

[The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Announcements](#)

[First Annual Contest](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Poetry](#)

["Our Stories" non-fiction](#)

[Writers' Craft Box](#)

[Book Reviews](#)

[Writers' Challenge!](#)

[Submission Guidelines](#)

[Indie Bookstores](#)

[Artists' Gallery](#)

[Feedback & Questions](#)

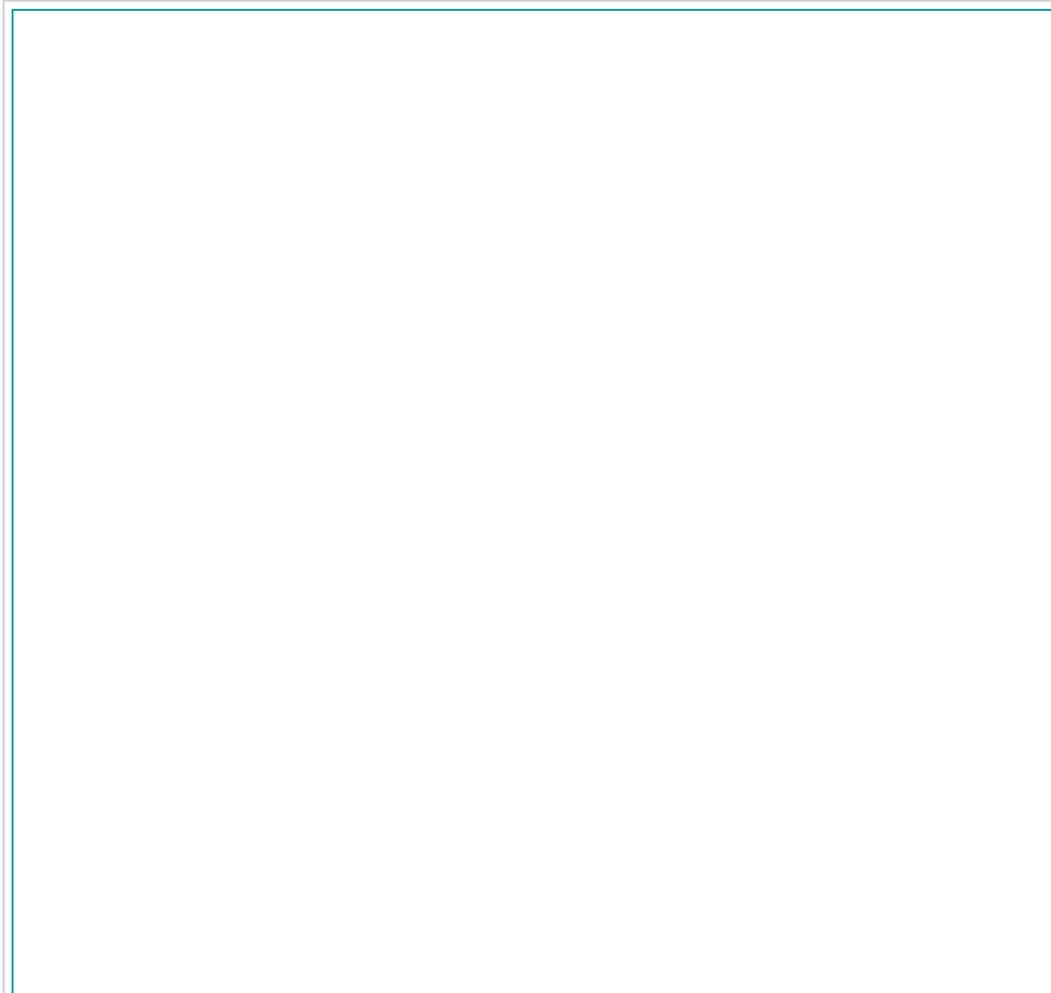
[Scrapbook of Four Years](#)

[Archives](#)

[Inscribing Industry Blog](#)

Come in...and be captivated...

[Search](#) x





"Captured Bonsai" by Linda Bigness; <http://www.lindabigness.com/>

Welcome to our Fiction section!

Featured Stories:

"The Elk" by Michael Tidemann

"Man and Wife" by Terin Tashi Miller

"A Hitch in the Clockwork" by Jack Logan

"The Spill" by Ilan Herman
"The Lines of a Pen" by SuzAnne C. Cole
"Jena" by Grant Flint

The Elk

By Michael Tidemann

The bugling elk stirred him. He had been dreaming of beaches and sand and young women whose bikinis grew ever smaller until they were mere splotches of color in key places. He was the only man on the beach, the only man for miles, the only man on earth, for that matter. And every woman in the world was his.

The elk though, that troublesome elk, had kept waking him through the long, lugubrious night. He was an old man now, and the only thing he could look forward to was one sad, lonely day after another followed by even lonelier nights. All of his friends had died or moved away and he was left with only his memories of them.

But an elk? he asked himself. It had been years since an elk had roamed these hills and valleys, sipping from Elk Creek for which Elk City was named. And now an elk had to pervade his dreams . . . dreams of as many bikinis on the beach as there were grains of sand.

A distinct, hoarse, high-pitched bugle sounded. He bolted up in bed. Crazy. That's what he was becoming. Maybe Darlene was right. Maybe that daughter he loved and hated at the same time was for once right. To even imagine an elk in a place where they had been shot out decades ago was insane.

"You know you can't live alone any longer," Darlene had told him a few weeks ago. She had the same long, red hair as her mother who had left him years ago for a younger man. That was before the Marines finally granted him a full disability for his leg that a Jap had nearly shot off just below the knee at Okinawa. It wasn't enough to keep him from working, though, and he took to the woods with a borrowed chainsaw and within ten years had built up one of the biggest independent logging operations in the Oregon Coastal Range.

When he tired of logging, he turned the company over to Frank, his trusted foreman, and tried salmon fishing. Toledo just downriver was a natural place to dock. He only had to go to Yaquina Bay then cross the bar to open water where the big ones were. When his boat proved too small to hold the catch, he bought a bigger one. Then a bigger one after that. In time, he was fishing off Alaska, filling crab pots and netting halibut and salmon like no tomorrow.

It was right after he bought the Alaska Adventure, an 118-foot trawler, that Paula contacted him again. It was wrong what she had done, she told him. She wanted him back. Could he ever forgive her?

“No,” he said and hung up the phone and never spoke to her again.

He guessed that it was only natural that Darlene, their only child, would want to stay near him and his money. She and her worthless husband Larry lived in one of the biggest houses in South Beach, a rambling, three-story monster whose windows looked like glowing teeth ready to bite into the ocean.

Phil admitted he liked their beach house with its hardwood floors and ankle-deep carpet and endless glass pieces placed strategically to reflect the ebb and flow of tides. He hated though that they made him take off his shoes before he entered the very house he had paid for.

He preferred instead to spend as much time as he could here, in Elk City. Tragically, his house was taken in a flood in the 1960s. He refused to let a mere flood push him from his land where he had lived so long so he put in a double-wide.

When the county declared his property a flood plain, said structures could only be 120 square feet, and told him to move his trailer, Phil built a 120-square-foot shack. Then another. And another. Soon he had a haphazard series of varying degrees of levelness connected by gangplanks eight feet above the ground, supported by stacks of concrete blocks.

The flood waters never threatened his home, though. In fact the Elk and the Yaquina had not spilled from their banks since he had put up his shacks. And the county? Well, the county zoning officer just shook her head and tried to forget about him.

He hid his money behind a veneer of shacks and an old pickup and threadbare clothes that a bum would have thrown away. As Californians moved into the area, paying sky-high prices for land, the friends he had known all his life moved because they couldn't afford the property anymore or even pay the taxes. The only people who knew what he was worth were Darlene, his banker, his lawyer. Any obvious connection between him and his money had vanished too. Years ago he had placed his businesses in the hands of men he trusted.

And so here he sat, with Clyde, his black lab aged as much as he, amid his beloved rambling shacks. The walls were filled with the flotsam and jetsam of a life that had strived but never been fulfilled. A sun-faded life preserver from the Alaskan Adventure and glass floats collected from years of beach combing adorned the walls along with a Marine flag and string of ears from Iwo Jima, Saipan, and Okinawa.

He was 86 now. He had enlisted in the Marines at 18 and fought his way across the Pacific until that Jap bullet at Okinawa. One little piece of lead had put him into a hospital bed in Honolulu and ended his career as a Marine. He never again bought anything made in Japan.

Phil's glory day reveries ended when he remembered that Darlene was coming today. She had told him she was going to go through his things and help him decide what he could take to assisted living. That was what they called warehouses for old people now, places where they were stacked like cordwood until they were ready to be burned. Clyde came to his bed, ears down in sympathy at his mood. The dog sensed he would be first to go.

