what he saw when he looked at it after his first absinthe. What he knew looking at that photograph, the flat, black and white image behind a glass and wood frame was that people, drunk or tired from lack of sleep, fell in front of the runners coming into the ring ahead of the Miuras. People jumped from the stands into the ring, to appear with the runners as if they'd also braved the run through damp cobblestoned streets with the 600 kilo bulls and the steers that led them to the ring, through the same route as the runners.

And when the runners fell, they formed that pile of disoriented people, people who forgot how and why they'd run there, for an instant, as if they'd crossed a finish line at a hometown 10K fun run. And they fell onto one another in front of the callejon when the first of the six bulls and two alternates came at them, looking to clear the path of runners with their horns.

Real life—where he drew his inspiration for writing—wasn't like he'd read or dreamed it would be. The room where he lay now on the bed watching the ceiling spin, or the ceiling stay put while the bed spun, was warming already from the summer sun. He'd come home at about three or four in the morning.

The poet had gotten married and, unable to publish much poetry or find a decent job out of college, joined the Navy. He wrote some great poems about dolphins diving in front of the ships, and missing his wife. He left the Navy, got an advanced degree and taught English for a while at the same university, and with the same professor, where they'd met. But he hadn't written much since those few when he joined the Navy, hadn't published any of it, and now he was selling computer software for banks.

What is it with banks and poets, the writer wondered to himself on his second absinthe. Ezra Pound had tried to solicit subscriptions to help finance T.S. Eliot so the writer of "The Wasteland" could get out of working in a bank, only to find Eliot actually liked working in a bank.

Lying on the bed now, the next morning, everything smelled and tasted of absinthe—like fermented licorice, or licorice gone bad. He'd succeeded in his experiment. He'd drunk four absinthes, and survived. He didn't feel like cutting off his ear, like Van Gough, or hanging himself, like Verlaine. At least, even if he did he couldn't move. But he didn't feel like he was back from it yet, either.

It had turned milky green as the ice it was poured over in a brandy snifter melted, his tongue already numb from the first one, his vision turning to that green hazy fringe of Van Gough's painting of a glass of Absinthe during the second one. He vaguely remembered sharing a table with a friend who was passing through, who wanted to try absinthe and abandoned it before drinking much. He'd drunk the friend's absinthe, to not let it go to waste. That was his fourth. And more than the first or the third, it made his vision change, so that he wasn't sure if he was awake, or dreaming, or if people were there or memories. Toulouse Lautrec had probably painted after three, or maybe two, he suddenly thought. Four wouldn't work for his style.

He smiled to himself. At least the poet had managed to stay married to the first wife. The writer was on his second marriage now. And his second wife wanted children.

His first book didn't sell many copies, and now he was worried he couldn't get anyone to pick up his next novel, which he'd just sent to his agent in New York. That was part of the problem in his first marriage. His first wife had asked him, once, when he complained bitterly of another rejection of his "art," "why don't you just try to write something that sells?"

He knew he would have to find a job—a steady job with reliable income—to support the children his second wife wanted to have. He did not have confidence in this second novel, because the first had made his agent say "sure, why don't you send me the next one when it's done," rather than "you've got a two-book commitment! Hurry up and get the second one to me...."

His wife had made pancakes and good, strong, sugar-roasted Madrid Café Pozo as they both always enjoyed on a Sunday after a night out drinking. He'd eaten them with only a couple hours sleep when he made his way home from Casa Puebla. She could tell by the odor of the absinthe where he'd been and what he'd been doing. It was the first Saturday in years she hadn't gone with him.

"You shouldn't worry so much," she told him, helping him onto the bed with his clothes on when his stumbling entry, preceded and trailed by the licorice smell, woke her. "We'll be fine. I hope you had a good time and got some good writing done and ran into friends. I...I don't know how much of it you'll be able to do after the baby comes...."

He had Fitzgerald's worries now. Without Hemingway's financial support.

He managed to get off the bed, and get over to the bathroom, in time to "get literary" all over the bidet that was so wisely placed opposite the toilet.

The Coffin Train

by Daniel Davis

Over there, he'd been Corporal James Trevor Simpson, promoted from rank of private by his being one of the few men not laid low by the influenza. The Great War had already been winding down; fighting had become routine, bored barrages of gunfire intermingled with casual, joking insults hurled back and forth. No one took the fighting seriously by that point; everyone was too sick. Everyone but James.

That had been there. Here, he was just Jimmy. By the tracks, Leah curled up beside him, plates and napkins laid out on a blanket. She hadn't gotten sick, either. Most of the town was ill, but only a few people had died. There were stories about other towns almost completely wiped out. Charleston County had been lucky.

"It's good to have you back," Leah said, for the twenty-second time that day. Jimmy was counting. It'd been so long since he'd heard her voice, and to be honest, he hadn't expected her to wait for him. So few girls did. How many letters had Jimmy watched his friends read? Their faces falling when they got to the reasons for goodbye—reasons that never mattered, because it was the act itself that caused the most damage... Give us pretense, Jimmy remembered thinking. Give us hope. Don't give us the truth, no matter how much you feel we deserve it. We don't.

