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"Wave and Sand" by Jim Fuess; www.jimfuessart.com

Welcome to our Fiction section!

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Land Underneath

By Jackie Dawn

Jeannie's tricycle is still in the garage, hidden behind Carl's old ride-on lawnmower. The lawnmower stopped working three years ago, but Carl can't seem to bring himself to throw it out, since it hides the tricycle from plain view—mostly from plain view, that is. The faded pink streamers that hang from the handlebars with their cracked plastic covers still peek over the seat of the lawnmower, like eyes peeking over the yard fence. They're still there, even if he tries not to see them.

Every June fifth, Estella pulls the tricycle from the garage and leaves it on the driveway. She'll watch it from the kitchen window for a few hours, then she hauls it into the woods and places it by the tree where Jeannie left it nine years ago. Sometimes she sits and waits there; sometimes she goes back to the house, into the kitchen, and puts on a kettle of Earl Grey tea.

She waits there, hoping Jeannie will find her way back to the tricycle, drawn to it like moths to a flame. She waits there and hopes hard that Jeannie will come pedaling out of the woods, streamers billowing softly like strands of hair on the breeze.

Estella pours herself a steaming mug of the Earl Grey and puts it on the counter under the window, but she never drinks it. She hasn't in nine years, since Jeannie disappeared. It doesn't taste the same anymore. It tastes like loss.

Carl was hanging a tree swing in the yard. He'd just hung the chains from the branch and was out buying the wood to make the seat when he found out Jeannie had disappeared. He could remember the exact moment: As Estella's frantic voice came through the phone line, the slab of wood had fallen off the

cashier's conveyor belt and onto the floor with a heavy, echoing thud. And then came the feeling. The sick, hard weight in his stomach that he knew meant something was wrong, and that it would never be right again. He wobbled as he picked the wood off the floor, paid the cashier, and left.

Every year on June fifth, Carl stands in the yard and looks at the swing that he built with his own hands, the seat that he hung although Jeannie was never there to fill it. He stands there for a little while, sits in the grass, and stares at the swing. And then he trudges off into the woods to pull Jeannie's tricycle from the tree where Estella leaves it for her. The sick, rigid heaviness in his stomach always comes back then, his every step a little more sluggish than the last.

Sometimes Estella dreams that Jeannie is back home. It's the same every time; she dreams of standing in the hallway and hearing the most beautiful noise coming from the back bedroom. She tiptoes down the hall, her footsteps slow and soft on the carpet, places her hand gingerly on the door and pushes it open. That's when Estella notices Jeannie on the floor, wearing the red jumper she wore the day of her Kindergarten pictures. The beautiful round noise is Jeannie's giggle, Estella's favorite sound in the universe. Sometimes it felt like it had been so long that she had almost forgotten what it sounded like.

Estella throws herself onto the floor and looks into her daughter's face—Carl's nose and wide smile, and the eyes that were all Jeannie's own.

“Jeannie, where have you been?” She always asks, and Jeannie just throws her head back, her two blonde braids swinging over her shoulder and keeps laughing.

Estella usually wakes up then, the echo of Jeannie's giggle resounding in her mind. She tosses back the covers and stumbles down the hall, throwing the door open and letting her gaze fall over the room. Sometimes it feels so real that she'll stare into the open darkness, convinced Jeannie's form will materialize in front of her like an apparition.

But the room is only occupied by shadows and the echo of the giggle fades like a scent on the breeze. Carl always wakes up at this point and sits up in bed, waiting for Estella to come back. He savors this, since unlike Jeannie, he knows Estella always comes back.

He wishes, like she does, that anything would fill their home—anything except the stagnant silence that has overwhelmed them since Jeannie disappeared.

Carl dreams of her often, too. But he never tells Estella. He never tells Estella that he dreams of their daughter coming back to them.

In his dreams, Jeannie is always dead.

June fifth this year dawns hot and muggy—“mosquito weather,” as Carl likes to say. Estella wakes when the sun is rising over the horizon, peeking over the landscape like the eye of a child.

Carl is in the kitchen. A pot of coffee sputters on the countertop; its aroma clouds the air like smoke. He sets two mugs on the table and pulls the creamer from the fridge, placing it between the two mugs.

“Three,” he mutters, staring at the creamer closely flanked on either side by the mugs. And then he busies himself with the sugar bowl and spoons.

He hears Estella drifting down the stairs, through the living room, dining room, and into the kitchen.

“Morning,” he says to her, but she doesn’t answer. Her eyes move to the mugs on the table, to the coffee perking on the counter, back to the mugs, to Carl. Soundlessly, she closes her hand around the handle of the tea kettle, opens the lid, and holds it under the hissing water cascading from the faucet.

Carl drops the spoon on the table and moves quickly, placing his hand softly on his wife’s arm.

“Warm today. Warmer than usual,” he says gently, the first thing that comes to his mind. “Wanna go for a swim?”

Estella just looks up at him, sleep still lining her eyes.

“Estella,” he continues, “let’s get out of the house for a little bit. Okay?”

She looks at the kettle, still poised under the faucet. It is full and overflowing,

water running down all of its sides. She places it on the sink bottom and turns back toward the stairs, leaving the water to continue to flow out of where the kettle can't hold it anymore.

On the way to the lake, Estella notices that Carl purposefully takes her five minutes out of the way so they won't pass the tree where Jeannie's tricycle had been found nine years ago. She's not sure why he's taken her this way. Her mind's been on the tricycle, the tree, and beautiful little Jeannie all morning, like it always is.

Soon, the thicket of trees opens and the edge of the lake is in view. Estella shields her eyes and sees the floating dock at its center and hears the water lapping at the edge.

She remembers that Jeannie used to be afraid to stand where the water and the land met. Jeannie used to think that it was like standing at the edge of a cliff, and that she'd fall straight down to the bottom if she moved an inch.

"No, no, no," Estella remembered laughing, with her hands on Jeannie's narrow shoulders. "The land is still underneath you for a few feet in. It'll still hold you up even if you can't see it. I'll show you."

Carl goes charging toward the water, diving in without even taking his shirt off. Estella can see his willowy figure under the waterline, swimming straight for the dock. He makes it there in one breath before his head breaks the surface and he shakes his sodden hair out of his eyes. He waves, beckoning her.

The sun beats down on Estella's freckled shoulders and the heat stings at her for a second before the cool water closes over her head. She rushes to the surface, realizing how much she hates the cold silence that fills her ears whenever she holds her head underwater.

Estella lets the water swallow her from the neck down, gliding through it soundlessly. The tickle of a minnow against the ball of her foot causes her to screech and flail for a moment, and Carl's laugh echoes.

"Not funny," she calls. "I hate when that happens."

"Well, what do you expect? We're in their territory." Estella's face crumples as

she reaches the dock. Carl reaches down, hoisting her out of the water.

The sun-bleached wood panels are warm against her back; she feels the water seeping onto them from her wet bathing suit.

“Feel that sun?” Carl asks, as he lies down next to her on his back, cradling his head on his wrists. Estella closes her eyes, listening to the rush of his breath, and that is all it takes.

She does it all the time.

She stares off and wonders about Jeannie. About her voice and her full, bursting giggle. About her hair—if it had lost its soft curl or turned a deeper shade of blonde, more like Estella’s than the bright shade of champagne that it was when she was little.

Would she have grown into a tall young woman with sharp features like Carl’s or would she have stayed small and wispy like she was—like Estella?

Would she have been a good older sister to the other children Carl and Estella would have had—ones that wouldn’t have to be replacements for Jeannie like they would now?

Would she still be afraid to step off the world and into the water, or had she grown more defiant, a little independent, a little strong—like Estella wanted her to be?

Would she have saved the beloved tricycle she rode around on for nostalgia or would it have sat out with the trash when she turned into a big girl who took to the world on a two-wheeler with a banana seat?

Estella does it all the time. She thinks about it all the time, even when it isn’t June fifth.

But today, it is.

“Jeannie,” Estella said, from behind the open door of the refrigerator. “I saw that.”

“Sorry,” Jeannie answered, pulling her hand from the mixing bowl where the cookie dough sat. In a swift move, she popped the dough she’d been sneaking into her mouth. Estella put the half gallon of milk she’d taken from the fridge onto the counter and reached into the bowl.

“If you don’t stop eating the dough,” she said, tossing the morsel into her mouth, “there won’t be enough for the cookies.” Jeannie giggled as Estella poured the milk into a glass and slid it across the counter for her.

We should have sat there and eaten all the dough, she thinks, feeling the sun beating down on her face. Then I wouldn’t have been so busy baking the cookies. She never would have left my sight.

The kettle sang on the stovetop; Estella moved from the bowl of cookie dough. She reached for the handle of the kettle, pouring the bubbling water into the mug on the countertop.

Jeannie leaned forward on the chair she was standing on, propping her elbows on the counter to peer into the mug.

“It looks angry,” she said, tilting her head to one side so her ponytail bobbed. “It’s all bubbly and steaming like it’s mad.”

Estella examined the water as she dipped the bag of Earl Grey into the mug.

“It must be mad because you’re stealing all the cookie dough,” she chided playfully, winking at her daughter. Jeannie smiled, and then hopped off the chair, her sneakers landing with a smack against the linoleum.

“I’m gonna go outside!” She announced, heading for the front door.

“Stay close now,” Estella warned. “I want to be able to hear you.”

The questions burn in Estella’s mind, hot and intense like the sun on her eyelids. Why didn’t I tell her to wait for me? Why didn’t I leave the damn bowl and the kettle and take Jeannie out to the swing in the back? If it was the last time I was going to see her, why didn’t I watch her leave?

“I will,” Jeannie called out from the living room. Estella heard the familiar slam of the screen door and Jeannie’s white tennis sneakers clambering down the front steps. As she turned back and continued mixing the dough, the high pitched squeak of the front wheel on Jeannie’s tricycle played faintly outside like a tune. As she reached into the cabinet, Jeannie’s giggle meshed with the soft clang of the metal cookie sheets as they collided with one another.

I would give anything to hear that sound again, she thinks. She clenches her eyes tight and stiffens every muscle, convinced she’ll hear it if she listens hard enough now.

The tricycle tires crunched over the gravel in the driveway as Estella dropped measured spoonfuls of the dough onto the sheets. Jeannie loved when she made the cookies. She smiled as she thought of the way Jeannie’s face always lit up when she came in the house and smelled them in the kitchen; how it pained her to watch them cooling on the metal racks by the stovetop.

“Just one,” Estella would say, pulling one warm cookie off the rack and handing it to her. “If you eat too many while they’re still too warm, they’ll make your tummy hurt.”

Just one. Everything hurts now.

Estella filled the tray with the even spoonfuls of dough, perfectly spaced like soldiers in line. She had just filled half of the second tray when she realized she couldn’t hear the squeak of Jeannie’s tricycle anymore.

I hate this part. Oh God, I hate this. And it doesn’t go away. It never goes away.

She picked her head up and waited, listening. She dropped the spoon into the bowl, wiped her hands on the front of her shorts and made her way to the front door. She could almost feel the scratch of the cotton against her palms.

Estella listened hard for Jeannie’s giggle.

She stopped, straining to hear the beads sliding down the spokes of the wheels. Her hands seized the knob of the front door.

“Jeannie?” She called, stepping out onto the front steps. The breeze rustled the

leaves in the trees lining the sidewalk.

“Jeannie?” Estella stood on her toes, peering left and right. And when she saw nothing, she dashed down the stairs.

“Jeannie Ray, you come back here right this second!” She shouted, racing to the sidewalk. She listened for the slap of Jeannie’s sneakers on the pavement as her breath became ragged.

Jeannie, where are you? Her mind screams. Where are you? Why won’t you come home to me? What can I do to make you come home?

But Estella heard nothing. Nothing. Nothing except the pound of her heartbeat drumming in her ears.

Estella stands up abruptly, and the dock wavers underneath the movement. In one swift move, she dives into the water, forgetting the chill she is met with as it closes over her head.

“Estella?” Carl calls, and jumps in after her. He thinks she can’t hear him as she swims furiously toward the shore, but she can.

The water turns white around Carl as he swims after her, finally catching up where it turns shallow near the edge.

“Where are you going?” Carl asks Estella, as she wades toward the shore.

“Home,” she answers, without turning to face him. “I need to go home.”