Phil's gnarled hand stroked Clyde's head gently. "You ain't goin' and I ain't either, boy."

Clyde whined and muzzled his paws, darting his eyes wonderingly. After a moment his ears lifted and he turned toward Harlan Road and a deep growl shook his frame.

"What's that, boy? Is someone coming?"

Clyde lumbered up, growled and lunged for the door.

Through the portal at the top of the door, a white Mercedes turned off Elk City Road where the pavement ended then onto Harlan. The car crept slowly down the road and into his driveway as though afraid to get dirty.

Clyde growled fiercely.

“That’s okay boy.” Phil petted him reassuringly.

Clyde growled savagely and tried to bite off the door handle.

“Clyde!” Phil grabbed his collar. The dog whined as he guided him out the back door and over the gangplank and into another cubicle that served as his study. He felt sorry for the whining dog as he bolted the door shut.

Darlene stood in front of his main cabin as he kicked open the door. A suited man, not her husband, stood beside her. “Hello, Father,” she said.

“What happened to ‘Hi, Dad?’”

Darlene cleared her throat and gazed at his cabin. “I can’t wait to get you out of here.”

“It’s home. Are you coming in?” he asked, not wanting her to.

Darlene motioned to the suit beside her. “This is Tim Henderson, my attorney.”

“Attorney?” Phil looked at the lawyer then Darlene. “What the hell you bring a lawyer for.”

“I wanted him to see the squalid conditions you’re living in.”

“Squalid? Squalid! Hell, this is good livin’!”

Darlene faced Henderson. “See what I told you about his temper?”

“Temper! You think I got a temper now, you should of seen when I killed three Japs at Okinawa, one with my K-Bar. And if you think that’s bad, you oughta see my temper when I shoot the two of you and hang your ears with the others.”

Henderson swallowed dryly. “So it is true then what she said . . . about the ears!”

“Hell, yes,” said Phil, entering the cabin just long enough to return with a string of brown, dusty ears. “See for yourself.”

Henderson cleared his throat and dry-swallowed. "Mr. Davis, we need to talk."

"Talk, hell. Talkin's over. I'm ready for a good fight."

Henderson tried to grow a backbone so he could continue. He opened his briefcase and retrieved an envelope. "I have a court order that you vacate this property and enter into assisted living. If you don't come willingly, the authorities will accompany you."

"Authorities? Authorities!" Phil lunged into his cabin, jerked open the drawer under his bed, and grabbed his Garand and an eight-round magazine and jammed it into the rifle. He chambered in the first round, pulled off the safety, and went to the door.

Henderson stood as white-faced as the paper he held.

Phil cracked the first round from the hip and it tore the paper from Henderson's hand. He shouldered the Garand and fired seven more rounds, sending the paper further with each shot until it nestled against a blackberry stalk, lifted in the wind, and tumbled away.

Henderson was a shaking bundle of shit. Darlene, who knew her father, stood like a rock. "We can get another paper, Dad."

"And I can get more bullets. And maybe next time I'll hit what I was aiming at."

"We'll be back," Darlene said. They left, Henderson shaking all the way to the car. He still shook as Darlene started the Mercedes and drove off slowly, roaring off when the car reached pavement.

The Mercedes was barely out of sight when he realized what he had done. He had shot a court order from the hand of a lawyer. If there was any doubt about his sanity before, there wasn't any longer. Only God knew what charges he would file.

The cabin walls and world closed in on him. He wished then that he were as poor as the day Paula had left him. His money, the very thing he had tried to accumulate through his life for security, had now become a snare from which he could never escape. Had he been poor, Darlene most certainly

would have favored Paula and ignored him. Like her mother, though, she knew a good thing when she saw it. She had first played to his sympathies, saying she needed help. Then she said she loved him and wanted to be near him. That all changed when she received a copy of his will and learned she was to get everything.

Phil looked to Clyde sitting patiently beside him, sensing his mood, awaiting his response. Phil already felt the sheriff coming to get him, gun drawn. He already felt their taking him away too, forcing pills down his throat, poking needles into his veins, so he would be more “compliant”. They would force him to live the rest of his days as a doped-up walleyed vegetable. It was going to happen. He knew that more certainly than he knew anything else in the world.

Phil gripped the Garand still in his hand. The warm, reassuring stock seemed the only friend he had left in the world – that and Clyde, of course.

He swallowed and closed his eyes then went to his ammo can and out of habit filled the magazine with another eight 30.06 rounds even though he would need only one. Without thought, he went to the door and reached for his keys and went out and down the steps toward his pickup, Clyde scrambling to keep up. He only remembered his old dog when he opened the pickup door. “Okay, boy,” he coaxed gently. “Get in.”

Though he knew the shotgun seat was his by custom, Clyde seemed to question whether this was a journey on which he should embark.

“It’s all right boy,” Phil coaxed.

Clyde put in his forepaws and Phil gave his hind end a boost. He set the gun on the seat between them and slammed the door and cranked over the engine and took off.

He knew what he was about to do was wrong – wrong in the eyes of God and family and the world. And yet he had never been one to follow what God and family and the world told him. He had only done what the Marines told him.

“You don’t want to ever let the Japs capture you,” his drill instructor at Parris Island had told them. “You’d be better off to fight to the last man, and if it boils down to be killed or captured, it’s better to be killed. And whatever you do, save one last bullet for yourself.”

He guessed that was what he was doing now, avoiding capture. And, while they wouldn't kill him, they intended to kill his spirit, to snuff out what fire he had left in him. And when that was gone, well, when that was gone he could just as well be dead. He still had mind and fiber to decide how he was going to go out.

And so he followed twisting Harlan Road along the bank of Elk Creek past pastures of grazing cattle and small waterfalls. He passed Harlan and glimpsed the lookout tower as he took Mary's Peak Road.

Clyde took the bouncing, jostling ride pretty well. This was another adventure, and his tongue lapped the cool air through the open window.

Something else guided Phil. Something dark and brooding and inevitable. It was something he had anticipated in basic training and later at Iowa Jima and Okinawa. He had anticipated it too at times when top falling or careening a fishing boat sideways down a huge Bering Sea swell. The only difference was that now he accepted it.

He reached Mary's Peak and found the old ranger's tower standing but unattended. He got out of the truck and went to the stairway, and, one at a time, climbed the switchback stairs to the top. At the top he had a good view of Corvallis, where he was born, and the surrounding countryside. His had been a full life of soldiering and logging and fishing. Until he was married he had found his share of girls too. He focused on all of that life now, every last bit of it, the good and the bad, and embraced it all in one, glorious moment. Then he turned and went down the steps one last time.

The she wolf pricked her ears. Sound, scent hovered in the brush ahead. She sniffed the tracks, gauging their age, examined the steaming droppings. Ever since the alpha female had chased her from the pack when she was but a pup, she had followed her quarry from the Baird Mountains of Alaska to the Endicotts and past the great, white beauty of Denali, so huge it made its own weather, and along the interminable coast ranges. She stopped only to sip from icy mountain streams, to catch an occasional rabbit or bird, but always the animal she had been tracking evaded her.

She knew she would catch up with him soon, though, for she had become a killing machine. She had tracked him for two years now, and she sensed that tonight she would finally succeed.

Clyde waited for him when Phil reached the last step of the ranger's tower. He offered his dog a sad, brief glance as he went to his pickup for the Garand. Gun in hand, he looked for a good place to commit his final act.

He was very objective about it, of course. His main concern was for those who found him. He wanted it far enough from his truck so as not to evoke horror from whoever found him and yet he wanted it close though so they could find him with no trouble. He settled on a flat table on the eastern shoulder that offered a glimpse of Corvallis. That would be a good, last thing to see. The place from where he had come would be the last place he would go.

He chambered in a round and looked to Clyde beside him. There was no way the dog could make it without him. Darlene would take him to the pound where no one would choose an old dog when there were dozens of eager, panting puppies wanting a home. Heart sinking, he pointed the muzzle at the side of his dog's head and the tired, old eyes blinked sadly. Phil thought of how he had picked the dog from the litter nine years ago, choosing him for the size of his paws and dominance over the litter. For years they had hunted together, the dog sleeping every night on his bed. All he could see now was that same puppy, larger, aged, tired like himself.

He set down his rifle and unbuckled the dog's collar. If he were to roam the wilds, he needed every chance he could get. A collar could catch on brush or be something another animal could grab in a fight. "There, boy. Now you're free."

Clyde stepped back from him, somehow knowing the bond between master and canine was broken. There was still a love between them, though, that would keep him there until the last.

Phil found a good, stout fir branch and broke off a foot-long piece. He lowered himself to the ground and placed the stick in front of the trigger. Then he took off his boots so he could cradle the stick in his toes as he put the muzzle against the roof of his mouth.