Jimmy ran his hand along Leah's side. He could feel the heat of her skin beneath the flimsy cotton dress. A warm November; the sky was blue and open, a spring sky. Perhaps it was just his joy at being back. And it *was* joy. None of that regret he'd been warned he might feel; none of the fear of returning, however temporarily, to civilian life. He was home. This was still his home. His parents—sick but alive. His brother—less sick, still in school. And Leah—healthy, vibrant, kissing him as warmly as on the day he'd left.

She let his hand drift lower. They still hadn't gone all the way. Surprisingly, he felt little rush to do so. A feel—that was enough for now. Yes, it was his joy—euphoria, really. Just to touch her again, the thrill as his hand gently—even accidentally, on occasion—brushed her breast. She would probably let him go further, if he wanted. She was as happy as he was. But knowing this was enough—knowing that, when the moment came, she would be willing. The moment wasn't now. Now was for taking stock of things—the warm weather, the smiles, the parades welcoming both him and the end of the war.

He'd known the people who'd died in his absence, of course. Charleston County wasn't that big; you recognized pretty much everyone, even if you didn't quite know their names. A couple of his cousins up in Chicago had died, but he'd never been close to his family. It was his friends overseas whose deaths haunted him.

But not today. He bent down, kissed Leah's forehead. She squirmed

beneath him, snuggling deeper into his arms. "I love you," she said, something she had never told him before he'd left, but which he'd understood to be true.

"I love you too," he whispered back. It was a comfort to mean it.

He was going to say something else, too—something about marriage, nothing concrete, but it was the kind of day where you thought about that sort of thing. She'd been thinking of it too—he'd caught her fooling with her ring finger a lot, conspicuously twisting a nonexistent gold band. A couple of times, he'd taken the hint, lifted her hand and kissed it. But inside he took it seriously, and the thought of her loving him that deeply—what had helped sustain him while he'd been fighting—was like the realization that a childhood dream might finally come true: scary in a good way, very similar to his anticipation at finally coming home.

Before he could say anything, however, the ground began to rumble. "Train coming," she pointed out, smiling up at him. "Returning soldiers, I bet. Let's wave."

He glanced southward. Yes—the train was approaching. A moment later, he heard its whistle. "Okay," he said. "But remember—you belong to this soldier."

She laughed. He noticed her fiddling with her finger again. Yes. When the train was past. Then he would say something.

They watched the train draw closer, its whistle echoing across the fields. Smoke trailed along its length, lingered in its wake. A majestic sight, and something he'd missed. You took simple things like trains for granted, until you were deep in mud and snow, running out of food and ammunition. Then you would give what was left of your rations for a train to take you away from everything, just like it'd taken you away from home. This train...bound for glory. Wasn't that the song? He began to hum it, and after looking at him quizzically for a moment, Leah joined in.

When the rumbling of the tracks became too loud to hear the song, he pulled her up, against his chest, and listened to the vibration of her lungs, her heart. He lay his head against her shoulder, nuzzled her throat, kissed her. He closed his eyes as the train reached them. He didn't need to see. He was happy here.

Leah stopped humming. He felt her vibrations die away. When she gasped, it was like a gunshot in his ear. He jerked his head up, looking first at her, at how pale she'd gone. Was it the sky? Had it suddenly grown darker? No—the train's shadow was over them, and thinking that, how much cooler it had gotten, he glanced towards the tracks.

The train wasn't hauling passenger cars, as he'd expected. Soldiers returning home, hanging out the windows despite their illness, hats flapping in the wind, catcalls lost in the train's whistles. Leah's laugh as she pretended to flirt with them, though in reality it was for Jimmy, only Jimmy. His own laughter as he waved at the soldiers, them recognizing him as one of their own, a happy returned soldier. Their growing confidence that they, too, could be happy with their girl in their arms, their families by their sides, the war and disease be damned.

There was none of that. Instead, the train was hauling flatcars, car after car full of coffins. Cheap wooden things, made on the fly, made to fit the demand, not the desires of grieving parents and widows and children. Full-sized coffins. Child-sized coffins. Gliding past, not nearly fast enough, far slower than he'd ever seen a train move before. Surely it could go faster. Surely it wasn't slowing just for them.

But it was, wasn't it? Here, the train said. Here is your happiness, Corporal. Look closely. Notice the hairline fractures. Notice the way they are bundled together at odd angles, thrown here casually. Whoever loaded these coffins didn't put any care into it, Corporal, because before they loaded this train, they'd loaded several others. And others before those. Train after train of coffins have passed on these tracks. And there are more still to come.

As horrible a sight as it was, Jimmy couldn't look away. Even Leah seemed to disappear to him, vanish from his arms, swept up in the pull of the train. It was as though he could see each individual coffin—hundreds of them, passing by his eyes for inspection, analysis. He couldn't blink. He couldn't think. Who were they? Where were they from? Where were they going? Why so many, why couldn't their families take care of them?