“Why?” Carl asks, but he doesn’t wait for her to answer. He charges toward her, the lake water churning around his calves as he rushes toward Estella. He clasps her wrist as her feet meet the sand at the lake’s edge. Carl spins her, but he doesn’t need her to answer his question. He already knows.

Carl does it all the time, too.

He wonders.

What happened to her? Did she just wander off too far? Had she ended up back

at the lake, unafraid of the water anymore? Had she waded in and lost her footing, her little white sneakers like stones tied to her feet?

Was it an animal? A bear, maybe a wolf, surprising her in the woods where she'd stopped? Or was it another kind of animal, one that didn't have sharp teeth or fur but bright eyes and friendly smile and soft hands that hid the claws underneath?

Had those hands been clamped over her mouth so her scream wouldn't echo off the trees?

Had it been fast, like a blinking eye? Or had it been slow, like watching the second hand on the clock tick every day for the last nine years?

And then there was what he thought about all the time. On June fifth, nine years ago. Six months ago. Yesterday. Today. Now.

Did it hurt?

"Estella," he says slowly and reaches up his hand to rest it on her face. She notices how cold his palm is against her cheek, like an awakening. "It's been nine years. Nine years and nothing. She isn't... she is never coming back."

Carl sighs as the weight of his words rests between them, like the creamer between the two mugs still sitting on the kitchen table.

"You don't know that," Estella says. "They never found her. That doesn't mean she's dead, Carl. We need to have faith."

Her eyes are glassy and glazed; Carl suddenly longs for the vibrant sparkle he used to see in them years back, years before Jeannie was even born.

"Faith," he says to her. "What we have is not faith, Estella."

"Carl," she pleads. "Don't you feel it, deep down, that's she's still alive somewhere? You have to feel that. And we need to believe that."

"But I don't."

“What are you talking about? How—“

“Estella.” Carl says shortly, and something changes in his eyes. Beads of water run down his cheeks and Estella notices how they look like tears.

The slow, sinking feeling comes back to Carl, only this time it radiates through his limbs. Nine years of sorrow had built up and he could see it now, materializing like a wall between him and his wife. He realizes he has been trying to reach through it to her all along.

“Estella, Jeannie is gone. That’s what I feel. It’s what I’ve always felt. I wish we could have her back, too, but these rituals, this silence that’s hanging over us, it’s not going to bring her back. It’s not. And we’re destroying ourselves by not believing that. She’s gone, Estella. She’s gone, and we have to let ourselves believe that.”

Suddenly, Estella’s shoulders tense and her expression tightens like she’s just been slapped, hard. Her eyes well up and in her watery gaze, she sees the lake stretching back behind Carl. The edge of the woods lines the lake like a barrier, and beyond it, she sees nothing. The sky stretches on with the curious eye at its center, but she sees nothing.

Carl’s arms drop to his sides. It seems as if, for a moment, the lights he’d been hoping to see in Estella’s eyes had flashed and then vanished. He didn’t know if they would ever come back.

He walks around behind her, the water whispering with his steps. He cradles her tense, stiffened form with his own.

Carl places his hands on Estella’s narrow, trembling shoulders.

“It’s okay, Jeannie. Let me show you. Put one foot down in the water,” she said. And Jeannie did.

“Good. Now take another step.” And Jeannie did, her tiny left foot sliding into place next to her right.

“Okay. Keep going,” Estella urged, but Jeannie froze, shaking her head. “Nothing will happen. The land is underneath you to hold you, like I said. It’s

there, even if it's hard to see." But Jeannie didn't move an inch.

Estella bent down, placing her head next to her daughter's. She knew at that moment, they were staring at the same sun kicking off the water, the same horizon lit brightly by the late spring afternoon.

"I'm here, Jeannie. I won't let you fall to the bottom. Come on, we'll take the next step together."

Estella slides her foot forward now and Carl moves with her. The bottom dips down and they slip deeper into the water. It reaches Estella's hips, and for a second, she wonders if Jeannie would have been able to touch the bottom here.

But the land holds them up. The same land Jeannie had gone to.

A soft wind puffs past them, and for a second, Carl hears the faint sound of a giggle as it rustles the leaves of the tree above them. And then it is gone, like dying sunlight.

Editor's note: Part I of this story was featured in our spring issue. As its themes are fantastical and directly correlate to one another, Part I and the now completed Part II appear together below in this issue. Part I is in italics. Enjoy!

The House of Stone Light

By Denise M. Bouchard

Part I

Six hours across the Atlantic, nearly six centuries back in time and I've found my home. Traveling to the Irish countryside for the third time this week from my hotel in Dublin, I realize my life has become a chaotic mess. I'm living out of a suitcase in a foreign country, taking on a blood-thirsty bidding war and risking my busy yet comfortable lifestyle all for a house I cannot bear to lose. It's an emerald with a secret, a piece of my soul, the long lost answer inside and I'm helpless against its spell.

The house comes into view as I pull up the winding drive in my silvery rental car that matches the gray skies overhead. It's raining; forty degrees outside and the fireplace in the common room of the hotel was roaring when I left to go out into the cool and damp. Oblivious to the phone calls and paperwork tying me back to my NYC life, I'm subject to a feverish passion only I can understand.

I reach down into my purse and sort through its contents to find my cell phone with my left hand, never taking my eyes off of the ancient stone house.

The realtor's number is on speed dial, number four on my contact list. I've pressed that button so frequently in these last few weeks with anxious moist hands, that the four is faded amongst the other numbers. It's more of a suggestion of a number... more like a rune.

When Ryan answers, I release the torrent of urgency, talking quick and hard, a voice belonging to the East Coast literary scene. He laughs, used to these calls from me. His voice is smooth, slow, deep golden and warm like bourbon... his lilt the tinkling ice.

"What is it Terina?" His voice coos and I think of how no one in New York speaks like this. It's one of the many elements that calls to me and even to my husband whenever we're here.

"Any word on the house yet?" I can't help myself even when relaxed by his voice. I have to ask yet again.

"Not yet, but I've got an idea. Where are you right now?"

He knows that I'm in front of the house again.

"Could you meet me in town? I'll buy you a Guinness!"

I'd meet this man in a foxhole and all because he's a pied piper leading me to my dream.

"Give me fifteen minutes."

It takes almost fifteen minutes just to leave the grounds but the little town that serves the picturesque hamlet is just right outside out of it.

Ryan already has a table when I walk in.

“What’s your plan?” is all I say as I try to stash my collapsible umbrella somewhere in a dignified manner which isn’t happening, hardly looking at him.

“A ‘hello’ would be nice... I’m beginning to feel used,” he jokes.

“Hello, Ryan. What’s your plan?!”

“Write the owners a letter.” He nods as he says it as though that will do it.

“That’s it? That’s your brilliant plan?.. Ok. Off the top of my head, here goes: ‘Dear Owners, I’m being out-bid by hundreds of thousands of dollars but I like your house more so sell it to me.’”

He shakes his head and grins. A deep sigh follows.

“I thought you were a writer.”

“Yes, so?”

“So write what’s in your heart. I know these people and we’re not really talking hundreds of thousands more now are we?”

“No, but it might as well be if the price keeps skyrocketing and as you well know we already have a property in New York.”

“Maybe the owners are not all about the money,” he interjects.

“Maybe? What have you heard, Ryan?”

“Good and bad.”

“What’s the bad news?”

“The English are willing to keep out-bidding you.”

“The English?”

“That’s what they call them.”

“So it’s over for the Americans...”

“Not so fast, Lassie! It seems ‘The English’ are planning to really modernize the place. They’re talking right in front of the owners about gutting this, tearing out that, putting in lots of steel and glass... modern art... The outside will have a pool and wet bar as well as an outdoor kitchen. It will no longer be a working farm for the area because ‘The English’ will hardly ever be there and they can’t be bothered.”

“Why not?”

“Well, like yourself, they have a big, busy life and two other homes. I can’t even imagine the complications of your own life with Jack.”

He recites what he’s learned of us so far and some of what he hasn’t, but gets it right on.

“There’s your life as an author... Your husband’s as a hedge fund manager who travels internationally at least once a month. A posh apartment overlooking Central Park. The theatre attended at least once a month. Leased homes for summer vacations both at home and abroad which you’d own if you weren’t so busy... especially that Nantucket property...”

“That’s amazing,” I say to cut him off.

“Not really, darlin’- you’re not so different from The English.”

I feel as if I’ve been slapped.

“That’s not fair, Ryan. I care about this house deeply. I’ll be there as often as possible. I’d keep it running as a farm for the town and perhaps even hire more help than they have now. I’d love every careworn surface, nook and cranny because of its age and beauty.”

“That’s it then, darlin’! Now you’re talking.”

He slams his hand on the table. I jump because he’s not usually this enthusiastic and then his wise words make me melt again as I begin to see what he’s been trying to tell me.

“See now, that’s exactly why I thought that a letter to the owners of why you are the best candidate to love and care for a home which they still clearly love but can no longer care for would help to sway them. You just convinced me, so maybe you can convince them.”

“Wow- did I say how good you are? You should’ve been a lawyer!”

“I’m too rugged for the little suits.”

I laugh but he doesn’t. He’s looking at me so seriously. He reminds me of Sean Connery. Older, rugged, still good-looking.

“What?”

“There’s something else isn’t there?” he eyes me suspiciously. “Something I need to know? Something you’re not telling me? What is this obsession, this desperation for such an old place when you could have a vacation home anywhere- the Caribbean, the Hamptons... Just bring your wet-suits and call it a day. This is a farm and it will make your life even more complicated. I’m just curious...”

He’s reading me; he does so skillfully. I wonder if all the Irish are so innately perceptive.

“It’s ok,” he says after a time. “So long as you’re serious about the place. You don’t have to tell me your reasons... but Mrs. Finnegan has expressed an interest in you. She has a good sense of people.”

How do you describe to someone that you’ve seen the past and know the future if there’s no change to your current lifestyle?

“As you know, Ryan, I’m a writer. My last novel was a re-worked fable. I

wrote facets of my own life into it and I then used my imagination to create a manor from the early 1500's. It was a stone house with a warming stone for warming baked bread in the kitchen which also contained a beehive hearth. The surrounding land contained a waterfall, lakefront, terraces for gardens, sheep, cows, horses and apple orchards.

You see, I wrote before I researched, so when I researched and found 'the house' not only existed but was now up for sale and had been built in 1510, the exact same year I'd depicted... I had to see it."

Ryan, who typically holds a loose posture, has the upper half of his body edged forward atop his crossed arms, leaning on the table. I see that he's intrigued and continue what sounds surreal even to me though I've experienced it.

"When I saw a few pictures of the inside of the house, it was positively eerie, Ryan... Yet when we got here and you physically walked us through, I... Somehow I knew what would be in the next room and the next... It was like recognizing a part of myself.

Jack and I had been thinking of a getaway from New York City. In the states I feel like I'm in the movie, Pelham 123; our lives are moving faster than our bodies and souls will allow.

I grew up going to my grand-parents farm in upstate New York and I learned to ride. I loved riding on the open lands. I would keep the horses... I would keep everything. It's the kind of house where memories are made and tired souls are healed. I need that more than I imagined, Ryan."

I have Ryan's complete attention, but it is a comfort to see that he doesn't think what I've said is crazy. He reaches across the table to squeeze my hand.

"We have some work to do to get you your house," he says, standing.

That conversation took place weeks ago and I'm left thinking that I went and said too much. The phone rings.

"Meet me at the house. I have something to show you." Ryan's warm and

even tone doesn't reveal anything.

"Why? Is it ours or is something wrong?"

"Don't know yet."

Now I'm beyond the point of frustration. I'm angry, feeling that this is an unnecessarily long tease that in the end just might leave me without the house anyway. Jack and I know that we need to get back to the states. What if it's all a big mistake? We're not about to offer any more money-never mind what else they have to show, what game there is to play. I hold my breath- prepared to walk if I must.

He insists. I agree with the notion in mind that I'll make clear the limit of my patience, face to face to determine a final outcome.

I arrive to see the heavily carved wooden doors unlocked. Never having been to the house so early in the morning, I relax in spite of myself, taking in the powerful golden light.

Scanning the driveway, I see Ryan's car, but he isn't outside to greet me. I turn off the ignition and remind myself to be strong.

In the grand foyer, there is a large weathered wooden table with a glass vase filled with newly picked March flowers from the grounds. Clearly this was Ryan's handiwork.