It would be all over in a moment. Then Darlene would have his damned money and he would finally be rid of her. He tried to measure the pain he knew he was about to feel with other pains – the tree that had fallen on him and shattered his legs, a cable from a crab pot that had nearly taken off his

hand, the Jap bullet. He decided the bullet was the worst he had ever felt. He recalled how strong that pain was, to diminish the pain he was to feel now, and tightened his toes on the stick and waited for the gun to fire.

A bugle, long and loud, sounded just behind him. He paused. Was he already in some other place? Hell? Heaven? Elk, in his mind, were found only in heaven. The bugle sounded again, throaty, full, upon him.

Clyde whined as bare tree branches grew from the hill behind them. Of an instant it grew, widening ever immensely. Steam poured from the base of the tree as it grew still larger, then below the tree appeared a bull elk. The rack spread a full six feet, ten points on one side, fifteen on the other. As he finally crested the hill, the gold-gray hide shone in the lowered sun. He was a full 1,600 pounds, evading predators both animal and human, to become the largest of his kind since his ancestors had crossed the frozen Bering Straits.

Phil held his breath as he turned his rifle muzzle toward the elk. A rustling sounded as the stick he had forgotten fell to the ground.

The elk turned and froze, listening for danger. Phil could not have imagined a better shot. He sighted at the elk's left flank and squeezed. The rifle cracked and the bullet was true, entering the center of the heart. The elk stumbled to his knees, rolled his head, and was still.

As the elk's heart stopped, Phil felt a giant fist clench his own. He had felt it before, but never like this. The clenching tightened until his own heart shattered and his head hit the ground, not forty yards from the elk.

Sensing death, Clyde whined and nosed Phil's head. He whined long and low, stopping when he heard a growl.

The she wolf came around the elk's carcass. She approached Phil, backing only slightly away from Phil as Clyde growled protectively. She was more interested in the elk, though, and went to where blood spilled from the wound and licked deliciously, then bit in.

Clyde eyed her interestingly. As she ate ravenously her hips rotated provocatively. More well-fed than she, he went behind her and mounted her.

Surprised at his audacity, the wolf turned to him. She was too hungry to fight, though, so she continued to eat as he bred her.

After he had satisfied himself with her, Clyde turned to the elk where the wolf had already made a good dent in the body cavity. She growled as he began to eat beside her, but it was the growl of a wife keeping her husband in line so he would mind his manners during their wedding feast.

They ate until sated then retired to a shaded bower where Clyde bred her again. Afterward, he licked the stray blood from her coat and she did the same for him. And then they disappeared together into the great wild.

Two Forest Service rangers who had heard the shot followed the sound to the summit and the pickup with the elk a few yards away. At first, on seeing the tracks, they thought a wolf had taken it. Then, curiously, they saw the dog tracks and Phil's body a few yards away and the exit wound on the elk.

"Wolf get him?" one ranger said to the other.

"No," said the other ranger grimly. "We'll need an autopsy, but I'd say it was natural causes."

The first ranger looked from Phil to the huge elk, trying to decide which was the greater shock, finding a dead man with a rifle on top of a mountain or the trophy elk beside him. He knew the question was totally inappropriate before he asked it, but he did anyway. "Do you have your copy of Boone and Crockett with you?"

The second ranger, his supervisor, glared a reprimand. He went to his truck for a blanket to cover Phil's body then radioed for the coroner and sheriff. Once the body was covered, he went to the elk, as fascinated as the other ranger. "This blows Boone and Crockett all to hell."

Man and Wife

By Terin Tashi Miller

She was just finishing the dishes when he called to say he would be home soon. She was glad he called because now she knew there was some time to

get ready. He was out with an old friend so his plans might change quickly but she did not mind. She liked all his friends. They all had gone to college together, her husband and his friends. She had not gone to college. She was a secretary at the college, though. And now she was his wife.

She went up to her room to make sure the bed was not cluttered. She always put things on the bed. At least she did not put them on his desk. He hated clutter, especially on his desk, so when she had a letter to write or felt like drawing – she once joked about becoming an artist and leaving him – she got a clip-board or used a magazine or something solid and wrote or drew on their bed.

She took some half-finished sketches off the bed. She even made up the bed, spreading and tucking the sheets like he liked them, tight and snug. She hated making the bed. And she hated the trapped feeling she got from tucked-in sheets. But she liked how he would be when he saw she made the bed for them.

She looked in the mirror. There just had to be time for her to take a shower. She wanted him to be surprised after a cold night out when he and his friend probably saw many nice girls around.

She took off her clothes and turned on the shower. If he came home while she was in the shower, all clean and wet and warm and her hair smelling damp, that, too, would please him. She knew how he liked kissing her skin when it was wet from the shower. She knew he liked to taste the water, salted from her skin, as he was kissing her. She stepped into the spray. It struck her fast, bouncing off her back, too hot at first and then too cold.

She hated showers. A bath was relaxing. It made her all light and pretty feeling. A shower made her think of getting up early and going to work, half-sleeping, the water beating on her in that little shower stall, where there was no room to escape the pounding. That pounding of the water is what woke him up, what excited him, she knew, but she did not enjoy it. Because her hair was long she took a shower to wash it well, but a bath was so much nicer.

He had not come home by the time her hair was done. She finished her shower and, drying off, wondered if there might even be time to set her hair. No. If he came home with her sitting in curlers he would not be the

way she wanted. She wanted him off-guard, pleased with his wife. She wanted him to take her to that well-made bed.

She dried her hair with a blow-drier, brushing it back and giving it more style so it looked close to what she saw girls on the campus wearing. Her hair was too fine and took too much effort for short-term results to look like them, but she tried anyway, because she knew they would be on his mind.

She was a very pretty girl, everyone said she had been, but she was older than the college girls and her husband. He had married her despite her being nearly a decade older but she sometimes wondered if, by the way they had grown used to each other, he felt older, too. She knew he would not like feeling older, really. He was still just out of school. He acted older than most of his friends and, in a way, he was – but he did not want to be older, she knew, so she did not want him to feel that way, either.

She put on her pink lace Teddy. She was really going to please him this time.

It was fun, being married. You loved the person enough to enjoy playing when they came home. When she had gone out with other men before him, all they wanted, it seemed, was a good lay. It was so different now, wanting a man as bad and wanting him to want you, too.

Since he was still not home she turned on the television. Just before the news broadcast came on for the last time, she heard the door open. She turned off the set. She heard him throw his coat over a chair. She put on the last touch of eye shadow and some perfume.

Then she sat on the bed, posing, her nice smooth legs curled around her bottom, hands on his pillow. He came into the room. She had turned off all but the lamp by the bed, giving the room a nice soft glow and there she was on the bed, with him home and her hair all nice and her eyes all pretty and sexy. He turned on another light. Then he quietly dropped his pants and took off his shirt and she was watching him, smiling, not making a sound.

He lay on the bed, naked. His body always pleased her. She loved the way his chest had hair, a line of it also going down past where his other hair grew, looking warm and dark and soft. As she leaned over, crawling onto his body, sinking into him, kissing his forehead and eyes, she smelled his

bar breath, stale and harsh, his mustache smelling of cigars again. Stilled, she had been wanting him knowing where he was, so she could ignore his breath. His body was what mattered, his love, and the way he would hold her close.

He began responding to her kisses, the weight of her body, the smell and touch of her. A smile crept across his face.

“Oh, Amy,” he said, his eyes still closed.

His wife stopped kissing him and stiffened. Her entire body stiffened, as if she'd been shot or stabbed in the heart. Try as she might, Mary couldn't hold back the tears that fell out of her eyes onto her sleeping husband's chest.

A Hitch in the Clockwork

By Jack Logan

Tom always got up at 7:05 for a quick shower, leaving plenty of time to get dressed. Shirt, socks, pants, belt, shoes, and a tie depending on the heat. It had been a hot year. Then, he would leave out the door to walk the three blocks to the subway. It took only one stop on the local, followed by a switch to the express which would carry him all the way down to work. He caught the 7:40 train, allowing plenty of time for small delays like people getting jammed in the doors or for the train to sit still when it ran too close to the train before it. Once someone had brought a gun onto the train, and despite the police mobilization Tom still got to work on time.

This routine had been chiseled into being over the early weeks of Tom's employment. Whether in social or business functions, Tom was never late. In regard to meeting with friends, this gave Tom much time for contemplation as hardly anyone else shared his timely traits.

Long and lonely contemplation.

But it served him well in regard to work. Not just on time, Tom was always early. For several months it was very enjoyable. However, Tom's job was easy and did not pay overtime. So every morning, Tom waited around the

front of his building, with an extra twenty minutes itching at him a little more everyday. Those twenty minutes would be spent with the temptation to craft a new morning schedule. But Tom had developed the reputation for always being on time, and would not risk marring that image for an extra five or ten minutes of sleep or shower.