But there were no answers, just coffins. Long after the train was gone, when he and Leah had said their goodbyes, thoughts of marriage left behind them like discarded scraps—even then, there were no answers. Just the track, stretching over the horizon, and the coffins, passing silently, endlessly, through his mind.

The Five Missing Days – A Parable

by Denise Bouchard

He was born on a day that did not exist. Julius Caesar had just declared a new calendar. It was decreed the Julian Calendar. The literal astronomical problem with this was that there were five missing days. Births and deaths occurring on the missing days would be assigned other days either being deferred or forwarded. The people feared what this would mean for those born on one of the missing days. They wondered if it would go so far as to affect the continuum of time.

Enosh was not only born on a day that didn't exist but to a young girl who could not care for him as her husband had left her and she in turn had left her son abandoned in a basket on a humble doorstep in a nearby town.

The family took him in but he was unlike them in every way. The children in this home were unruly, brutish. The child entrusted in their care was slight in weight and shy in demeanor. He was called Enosh. His step-parents were ineffectual in keeping their own children in line and they

preyed upon their step-brother.

Enosh was treated as though he were invisible. He was taunted that he did not even have a birthday and this one thing was true; Enosh's birth had never been recorded at all. His day was not honored at home, he did not thrive in school.

The girl who had given birth to him could not forget the child. She had begun to put the pieces of her life back together and found meaningful work, having studied the uses of herbs and their applications. She had become a gifted healer but she could not heal her own heart. She set out on a journey to bring her son home. His step-family easily let him go with her. He would now be in his seventh year, had his years been counted. She found her son to be slow in his responsiveness, distracted and he would flinch from her affection.

She sought out a wise rabbi to seek counsel for Enosh and she cried for the boy whom she did not believe would flourish in the world. She gave the rabbi very little information of his birth and early years but he knew that those years were of great importance in anyone's life.

The wise elder said, "Bring the boy to me." He spent time talking with Enosh. They would walk and discuss as friends, the older man listening and asking questions in a caring, thoughtful manner, without proffering his own opinions. In this way, Enosh unburdened himself and told of the taunts about his name, of being slight in frame, of not having a birthday and of not mattering in the world like the other children did. He told the boy that the family who had taken him in meant well but that they had misunderstood him and that, even in naming him Enosh (which meant frailty), they had made his young life more difficult. He then told Enosh that he saw in him someone who was strong yet gentle, someone who held noble attributes; that when he thought upon it, he felt sure that his name should be changed to Hanefesh, meaning "strong one who is helped by God". Enosh was happy indeed with this and proud of his new name. The rabbi then called the mother in and told her that he'd found her son to be

very bright. He told her that it was important for him that she go and register his birth. He then told her that he would draw up an astrological chart that would tell of the boy's true birthright and the qualities inherent of a person born on the missing day.

She did what the rabbi asked of her and he gave her his astrological findings. A boy born on this missing day would have had strength, leadership, patience and wisdom. His name was changed to Hanefesh in a special ceremony which was conducted to give him his proper place in society and he was told of his true birthright, his importance in the world and of the qualities a child born on his day would possess.

Like his mother, Hanefesh became a person of the healing arts and helped countless people. When the mother of the boy learned that the rabbi was ill and becoming frail, she went to him to properly thank him for his discovery that her son was meant to be a great man. He told her that although he had an understanding of astrology, he never actually studied it and had never drawn up a chart for her son. "I have forever studied people," he said, "...and I am sure of this one thing – we are what we believe ourselves to be."

At first, the woman felt betrayed, lied to, as though something had been taken from her. She then thought of her thriving son, now a man, strong, kind and clever and she realized that the rabbi had been very wise indeed. Her son's legacy did not have to be written in the stars. Jupiter and Mars did not have to be in alignment, nor did the tides affect how her son turned out. He had just needed to know that he was loved and thought to be an important and valued member of society.

Would the five missing days affect the continuum of time? She would not concern herself with any of this – for, as the rabbi had taught her, like a stone cast into the river, it is the ripple effect of love that matters most, paired with the power of our beliefs.

Wendy Isn't Coming Home

by Martin Crosbie

He's sitting on the stool in the kitchen when I get home from work. He briefly turns his head towards me, then immediately turns back and faces the window. It's not a scowl; it's indifference, he's not interested in me.

I walk into the bedroom and see that all her clothes are gone. Our photo album is sitting open on the bed with some of the pictures removed. I wander around our house, mentally cataloging the missing items, trying to determine whether or not they're significant to me. Her china cabinet is still there but it's empty. She's been busy. That's three trips now that I'm aware of, one more should do it. One more and all her things will be gone.

He rubs against my leg, and I almost jump out of my skin. "Spock, what are you doing?"

I stand for twenty seconds, fully expecting him to explain why he pushed against me. I want him to say that he's hungry, or he misses her, or she took something today that she shouldn't have, or maybe, just maybe, he'll say "When is she coming for me? Why isn't she taking me with her?"