The wide plank floors glow like honey.

Ryan sits at the grand piano, his back to me, trying to play a melody I don't recognize while the fireplace blazes.

"Are you trying to break my heart?" I ask, the disappointment evident in my voice.

"If we don't get the house, Ryan, then you're just teasing me with all this."

He stops playing and turns to me. He must have seen the fatigue on my face from a series of fitful nights. Tenderly, he folds his hands in his lap

and asks, "Do you think I would do that to you, Terina?"

Politely, I say, "No," and it's what I want to believe but he hears the moment of uncertainty.

"The Finnegan's are away for a week. Family business. But they left the keys with me which gives me hope. Also, it seems I've been given some instructions in the care of the house and a bit more of its history. Mrs. Finnegan loved your letter- so much in fact it moved her to tears and she found it very interesting that you took art history in college. What she really found interesting though, was your name."

"My name?"

"I think you'll find this more than a bit interesting. Shall we?"

Ryan takes my arm and leads me into the dining room. I love this room. I love the fact that for such a grand manor, nothing here is ostentatious or stereotypical. No deer antlers on the high walls. Instead there are medieval tapestries that I could never tire of. A long rustic table that calls out to us is perfection to me. Stone fireplaces with carved angels and rustic country hutches filled with beautiful antique plates from Dublin add to the careworn beauty.

There is a large metal box on the table. Its dimensions are wide and deep. Ryan reaches in, taking out all of the family deeds right down to the original owners.

"Mrs. Finnegan wanted you to see these things."

"Does that mean she's leaning towards selling to us?"

"I think she'd like to know your feelings on all of this... This was the family who first owned the house," he pointed out with a tap of his finger.

I read the husband's name, both the first and surname, nothing special there and then the wife's name in lovely script jumps out at me: "Terina".

With thinly veiled excitement, Ryan exclaims, "Look at that! She had your

name!”

I meet his eyes and attempt a smile, but suddenly the atmosphere around us seems heavier with a palpable haze that drifts in and out of the golden rays of sunlight. My hands sturdy themselves on the table.

Ryan reaches into the box taking out more items. There are family trees. It seems there were three children belonging to the original owners. Studying it more closely I feel a different sort of heaviness, this one pressing on my heart. I touch the tree. The tree of life. Jack and I had desperately wanted children but for some reason it just had never happened. I think, ‘This is a house that should have children in it... Painted murals of Peter Pan, starry skies and ships upon the nursery walls. Their own ponies in the stables. Stability?’

“What are you thinking, love?” Ryan asks.

So much is going through my mind but I feel subdued, faraway, and want to keep my thoughts my own. I’m almost nervous. Did Mrs. Finnegan want me to see these things to give me the message that this home was meant for a bigger family, one of substance?

“It is interesting that the original owner and I share a name but I’m not sure what to make of the rest of it...”

Ryan pulls out another box. This one is not metal but rather oak. Heavy and ornate. Ryan slides it toward me.

I don’t ask whether or not I’m supposed to simply look it over or whether I’m allowed to touch it. From my years of working with art restoration and antiques, I know how old this piece is. Greedily I run my fingertips over it and with purposeful precision, lift the lid. Inside is a golden necklace with a thickly braided chain and a semi-circle that held three gems. One is missing. I try to imagine how it became loosened from its setting. Had the necklace fallen from the woman’s hands to the floor after the telling of bad news? Had there perhaps been a child teething on it? One of my favorite pictures of Jacqueline Kennedy was one where she was laughing, holding baby John in her arms while his chubby fist held her pearls in his mouth...

I feel the soft threadbare blue velvet lining- each fold manifested from the loosening of the material over the ages. As I do so, I feel a hard raised surface. It's a ruby- the center gem that had come loose.

Being clairsentient, I feel the ruby's energy between my fingers. A strong vibration still imbued these stones.

With care, I place the ruby back into its setting. Would she have wanted the stone re-set? Her necklace complete? I had meant to only see for a moment what it would have looked like with all three gems intact; the way that it looked when the woman who shared my name would've worn it. Yet old-world craftsmanship holds it in place so that it doesn't tumble loose when I gingerly lift the edges of the necklace. A sapphire to the left, the ruby in the center, an emerald to the right. Regal and vibrant as though the sixteenth century was not the last time it had been worn against a woman's breast.

Anything could have happened here- I nearly expected someone to reach out and stop me from handling something so precious as though I was betraying a sacred trust or about to bring forth the ruin of a cave of wonders simply for touching this with unworthy hands... Yet as though she were simply in the next room, the vivacious woman who possessed this necklace centuries before had left me with it, certain of my curiosity, knowing in the way a grand-mother knows her grand-daughter, that I could not help but look to the mirror with this beautiful treasure against my own skin... trying on a more worldly identity.

I do not bother with the chain or clasp. I simply cradle the golden half-moon between my hand and chest so that my heart beats against it. Almost instantly the cool of the metal melts and warms with my body heat. I catch my reflection in a wide golden mirror above a banquet table, my pulse racing to match this energy that is stronger than mine.

The stones capture the golden light of morning and refract it into a prism of deep, intense blues, greens, gold and fiery crimson. These colors of light envelope me, surrounding the frame of my body. I think, 'My own aura is lighter than this...' A strange thought.

And I can hear Ryan calling out my name, from a distance it seems, but I can't bring myself to look away from the mirror... The regal colors vivid against fair skin and in contrast to the dark mahogany waves of hair touching down on my shoulders.

I can hear the birdsong outside, though it's fading, muffled by an increasing pressure dulling my senses. I feel myself losing consciousness or at least evolving into another form of one as the colors intensify, blocking out all other imagery as I fall...

Part II

Blurred images like pieces of a mosaic turn and arrange themselves gracefully before my eyes like an orchestrated dance... skirts swirling as they brush upon the hard surface beneath where I lay.

“Milady! Milady!”

They call out to me, these graceful forms that remind me of the Botticelli Renaissance goddesses. How is it then that their tones entreat, as though the syllables were bowed in servitude?

“She's come to!”

“Thank heavens, milady!” one says with her porcelain hand cradling my head. “Ya've given us all a fright this mornin'!”

“Wh.. Where is Ryan?” I ask, timid and afraid, even though all they seem to want to do is comfort me.

“There is no man by that name here, milday... You fainted. And it's no wonder in this heat! And what with all those people comin' today for the christenin'...”

“What? Christening?.. What's being christened?”

“Oh suren, ya must be needin' to be lyin' down, milday, yer not yerself.”

As I look around, I notice that the medieval tapestries still hang on the walls

as they had seemingly minutes before I lost consciousness, yet every other thing is different. It is all medieval and I, I am the only figure out of place.

A man I don't recognize barges into the room and issues commands to everyone present spare for myself. He claps and they scatter to the four directions as leaves taken away on a strong gust.

To my astonishment, the clenched features relax as he tenderly lifts my body and carries me up the stairs to an ornately carved bed. I cannot take my eyes from him.

I don't remember this beautifully intricate bed having been there at the open house when I first viewed this room. He is dressed in medieval attire and for that matter, so am I as I turn my eyes to scan my reclining form on the bed. My head spins and my skin feels as though it's on fire. I'm so deeply, deeply confused. My form sinks more heavily into the mattress and I cannot explain the added weight that seems to hang upon my bones.

"What's wrong, woman?" he asks me in a thick brogue and adds rather thoughtfully, "...have we planned the christening too soon after the birth of the babe?"

In my disoriented state, I laugh, almost hysterically at the absurdity of all of this. He in turn looks truly alarmed and I daresay hurt.

As I laugh though, I feel searing pain rise up through my body. I try to collect myself mentally and emotionally.

"What year is this?"

"1535."

"I... I want my husband."

"I am yer husband, Terina."

"How do you know my name?!" I ask, panic running through my veins like a fever.

He rises suddenly and stalks the hall until he discovers an attendant. I hear his deep voice echo. "Send for the mid-wife. Make haste, she is not well."

The maids enter the chamber with a rosy-cheeked infant and place it in my arms. I recoil, whimpering in helplessness.

He returns to witness the scene. "Can't ya see she is not well?!" he bellows. The maids take the up the baby and retreat into the hall.

"Whose baby is it?" I ask.

"Yers," he answers with a lilt that is posed to me like a question.

He takes me by the shoulders and shakes me almost too hard for the state I'm in. Hysterical, I feel a sudden rush of blood and then I know- I have all the symptoms of a woman who's just given birth.

"Now listen to me, Terina- you've got to get a hold of yourself! Have ya forgotten who ya are?!"

"I am yer husband, Shawn, yet ya look at me like I'm a stranger. We live here in this house. Ya gave birth to our daughter not two days ago. Now today is the christening. Guests are expected in an hour. I've sent for the mid-wife but in this state, ya might well be confined to bedrest and I know ya don't want that."

A new thought comes into my head. I've experienced psychic phenomena all my life, what would be shocking to most people would seem in the realm of possibility to me. But this... never anything like this. I know that if I'm barred away in this dark room I'll scream. I choose to summon my strength and play this game because I'm sure the more I fight this, the worse it will become.

Clearly my body and mind are trying to tell me something. What lesson am I to learn?

"Bring me the baby," I say, willing to experiment. He eyes me with suspicion for a moment before sending in the maids again.

“Are ya sure yer up to it?” Shawn asks, his voice decibels softer.

I nod.

As the maids bring the infant back in, they all look hopefully at me, thinking that the baby and I will instantly bond. What a foolish supposition I think... yet I will try to act like a new mother.

A strange thing happens though when I take her in my arms. I can't help thinking she really is so beautiful. Her hair is soft, dark and she has a lot of it with glints of gold which is unusual for a newborn.

Her cheeks are pink and she has a perfect rosebud mouth. She's fair skinned and alert. Her eyes recognize me as surely as any person who's ever loved me. She particularly responds to my voice. She is everything I wanted in my real life, other life, or whatever it was. All I know is that at this moment, this is all I want- just this, right here. Though I'm holding her, it is she who holds me in her gaze.

“Emma Rose,” Shawn coos.

The name is not one I would've chosen but I fall in love with it.

“Ya see, Terina, all ya needed was to have yer daughter in yer arms.”

I think, yes, this is all I needed...

He looks so relieved, I almost feel my heart reach out to this man.

“Do ya know how lovely ya are?” he asks me.

I see myself in a golden mirror across the room. I look down at my body and panic. My body is much fuller than I've ever known it to be. The panic and irritation in me rises once more.

“These aren't my hands,” I say, meaning it literally. “This isn't my body.”

Shawn takes my hands in his and says, “Ah, no- they are more beautiful now. A woman's hands. A woman's body. This new bit of fullness is

beautiful to me.”

His words, his accent are soothing to me.

The baby’s violet-blue eyes go between the two of us, yet seem to linger more on me, whom she is protectively watching over.

Shawn reminds me of Jack and at the same time, not at all. Shawn is a more sensitive man but also more volatile.

“Now are ya sure yer up to all this today?”

“Yes”, I answer, thinking all the time no, no, no...

As I agree to get up and get ready, the baby is swooped away from me. An instinct I don’t understand makes my unfamiliar hand reach out toward her as she departs, holding what to me is like a piece of a dream. Other maids come in then to help me dress.

Before Shawn leaves the room, he says, “I want to be alone with my wife for a moment.”

The maids curtsy and take their leave.

He takes me in his arms and says, “I don’t know what I would’ve done if I’d lost ya today when ya fainted like that. Do ya know what ya mean to me, wife? I love ya sorely- especially right now with yer hair all a mess, yer eyes wild and talkin’ so crazy... I’ve been wanting to thank you for our daughter- for Emma.”

Taking a box out of his jacket pocket, he carefully hands it to me. Adrenaline rushes through me as I realize it is the necklace that I held up to me before I fainted. I marvel at its beauty and hug him to me.

He then bids the maids re-enter the chamber and becomes his ornery version of himself again saying something to them about making me look decent but the tears in his eyes give his love for me away.