And so, like any other weekday, Tom got up at 7:05 for a shower, dried off, dressed, and headed briskly out the door for the subway. He caught the usual local and transferred to the usual express. He took a seat right by the door. It was a good start to the day, half of the time he had to stand. Tom made himself comfortable, he was tall enough to drape his arm over the metal bars that bookended each row of seats. Here Tom gave himself options. If the train was full and chattering, he'd listen to music. Starting the day with something bluesy and moaning, then travel into slightly more pop grounds. But the train was sparse, which left him to enjoy the quiet. At times like this, Tom gazed around the train for fellow commuters that he recognized. The first who stood out was a woman, sitting on the row across from Tom, who frequently rode this train. She might've had a pretty face, but every time Tom saw her (or at least recognized her) she was always staring down intently at her two cell phones. She plugged away at both, sending out a message with one hand at the same rate Tom could produce with two. She always stood out to him, because the first time he saw her working so critically was the first time he realized how easy his job was.

Tom did not love his job. But the money was good enough, and he never had to take anything home with him. After being hired, very few people moved around. They would get pay raises according to a long standing structure based on tenure. And a few people would get small promotions to slightly larger desks that were still out in the open with everyone. The majority of departures from the job occurred due to death. It occurred to Tom that he could stay there for years without realizing it.

The train pulled into a station. It had run by five local stops. People got on and people got off. All in all, the train grew more crowded, but it wasn't packed.

The next person Tom recognized was a young boy. A kid, whose curly hair piled on top of itself and his jeans hung halfway down his butt cheeks. He had a packed red book bag, stuffed with books and school supplies. It looked heavy and reminded Tom of his last days in college, when his own book bag started becoming so heavy that it pained his back. Of all the of the

train's usuals, Tom had seen this boy the most. And on this particular ride, the vague idea that Tom's rigid, partially self-imposed, schedule most closely resembled that of a school child started a rumbling. It stirred Tom so much that it produced a rarity. Tom decided to talk to someone on the subway.

"Hey, kid." Tom's first words were harsher than he intended, but that was his mood. "Do you skip a lot of class?"

The boy looked at Tom, maybe a little scared but brazen enough not to back down from anything. "No. I like school."

Tom nodded slowly. "Good. That's good." He knew to offer encouragement, although he had hoped for an opposite answer regardless of what it would mean for the likely future of the youth before him. Tom wanted someone to be flippant with their life, with their responsibilities. But this kid wasn't.

Tom spent the time until the next stop decidedly looking anywhere aside from the young boy. The train pulled into the next station, having skipped four local stops, and the boy exited off for school. This relieved Tom for a moment, until he realized he would never forget which stop the boy got off. It made him feel like a stalker.

The subway doors closed. Tom's stop would be next. A call filled the subway car. "Ladies and gentlemen, I do not mean to disturb you." The entirety of the train consciously turned their attention elsewhere. "I, like many others like me in this city, have recently fallen on hard times."

Those people standing inched closer to the occupied seats, so that the man could pass through without incident when he inevitably moved down the car. Tom saw it as an example of everyone knowing the system. It made things easier for everyone. The man had plenty of time to sell his story, four local stops, then get off and move to the next car. "I had a good job and a good apartment. Through no fault of my own, I have lost both in recent months. Because of a burst pipe, my apartment flooded with water and was condemned."

The train ran by the first stop. The man had yet to move from his spot at the door. "Without an apartment, I soon lost my job. I turned to the Holy Father, and all his servants, for guidance." Tom tapped his leg. According to

the blueprint to how these things worked, the pitch should be wrapping up right about now. “And so, with all their help, I became ordained.”

Tom looked up, and the train flew through another station. He took a full look at the man. He dressed in a coat too heavy for the weather, was unshaven, and had misshapen sneakers. He looked the part, but was playing it all wrong. Tom glanced at the other passengers, no one seemed bothered by it. Another stop went by.

“...with happy heart I pass the Lord’s blessing onto all of you. And I hope you can find it in your hearts to make a donation for the church.” Tom tapped his foot in anticipation, waiting for the man to start making his rounds through the train. He stayed still. “And now, I will share a prayer that I wrote.”

“He keeps starting over...” Tom said amazed. He looked to the man sitting to his left, about to ask if they were seeing the same thing. He choked the words in his own throat. He had almost become another psycho on the subway, talking to someone out of the blue for no reason.

“Dear Lord, hear me on this day. Please guide us all through this day with comfort and warmth.”

“It’s ninety degrees out.” Tom muttered. Another stop went past.

“And let us take care of each other, Lord. For we are all but lost in the day to day struggle of life. For without each other, what have we? Bring us together! Hold us together. Bind us together! For only then Lord, will all the people on your green and blue earth be able to understand each other.”

More and more, he turned up the Sunday morning television preacher routine. As he grew louder, he pulled up some heads from their owner’s laps.

“And for all those turning their heads against the divine, praying to false gods with false idols, help them see the way to your true light.” A few heads turned at that, but any little anger was abandoned as the train pulled into its station.

“My Lord, I pray.” Those who wanted off or on the train had to shove past him. He raised his voice in response, although the train was actually quieter while being still. “And let those men from damaged and war torn countries

find solace in their life, so that they don't come here and clog our streets and subways with their unfortunate condition..." A chime went off as the doors closed. Tom snapped back to reality, and realized he had missed his stop. He stood up and moved toward the exit, choosing the one the man solicited at.

"You know you messed that up right?" Tom asked with face and body locked still, staring out the window. The man cut his sermon off and listened. "A lot of people got off, and you didn't ask them for, ah, contributions. Your story... prayer ran too long."

"Hey." The man said, face solemn and certain. "Can I have some money?"

Tom turned his head and looked into the man's eyes. The car was silent, save for the heartbeat of the train tracks. Tom dug out his wallet and handed over a dollar.

"Got ten more cents? I can get a beer with that."

Tom dug out some change and handed it over. The train pulled into the next station. Tom jumped off with a nod to the train preacher and doubled over to the uptown bound trains. He caught a train five minutes later, which brought him into work only two minutes late. Everyone assumed he had arrived on time, as always. Tom spent the morning rolling around with his small secret. He flicked his stiff subway card in rhythm with the clicks of the clock. He slid the card back into his wallet, right into its proper place.

"I think I could pull five more minutes in bed."

The Spill

By Ilan Herman

I knew him as Daman Yadav, an unusual Hindu name. Daman means, controller, or one who tames, subdues, and is prevalent as a surname. Yadav is one of many words that mean Krishna, and is primarily a first name. Therefore, it makes sense that Daman Yadav was instead named Yadav Daman—Krishna who tames and subdues—but that wasn't the case with the name Daman Yadav—he who subdues Krishna.

Forgive my linguistic curiosity but, I dare say that if Daman's mother had taken a moment and named him Yadav, maybe, just maybe the spill wouldn't have taken place.

I don't know Daman's mother or her motives. She's long gone. Perhaps mother knows best.

Your shrug tells me you don't quite get the name issue. Let me cross cultures to Anglo-Saxon. Say you met a man named O'Neil John?

I suspect you'd crane your neck and politely ask, "Is that John O'Neil?"

"No," the man would reply. "It's O'Neil John."

"So your first name is O'Neil?"

"Yes," the man would say, perhaps tersely, as you've joined the multitudes that already asked that question. "My name is O'Neil John."

Such was the case with Daman Yadav. There must be repercussions to that reversal of names. I cannot in truth insist that is the only reason that led to the spill, but I can imagine how, as a child, Daman was ridiculed by his peers. How much does childhood ridicule come to fester in the heart of the grown man? How does that man express the festering? Does he fight evil to prove his nobility? Does he lead an army in search of self worth? The ripples of ridicule are infinite.

Bullies enjoyed ridiculing Daman Yadav for his name, but also for his height and girth—five-feet tall and 200 pounds. Daman confessed that, even as a child, he lacked the slimmer version of his dreams. "Short and skinny is better than short and fat," he said, moon-faced, dark hair quickly receding to shape his head like a bowling ball.

"You're probably right," I said. "I was short, but also one stripe on the pajamas."

He didn't know what that meant, so I explained, and he laughed in a thick baritone, one I sparsely heard and mostly when he conversed in rapid Hindi with the staff at Hurry Curry, the Indian restaurant where Daman Yadav worked—a cafeteria style operation with a few tables and a great majority of takeout.

I first walked into Hurry Curry two years ago. I'd just moved to Los Angeles and the restaurant was a stone throw away from my apartment. Looking out my bedroom window, I'd watched a steady stream of folk walk in empty handed and walk out with paper bags. I took an hour to count 130 patrons pass through at lunchtime. I was impressed, and, by that time, quite hungry, so I rushed out and crossed the street and walked into the restaurant and came up to a sheet of glass featuring nine metal containers filled with lentils and potatoes, cauliflower and garbanzo beans, lentils in spinach, eggplant curry. The steamy aroma satisfied me deeply even though I sadly noticed two containers with chicken and one with lamb.