He's her cat, not mine. When she moved in twenty-seven months ago, it was a package deal. Spock, the cat, was her family, and if I wanted her to move in, he was coming too. So I reluctantly gave in, and began living with the girl that I couldn't stop thinking about, and Spock, the tuxedo cat. Back then, I didn't know what that meant. Now, I do though. He has a black shell and a white chest, just like a tuxedo. He's moody and affectionate, and cries at night, because I don't let him sleep in our bed with us, or my bed with me. I can't get used to thinking about "my's"; I want to think about "ours" not "my's".

I take his little canister of cat treats from the top of the stove and shake it, and he rubs against my leg once more. His food is untouched from the

morning; the water level in his bowl looks like it's gone down though. He's drinking at least, that's a good thing. Do cats get depressed? Does he really know what's happening? I'm not sure; he's not himself though.

I take last night's empty pizza box and bend it in half so that it will fit into the garbage can, and he jumps away from his cat treats that I laid on the floor.

"Sorry, buddy, sorry Spock, it's just the pizza box. It's okay, I'm not angry, I'm not mad at you." Again, I expect a response from him, something, anything. No response though. He just keeps watching me until I back away, into the living room.

I settle on the couch wondering if it will still be here tomorrow when I get home. There are gaps on the shelves below the stereo, gaps where things have been removed. The problem with gaps is that I don't remember what was there to begin with. I remember years ago, living in a suite with a roommate and our place was burglarized. It was months before I remembered all the items that were missing. I mean, big things you remember, the clothes, the furniture, the dishes, but do you think to go check if your camera is still in the bottom drawer? Or, do you see if your leather jacket is hanging in the closet? I don't.

He jumps up on the couch beside me, licking his lips and smelling of cat treats. He looks at me expectantly, as though I can explain the situation to him. I can't of course, I can barely fathom it myself, but I try. He's owed some kind of an explanation I suppose. "She's not coming back, Spock, and if I had to guess, I'd say that it's just you and me, buddy. It doesn't look like she's taking you with her."

I swallow and there's a lump in my throat. He's a cat; I have to remember that, he's just a cat.

"Just a cat" brushes against my leg, as though he's asking permission to climb atop them. I let out a little laugh, and rest them on the ottoman in

front of me. “C’mon, come up here.”

He climbs up and does the little thing with his paws that I’ve seen him doing when he’s on her lap. Once he’s prodded around a bit, and determined that it’s safe, he lies down and tucks his head between his front paws. The warmth from his little body feels good. I don’t want to move a millimeter in case he finds some discomfort in our little arrangement and gets up.

The picture from the mantelpiece, the one where we look happy, really happy, is missing. No, hold on, the picture is there, it’s lying on the mantle; it’s the frame that’s gone. I let out a gasp of air and my body stiffens up. Spock lifts his head and disembarks from my legs, afraid for his life I suppose. I mean he must have seen her taking the picture; he’d know what my reaction would be.

“No, Spock, no, I’m fine, it’s okay.” It’s not though. He’s gone, into his basket, or his stool, or somewhere more favorable than my unpredictable legs, and so is the frame, the frame that used to hold our picture.

I go to bed early these nights. I close the curtains and make the house dark, then, I check that Spock’s blanket is by his basket, and his bowls are full. Then, I close the bedroom door, and climb into the queen-size bed where the two of us previously slept.

The duvet is gone; I knew something didn’t look right. I’m laughing now. The duvet and the duvet cover are gone. I remember when we bought it, but for the life of me I can’t remember who paid for it. If I really wanted to, I could check my credit card statements and see if it was my money that kept us warm all these months. Or, I could grab the old gray wool blanket that’s on the chair beside the bed, and use it.

It feels itchy at first, but I’ll get used to it, and tomorrow I’ll pick up another duvet, with the most comfortable cover that they have in the store.

Spock doesn't cry at night anymore. He did for a while, after she moved in. He would scratch at the door, telling us he wanted to sleep with us. I'd yell at him and he'd hush for a minute or so, and then cry a little more. After a while, he stopped, and started sleeping in his basket. I'd tell her that he's just a cat, he'd be fine.

I can't sleep. The blanket is scratchy and my mind is showing movies of everything that happened the past few weeks. I see too many glasses of wine and too many raised voices and too many questions about her suspicious phone calls. And, I see her leaving. I see that over and over again. I get up and go to the bathroom. When I'm finished, and return to the bedroom, Spock is sitting outside by the wall, looking the other way. It's as though he's playing that game where you say to yourself, if I can't see you, then I'm invisible. I see him though, with his pouty expression looking down the hallway away from me. I don't say anything, he knows the rules. He sleeps in his basket and we, or I, sleep in the bed. He's just a cat.

I enter the bedroom and leave the door open, wondering how many nights he sat out there, listening, waiting.