I’m being dressed by these women and it feels so strange to me- the layers,

the rituals, the ornate hairstyle. It's all too intimate, too tedious and the lack of privacy upsets me. Feeling impatient turns out to be a positive thing. It feels so strange to be living in another time but not to feel in control of my body yet I manage to get my emotions under control and as I do I'm ready to start asserting my authority to oversee things in the house as the proper lady of the manor. I hear myself saying things like, 'Move our best silver trays forward... I want the food layered... I want these flowers over here...', but then I ask, "How far away is the chapel?" and at this I receive strange looks but am nevertheless bid to follow down the stairs. Here what I'd discovered to be a modern, climate-controlled wine cellar, is now instead an open passage to a wider stone enclave that houses the chapel of the manor. I walk in and though there is shelving for cider, there is also the large anteroom with pews and an altar. Ivory satin ribbon adorns the entrance to every pew. There are dusky pink roses and sprays of baby's breath upon the altar. The priest awaits and the pews are filled. I am hugged and kissed and the godparents are holding Emma. I guess at what must be my own parents by their adoring eyes. Thankfully they are all in place for I have no idea of what I will say to these strangers when the time comes at the end of the mass.

I'm afraid of a mis-step. My husband looks at me oddly and I realize I have made a terrible and hurtful mistake. I've left the necklace in its box on the bed. He goes to a maid and whispers a curt instruction. She all but flies out of the chapel. He comes over to stand beside me but doesn't seem to be angry so much as perplexed. He knows I have an excuse for why I am not myself today. I suppose almost every new father will have to get used to his altered wife on some level. After a woman gives birth, it's as though she enters through another doorway. My maid hurries in and discretely clasps my necklace. I feel strange again. I am sweating profusely.

My hair and clothes are actually wet. This has never happened to me before. The necklace feels so heavy and as I turn to reach to Shawn, my ears start to buzz and all turns to black.

*

"WAKE UP, TERINA!!! WAKE UP!!!"

What's buzzing, I think...

I'm cold. I slur my words upon awakening.

I hear faint cheers and nervous 'congratulations' along with a deep, melodic laugh. A deep, rich laugh. Ryan?

Kind nurses fill the places where maids had once stood. How much more could my heart withstand of trading one life for another, both speaking to different parts of my soul?

Tears are streaming down Jack's face. The doctors ask me some questions I cannot answer. They give me information about how I ended up in the hospital.

It smells like metal and antiseptic. A pile of blankets does nothing it seems to warm me.

"You had a fainting episode, Terina. Because we couldn't wake you, we feel it was a form of a mini-seizure. Have you ever had anything like this before? We have to ask that because although we sometimes see this in the first few stages of pregnancy, we want to make sure that it's not related to anything else."

"Pregnancy?!" I repeat, incredulous, putting my small hand over my stomach. "I'm not pregnant," I tell them. "I have a baby. Jack, bring in Emma."

He looked helplessly at the doctors. "Who is 'Emma'?" they ask Jack.

"I have no idea," my husband answers, a man I had trusted.

I'm so confused now that I panic at the loss of Emma and I fight them as I've given a sedative.

In the ensuing days, I learn that we got the house, I learn that I am pregnant, and I in turn try to explain to the doctors and Jack what happened while I was unconscious but they will have none of it.

As I looked from one male face to another, I knew that they couldn't even conceive of such an idea. They even sent in a psychiatrist to explain that I most certainly did not have a past-life experience. It simply seems that once Jack and I relaxed at the hotel, we were able to conceive. At first, I was so annoyed with the doctors and even Jack for not believing me. But then, I don't think men and women have the same life experience. We create life and we are the keepers of the mysteries.

The owners of the house are thrilled for us. They really wanted a family here and not some restless couple with wanderlust. We talk of how my child will learn to ride here. She asks me what I will name my child now that we know it will be a girl. 'Emma Rose' I tell her and she gives a knowing smile.

"Did the house ever have a chapel?" I ask.

"Well, yes, but that was hundreds of years ago, dear, when it was first built. The wine cellar actually was where it was."

I can hardly breathe.

The house serenely welcomes us every morning with birdsong and golden light and embraces us every night in indigo velvet skies dotted with golden, twinkling stars as if it had a secret. As I lie there at night, do I ever wonder if I once lived here? All of these things could be scientifically explained and some things are not meant to be scrutinized. Still, late at night, there is an ancient Chinese saying that runs through my mind: "Fallen leaves always find their roots."

Killing the Writer's Block

By Mayra Calvani

"Remember my words: The sea will eventually turn into lemonade. Some say it

will be grape juice. They're wrong. The sea will turn into lemonade," Carla said.

Carla was an impressive woman of sixty-five, with gray hair sharply cut above her shoulders like Cleopatra, cunning black eyes, and extremely tanned skin. She wore a white cotton caftan and numerous silver rings around her fingers. As she sat on the wicker armchair, with her bony wilted hands resting on the sides, there was an air of ancient sensuality and wisdom about her.

She took a piece of baklava into her mouth and devoured it with vampiric pleasure. Her long fingers, tanned and wrinkled, got syrupy and sticky. She licked them, one by one, throwing her niece a languorous look.

Greta sipped some of her coffee and gazed at her aunt with childish fascination. "Is that your theory about the end of the world?"

"No. That's my theory about the disintegration of the world. It's not quite the same thing."

"I really don't see what's the difference. In both cases, there won't be anything left afterwards."

Carla shook her head. "The end of the world is both material and spiritual. The disintegration of the world is just spiritual. We lose our souls."

"In that case, our world has reached that point long ago. There are very few souls left, true free souls, like yours."

A little laugh escaped from Carla's throat. "Stop talking so much nonsense and have some more baklava. And don't pretend you don't want to. I see the way you're looking at it. Or are you on one of those silly diets? What is it with young girls and diets these days?"

Greta ate some more baklava and finished her coffee. At eighteen, she still possessed that unspoilt babyish look that makes young women appear vulnerable. Her red hair didn't have a real style. Parted in the middle, it fell all over her in soft waves all the way to her waist. Her skin was pale and dusted with freckles, as is common with redheads, but the effect was delicate, like a light sprinkle of cinnamon on vanilla pudding.

Greta smiled. "I'm so glad I'm here, Aunt Carla, with you. Even though it's only for the weekend."

"A weekend is enough for some things, but not enough for other things."

"I wish I could stay longer, but I have to be back at school by Monday." She looked around her. "This place is fantastic."

Carla's beach house was situated on the west end tip of Grand Bahama, on a deliciously quiet and isolated area. It was decorated in a primitive, Bedouin style. Whitewashed walls, lots of wicker baskets, kilims or woven rugs with colourful Persian motifs (Carla claimed she had been a Turkish dancer in an earlier life), pieces of pottery, coppery things. Except for Carla's grand wicker armchair, there were no other chairs, but huge cushions in rich earthly colours scattered about the floor. And there were no doors. Everything looked huge. The rooms looked huge, the corridors looked huge, the stairs looked huge, even the toilets looked huge. Greta wondered if it was she who was too small.

Everything appeared to be out of proportion. Carla's studio was in a separate cottage a few yards away from the house. Ferns, bushes, palm trees dotted the sand. The salty reek of the sea and the to-and-fro of the waves worked on the senses like a shot of opium.

They chatted for a while and drank more coffee. Greta felt tired.

Her flight from Tampa, where she was a first-year creative writing student, had been hectic. First it had been delayed, then in the plane a Japanese baby with a Donald Duck hat had wailed non-stop.

"When are you going to show me your work? I can't wait to see it," Greta said.

"Oh, yes, my work. Well, well, you'll see it later. There will be time for that. What about your writing, my dear? Have you written anything lately?"

Greta nodded with a smile. "Actually, I'm working on something right now. A weird story. I only have an outline in my mind. It's not complete yet, but I'm pretty excited about it."

"That's wonderful! You'll tell me all about it at dinner. Tired?"

"A little."

At that moment, a young man of no more than twenty entered the room. Like Carla, he was extremely tanned. His wild brown hair was tied up in a ponytail and a gold earring dangled from his left ear, reminding Greta of storybook pirates. And he had wolf eyes, if such a thing was possible. Closely set, gray wolf eyes, the color being unnaturally accentuated by the darkness of his skin. He only wore jeans, torn up and ragged at the knees.

There was a moment of silence as he and Greta looked at each other.

Greta felt little things revolting inside her stomach, as if she had swallowed a handful of pygmy fish. Along with the excitement she felt a distinct feeling of dread.

"Oh--Julio! I want to introduce you to my favorite niece, Greta. Greta, this is my--how should we say--pupil," said Carla.

Julio approached Greta, took her hand, and ever so gently turned it over and kissed the palm. "A pleasure to meet you, Greta." He had a heavy Spanish accent.

Greta felt heat rise to her cheeks. "Nice to meet you, too." She pulled back her hand.

Carla watched them. "She's just come from Tampa . She'll be staying with us for the weekend."

"You didn't tell me anything," he said.

"It's not her fault," said Greta. "She didn't know I was coming. I wanted it to be a surprise. I shouldn't have done that."

"I see..."

"Nonsense!?" Carla said. "You're welcome to come as often as you like. Isn't she, Julio?"

"Of course, of course. I'm delighted you're here," he said.

"Thank you." Greta pointed at the coffee and baklava. "Would you like to join us?"

"I--"

"He's busy right now. Aren't you, my dear Julio?" Carla threw him an intense look. Then a splendid smile appeared on her face, her wrinkles deepening, her black eyes as piercing as a bird of prey.

"Yes, I am." He turned to Greta. "I'm trying to clean up Carla's studio. It's a real mess. Perhaps you'd like to come later, have a look."

After he left them, Greta said, "I didn't know you had any pupils."

"I didn't know it either... until five months ago."

"He's very..."

"He's really a child of beauty, isn't he?"

"Aunt Carla..?"

"Yes?"

"Is he--?"

"My lover? Why deny it? Are you shocked?"

"No."

Carla's shoulders shook with silent laughter. "Your eyes are transparent pools, my dear. You're shocked. I'm going to shock you a lot more this weekend. It will help you in your writing, believe me. He wants to be a painter. He has talent, too. I can give him my knowledge, my experience. He can give me youth and inspiration. And he can cook and clean up my studio once in a while. Why not?" She threw her hands up in the air. "Who can judge what is right or wrong? All is relative."

Greta shrugged. "If you're happy, that's all that matters."

"Who's talking about being happy? You young people care so much about being happy. Happiness doesn't exist. It's all in the mind. Happiness is for pigs. They eat, drink, mate, and turn their bodies in the mud. They're extremely happy animals. And yet, would you like to be a pig, even if it would mean complete happiness? Of course not! It's better to be a human being unsatisfied than a pig satisfied. Oh, well, don't listen to me anymore!"

"Well, there's not much difference between us and pigs. We all have the same basic needs--food, water, sleep, sex..."

"Yes... sex..." muttered Carla.

"You shouldn't be such a pessimist, Aunt Carla. I always thought you were an idealist. That's why I admired you so."

"Idealism belongs to youth, my dear."

"Perhaps you're right, although I disagree with you. In the meantime, I consider myself an idealist."

"Then you're the only idealist who's a writer."

"Not all writers are pessimists."

"No. But all the good ones are."

"Now you're wrong. A good writer is that one who's an idealist but dresses himself as a pessimist."

"Very well put, but not quite convincing. But enough of that. Time for my nap!" Carla blurted out.

She walked Greta to one of the upstairs bedrooms and kissed her extravagantly on both cheeks. Then she left. Dinner would be at seven.

It was five o' clock. Greta would have time to rest, take a bath, and arrange her

things. She went over to the open window and looked out.

To her surprise, she saw Julio walking through the palm trees toward the cottage, disappearing around its corner. The moist heat of his lips against the palm of her hand was still on her mind. She quickly discarded the thought. A sudden uneasiness seemed to overwhelm her. Carla and Julio... It was unacceptable, in a way. But so what? It was not up to her to decide what was right or wrong in such matters. She shrugged. She wished she could get rid of all her foolish conventionalisms. Carla was right. A writer needed to be shocked. She needed to be shocked. And now that she thought of it, she wished to be shocked.

In a way, that's why she had gone there. Her mind was blocked. She needed help with her story, which wasn't going anywhere and she had to hand it in to her professor in a week. What better way to get ideas than paying a little visit to her infamous aunt?

Dinner was simple, but excellent. Roasted pork, lots of fresh bread and lots of wine. The three of them had consumed five bottles by the end of the evening. Carla had talked incessantly about herself, about sculpturing, about art, politics and philosophy. She wore another white caftan, but this one was translucent, revealing her very naked body underneath. Carla didn't seem to care. Julio didn't seem to care. The only one who seemed to care had been Greta. But after a few glasses of wine, she had forgotten about Carla's dark nipples and begun to talk about her writing.