The short and fat man I'd later know as Daman Yadav, had round and dark-brown eyes. His gaze was friendly but also detached—the proper etiquette for someone who serves 1000 meals a day. His voice was low and soft.

“Naan,” he said, or perhaps asked, judging from the slightly raised brow.

“Naan what,” I asked.

“Plain or garlic.”

“I don't know what you're saying.”

“Naan plain or garlic?”

His eyes flickered with slight frustration, so I quickly said, “Plain,” though I still hadn't a clue what he was talking about.

You, of course, are an educated and savvy reader, so I hear the snicker, so be it, but I confess that until the day I faced Daman Yadav, I didn't know what Naan meant.

“Lunch one or two?” he asked.

“I don't know.” I was besieged. A line of four hungry people had formed behind me. I clenched my fists and decided to fight my way out. In quick succession I pointed to three of the nine containers. “I want the eggplant curry, the potatoes and peas, and the spinach.”

I stepped back and grinned. Daman Yadav spooned the food into three compartments in the styrofoam plate. I watched him measure what he thought was right, the wide silver spoon dipping and rising with sauce. He added white rice, a container of yogurt, and the Naan, which I finally understood was much like Pita bread, if thicker.

His motions were slow and deliberate, confident, a rhythm he'd known for years. I was impressed but also very hungry, almost famished, so when the bill came to \$8.76, I quickly handed the server a ten-dollar bill and said, "Keep the change."

His eyes shone with a flicker of gratitude. The line behind me snaked with six hungry people. I spun on my heels and walked out, fled, like I was encroaching on a cosmic flow.

The food was a rainbow of spices and sauces, the vegetables cooked just right—a softness with a crunch, like the skin of the eggplant and zucchini. The portions were so generous—enough for three meals at about 3 bucks each—and I knew I'd found my well of sustenance for the foreseeable future and that doing so also entailed daily contact with my server, one Daman Yadav, an association that would lead to the spill. I can't take that back, wish I could.

Hurry Curry was open daily from 11-11. I couldn't fathom how anyone survived such a cutthroat schedule, yet Daman Yadav did so six days a week. He took Sunday off. I found it best to arrive early, like five minutes after 11. The shining metal containers, like chariots, filled to the rim with fresh and bubbling food, waited to be assaulted. I was privy many times to the first ladle-filled scoops of the day. Only a trickle of patrons arrived before 11:30 and then the pace rapidly picked up as a human herd rushed the place in search of delicious and cheaply priced food.

I took advantage of some slower moments to try to get to know Daman Yadav, but the always polite and friendly conversation never flowered into friendship. Daman never asked me anything about my life. Was I married, kids, what kind of work? Meanwhile, I inquired about his past in India, his culture, how the food was cooked—like a Samosa—the batter wrapped the potato and soaked in the starch. Our exchange was never more than two minutes, but, when one adds 2 minutes x 250 days, one ends up with 500 minutes—over 8 hours. One could be psychoanalyzed in less time.

Good morning, Daman.

Good morning, Boss.

The food smells good.

Thank you, Boss. Naan plain or garlic?

You're funny, Daman. No eggplant curry?

Tomorrow.

Okay. How's the blood pressure?

Not so good. Doctor give new medication.

You don't need medication, Daman, you need to shrink that gut of yours. I'll take the lentils, potatoes, and garbanzo beans.

I have no time to lose weight.

I know, Daman, you work a lot. I admire that.

Thank you, Boss, he'd say, placing the styrofoam container in the paper bag.

You, esteemed reader, surely detect the aloofness in Daman's words, but I was not offended. How many other middle-aged white guys pestered him with fake cheer (though not in my case) but wouldn't even notice him walking down the street.

I'd known Daman three months before I saw him beneath the waist, obscured as he was behind the glass counter, but when I did—he emerged from behind the counter with a cardboard box of chutney jars to stack on the shelves—I saw Buddha as he's depicted in picture and statue—round face, big belly and squatty legs, and an authentic Hindi accent.

And finally, to surmise the portrait of Daman Yadav, I will speak of his artistic performance, the beautiful constant of the pedantic precision—the ladle gliding to collect the bounty—the trained discipline of a concert violinist executing Paganini—and gently placing the food in the plate. I'd

watch him scoop up from the potato bin, when sometimes he'd return for another slice, perhaps feeling he'd dished out too much sauce, like a god extending favor. He never quibbled with a scoop that possibly had too much potato. Indeed, Daman Yadav was a master on the ladle, smooth moves, like Fred Astaire, feeding the multitudes who came to drink from his well—his teat—the teat of Buddha—turning water into wine.

A year had passed in blissful mundane, when a phone call came from a friend in distress, and I was set to fly to NYC at midnight. Flying 3000 miles at 30,000 feet in the dead of night on a tiny cylinder is nothing I'd wish on my worst enemy, but my duty was to go—strong enough to face phobic tendencies.

Busy all day, eight in the evening came about, and I was delirious with hunger.

I peered out my window. A year had passed since I'd been to Hurry Curry other than my 11:05 am time. The place was busy. Territorial impulse pointed me to challenge my fellow men in my need to live another day. I had a plane to catch. I needed the soothing touch of basmati rice and curry potatoes.

I hurried across the street, walked into Hurry Curry and stood in a line of five people tapping toes and scrolling cell phones. I read the labels off DVD's—Indian film and music stars, and admired the bronze kettles and incense vases gracing the top shelf. Daman was in the groove, but two more people now stood behind me. He picked up the pace—moves confident as ever.

I was next in line when two tall Indian men in long black coats walked in, accompanied by Nazar, the owner of Hurry Curry, whose pitter pattered with great need for approval. Daman Yadav narrowed his round eyes while he scooped the food into the plate. He packed the goods in a brown paper bag and handed the bag to the client.

I walked up to the glass window. Daman ignored me. He rushed out from behind the counter and, much like a duck, waddled up to the visiting dignitaries and quacked loud angry words in rapid Hindi.

I've since wondered many times what Daman Yadav was so upset about.

I strongly suspect it was about an issue many people express—not being appreciated, not rewarded for diligence and honor to duty.

The two Indian men in the black coats nodded and smiled, like they were trying to shake him off. Daman Yadav turned on his heels and waddled back to his place behind the counter. He bit on his wide lower lip and looked at me, eyes remote with anger.

I shrunk into my jacket. Four people stood behind me. I pointed and quickly said, “Potatoes, spinach, and eggplant.”

Daman Yadav had fished and placed the potatoes and spinach in their styrofoam compartments, and had the scoop of eggplant gliding toward its resting place, when something happened. To this day I’m not sure of the breaking point, whether the hand gripping the ladle, or the one balancing the plate. I’d been distracted as I glanced at the two men in black coats, and I hated them.

I heard a muted, ominous thud, and turned my eyes on the glass partition. The plate, filled to the rim with saucy food, had crashed to the counter and splattered all over the place, including Daman Yadav’s pants and shirt.

Silence lingered for a moment while Daman, frozen in time, head bowed, witnessed the chaos. Then he looked at me, sad eyes filled with contempt, possibly hatred. The chatty conversation between Nazar, the owner, and the two men in black trailed off.

Nazar looked at Daman and raised his voice. Daman didn’t answer. He wiped the counter with a towel and tried to brush off the sauce dripping from his white shirt. His shame consumed my heart. I could take no more. I turned on a dime and scurried off without my dinner.

The week in NYC was chaotic and fast-paced, but not enough to help me erase the memory of Daman Yadav, head bowed, witnessing the devastation.

I kept asking myself if I had anything to do with the spill.

Of course not, said a well-tempered voice in my head: you were but an innocent bystander, a loyal customer, one of a thousand standing patiently

in line when two men in black coats entered and caused Daman to lose his cool.

That is true, said another voice, this one quivering: but what if you hadn't been there, all stressed out, at a time you never frequent the place. Surely your frazzled energy contributed to the mayhem. What if the call from NYC never came?

The well tempered voice snickered: My, my, aren't we important. If you're looking for some esoteric collective energy excuse, then go ahead. I'm not going to reason with shaky and unproven metaphysical scaffolds. The spill had nothing to do with you.

Maybe, whispered the anxious voice, but you were there, the conduit, when Daman was fragile. What if you'd asked for lentils instead of eggplant as the last dish? The lentils tray was much closer to Daman. He wouldn't have to stretch his arm, perhaps the time when his elbow shook and lead to the spill.

Whatever, said the well-tempered voice and walked away swagger intact, leaving the anxious voice to cross his trembling fingers with remorse.