I lie away from the door, straining my ears so I can hear him. Two minutes later, I know that he's inside the room, and he's watching me. I can't see him, but I know he's at the foot of the bed, wondering whether or not to jump up. Two more minutes pass, and he gently plops onto the bed. I don't say a word. The time seems to pass slowly now, and I can sense the little cat breaths coming from his mouth.

Then, I feel it. He gives me the preemptive nudge against my leg. Still, I don't move. He knows I'm not asleep, he can tell, he's a smart cat. His little black and white body settles down beside me, and forms a sleeping area against my leg. The itchiness of the gray blanket doesn't bother him at all.

I gently reach around to his back, and stroke him with my hand. He tenses his body up slightly, but when I keep stroking the softness of his fur; he settles into his sleeping position again. He's a smart boy, he knows that it's

okay; he knows that he's allowed to sleep there. I feel every single particle on my leg drawing heat and comfort from him. I don't want him to move. I don't want him to ever move. As I re-visit in my mind the catalogue of items left and items removed, I make a decision. She can have anything she wants, the television, the stereo, the computer, but there is one non-negotiable item. The cat is staying with me. Spock will not be leaving this house.

I say it softly, so as not to disturb him; after all, he's been through a lot. "It's just you and me now, buddy, just you and me, but we're going to be alright. We're going to be okay."

If he lifted his head up, and answered me, it wouldn't surprise me at all. He doesn't though; in fact he doesn't move a fraction. He just keeps sleeping and breathing and giving warmth and taking warmth and being a cat, just a cat. He's my cat though; he's definitely my cat.

Hannah Was Here

by Nicole M. Bouchard

He found himself on the same park bench, the one whose underside was a constellation of brightly colored chewing gum in orbit around a single, thirty-year-old engraving that read: *Hannah Was Here*. It was the one place in the world that he could go to know that everything was alright. No matter what happened, the erratic lines of his universe converged at this single point. Here, along the horizontal rows of weathered wood and chipped green paint in Eros Park, he could reclaim her; and that was all that mattered, really.

The man reclining on the bench in his khaki trench coat left open over his suit drew the attention of the surrounding women, old and young, despite his being middle-aged and perhaps not conventionally handsome. He wasn't unattractive. His olive skin and dark hair threaded through with

silver strands, mixed with a peace in his dark eyes and a barely perceptible smile, made him approachable. He was elegant without having put any effort into it. Yet it wasn't any of those things that drew a double take from the blonde jogger in her mid-thirties, a pause from the teen girls posed across the lawn with textbooks they didn't intend to read, a grin from the fifty-something walking with her husband. When he thought about Hannah, a frequency was emitted outward from his chest, an aura of love pure and powerful that made the married women remember and the single women yearn. He was never so desirable in the best days of his youth until he fell in love with her.

"I can't reach Dad at the office. He was supposed to swing by here for lunch and then come back to the house with me. You remember he's having dinner with us tonight? Yes, I tried his cell phone. He knows it's my half-day today. I know, I just... I can't help but worry now. Alright. I'll wait another hour and then I'm driving over."

He smiled to himself remembering the first day they met. Staring in between the lines of his handouts for a glimmer of inspiration, he didn't see the ginger-haired girl in the paisley sundress approaching him. At the border of his page, the lemon and lime colored print of the fabric pressed with anticipation.

"Excuse me," a clear, soft voice said.

Raising his eyes, he took in the sight of what appeared to be a direct manifestation of the innermost wish he hadn't dared admit to himself in the long hours he kept immersed in books. His was a world of printed letters, numbers and rules. He hadn't awakened to the freedom of campus life. He didn't attend the parties he was invited to, didn't linger in the eyes of young women caring to share a night without attachment. Her gray-green eyes taking shelter under the umbrellas of long, dark lashes had an inaccessible, natural beauty to them. They made him think of Titania, fabled queen of the fairies in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the product of his freshman

literature course. The breeze took up the curtain of copper hair as she smiled down at him, her porcelain hand shielding her face from the sun.

“You see that guy over there? The one with the sandy blonde hair in the blue sweatshirt? He happens to be my ex-boyfriend and he’s with the girl he broke up with me for. Can I possibly borrow you for a minute?”

He didn’t see anyone or anything beyond her but nodded at her direction, transfixed. When the porcelain hand extended towards him, he took it without a word, without letting his eyes stray from hers. She pulled him to his feet. He barely felt the papers slip loose from his left hand. It didn’t worry him that in that moment, he might have followed her anywhere, done anything she bid him do.

She smiled as she closed the small distance between them, her torso lightly brushing his. With a look over her shoulder, a mischievous grin formed itself from the coral-hued lips that unwittingly controlled his fate. Her slender arms wrapped suddenly around his neck. All the noise in the park—the music from the guitar players, the diesel engines of the cars across the street, the conversations meant to be overheard—faded away.

“Thank you for this,” she whispered, as she leaned in to kiss him. One of his hands lay on her back in a familiar sort of way, the other found itself in her hair. It was a gentle kiss, only a few seconds of his life, but he felt the change. At a deep alchemical level, he’d started the transformation into someone else, someone better than himself.