"Carla told me you're working on a story," Julio said.

Greta nodded, her brown eyes liquid and mellow by the wine. She leaned forward over the table and whispered in a secretive tone, "It's kind of sick. It's about a woman who uses people as spectators for her own pleasure."

"Spectators of what?" he asked.

"Of her love making. She likes to make love in front of other people. It gives her a sense of power. The truth is she's a fraud. That's how she uses people."

Julio glanced at Carla, then looked back at Greta. "Yeah, I know a lot of people

like that."

They all laughed, like clowns in a circus.

Then Julio turned a bit serious. "So?"

Greta raised her brows. "So--what? What do you mean?"

"So have you done it? Made love--in front of other people?"

Greta stared at him, her cheeks burning.

Carla watched them, delighted. "For God's sake, Julio! Are you blind? Don't you see this awesome creature? She's like a little bird trapped in a cage, waiting to be let out and taste the raptures of liberty."

"No, I'm not!" Greta protested.

"She's delicious. Isn't she, Julio? Simply delicious," Carla said, licking the edge of her glass with the tip of her tongue.

"Well then. Has anybody made love in front of you?" Julio said.

"Julio!" Carla admonished.

"Okay, okay. I get your point. How am I going to write about things that are totally alien to me? Still, I don't have to kill to describe a murder, do I?" Greta said.

"You should," Julio answered.

So they bickered like this, good-naturedly but with a vicious edge.

Then Julio started talking about his obsession to become a known artist and about his politics.

"Julio's something of a revolutionary," said Carla, amused.

"I'm not truly," he protested. "But everyone has the right to their own personal

revolution. Revolutions are what make history."

"I agree with that," said Greta, sipping her wine. "Not only material revolutions but also spiritual revolutions. There wouldn't be any history without revolutions. This has proven to be the law since the beginning of time. No, but really... Isn't the need for that artsy mode of thinking extinct?"

"This is just a necessary stage. Still waters. A transitional period. Just wait and see," he whispered with a wink.

Greta remained quiet, looking at him and smiling politely as she didn't believe him.

"The sea will turn into lemonade!" exclaimed Carla suddenly, her dark nipples jutting through the cloth. "More wine! Julio, bring more wine!"

"Don't you think you've drunk enough?" he asked.

"I want more wine!" she demanded, her face flushed by alcohol.

Julio got up and brought another bottle from a cabinet.

"The sea is already lemonade!" Carla went on. "But we don't know it. Do you know why? Because on a hot day we drink salty water. We're living in caves, enslaved by chains and looking at nothing but shadows!"

Greta and Julio gave each other a look.

"She has a fetish for Plato," Julio said, looking bored.

Greta burst out laughing.

Carla had gotten totally drunk. She dropped her head forward over the table, muttering incomprehensible monosyllables. They helped her get up and walked her up the stairs and into her bedroom.

"I'm not... drunk... I'm just..." Carla murmured. "The sea... will turn... into lemonade..."

She collapsed on the bed. Julio made sure that she was comfortable, gently arranging the pillows under her head and covering her body with a blanket. Greta watched him with strange fascination. The act reminded her terribly of when she herself had taken care of her sick mother, now dead.

The next morning Carla showed Greta her studio. Greta felt as if she had stepped into a secret and forbidden cave. The paintings were like nightmares, gloomy, sadomasochistic things, depressing to look at. And yet she couldn't take her eyes off them. The rich details reminded her of Dali. But Dali's paintings were not so violent. She couldn't help thinking that a person had to be mentally deranged to paint this kind of thing. But then again, Carla was not your usual type of person.

"The Blood Drinker," for example, depicted what appeared to be a mystical creature with the face of a woman feeding on the inert body of a young man on a huge white bed floating in space. Or "Female Fantasy Number 29," which showed a smiling girl with long red hair sewing with a huge needle the ripped belly of a horse. Inside the horse's belly one could see a group of little men struggling to get out.

They stayed in the studio for about an hour, talking about Carla's work and about art in general. Then they had tea out under the palm trees. Imported tea from Turkey. The morning was hot and sticky. But a soft breeze hit their faces and there was a nice salty tang in the air. Greta would have preferred an iced can of beer, but Carla said, "Believe me, tea can actually lower your body's temperature. It sounds crazy, but it's scientific. People drink tea in the desert." Carla was feeling good today. The heavy drinking of last night had not seemed to affect her.

So Greta drank her Turkish tea. In fact, she felt kind of exotic and desirable, drinking this tea. She thought of Julio. Where was he?

She had not seen him today. After they had put Carla to bed last night, she had gone straight into her room and he had gone downstairs. She had wanted to talk to him. She had had an incredible urge to go into his room and gaze at his intensely gray eyes. She had wanted to touch him, to touch him as one touches a work of art. His beauty had obsessed her in a way that was beyond her comprehension. His wolf eyes tormented her. But then, she had always had a

morbid fascination with wolves. After an hour of turning in bed she had finally fallen asleep, blaming her intense restlessness on the wine.

"By the way, where's Julio?" Greta said, trying to sound casual. She took a sip of tea and burned her tongue.

Carla gave her an inscrutable smile. "He went to town to get me some supplies. You know, for my art."

Later that day they decided to go swimming. Julio joined them. He said he had been to town, then he had spent the rest of the day in his room, working.

Carla walked ahead, leading the way, while Greta and Julio followed a few feet behind.

"When are you going to show me your work?" Greta said.

"Maybe you'll be disappointed," he said.

"Oh no, I don't think so."

He gave her a slow, mysterious smile. "It's all a mirror of Carla's work, only in a smaller scale. But instead of expressing malevolence towards the male sex I do the opposite. In my paintings women don't look so happy. I guess in a way I'm your worst kind of chauvinist pig."

"And here I had you pegged as a rebellious sort- against all types of oppression," Greta said.

"No one's perfect."

Greta laughed.

"I started working on a new painting last night. It's called 'Virgin Sacrifice For The Gods'."

"Oh?"

"Come to my room tonight. I'll show it to you." He shrugged. "If you want to."

Then his eyes locked into hers, and he murmured, "Inspiration for inspiration. It's only fair...is it not?"

Greta felt momentarily confused.

They found a spot under the shadow of a few palm trees and settled there. Julio had brought with him a CD player, and Greta a basket with bread, cheese, dates, grapes, and two bottles of red wine. It was an unspoilt beach, with sand as pure as crystallised marble. The bright blue waters melted with the horizon. The clouds were as plump and white as cotton balls.

Julio turned on the CD player. The music, Berlioz's "Marche Funebre," came out at full blast.

Greta took off her bathrobe and revealed her pale slim body in a black bikini. Carla and Julio gave each other a look. Then they smiled.

"Is something wrong?" Greta said.

"Bathing suits aren't allowed here," Julio said.

"This is our own little world, my dear. If you've never swam naked in the sea, then you don't know what it is to feel really free," Carla said.

Julio took off his shirt and pants and stood completely naked. He looked at Greta with inquisitive eyes. She was disturbed, but tried to conceal it. He was like a child of nature, almost ethereal, asexual.

Still, it was deeply disturbing. Then Carla appeared naked before them.

Her body was dark and wrinkled by the age and sun. It was even more disturbing to see her.

"I think I'll keep my bathing suit on," Greta said.

"Nonsense! You'll spoil the fun. Don't be so damn conventional. You're a writer, for heaven's sake!" Carla scolded.

After a few minutes, and many persistent remarks, they convinced her.

"Oh, all right, all right! You make it sound as if my life depends on it," she said hastily, rather tremulous. She took off her bikini and let it drop on the sand.

Carla and Julio clapped approvingly, exclaiming "Bravo, Bravo!" many times.

They swam freely and splashed water around them like children. Carla was right. She felt like a newborn creature, opening her wings to the sky, letting her soul go free. The warm waters enfolded her in her own sensuality. She had never felt so excited. Her face glowed, her brown eyes shimmered with the lust of the innocent.

Later they sat under the palm trees and ate and drank wine. Greta couldn't believe what she was doing. She had to gulp one glass of wine after another. She had transcended one ridiculous level of society. After eating, she lay under the sun and Carla and Julio went back to the water.

Greta listened to Berlioz's "Marche Funebre" once again. It was powerful and haunting. The burning rays of the sun were beginning to make her drowsy. The wine and the music were transporting her to another dimension. After a while she turned on her stomach and watched Carla and Julio in the water.

Carla and Julio were kissing, their bodies clasped together, one old, one young, rising in intensity. Carla was rolling her head from side to side, her wet gray hair flying against the wind. She was giving out little cries.

Greta stared at the act, motionless, fascinated, while something like subterranean heat spread through her.

Then they came out of the water.

Julio bent down and kissed Greta on the mouth, softly biting her lower lip. The kiss was like a luscious and delicate hors d'oeuvre, promising a yet more voluptuous entrée, and it more than took her breath away. It stunned her.

Then Carla came across the sand, stopping at a short distance away from the two of them. She had never looked older than now. She was like an ancient vampire, a goddess of battle, smug and lecherous after a fresh kill. She looked down at Greta as one looks at a lesser being.

Greta wondered just what it was that Carla was after. Was it her innocence? Her youth? Her idealistic nature? And with what end in mind was she pursuing it?

"I wish you good writing, my dear," Carla said. "And the weekend is not over yet."

The Essayist and the Fly

By SuzAnne C. Cole

Once upon a time, on a warm summer day a century or two ago, an almost famous essayist sat slumped at his desk, suffering as only a writer can whose muse has deserted him, apparently for younger, more vigorous writers. No suitable subject presented itself for an essay now several days overdue for a not quite first-rate journal. Although he would not deign to read this publication himself, he nevertheless happily accepted its coin. Bored, he watched as a fly winged in through the open window of his sunlit library to land upon his desk.

His pen was in the ink bottle; on a sudden impulse he drew it forth and suspended it over the fly until a drop of ink fell on her back. Immediately she set to work cleaning herself with her feet, as narrow, he observed, as the lines inscribed by his fine pen point. Busily she scrubbed down her thorax and delicately she scraped her segmented wings. Clean at last, she flexed her legs, readying herself for flight, but that was not to be.

Her observer dipped his pen into the ink once more, allowing a second drop to sully her body. Again she began the cleansing task, perhaps not quite so enthusiastically this time and certainly not so quickly, but still, after no more than ten minutes, she had removed the last traces of the noxious liquid. Stretching her wings, she prepared for flight.

Disliking himself perhaps just a bit, but overcome by curiosity about the

strength of her endurance, the experimenter let another dribble of ink engulf her. This time he fancied she staggered a bit, maybe wondering dimly what evil she had committed to be so inexplicably punished. Nevertheless, she set herself to the task, for if she could not dry herself, she could not fly, and a fly that cannot take flight is simply not a fly at all. The cleansing took much longer this time—her observing deity had to wonder if the ink was, after all, toxic for her—but finally, at last, she was dry enough to hazard flight.

This time he really did despise himself but helpless to restrain the impulse, he dipped the pen and once more loosened a gout of ink onto the helpless fly. With a sudden convulsive shudder, she stiffened and died, a crumpled bit of black marring the ivory whiteness of his parchment. With a sigh of regret, or possibly remorse, he delicately flicked her corpse into the leather wastebasket beside his mahogany desk. No doubt he had been responsible for the death of one of God's creatures, but on the other hand, he now had a subject for his essay—resiliency, a character trait reserved for God's highest creation alone.

Flash Fiction

By James Thibeault

"Flash Fiction, is the attempt to capture the audience with as little words as possible. By doing so, the message and emotions are infused into the reader before distractions overcome him. When we see the subway fly down the track, we notice passengers as a blur. However, stare at an individual and within that moment, from tunnel to tunnel, you can remember that person forever."

We hugged the tunnel wall. I told him this is how we should write.

“Get ready.”

The subway screeched around the bend. We felt the vibrations at our feet.

Jared's fingers clawed the bricks.

"Come on, it won't be that bad."

Light splattered along the walls. It would pass us in a moment.

"Remember, I'll pick the one for you."

Our eyes dilate to hockey pucks.

"Now!"

Thousands of people. One rectangular window.

"Red hat."

"Uh..."