The airport shuttle dropped me off at my apartment at 11:15 am—time for me to hurry upstairs, drop off my suitcase, and rush to Hurry Curry so I could profusely apologize to Daman Yadav.

He wasn't there.

"Where's Daman?" I asked the server—a young Indian man with acne scars and thick glasses.

"Fresno."

"Fresno? That's 250 miles north. What happened?"

"He go to live with his uncle."

"Why?" I was really distraught—the hopeful scenario of regret and atonement, maybe even absolution, slipping away, perhaps gone forever.

The server shrugged. "Family matters, Boss. Naan plain or garlic?"

I walked off in a sad mood. I suspect that Daman was never the same after the spill. I really wanted to know how he was doing, but that would involve going to Fresno. Daman Yadav wouldn't appreciate that, couldn't care less to ever set eyes on me again.

I returned to my apartment and indulged in the sublime cuisine. I was now convinced that hadn't I been there on that day at that hour, the spill wouldn't have happened. I choose to feel that way. I know it's the truth. I was the proverbial straw.

A year has since passed, and I still feel the same. I just know it in my guts of guts.

Goodbye Daman Yadav. Be well. I'm sorry.

The Lines of a Pen

By SuzAnne C. Cole

Carefully Mark examined the hotel room, making certain he'd left behind nothing personal. Kneeling, he looked under the bed. God, his wedding ring, winking up at him. Must have rolled off the nightstand. Removing the ring before sex was important to him; then he could swear that as long as he wore it, he'd never stray. Standing, he slipped the ring on his finger and pocketed the rather elegant hotel pen—stainless steel with a discreet logo—from the nightstand. After paying \$300 for half an hour's residence, he deserved a souvenir. Certainly didn't get much else for the rent. Honey had seemed cold and distracted today. Didn't even pretend to be sorry when she rushed away after the day care center called. The kid, always the kid. As he left after another last check of the room, he swore his next mistress would be childless.

Back at the office, Mark plunged into work. Late in the afternoon, stretching and yawning, he called his assistant Clark to examine some contracts. As he recommended some changes, Clark unconsciously picked up the hotel pen to take notes. When they finished, Mark could only watch as Clark, still holding the pen, returned to his desk. Maybe, he thought, I

can grab it later. But when Clark, calling a cheerful goodnight, left, he must have taken the pen with him because Mark couldn't find it on, or in, his desk.

But Mark had been on another floor when an administrative assistant, who'd already locked her own desk, grabbed a sticky note and the pen from Clark's desk to record a fax number for her supervisor. Scribbling her note, she'd left it and the pen on her boss's desk.

That evening, working in the supervisor's office, one of the cleaning crew saw the pen and coveted it for her son. He'd complained yesterday that the packet of stick pens she'd bought at the dollar store "stunk" because the other kids had erasable, retractable ballpoints. And this was middle school. What was he going to be like when he got to high school? He probably would resent the hotel name being on the pen—but the Four Seasons was nice. She'd cleaned there, too. So she stuck the pen in the pocket of her smock and wished the night was over.

The next morning, her son, pouring himself cereal and milk, saw the pen with a "Love, Mom" note on the table. Cool, he thought, polishing it on his sleeve. Ritzy hotel too. But at school, after one of the athletes grabbed the pen and laughed, "Hotel pen, cheapo hotel pen," he'd tossed it into the wastebasket.

His teacher always checked wastebaskets—kids had been known to wrap their orthodontic retainers in a napkin before lunch and toss the napkin without remembering the retainer. Then their parents would complain as though it were her fault. So when she saw metal glinting in the trash, she wasn't surprised. Not a retainer this time, though, just a hotel pen. Nice quality, though. And from the Four Seasons. Maybe someday she and her husband would be able to stay at a hotel that nice. Tucking the pen into her purse, she left for home.

The phone was ringing as she walked in the door, a friend with complicated instructions for a PTA luncheon, so she fished the pen from her purse and took notes. Looking at the clock, she gasped. She hadn't realized it was already after 6. Mark expected dinner at 6:30 sharp and no excuses. Maybe if she left the pen on his plate, he wouldn't be so angry. And maybe, just maybe, she could sweet-talk him into a tenth-anniversary weekend at the Four Seasons.

Jena

By Grant Flint

Robert double-parked, left the motor running. "One month," he said to the girl, "...we'll give it a month. I've got to have a month. Got to find out who I am." He was beginning to sound desperate. "Got to find myself, learn to like myself, otherwise, how can I --"

"Right," Jena said. "Well, you better go now, you'll be late." She started to get out.

"Wait. Wait a moment," Robert said. "I'm not going to be able to take it. I'll go crazy wondering how you are, how you're doing. Promise me, promise me this -- you'll write or call the office, something, if anything happens, you get sick or something."

"Yes," Jena said. "You better go now, you can just make it."

"But only if it's something serious, I mean -- you know what I mean. Otherwise the month won't work, we'll be right back where we were."

"Yes," Jena said.

"Oh for God sakes," Robert said suddenly, "we better make it three weeks. I can't stand it, worrying about you, not knowing --"

"No, four weeks," Jena said. "Four weeks." She leaned over closer to him, slowly, then kissed him hard. She could feel his surprise, and then as he started to respond, she pulled away quickly, got out of the car.

"You're the best," Robert said emotionally as she paused at the window a moment. "The best there is -- in everything."

Jena smiled slightly, then moved behind the car and crossed the street. As she walked over to the apartment house, she knew Robert was waving, probably waving all the way up the street to the corner as he always did, always had -- to her, to his kids, and when he was a child, so he had told her, to his mother. She didn't look. But then she paused at the steps,

knowing he would be at the corner now. She turned, saw the black car for an instant, the setting sun reflected brilliantly on its windows, thought she saw his arm waving. Then he was gone.

For a moment she attempted to fix that last image in her mind, as though she would never see him again, and the tears started to come to her eyes. Then she shook her head quickly. No dramatics, she thought. She had handled herself well, she decided. Perfectly, in fact. Left him puzzled, which was good, yet feeling all right about it, which was also good.

She went inside to her apartment on the first floor. As she put the key into the lock and started to open the door, she suddenly felt that she couldn't go in there. It was a tomb now. It had no reason, no future, no expediency. It was like a false front now, a mockery.

She pushed the door open suddenly, went in. Everything was neat. Irrationally she had hoped he might come here tonight. That the session with the psychiatrist might change things.

She stopped at the door of the kitchen. No, she thought, couldn't face that now. Everything ready for the last-minute touches, dinner for two. She went on into the combination living room-bedroom, and sat down warily on the sofa. Automatically she looked up at Robert's picture on the bookcase.

A sudden, complete devastation came upon her. Utter failure. A terrible aloneness, worse even than when she was a child. She started to shake as the tears came, and then feeling the warm tears slipping down her face, she let go entirely and heard her voice making an eerie wailing sound, and something about the sound shocked and yet comforted her. She reached blindly for the Kleenex on the coffee table, knocked the box on the floor, and then as she found it and wiped her face dry with the tissues, she saw the new issue of *Time* magazine on the coffee table.

She picked it up and began reading at the beginning, not thinking of anything.

Later, as it became darker, she didn't stop to turn on the lamp, but kept reading until she couldn't see any more. Then she got up quickly, moved the coffee table to one side and began to pull the sofa out into a bed. Suddenly the tears started coming again. She hastened into the kitchen, filled a glass nearly to the top with the bourbon they had bought together,

dutch treat, and drank it down until she had to stop, gasping. Then she filled it with water and drank the rest of the glass.

She went into the bathroom and washed her face. Automatically, she reached for her toothbrush. She looked at it a moment, put it back, then saw the circular birth-control pillbox with its daily pill exposed under the day of the month. She picked it up, looked at it. There were eight pills remaining. She put the box down, started to leave the bathroom, then shook her head in confusion, picked up the pill and took it, washing it down with water cupped in her hand from the tap.

She went in to the bed, took off her clothes quickly in the dark, laid them neatly on a chair. Then she went over to the window to pull the drapes, but hesitated. For a moment, she moved close to the window and stood there naked, passively. No one came by. She stumbled as she went back to bed. She pulled the covers over herself and then attempted to make her mind blank, think of nothing. She heard the clock ticking. For a moment she lay there, then angrily jumped up and went over to pull out the clock's alarm button. Then she went to the closet and put on her oldest night gown, a flannel her mother had sewed for her long ago. She went back to bed, pulled the covers up slowly, and began not to think, then was asleep.

At that moment Robert was practicing breathing exercises from a book he had recently purchased on self-hypnosis. 1-2-3-4, he counted to himself as he drew air in, his right thumb holding his right nostril. He shifted his right forefinger to his left nostril while holding his breath for an eight count, then exhaled through his right nostril while counting to four.