She drew back and smiled again. “Did he see us? Is he gone?”

The guy in the blue sweatshirt; he hadn’t even turned to look at him but he felt he owed him his life. Raising his head obediently, he cast a gaze around them, almost startled to realize that they weren’t alone in the world. No one fit the description; their intended audience had moved on. He wondered if the guy might have glimpsed them and walked hurriedly away, destroyed. The thought pleased him.

“He’s still watching. Don’t turn around,” he answered with unusual cunning. He was the one to kiss her this time, the kiss just as soft and unassuming as before but more dangerous in its power over him; the seal of a spell, a promise...

He looked up at the afternoon sun, drinking in the warmth of the memory. He’d been seventeen in his first year of college. She was sixteen in the last semester of her junior year of high school. They got married when he turned twenty. He never tired of telling people how they met. How she’d used him to get back at the poor sucker who he owed his happiness to. How he’d lied just to keep her in his arms and kiss her again. It was the favorite story at parties and family functions. He would sit on the edge of the table and loosen his tie, watch the face of his young bride across the room, her eyes glowing when they met his, as he told the most important story of his life.

“You know that I’d support you no matter what, I understand that this is your father- we all love him, Joan- what I’m saying is that this could be a problem that you can’t handle on your own.”

Her and Bill’s marriage was not the legendary stuff of her parents’ marriage. Although Bill was a few years younger, Joan always felt that he had the ways of an older man- one who took to stability and routine as though he was born the capable adult who could handle everything, didn’t need risk, didn’t want change. There were times when being the daughter of an unrealized actress seemed to be behind the hundreds of characters she felt she was. Bill couldn’t access all her roles; couldn’t always be cast as her equal and opposite. It was when she was feeling every bit the vulnerable maiden in need of rescuing that he, draped in the courtly colors of his knighthood, quieted and soothed the starving dragons that wreaked havoc in her mind. It was in the stillness, late at night, when she was beaten down, pressed hard to the bed with her own doubt and fear that he had his glorious moments, reaching across the mattress with reassuring hands at the precise moment she needed him. If Joan was dressed up for a

party with her friends, riding high after some victory at work, she'd watch with a familiar mix of guilt and disappointment as he wilted in the wake of her spotlight. It wasn't that she would want another man, she loved Bill; it was just that she had to realize that he'd never understand all of her. She had to reconcile the wanting him to. Since her mother's death, she'd found more of a disconnect with him. He couldn't relate to the way she'd suddenly turn away, hands clutching at an invisible place between her chest and stomach where the grief lived and sob like a child at any given moment. This he expected right after it happened; right after she'd gotten the call to go down to the hospital that morning and then the second call saying it was too late- not months later.

"Bill, I can't justify forcing him into something he doesn't want to do. He's... he's still a relatively young man. He's fifty years old and something has just happened that... I know he can't accept it right now but I know that in a way he never will- he'll just learn to cope and I do believe that he will get to that point. I'd rather worry about him now and try to handle it on my own rather than do something he'll resent me for later; something that I'd resent myself for later. You can't begin to know how he feels."

"I can. I think of how I feel about you...if you ever... I don't know what I'd do. I'm just concerned for him and for you. I love you, Joan."

"I love you too. I don't think I'm going to get my brother involved. He doesn't...it's not that he isn't affected by this too, it's just that with the new promotion, he doesn't have the time or the patience to deal with this. He just tries to 'fix' everything. This can't be fixed... I have an idea where I might find him. There are no rules for this kind of thing. Just let me feel my way through it. I'll call you."

It wasn't until the birth of their first child, his son, Robert, that she told him the truth about their first meeting. She was tired but in his mind, never more beautiful. Her hair was in a thick braid spilling over left shoulder as she cradled the baby in the hospital bed. He had been reminiscing about when they'd met. A small smirk made its way to the corners of her mouth.

“Do you want to know what really happened that day? Even if it changes the story?”

He had been leaning on the window sill, one foot up on the chair. Through the hours of labor, he'd never been more scared in his entire life- for her, for the baby. He didn't know if he could handle a shock but he could see in that face he knew so well that she was just dying to tell him a secret. After all she'd been through, he couldn't help but indulge her.

“Of course,” he replied, drawing the chair close to the bed and sitting down with his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped under his chin.

“I'm not sure if this will be a disappointment or not, I know how much you love telling this story, but I've always wanted to tell you what really happened. You see, there was no other guy. There was no ex-boyfriend that I was trying to piss off. I just saw you sitting there, so handsome, studious...and I wanted to come up with a way to talk to you. You weren't silly like the other guys I knew. Not a jock, not a joint-smoking hippy on the grass, just serious. You seemed so absorbed studying. I walked by a few times but you didn't look up. I wanted to try something drastic to get your attention. I saw this other guy our age with his girlfriend and I made up the story. I felt like I'd never forgive myself if I left without talking to you. So there you have it- your beloved wife is a scheming liar.”

He didn't say anything for a moment and she frowned with worry. When he started to laugh, she relaxed and smiled mischievously.