They moved at 50 miles per hour, but stayed frozen.

"He's in his 20's."

"More."

"Beard."

"More."

"Wears a hat."

"I know!"

Two idiots watch, inches from death.

"Uh..."

The subway drilled into the dark. Everything disappeared.

I checked if I soiled myself, then stomped onto the rail. Those were details?

A hat-wearing, bearded, 20 year old? There're a dime a dozen.

"That was the worst you've done yet, Jared!"

He wheezes like a chronic smoker.

"I'm sorry, it was... I hate you."

"But this is the best way to practice."

"Can't we watch people at the mall?"

"They move too slow."

Jared checks both sides of the darkness and guesses which the exit is.

"Where are you going?"

"Where it's safe."

"Safe is boring."

He walks towards me, but makes sure he's nowhere near the rail.

"You and your stupid ideas! People can describe men in red hats without praying their heads don't fall off."

"But you don't need to go on and on. If you word it right, and make sure you have all the interesting details, then I can assure you people can be compelled to—"

"We don't need all of that."

"Maybe if we didn't get so distract—"

The ground shook.

"Round two, baby."

I jumped against the wall and smiled at Jared.

“You’ll have to wait until it passes.”

He scowls and slaps both hands to the bricks.

“We’re doing something harmless like fishing tomorrow.”

“Just get the details.”

“For Christ’s sake, I did!”

“About the person!”

Another subway shot around the bend.

“Describe their soul, you don’t have time to tell me their looks.”

“Why not?”

“Because we only have a flash.”

The light burrowed through the darkness and into our eyes again.

“Go.”

Exhausted souls. Rush hour.

“The one with the diary.”

“A writer.”

“More.”

No one speaks. They’re cramped and achy.

“A worn out mother.”

“The diary!”

“Writes about dreams.”

“What dreams!”

Three kids play beside her.

“When she was a girl.”

The subway passed. Jared wanted to say more, but it wasn’t needed. I gave him my approval.

“I’ll remember that.”

Angel of Death

By Nicole M. Bouchard

Whitey Jackers was a fair-skinned, red-haired, average American male making a modest living as he traveled the country doing the work he felt so compelled to do. He lived in the same house since he was two years old. Yellowing floral wallpaper and outdated shag carpeting didn’t faze him. He didn’t think himself extraordinary and certainly neither did his foster parents who had given up all their hopes for him by his seventh birthday. He rarely had very inspired thoughts, never really remembered his dreams if he had dreamt at all, and he couldn’t relate to things like religion, politics, yoga and self-help books.

The only time he thought deeply, or at least as deeply as he could manage in the measure of his daily life, was when he was holding his Remington pistol to someone’s temple. His weapon of choice was a classic, somewhat antiquated and unimaginative, but it served its purpose nonetheless.

Today, as he politely asked an older woman to smooth back her still

attractive white wavy hair, he mused about sick days in his mind with his seemingly unfocused eyes surmising a clear shot to the delicately shaped head. He offered to hold her hand as he customarily did when he was doing this to some frightened stranger or another, but through her tears, she nobly shook her head to refuse. They often did. But there were the occasional exceptions.

Sick days... He had heard a man at the post office the other night talking about how great it was to take a sick day from work...to have the opportunity to evade one's responsibilities...to curl up on the couch with a box of tissues and sugary throat lozenges in front of the television. It wasn't as though he had ever needed a sick day or had any use for them, as he was never ill. But at that moment, it bothered him that his was not the kind of job that he could call in sick to. He felt heavily obligated to carry on his solitary work- who else would do it for him? No doubt there would be self-righteous prejudices against it. Furthermore, the world did not stop turning over its joy and suffering for sick days. And yet, even though there would be no one to fuss over him in concern, no television to settle down and watch, he still wondered what it would feel like if there was. On that sour note of disappointment, his fingers pulled the trigger instinctively. One click and it was over. It was all over. Painless.

Usually, he would have had a few changes of clothes, pocket money and a train ticket waiting in his ancient pine green Chevy truck which looked and crawled much like a two-hundred year old turtle of the sea. But those things weren't necessary in this case. No one would ever be the wiser of this incident, expect for him and the woman lying at his feet. Even she hadn't known his name. He asked this of all who knelt before him; he asked to be referred to only as the Angel of Death.

Always, he reserved the quiet time before the trigger was pulled for reflection. His inner dialogues would play about the things he'd noticed in his week like the man's conversation in the post office. He'd put his reactions one by one into a jar in his mind and pulled them out only for this particular moment. He might also take this time to consider what simple mundane pleasures of life these people on the floors of their homes would miss if they died. He did not know of nor understand these simple pleasures himself, but their existence was irrefutable and he thought of them. He was like a musician and life was the one melody he could never

play. His ears strained to hear it, he observed it being played, he even rehearsed time and time again till his fingers bled down the strings, but never could he master it.

When his thoughts had summoned the right amount of feeling while he stood holding the gun in his hand, his fingers would know the moment and react as easily as though it was a simple reflex. Then and only then could he pull the trigger. It had to come naturally, never forced.

As he crossed the sitting room of the weary Victorian home and approached the chipped yellow ochre doors, he glanced backward at a mantel laden with the buckling weight of what had to be at least thirty wood and gold pictures packed full to the edges with memories. Looking through the dust upon the glass to the frozen smiling faces of relatives and friends of the old woman, he felt sure that he had done them a service. A younger picture of the woman with her arms wrapped tight around a struggling grandson caught his eyes as his feet turned toward the doors once again. 'Yes', he thought, '...quite sure.'

The boy in the barn was different. What came to his mind now was a quick meaningless encounter with a cashier at the produce store. Purple grapes on the conveyor belt of the checkout stand matched her nail polish. They were his grapes. He wanted no more and no less than the fruit of the vine. Through her thick mess of frizzy black hair, she didn't look at him once. She struck out a white pudgy palm with the purple talons arched and ready to ensnare their prey. She hadn't told him the price and he couldn't see it on the monitor screen of the register from where he was standing. 'Ah, so she thinks I'm a damn mind reader... And what if I could read in to her deepest, darkest secrets? Wouldn't she fear someone like that enough to acknowledge them? No matter... there seems to be nothing going on inside that head spare for the echo of the intermittent pops from her chewing gum...' It was this, he felt, people's refusal to acknowledge one another that often fueled the need for his kind of work. Manners, a sense of respect, and a feeling of gratitude had to be instilled back into society.

That was when he felt the right moment and his fingers tightened. But a second before the trigger was pulled, the boy clasped the sturdy hand holding the gun.

“Wait... If I’m going to die anyway, let me do it. I might as well die like a man...”

Unnerved initially by the fact that this had never happened before, he hesitated for a moment, shifting his feet around in the dirt covered hay. “Alright,” he said after thirty seconds or so, and he handed the boy the gun with no fear whatsoever that the boy would turn the gun on him instead. He could handle it.

This time there was no hesitation. The boy pulled the trigger with surprising ease. Knowing that he had no more business in this place, he grabbed his gun from the boy’s limp hand and dragged his body toward the truck. For this occasion, he did bring the train ticket and the fresh clothes.

It couldn’t have been more than a week later that he was standing over a beautiful housewife dressed in her Sunday best, clutching her prayer beads tightly to her full bright red lips. He always spoke to them politely and he always asked them to kneel. It was a decent aim, not too far from the ground to create a dramatic fall, and it brought some order and predictability to his routine. He racked his brain for a thought to come. He stared at the pattern of the silky black dress, tiny white polka dots interspersed throughout the darkness like stars. Her slightly disheveled brown hair was the only visible sign that she wasn’t about to skip off to church or turn toward the oven to make something of the meatloaf leftovers in the fridge from the previous night.

Her whole kitchen was white. Sickeningly white. Every appliance, list, magnet, table, chair, saucer was white. And here, she thought, was her chance to paint it red. Her mind, her fear and her hope gone away from her, she accepted the empty hand he offered. The starkness of the kitchen was enough for him. This 1950’s *Leave it to Beaver* charade was over. He pulled the trigger.

That night, as he sat perched on a red pleather and chrome stool, he overheard the television reporting the missing boy’s disappearance. The old man on the stool adjacent to him nearly choked on his wheat bran.

“Hey,” the man shouted through his thick beard, sending shards of cereal left and right, “...I know that kid!”

He knew he had stayed in one area too long. Even a state away, this region of the country was small. Without finishing his meal of fish and chips, he left twelve dollars on the counter. It would just about cover the bill and a small tip. Any more money and it would have seemed conspicuous. Whether or not he'd been seen, he decided to ditch the truck in the lake and take the bus to a neighboring town. He might have slept that night in the solitary orange and brown motel room, if it hadn't been for this mind chanting over and over again, 'One more, just one more...'

After he'd left the diner and placed the money on the counter, the TV blathered on, describing a faint outline of a man seen heading toward the Parker's barn around a dirt path perpendicular to the house.

This would be his last time. A jar of blueberry preserves lay neatly on the center of a white window sill. Its scratchy paper label was faded by the sun so it had obviously been left there awhile. A red tricycle was being strangled in plain sight on the front lawn by the weeds sprouting up all around it. The screen door was closed. The sky was a dark bluish-gray, it was sunset, but the house was dark. There were no lights on inside. The paint on the exterior of the house matched the sky so the white windows, sills, steps, and doors seemed to be painted disembodied in the air. He walked through the overgrown grass to the concrete steps and tried the screen door. It wasn't locked. 'One more, just one more...' Before closing the door behind him, he eyed the other toys left covered over in the grass and dirt, long unused by their owner.

He climbed the hardwood stairs inside. The railings hadn't been dusted in quite some time and the furniture on the first floor was disturbed. It was so silent in the house that he hardly expected to find that anyone lived here anymore. It felt like desperation and it looked like living without living. The first door on the left at the top of the stairs was closed. Somehow he had expected it to be. He had also anticipated that one would answer when he knocked. The brass knob turned easily in his hand.

A mother and father sat across from one another, looking over a small bed. The quilt was twisted over a small shape whose face lent a gray sheen when it appeared from beneath its folds.

“I don’t understand,” he whispered, lingering nervously in the doorway.

The mother looked up first; her brazen red hair a stark contrast to the white pallor of her skin. “If we’d told you the truth, we were afraid that you wouldn’t come... She’s sick. She’s been sick and suffering like this for over two years now. The doctors know she’s dying, but no one has the heart to put my baby out of her misery!” Hot, angry tears streamed from her pale blue eyes. Her body shook violently. The husband stood suddenly, eerily silent, staring at the small figure writhing under the quilt.

“I...don’t...do this...” he stammered clutching the door frame tighter with the whites of his knuckles straining to break free of the skin.

She leapt up from the foot of the bed. “But the website, “A Means to an End”, you help people commit suicide right?!”

The easy answer to her question was yes. The true answer, however, was no. He thought back to the old woman and her picture frames. Loneliness was curable. The realization always hit them when the trigger was pulled and no shot came out. They sank to the floor aghast. There were of course cases that didn’t want to be saved, be he only took on those whose letters held a glimmer, only a glimmer of hope. He would read them for hours, scrutinizing them, figuring out what they needed. That old woman would get up off the floor, smooth out the creases in her salmon pink skirt and return to her family. The boy in the barn, however, having endured years of physical abuse, would leave his home, take that train ticket in the bag of clothes and start a new life. The cruelly demeaned and neglected housewife who suffered from emotional abuse, would do the same. He thought of all of his recent cases now for strength as he explained this out loud to the grieving parents.

“It doesn’t mean that none of my cases will never again stand on the edge of a bridge staring into the provocatively violent waters below them. It simply makes them think twice. It’s a moment of hesitation and I help give people that moment because sometimes a moment is all it takes to make the difference”.

The couple stood with one arm around each other, the other resting on the child. They turned their faces away from the bed to study him.

“So, you only take cases that have or want a chance of rebirth?”

“Right,” was the only answer he could give to the father.

“Well,” the wife said looking out the circular window, “...that doesn’t really make you an Angel of Death, now does it?”

“No... no, I suppose it doesn’t.”

Somewhere, deep in her sleep, the child smiled serenely. She knew she had closed her eyes for the last time. She had found her moment, and let go.