As he continued the 4-8-4 series, he attempted to concentrate on the prava he was accumulating, but his thoughts kept slipping off to brief scenes and emotions: the smile on the psychiatrist's face and her unprofessional sigh of relief when he had told her about the proposed one-month layoff from Jena; the curious half-smile of Jena as he had left her at her apartment house, and the intensity, almost finality, of her kiss -- as though she might be relieved, and was trying to leave him feeling good!

Not so. She had been feeling awful. He knew that. As for himself, pretty good. Freedom, it was great. Then he allowed himself a little self-pity. It would be rough. Not going out, none of those wonderful home-cooked meals with Jena, no sex, just staying here and working, finding the way.

And for a moment a sharp stab of sadness hit him as he thought of Jena and how she must be feeling, realizing the month thing was really only the easy, bearable way to end it. They would probably never see each other again.

But thinking of the finality of it was too much. He quickly shifted to the "maybe" part of it. The probability, actually, that Jena would be coming over on Sunday evening, bringing dinner, just as it had happened last Sunday after he'd agreed to her suggestion that they split for awhile. Then finding out, of course, that she hadn't really meant it -- or had maybe half meant it -- but really she had said it only to shock him into decision, make him commit himself to marriage, buy the ring -- her offering to help on the payments of it. All that. Then her coming over on Sunday -- it would happen, this time, the same way, was sure to happen -- and like last time, his reluctance but not wanting to hurt her, and in the sex -- better than at other times, much better.

Robert got up abruptly and went to the refrigerator. From the top of it, amidst bills, and things the children mustn't get into, he withdrew a yellow writing tablet and took it back to the sofa. He opened it to the secret middle part, hidden among all the empty sheets, before and after, read what he had written there a week before when trying to clarify his thinking, to make a logical, final decision about Jena.

Positive

Loyal
 Attractive
 Intelligent
 Practical
 Good cook & housekeeper
 Understands me
 Loves me
 Good with the kids
 Young
 Has orgasms

Negative

Midwestern accent and words
 Wants big wedding
 People say, I can do better -- looks.
 Too tall, small breasts, poor eye-sight, not too sexy
 I'm not ready, want to be free, play field, have money
 Don't want to set up house

Robert decided he definitely felt better now after reading the pros and cons again. And he added, "likes too much heat" to the negative list. In the 16 months they had gone together, the heat business had been the final straw many times, making him realize, at least for that moment, that he should

never marry her, should leave right then so she could find someone crazy enough to want to live in a room about ten degrees too hot.

As Robert made his preparations for going to bed, he decided to take a tranquilizer just to be on the safe side. Then he went into the bathroom, took the toothbrush from the medicine cabinet, looked at it a moment, put it back. He looked in the mirror and smiled, then frowned. Thirty-six. Beginning to look it. A year, no sixteen months ago, when he'd advertised in the campus paper for a "slightly neurotic, nearly beautiful" girl, he'd called himself twenty-eight. And they had believed it, those first seven girls he'd taken out. One time each. And then there was Jena. And when he told her -- that fourth date when he told everything: age, three kids, the divorce not final divorced yet, the whole mess -- she had accepted it. Even welcomed it. But now -- the thirty-six years were coming in. Fatigue in the eyes, new lines round the mouth, more gray hairs.

A brief sharp fear made his stomach muscles hurt and he panicked momentarily, thinking only that he was alone now, nobody really caring, and he wanted to run to Jena, quit fighting the world, accept the good things, the possible, what was right there, ready to be taken.

"No," he said aloud, and then dropped to the floor and did 10 quick push-ups and 10 sit-ups.

He took off his clothes, hanging the pants up by the pants hanger Jena had given him when he lived with her all those months at her apartment. He put on the wildly striped pajamas, one of a pair she'd given him for Christmas. The other ones were still in her apartment.

He set the alarm, turned out the light, checked again to see that the alarm button was pulled out, then got into bed. The word "Jena" and a blurred image of her face kept trying to pop into his mind, but he kept it out and tried to think positively. He attempted to picture a restful, pleasant scene. Immediately he thought of Jena and felt that she was suffering miserably. Because of him! He in control and she just waiting, nothing she could do!

For a moment he started to pray, "Please help her, make it all right for her, take care of her," and then stopped himself, amazed that he'd slip into that. After what? Twenty years? But he felt he should do something, even though it was cheating, ridiculous. Thought transference? *Jena, be calm,*

feel all right, it will be all right, he thought forcefully. It helped a little. But he started to smile at what he was doing. Then stopped himself abruptly, and tried to think positively. *Every day in every way I'm getting better and better*, he said silently. *Better and better, day by day, in every way.*

He turned on his left side, feeling quite relaxed and righteous as though he'd earned his way. He drifted almost at once into a half sleep, filled with fragments of dreams. The dreams were about Jena. Or rather about a girl he had known years before, the first big love in his life, a girl who had looked something like Jena and whom he had left finally after giving her an engagement ring. In the dream she was a whore who accepted men languorously, sensuously, but without really accepting them. She remained pure and waiting for him. Waiting, waiting, standing still in time.

The next few days were not as bad as Jena had expected. The worst moments were when she first awakened in the mornings, when everything was brutally clear. But by mid-morning coffee break at the university library where she worked, she had rationalized things around to where it was bearable. Robert would come back, of that she was certain. Nearly certain. He was weak, couldn't cook, and the old sex drive would be around. He'd be back. Or else she, herself, would weaken. It wasn't ended. Impossible. They meant too much to each other, were too much a part of each other's lives. Probably he'd call up -- "just to see if you're all right" -- on Friday night, and then without too much persuasion, in fact for any reason at all, he'd come over and -- If he didn't, and maybe he wouldn't, well, some of his creditors would be calling and they only had her number so she would need to take him the message. Probably wait until Sunday afternoon -- take him over a big meal. But did she want it to start all over again? Really want it? Maybe. Yes. Something, anything was better than nothing.

There was a bad moment at work on Thursday afternoon. "Dave and I would like to have you and Robert over for Saturday night," Ann said. They had double dated twice before and Jena had told Ann only two weeks before that she and Robert had been looking at engagement rings.

"Sorry. Can't make it this time," Jena said.

"Okay. Some other time. Jena -- you look a little peaked lately. Anything wrong? You and Robert having troubles?"

"No. Oh, maybe a little. Nothing too serious."

"Play it cool, kid. It'll work out. They always come around."

Jena wanted suddenly, desperately, to tell Ann everything. Tell anybody. But Ann wasn't exactly a friend, not a real friend, not somebody to tell all this to. There wasn't anybody here like that. No roots here. Only Robert. She'd only stayed here in this dismal place, with its no seasons, no snow, no real heat -- because of Robert. Fifteen months, meaningless unless -- only three weeks ago he'd given her that expensive perfume for her birthday. Perfume which would last at least six months. He wouldn't have given her that unless -- Twenty-four years old. Two birthdays she'd known him. From the time of having enough time, to the time of worrying about becoming an old maid. It couldn't end. For every reason there was, he would have to come back. Damn his freedom! He had no right to be in control of everything that happened to her.

She worked hard each night finishing a dress she'd started sewing months before. On Thursday night she watched the clock, wondering if he'd call after taking the children back home.

Friday night she hurried back to her apartment after work, half certain he would come directly there. At 5:20 the telephone rang. "Yes," she said, answering, her voice quavering. It was a bill collector. He called her "Mrs." and wanted to know if "Mr." had forgotten to send in his payment. She said she would tell her husband and was sure he'd mail in the payment right away.

When she sat down, her hands were trembling. It was a link, anyway, she thought. She had an excuse now. But he would be by soon, anyway.

When it became nine o'clock, she couldn't decide whether to take a taxi to his apartment and risk missing him -- if he came here -- or stay and perhaps risk seeing him at all. She decided to wait.

The following night, Saturday, she finished the dress, listening to busy, happy sounds of people going by on dates. Waited numbly for the call, not really expecting it now. If he'd been strong enough to get through Friday night, he probably wouldn't come tonight.

Sunday, she slept late to avoid thinking, but then at noon got up hurriedly and began a flurry of activity. She straightened up the apartment, scrubbed the kitchen floor, baked an apple pie with nuts in it and prepared another of Robert's favorite dishes. She felt nearly happy in a grim, unreal way, and didn't take time even to read the Sunday paper.

At three o'clock she went to the bus stop, wearing her new dress and carrying the dinner in a large bag. Riding the mile and a half on the bus, she found herself not really thinking of anything, almost sleepy in fact. She got off on his street, walked nearly a block and saw his car wasn't in front of the apartment.

There was a note on his door and some magazines on the steps. The note was from a friend who had left the magazines and said he was sorry he'd missed Robert. The note said 2:30.