“Why didn't you tell me? All this time? If I had known you went to all that trouble just to be with a guy like me, I think I might have proposed that day.”

“So you're not disappointed, you're not mad- even a little?”

“Yes, Hannah, I'm so disappointed that you wanted to talk to me that bad. If you weren't holding our first child I might just walk right now...” He couldn't answer with a straight face. He flushed red trying to hold the

laughter in.

“Well, I figured that I’d wait until our first born to tell you. That way you’d be really tied down- not just married but a father. When it turned out that this baby was a boy, I knew I was in the free zone. Kings didn’t behead wives who bore them sons so I figured it was a good time to let this slip.”

They were both laughing; her fatigue and concern over startling the baby kept hers quieter as she dabbed at the tears in her eyes with her free hand. He felt a full release from the fear he’d been struggling in for the past twenty-fours and let loose to the point where he was trying to hold onto the sides of his chair, lest he tumble out of it. Nurses walked by smiling, taking shy peeks into the room to see what all the noise was about.

“Isn’t this the best?” she asked him. “To have a baby christened by laughter?”

He reached out to embrace his wife and son. Pressing his lips long and hard to her forehead, he said quietly, “Yes, it doesn’t get better than what we have.”

He couldn’t suppress a wide grin. It didn’t matter that he was alone on a park bench with people giving him curious looks; she still made him laugh. Seeing a beautiful woman with copper hair in the distance, he stood up suddenly with the anticipation of a teenager.

“Hannah!” he called out, waving to her.

Locking eyes, she winked, mouthing the words “olive juice” because she told him once that she’d heard it looked more like “I love you” from a distance.

When she came closer and the sun darted behind the clouds, he was struck with confusion. It was a stranger. He’d sworn it was Hannah. He’d seen her. This woman barely looked anything like her. She seemed nervous

under his stare and took out her iPod, beginning to fiddle with it. He sat back down with a heaviness he couldn't explain. This wasn't the first time in the past six months that he'd had moments like this; moments that didn't make sense. It was as though his mind was the sun, darting in and out of the clouds, brilliant and dull, clear and hazy. He couldn't remember why Hannah was late. They met every Wednesday for lunch. She'd drive into the city before one of her afternoon classes and they'd meet at their bench. He dialed home on his cell phone. No one answered but her voice rang out sweet and melodic on the answering machine. Listening for a moment, he sat further back, hung up and closed his eyes...

It was raining. They'd had a terrible fight. She'd gotten accepted to Columbia and hadn't told him. He found the letter in their Cambridge apartment. She'd never said that she applied there; they had planned on staying in Boston- it was where his future was. He hoped it was where their future was; she had loved Boston longer, having grown up there. She would talk about visiting the old Colonial theatre as a little girl even though it had closed its doors during the Depression and was home to the Miller's art supply business. She had gone there once with her aunt who painted for a living; from that one glimpse of the former theatre, she couldn't learn enough about the building's past. Performance art became her passion. She made her parents take her there regularly so that she could look out for some trace of its former Gilded Age glory to dream about. When he brought up the Colonial in the context of affirming her love for the city, its history, Hannah tried to explain that the architect, J.B. McElfatrick, had designed over fifty theaters in New York City. New York was the center of theater.

Hannah was crying, insisting that she had applied early decision before they had gotten serious and hadn't thought about it since, thinking she'd never get in. But now that she had the chance to go... He took off, slamming the door behind him. He wondered how long she'd had her mind made up and whether her plans even included him. Hours passed. She couldn't bear staying in the apartment when he didn't come home for dinner. She went to the only place she wanted to be. It was warm, the

reason for the torrential rain- two opposing weather fronts clashing. He saw her the moment she saw him. It was their bench, where they went every anniversary, where she carved her name on a dare. She was wearing a raincoat but hadn't put the hood up. Her tears mixed with the rain on her face and in her hair. He got up and ran to her.

"Wherever you are is home," he'd said. They made a deal. She went to Columbia to study theater and he transferred from Boston University to NYU to complete his undergraduate business degree with the concentration in finance. They found a small place in New York that she did her best to make look like home. Every month they visited family and friends in Boston- it was on one of these visits that he proposed on their bench; they got married in a small ceremony in Boston during a spring break. He finished school two years ahead of her and got a job at a brokerage firm that trained him as a financial planner and paid for him to take his exam. Once she was done with school, they moved back to Boston where he went into business for himself and she was relieved to find less competition for auditions.

She had a few modest parts but always found the craft and theory of theater more rewarding than the acting itself. She wanted one lead and then she planned to teach. He couldn't understand why, if she was able to land a lead part, she would want to give up her stage career after that. Yet Hannah was adamant. This was what she wanted. She even added the clause that she'd start trying to get pregnant if she could just do this one amazing thing first. She traveled the circuits of smaller theaters until she heard of an audition call for *Midsummer Night's Dream* through a friend of hers whose agent had come across the listing. Jack urged her to try out for the part of Titania- it was how he'd always seen her. Though she was initially asked to read for Hermia, the director shared her husband's perception of her ethereal quality and cast her as the Fairy Queen. Hannah counted it as a leading role and wowed audiences in her first and last large scale production.