Reunion

By Ronald Paxton

Jackson Howard awoke in a full blown panic. His head whipped back and forth as he surveyed the unfamiliar surroundings. Slowly, the nausea and butterflies in his stomach receded and his pulse rate dropped to a point where he could no longer hear the blood roaring in his ears. He took a deep breath and waited for his mind to clear. Okay, he had driven straight through from his home in the Florida Panhandle and had arrived late last night. Jackson didn't know how far it was from Apalachicola, Florida to Wild Pony Ranch in Shenandoah County, Virginia, but when he left he was sixty six years old and right now he felt about one hundred and ten.

John Howard knocked softly on the door and opened it. “Dad? You awake?” he asked.

“I’ll be down in a minute,” Jackson said.

“Papa!” five year old Emma exclaimed as Jackson entered the kitchen.

“There's my favorite granddaughter,” Jackson said as he pulled Emma into his arms.

“How long can you stay, dad?” John asked as he handed his father a plate of

grits, fried apples, and homemade biscuits.

“Didn't I tell you my plans last night?” Jackson returned with no small amount of fatigue in his voice. “I was so tired I really don't remember.”

“It was late,” John's wife, Sarah Jane, explained, handing him a glass of orange juice, “...and Emma was asleep. Why don't you start from the beginning?”

“Do you want the long version or the short version?” Jackson asked.

“The long version,” John, Sarah Jane, and Emma replied in unison.

Jackson finished his biscuit, eased his chair back from the kitchen table, and began.

It was May 27, 1960, and the Highland Meadows, North Carolina high school baseball team was about to realize an impossible dream. Two weeks earlier the team from the tiny school in the remote mountains of southwestern North Carolina had won the state championship. A series of highly improbable victories in the regionals had brought them to the national championship game against a legendary powerhouse from southern California. When the dust settled on that historic day the state of North Carolina had its first national high school baseball championship. Fifty years later that team remained the only national baseball champion from North Carolina. Jackson Howard had been the second baseman on that team.

“There was a surreal quality to it,” Jackson said; “a feeling of destiny. That championship game we played was like the movie Field of Dreams with Kevin Costner. I felt like each blade of grass on that field held a hope and a prayer.”

The next day Coach Thompson had gathered the team together for the last time. He spoke of the magnificent achievement that had brought such pride and respect to their school and the state of North Carolina. But, more importantly, he spoke about the lives that were in front of his players. He knew that most of them would leave Highland Meadows and lose track of each other in the years ahead. He told them to treasure this milestone in their lives.

“The last thing he asked of us was that we agree to meet back here at the school baseball field on May 27, 2010, to celebrate our lives and the fiftieth anniversary

of our achievement,” Jackson said. “We all agreed. I don't know how many of my teammates remember that day and that promise, but I do. And I'm going; even if I'm the only one there, I'm going.”

“Dad, the twenty-seventh is tomorrow,” John interjected.

Jackson nodded. “I'm leaving this afternoon.”

There was a brief silence. Sarah Jane looked at her husband and daughter, before asking shyly, “May we come?”

They checked into a motel on the outskirts of town and had dinner at Sonny's Pig Pen.

“Didn't I tell you?” Jackson asked. “Right here, the best pork barbecue in the United States.”

The others just nodded their approval of the recommendation, too busy wolfing down the food to stop and talk.

“Papa, did you used to bring Nana here?” Emma asked.

“No, honey,” Jackson replied. “I met your Nana later on after I moved away from Highland Meadows.”

Emma finished eating a French fry and sighed wistfully. “I wish she was here now.”

“So do I, Emma,” her grandfather answered.

Ellen Howard had been struck down by a massive heart attack the previous year and Jackson was utterly lost without her. They had been married for forty years and it had become a struggle for Jackson to find a reason to get out of bed each morning. He was taking anti-depressants but they just made him groggy. He wasn't a drinker, but he spent most days in a mental fog.

“I used to bring Beth Ann Rogers here when we dated in high school,” Jackson said. “Boy, did I have it bad for her. Talk about good-looking.”

“First love?” Sarah Jane asked.

“For sure,” Jackson replied.

“What ever happened to her?”

“Oh, I wasn't in her league and I think she figured that out after awhile,” Jackson said with a grin. “She traded up to Harold James, the quarterback on the football team. Ended up marrying him. I think they still live here in town.”

They returned to the motel and turned in early. The reunion was scheduled for ten o'clock the next morning. Jackson was showered and dressed before dawn and killed time pacing back and forth in the parking lot. He was a nervous wreck. For maybe the hundredth time he considered the possibility, even the likelihood, that he would be the only one there. He would have dragged his family here for nothing and they would see him as a ridiculous old fool.

It was time. Jackson directed them to the school. They parked in front of the gym and Jackson practically raced across the parking lot to the hill overlooking the baseball field. John, Emma, and Sarah Jane caught up with Jackson and looked down on the ball field. At first glance, it was deserted. Jackson's heart sank.

Yet it wasn't long before another car pulled up.

Everyone came; the entire team. Harvey Walls, their star pitcher, arrived five minutes after Jackson, and within fifteen minutes everyone was there. Hugs and handshakes were exchanged as the players mingled with a sizable group of spouses, children, and grandchildren. Most of Jackson's teammates had enjoyed comfortable and productive lives. Law, education, business, and banking were the primary professions represented at the gathering. Harvey Walls, despite his promising ambition was the exception. Bright and personable in high school, Harvey had later been diagnosed with schizophrenia in college. His life had spiraled downward out of his control and he had spent his life working sporadically at a series of low paying jobs. Harvey's social security check enabled him to pay for groceries, his medications, and clothing from the Goodwill store. There was no money left for housing or transportation. He'd eventually become homeless, without a wife or family. He had hitchhiked to the reunion from Atlanta, wearing only the clothes on his back.

Jackson turned to look up from the crowd as a man he didn't recognize stepped up to a podium in front of the bleachers.

“Welcome to the fiftieth anniversary of the Highland Meadows High School national championship baseball team,” the man said. “My name is Jason Thompson, and I'm the baseball coach here at Highland Meadows High School. I took over from my father when he retired. I'm sorry to say that dad passed away two years ago. One of his final wishes was that I represent him on this special day.”

Coach Thompson cleared his throat and continued. “When I call your name please take your positions.”

The players trotted on to the field as their names were called. Their bodies were bent and slowed with age, but the same fierce pride and determination that had served them well through the years remained.

“Jackson Howard, second base,” Coach Thompson called out.

Chills raced up John's spine as he watched his father jog out to his position.

When the last name had been called, Coach Thompson paused and looked out at the men on the field. Turning back to the crowd, Coach Thompson swept his arm toward the field and exclaimed, “Your 1960 Highland Meadows High School national championship baseball team!”

The cheers rang out.

A catered picnic lunch awaited the players and their families at River Ridge County Park on the outskirts of town. At least half the town had turned out for the celebration. Delicious comfort food was consumed while the stories and conversations flowed. Harvey Walls sat off by himself devouring hot dogs and potato salad like a man who hadn't eaten in a good while.

“You're an inspiration, dad,” John Howard said as he balanced a plate of food in his lap. “You all are.”

“Even Harvey Walls?” Jackson asked with a nod toward his friend and former

teammate.

“Are you kidding?!” John continued with a hitch of disappointment in his voice over his father's lack of empathy. “Especially Harvey Walls. There's a man who has fought mental illness his entire adult life and is still surviving. Can you imagine how much courage it took for him to come to this reunion?”

Jackson shrugged sheepishly.

"Imagine the judgments and stigmas he's had to face on top of his condition. Take that and multiply it by about a hundred when you consider what its like now for him to face his old teammates who saw him in his prime. That's Harvey Walls courage, heart and soul. The man is a warrior.”

Hearing the conviction in his son's voice, Jackson paused for a moment. He went to say something when the sun on his face was suddenly obscured by a familiar shadow.

“Jackson?”

Jackson Howard looked up into the smiling face of Beth Ann Rogers. He leaped to his feet, knocking his plate of food to the ground and dumping a drink in his lap. Beth Ann laughed her wonderful laugh as Jackson made the introductions.

“My God, Beth Ann, you look amazing,” Jackson gushed. “How do you do it?”

Beth Ann blushed. “I can't tell you that, Jackson,” she glanced nervously at Sarah Jane, and added, “...that's why they're called beauty secrets.”

Sarah Jane smiled warmly at the older woman. She could tell that she'd had some work done, and the blond streaks in her tousled hair had definitely come from a bottle. A man wouldn't notice and wouldn't care. It wouldn't bother Jackson if Beth Ann got that look by shampooing with margarine. He was staring at her like he was fourteen years old.

“How's Ellen?” Beth Ann asked.

“I lost her last year,” Jackson replied. “Heart attack.”

Beth Ann touched his arm. "I'm so sorry, Jackson. I didn't know."

"What about Harold?" Jackson asked. "Is he here?"

"I wouldn't know... I've been replaced by his twenty five year old secretary."

Jackson stared at Beth Ann, incredulous. "Harold's a fool."

Later that afternoon Beth Ann invited them all back to her place for a light supper.

"Guess where we ate dinner last night, Beth Ann," Jackson asked.

"Not at Sonny's?" Beth Ann replied.

Jackson nodded and tossed her a wink. "We even sat at our table."

Beth Ann laughed and her face colored like a young girl.

After dinner they were beginning to say their goodbyes when Sarah Jane pulled Jackson aside.

"You'll never have another chance," she told him in a quiet voice.

Emma, Sarah Jane, and John waited out by the car for Jackson.

He cleared his throat to speak. Beth Ann looked like she might cry.

"You know, Beth Ann, I've learned in the past year that I'm not very good at being alone. I love Florida and I've got a great little place on the Apalachicola River, but I take anti-depressants and walk around in a daze half the time."

Beth Ann didn't trust herself to speak.

Jackson's heart was galloping. He forced himself to look at Beth Ann. "Have you ever been to Florida?" he asked in a voice that was barely audible.

Jackson carried Beth Ann's suitcase out to the car, grinning like a school boy. Beth Ann was flushed and radiant as a newlywed on her honeymoon. It was

time to go.

John was pulling onto the highway when he spotted Harvey Walls standing on the shoulder with his thumb out.

“Hop in, Mr. Walls,” John said.

Jackson and Beth Ann slid over to make room.

“Where you headed, Harvey?” Jackson asked.

Harvey shrugged and said, “No place in particular; maybe Charlotte or Richmond.”

“Since when did you start liking the big city, Harvey?” Beth Ann asked.

“Since never,” Harvey replied. “ But that's where you find the soup kitchens and large social services agencies and veterans hospitals.”

Emma turned in her seat and asked, “What's a veteran, Mr. Walls?”

Harvey Walls smiled and explained, “That's anyone who served in the armed forces, honey. I was in the army.”

“Were you in a war?” Emma asked.

Harvey's smile faded. “Yes, I was,” he said softly. “ I did two tours in Vietnam.”

John looked in the rear view mirror and caught his dad's eye.

“I can't imagine what that was like,” John said. “I always try to take away something positive from any situation but I guess there wasn't much positive to bring back from Vietnam.”

“Just this,” Harvey said, pulling something from his pocket and handing it to John.

John glanced at the item and nearly drove off the road.

“God, man!” he gasped. “This is the Purple Heart.”

Everyone in the car turned and stared in admiration.

John handed the medal back briefly clasped Harvey's hand. “Thank you for your service, sir.”

Harvey returned the medal to his pocket and fell silent.

The miles ticked by as they drove deeper into the night. Jackson caught his son watching him in the mirror. John nodded slightly. Jackson shifted in his seat and found Beth Ann looking at him. She smiled and nodded.

Jackson looked over at his former teammate. “Say, Harvey, how would you feel about a sleepy little town in the Florida Panhandle?”

Harvey Walls stared at Jackson and Beth Ann for a long moment. He looked away long enough to rub something from his eye.

“I think it would feel like home,” he said.

The highway stretched out ahead, seemingly endless. Emma awoke from a light sleep and snuggled up against her father.

“I like reunions, daddy,” she said.

John could feel the tangible joy and contentment as he carried his passengers through the night, taking them home.

One Foot In Front of the Other

By Shiloh Slaughter

"If I was a child, I would believe you," she said, when you promised her if she fell, you would catch her.