Despite the favorable reviews and audience appreciation, she stuck steadfast to her plan. She quit the stage once the run of the show was over;

she would later find her true joy in teaching and still having the time to be an involved mother to her two children.

During both pregnancies, they went to the park on warm days and leaned against each other with books, talking in the pauses. It was where she felt safe. For him, he felt even more than when he'd first seen her that she was a nature spirit, a queen of the magical world, enchanting his life and this was her bower. Wherever she was, was home.

His eyes fluttered open at his name. It sounded like Hannah. He looked around and spotted her. It looked as though twenty of her forty-eight years had faded away. She looked exactly as she had the first time he saw her. For a moment, it even looked like her paisley sundress.

He couldn't explain it nor did he want to. She was coming back to him. The sun picked up the light in her coppery hair. She was the picture of youth. As she came closer, she extended her porcelain hand to him, the same smile on her lips. Breathless, he started to stand up.

The sunlight blurred her image for a moment. He put his hand to his eyes to see more clearly.

"Dad? Daddy?" The image became clear again. His daughter Joan was standing over him with her hand reaching for his.

"Joan? I...I thought..."

"I know. You thought I was mom." She sat down on the bench in her blue jeans and gray blazer, still clasping his hand. He settled down beside her. Neither one spoke for a few minutes.

"It's okay, you know? It's not quite the same, but I do it too. I think I see her, I go to call her. I'm still not ready. There's no right way, no right amount of time. Mom told us it would be like this."

At his daughter's words, the clouds cleared, that spot just below his ribcage where he held his grief ached and he remembered. The long conversations

none of them wanted to have, the endless nights spent in hospital hallways, the planning Hannah chose to do, making her funeral seem more like one of her parties with her favorite music, food and home movies. There was the time when he considered that his children were grown, home was with Hannah and he didn't want to live without her. Joan and Robert had found him that night. Instead of retreating back into the grief, there was a safety switch that went off, making him forget.

He wept quietly with his daughter, neither of them able to stifle the tears that came in violent and gentle rushes, their hands intertwined. There was nothing to wipe the finality of it from their minds.

When the words could come again, she turned to him. "Do you think you'll be ready to put flowers with us on Memorial Day?"

"I can't. I can't even imagine that that's where she is. Just thinking something that beautiful and perfect is fading away... I can't handle visiting the grave. I want to protect her forever, even protect her body from time...from nature..."

Joan shook her head to shake away the thought. "I understand; but I just want you to know that it's not really where she is. She talked to us about this; the woman we know and remember is not in some cold place in the ground. Her spirit is watching over us."

"I don't know what to believe. I just know I won't see her again; not in this life, on this earth. She's gone; just gone."

"I'm not going to say that I don't think of how much I just want one more moment or that I don't worry that I'll forget some detail...little things about her... But I wonder sometimes if I'll have a vivid dream, how much are they gone? When you love someone, that bond can't be broken. I can't see her or hear her but I swear I can sense her sometimes, that unexplained feeling of comfort when I can't seem to get up out of bed in the morning, when the loss still burns..."

He acknowledged her with a tightened squeeze of her hand.

Joan remembered for the first time since she'd gotten to the park that she had to call Bill and let him know what was going on. She thought affectionately of how his voice would sound, the way he scarcely ever let the phone ring more than once or twice when he knew she'd be calling. He didn't mind showing her that he cared. She was glad for their kind of love; it was strong, but not to the point where it would make either of them suffer the way her father was suffering now. She wasn't quite as strong as either of her parents and was conscious of her limitations in much the same fashion that Hannah and Jack were aware of the fact that when it came to one another, they had none.

When she felt her father's hand slip loose from hers, she stood to fish her cell phone out of her bag. She walked a few feet away while dialing Bill at work. As he heard his daughter talking, he leaned back with arms spread out over the top of the bench on either side. Casting his gaze around the park, he saw a young guy with sandy blonde hair walking with his girlfriend. Time to time she would look serious as she said something, putting her hand to his chest against his blue sweatshirt.

Jack laid his head back and laughed out loud. A warm breeze came up, tousling his hair. Joan looked up at the sound of his laugh and caught sight of his grin; there was something he'd seen, something that made him think of her, but she knew he would keep it to himself. She didn't need to know what it is; it had simply made him smile. She told her husband she loved him and turned off her phone. Walking over to her father, she stood over him with an outstretched hand. Jack took it and walked arm in arm with her towards their cars.

"Joan? I was thinking about what you said and I had an idea; we should donate a park bench in that spot with your mother's name on it. I do think she watches over us but if there's any one spot that I'd visit and think she was around, it would be here."

“I think that’s perfect, Dad. We could come here on Memorial Day.”

Jack’s smile broadened and he looked back at the bench. Here, he could reclaim her; and that was all that mattered, really.

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