You are walking foot by foot on the railroad track; she is walking the same pace as you, foot by foot, parallel, down the other track. You're left hand is wavering, as is her right hand, but where your hands meet they are steady, embraced, and sweaty. The truth is, if she lost her balance, you had one hand to catch her, because your other hand was making sure that you didn't fall as well. Or perhaps, you would fall with her, onto the sharp rocks and cross boards. This would be either because the sun was in your eyes, or your eyes were on her smile, which came and went like the wind, depending on her thoughts, which also came and went like the wind.

It is the time of year when things are new or maybe just reborn or dug up, but regardless, the birds sing a song that has become so familiar to many that it is a lost story buried in the city. The water is lapping against the shore to your left, leaving slow sedimentary fossils, that adhere like homelessness and adolescence, discarded rubbish and smelly fish. This too is buried from sight, beyond your peripheral vision, beyond your focus, as you notice the way her eyes smile when the sun burns. Through her eyes, you see things you haven't seen before, like the old man sweeping up the walkway to his bar and the teenager with long stringy black hair holding hands with a shy girl who stares at the cracks in the cement. Yesterday you smelled the fish and pitied your mother who has never heard the birds' song and who every year forgets that things become new, but today you too are new.

"Believe me, I would catch you," you say, and playfully tugs at her arm slightly to make her laugh like a little girl, laugh like your sister and one of your past lovers and your mother and your aunt but not yet like your grandmother, because her laughter runs deep like your memories, where often you are lost and found at the same time. Because you are not lost right now, the girl's laughter is still familiar.

She doesn't fall, but her purse slides off her shoulder opposite of her hand holding yours and she doesn't catch it. Its contents spill onto the sharp stones. A mirror, lip gloss, receipts, granola bar, and one earring. You release her hand, and let her walk foot in front of foot ahead of you, to crouch down in the cool grass and retrieve her purse. But her hips are

swaying with each foot moving in front of the other, her arms spread out in front of her, wavering like an airplane. She knows you will pick up her purse, and she knows you are watching her, and won't let her get too far ahead. You pretend that you are spying on her, and she is in a moment of freedom, freedom of your influence. You are proud of her that she chooses this, because you know if she falls, you will not be there to catch her, but you will be there to listen to her talk about it.

Delicately you pick up her belongings, disobeying your curiosity to look a bit further, to pull her purse open a bit more. But instead you watch her walk away, one foot in front of the other. When her hips sway a bit too wide, you know she is losing concentration, is losing her balance, that she caught the sun's reflection on one of her scars that line her arms, that she is predicting a future which is blinding her from the present, that she is focused on the bird's song, which makes people think she is insane because no one else ever pays attention to it. You run to embrace her, your hands instinctively grab hold upon her hips, and you hold her gently, so she can regain her balance, and then you let her go.

Her freedom happens to be next to your own freedom, as you both release one another's hand, walking the rails side by side. The more you focus on your feet, you realize she is focusing on her own feet, and the more she focuses on her feet, she wants to make sure that you are focusing on her own feet too. But when her sandaled foot nearly steps on a slab of glass, you trip on your feet, but that is okay, because she catches you.

"You know I got you, don't you?" she asks, squeezing your hand and hitting you softly on the back of the head.

"No, I've got you," you say, and hand her back her purse.

She hugs you a little too tightly, and with the back of your foot, you kick the shard of a forty ounce Budlight to the river.

"Let's walk to the pool hall," you say, because you won't tell her that she almost sliced her foot in half. She takes your hand, and believes, like a child, that she will have a good day.

Chutes and Ladders

By Jeff Tompkins

She forced herself to concentrate now, focus on what she was doing. She remembered that this was the part of the highway, as you approached New York City, where several things started happening at once. North of the exit for New Brunswick, the landscape itself took on a new kind of density: gradual at first, with a sprinkling of office parks and radio towers, but then you came over one rise and saw nothing but refineries filling your field of view on either side of the highway, and you knew you were inside the whole grim panorama, three hundred and sixty degrees of ugliness. Over to the right, along the railroad tracks, a line of steel gray boxcars stretched to the horizon; the random tags of graffiti sprayed on their sides made Casey think of a tiny human cry raised in defiance of the forbidding landscape.

And yet, inside the car, relief was no further away than the end of her own right hand. Because around here was also when you could hit the scan button and the radio would begin to yield a riot of Spanish voices, Caribbean rhythms, and when Casey did so now it was as though splashes of tropical color suddenly filled the inside of the Honda. If the station held, maybe the music—salsa? merengue? she could never be sure of the difference—would get her all the way to Connecticut.

Connecticut. She had been driving for less than two months and now she was embarked on this mad dash from the New Jersey Turnpike up to southern New England, across two state lines, across the hellish centrifugal whirl known as the greater New York area, just because a woman she'd met less than an hour ago had taunted her from the other side of the table, back at the rest stop. And her the epitome of the cautious, responsible driver,

too—or so she'd thought. What kind of pent-up demons might have been uncaged, the first time she slid the key into the ignition of her new Honda Civic?

But questions, analysis, the relentless glare of her own self-scrutiny, could wait. Right now she had something to prove to Roxana, and needed to keep her attention where it belonged—on the barrage of stimuli seeming to land everywhere she looked. To her left Newark Airport spread out like a set of building blocks, and as Casey sped past it a plane came in for a landing, directly overhead, so low in the sky she had to suppress a reflexive urge to duck. And that was the IKEA building on her right, huge yellow letters against a deep blue backdrop; those would be the colors of the Swedish flag, wouldn't they. Maybe she could even hop on one of the planes across the highway and fly to Sweden. Further ahead on the left, a handful of skyscrapers shining in the distance: beautiful downtown Newark. Maybe it got a bad rap.

An atrocious smell, unmistakably chemical, reached her nostrils not long before the turnoff to the Lincoln Tunnel and the George Washington Bridge. The car climbed and climbed until suddenly, over one rise, midtown Manhattan appeared in the distance, skyline looking from this vantage point like an architect's model, and, as if to confirm that the onetime Babylon hadn't been scrubbed of all its sleazy soul, a billboard for a strip club somewhere in midtown greeted her around another bend in the highway, two cupcakes with big hair and a come-hither look beckoning to who knew how many family men in the course of a given day.

Then the highway plunged and cut through wetlands, the sheets of water on either side steel-gray in the October sun; she spotted a lone egret perched on one leg, so still it could have been part of the world's largest diorama. There was Giants Stadium on the left, followed immediately by the Continental Arena (she remembered wondering, the first time she'd cruised through this area, what kind of chicanery could have led to a second behemoth's being built right on top of the first one). The signs for poor Vince Lombardi, hiding behind his reeds there on her right, had an almost plaintive quality: LAST SERVICE AREA.

Leaving the New Jersey Turnpike behind always brought with it a pleasant sense of anticipation, a feeling that she was moving back up to the big leagues: the highway just plain I-95 again, her road. As if to confirm a new scale of things, before the George Washington Bridge came the archway that made her think of a Roman aqueduct, halfway into the sky, soaring so far above the track full of tiny whirring cars you'd feel dizzy if you stopped to look up at it. A man singing on the radio rhymed *corazon* with *chicharron*, and even with her high-school Spanish, Casey had to appreciate that.

The George Washington itself was always a stomach-tightener. She'd crossed it before, she knew that infinity beckoned on either side of the causeway and that on some days if you peered far enough south lower Manhattan would almost seem to hang suspended in a sort of sooty haze over the Hudson River; today though she took all that on faith and kept her gaze focused with laserlike precision on the rear bumper of the car in front of her, hands clenched, jaw clenched, roaring across the upper level of the bridge in what felt like a single sustained effort of concentration. When she reached the other side she half-expected to look in the rearview and see the entire apparatus collapsing into the river, cars, roadway, stanchions, a whole disaster-movie spectacle.

But it was too early to relax, in fact the pace only seemed to accelerate from here. She still had the Bronx to cross, the road was already narrowing into the insane free-for-all of tight turns and twists it would remain for the next couple of miles, and switching genres if not lanes Casey pictured herself in the middle of some post-apocalyptic science fiction scenario, the kind in which grizzled survivors raced their clattering heaps through the ruins of once-great cities. The overpasses bore signs reading Weeks Avenue, Jerome Avenue, Arthur Avenue: genteel-sounding names for such a dismal stretch of the highway, or maybe it was just a different picture up there. But down here the road was cracked and pitted, weeds sprouted at regular intervals, and while she knew it wasn't fair this section only deepened Casey's suspicions of New York City; she wouldn't have been surprised to see troops of rats scurrying along the side of the road, with random exchanges of gunfire the natural accompaniment.

And then, all at once, everything was better. She couldn't have told anyone exactly why she felt that way, but it was just better. You emerged from beneath one last overpass onto a plateau of light and space and as the road began arcing to the left in an exquisitely modulated curve there was the first sign for New Haven, herald, she always felt, of a brighter world to come. For a few minutes afterwards 95 snaked its way north through parks and projects in a way that made her think of a childhood game called "Chutes and Ladders", but she knew she could handle it; because not long after that the highway burst out of its straitjacket and became three lanes again. At last she could exhale. The car could exhale. Casey positioned herself safely in the middle lane, not to move from there until her destination was within reach. Next stop, southern Connecticut.

Trees shot up on either side, filling both the left and right margins of the windshield, and somewhere just before New Rochelle an unexpected sight added to the sense of pastoral: a black cowboy, in full Roy Rogers regalia, seated astride an honest-to-goodness horse, just off the road's right shoulder. Maybe an apparition like that was your reward for making it past the city in one piece.

The toll gave her no trouble at all and when the highway crossed the first outlet onto the Sound, a sign she'd reached familiar turf, she realized she hadn't thought of Roxana in a good half hour or more. Where would her rival be, by now? Casey knew it was ridiculous to think she might suddenly spot the silver Ford wagon after all this distance, but she couldn't help herself: her eyes tracked the road in front of her, back and forth across the lanes in a continual restless sweep, and from time to time she even consulted the rearview, hoping for a glimpse of the one car she might recognize among all these other pretenders.

I'll race you... Roxana had said—just a few minutes after the two of them had first gotten through saying hello to each other. What kind of woman would issue such a juvenile challenge to a total stranger she met at a highway rest stop? Or maybe the more pertinent question, Casey told herself, was what kind of woman would accept such a challenge. For weeks

she had been yo-yoing up and down the highway, expanding her range, testing her powers, as if in pursuit of something she couldn't even name; now, just barely, on the edge of her conscious thought, she was beginning to contend with the possibility that all her restlessness might have suddenly found its object.

Having her mind occupied like that ate up the last of the miles remaining before her destination; the big glass boxes that comprised downtown Stamford flying backwards before she was even aware she'd passed them, the first exit sign for Darien flashing overhead not long after that.

Her Spanish station had been breaking up for the past several miles, so she put the radio out of its misery; that music wasn't the appropriate soundtrack for these surroundings anyway. Adios, amigos, your work here is done. The road came over a rise and on the gradual downhill slope she saw the two rest stops facing each other across the highway, subdued, almost tranquil in comparison with their brethren further south. (She almost found herself mentally reaching for the word tasteful before wondering if that wouldn't mean her standards had irrevocably and disastrously slipped, a sure sign she'd logged too many miles in the Civic.) A long single lane led into the McDonalds on the eastbound side and as she slowed down Casey resumed her lookout for the Ford Escort; here, at least, she might realistically expect to see it.

She glided nearly all the way across the lot doing ten, fifteen miles an hour, but her new friend was nowhere in sight. She circled halfway around the building to be sure, but all that waited for her on the reverse side were a parked truck and an empty service station, the latter looking oddly desolate. The west end of the lot allowed her the luxury of a wide, slow turn before she steered the Civic back to the main parking space; then, nearly two hours out from the Joyce Kilmer Service Area, the car came to rest next to another Honda Civic, whose New York license plate actually read LV2 DANZ.

Those hedonistic city folks, Casey thought. But talk about anticlimactic. There didn't seem to be much point to winning a race if no one was there to

see you do it.

So what was her next move, anyway, now that she'd actually made it here. She wasn't thinking clearly; she hadn't expected to be the first to arrive, and realized she had no conception of what to do with this odd interval of found time—however long it was going to last—on her hands. Really the only option seemed to be to sit and wait. But once she slid the key out of the ignition and popped her seat belt, Casey decided there was a good reason for her lack of decisiveness. It was a novel sensation, admittedly, and it might even do her some good to get to know it. For the first time since she'd begun her travels, she had to take another person into consideration.

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