Well, he was probably just out grocery shopping, Jena told herself. She sat the sack down and waited. At first she wouldn't let the ugly thought intrude, but then she did and dismissed it. He had told her he wouldn't be going out with anyone during the month. That he couldn't. Couldn't because he felt loyal to Jena, and it would be disgusting. He couldn't do anything to hurt her, he said. All he was going to do during this month, he had told her, was find himself, suffer alone.

Eventually Jena sat down by the door on one of the magazines. She picked up another and skimmed it, not really registering what she read.

After an hour she got up, picked up the bag and went out to the street. She looked up and down the street once and then began walking hurriedly to the bus stop.

Robert returned to the apartment six minutes later. Had he come from the other direction, he would have seen Jena at the bus stop. At one o'clock he had gone out for groceries, expecting to return in 20 or 30 minutes. But on the way he had turned on the radio to hear the baseball game and had suddenly decided to see it on television -- with people -- at a bar. *Why not?* he had asked himself. He was a free man, nobody dictating where he was to be, what he was to be doing. Also, he admitted reluctantly, it was an excuse

not to be at the apartment if Jena came. Because if she came, in his condition of mind, it would all be back the way it had been, only more so, because he'd never again have the strength to leave her. Besides, he'd be back anyway by three or so, before she'd be likely to come.

He went to a bar, had two beers while watching the remainder of the game. Then he went to the supermarket, wandered around aimlessly for some time, finally buying some staples -- the TV dinners were getting unbearable, and, he admitted gloomily, it was beginning to appear he might have to cook for himself for quite awhile -- and at the store he met one of his friends from work who had been on vacation and who now asked him how he and Jena were doing. This had involved a lengthy conversation and some bad moments.

So it was after 4:30 by the time he returned to the apartment. He found his heart was pounding as he drove the last block. He tried to think of the resolute way he would handle himself if Jena was there, but he knew already it was going to be like homecoming, all smiles and kisses and weak acceptance of the comforts of life.

When he didn't find Jena there, he felt a deep and total disappointment. Which surprised him. He knew he should feel relieved, in fact did feel relieved in a way, but it was lonely, suddenly terribly lonely. The apartment had seemed all right when he left, but now it was an effort to go in. He read the note which fooled him for a moment until he saw the handwriting and now made him feel angry, irrationally he knew. *Damn the men*, he thought bitterly, *with their friendship and magazines*. They were useless, shallow comfort, meaningless. As empty and stupidly useless as this cold apartment.

It had been a bad weekend. Friday night, he had simply got through, accomplishing nothing except fixing one of the kid's toys, fighting himself not to call Jena or go to her.

Saturday night he gone out to get something to read and ended up buying a stupid girly magazine and then at home had read every line of it, listening to all the people joyfully passing by, and had finally taken the magazine to the bathroom, ending the evening with that foolish, so sad now, childish, lonely outlet. And the childish, ridiculous guilt, frustration, afterward.

A bad weekend. And now no Jena. How could she stay away this long? That half smile when she'd kissed him goodbye -- had she really meant it? Final? If so, she wouldn't just sit there in that apartment. She couldn't stand it if it was final. She'd go right out and get a man, get involved completely deeply, with some nut, just the way she'd always done. With her there tonight, probably. Eating with the same utensils he used, sitting on that sofa, his picture up there -- no, she would have taken it down. The man helping her pull out that bed --

Robert opened a can of spaghetti and meatballs, warmed it on the stove, and ate it standing up. Later, he read a story in one of the magazines his friend had brought. Finally he forced himself to read another chapter in the self-help book. It was about depression and how self-hypnosis could relieve it. It pointed out, however, that in some instances when depression becomes too severe, it was necessary to seek professional help, as suicide might occur.

Robert again felt the panic he experienced the first night after the departure. Jena! My God, he thought, she could commit suicide! Maybe that's why she hasn't come around. If she did die, nobody would know to tell him. They'd call her parents, and they didn't know where he lived. No phone, not in the phone book. She could have -- she could be in that apartment -- oh, Jesus!

At the same time he experienced these morbid projections, Robert knew somehow, knew with a certainty, that Jena wouldn't commit suicide. He forced the panic down and refused to think about it. He knew it was just an excuse to go to her. He would force himself to wait. It was like quitting cigarettes. A thousand reasons to have one. But the pain would lessen. She would come around soon. Probably. Anyway, three more weeks, then...

Jena, because she was practical and because she had been rejected before by other men, once two days before marriage, began reluctantly to consider what she would do if Robert didn't return -- even after four weeks. Though she knew, almost knew, he would. She had gone through the fifth of bourbon and she knew now she wouldn't commit suicide. In the first week there was hope and now there was still hope, and she knew, realistically, there would be less need, day by day, to end everything.

She would, if she had to -- but wouldn't have to -- she would return to the Midwest, get her government grant renewed and work for her Master's degree again. It wouldn't mean anything, it would all be stupid without Robert, but it would be something, a little better than nothing.

As for why Robert hadn't been there on Sunday, well, he could have been a dozen places -- all innocent. She knew him well enough, probably did anyway, to know he wouldn't have gone looking for some girl that soon. He was the faithful type. Like herself. A one-woman man. Too shy to move out that fast. And no money. He was loyal, cared about her feelings, always he had said that. He couldn't possibly have picked up some girl, made love to her, made her fall in love with him, let her feed him, take care of him -- not that soon. He had feelings, he couldn't have done that. He did love her in a way. He loved her more than he knew.

Saturday night of the second week, Jena took a taxi cab past Robert's apartment. The lights were out. His car was gone. Jena told the taxi driver to take her back to her apartment, then changed her mind and had him drive slowly down the main street near the campus. She got out at the campus, walked slowly up and down the main street for blocks, then went to a movie.

It was strange being in the movie alone. When the lights came on, she looked around carefully at the people, then got up and walked back to the apartment.

She refused to think about it during the next week. Nor did she take a taxi to Robert's apartment the following weekend. Robert was loyal, she knew that. To think otherwise was disloyal. Meaningless. Useless harm.

Robert had been at a movie the night Jena looked for him. He detested going to movies alone, but he sat through the science-fiction feature. He had liked science fiction movies once. He saw nothing in them now. After leaving the first theater, he walked around aimlessly, twice caught himself looking in jewelry shops at engagement rings, and finally went into a run-down movie house featuring nudist camp adventures and strip-tease dancers.

There were very few people in the theater. Yet, halfway through the first

feature, a man took a seat next to him and after a few minutes of nervous squirming in his seat, which Robert only dimly was aware of, the man put his hand on Robert's right thigh. Robert got up quickly and left the theater.

In the third and fourth weeks Robert continually held down the impulse to drive by Jena's apartment. He succeeded partially because he wanted to prove he was strong enough to wait the month, and partially because he was afraid he might see the image of a man shadowed behind the drapes of Jenna's apartment window. He had the curious almost superstitious feeling that if he didn't break down, didn't go there to check, there would be no man there.

On the night they had separated, Robert had circled the date on the counter when the month would be up. He had done this, feeling foolish about it, sure that one of them would break before that time or that he would have gained strength, independence, and the month arrangement would have turned out to be meaningless -- the departure would have been final.

But in the fourth week now, Robert was very aware of the circled date. He felt a sudden urgency to arrive at something, have something to show or give to Jena. He had changed, he knew that. It was as though he had had to be free for a time in order to accept Jena freely. He thought of his past feelings, the indecision, the sensation of being trapped, the ridiculous list of Jenna's negative points -- all this was shallow, a kid's thoughts. He had the greatest thing life could give -- a second chance -- a woman who understood him, and so important, so totally important, a woman who loved him. Loved him with all his faults and the pain he'd caused her. Loved him without reservation. The best gift that life could give. And he'd nearly lost it through the quirks of a child.

As he came to this understanding in the final days of the allotted time, he wanted to rush to Jena's apartment, and not waste any more precious time. But something held him back. The strange feeling that if he waited the full month, she would have waited for him also.

It wasn't all black or white. He knew that. Some dreams would have to be buried. Jena wasn't perfect. He could do better in some ways. On several occasions in the last weeks, attractive, twice very attractive, women had smiled at him. Probably because of a different look he'd had in these days of freedom.

It was like growing old to stop wishing for the most beautiful woman, all the other dreams. But it was childish to do otherwise. Life was here, now, and he was 36. More than half a lifetime gone. And Jena loved him. A miracle -- never understood before. And the freedom -- the test of these weeks -- a forced growing up time -- he loved her, really loved her. Had never understood before how simple, how easy it was to love.

On Wednesday, two days before the month was up, he went to four jewelry stores and finally managed to get an engagement ring without a down payment. It would be \$43 a month for two years, but it was a beautiful ring, the diamond bigger than the ones they'd looked at so long ago -- it seemed long ago.

On Tuesday of the final week, Jena woke up knowing it was over. She didn't cry, she fixed her breakfast and got ready for work, the thought staying there dead and heavy. It didn't go away during the day. She didn't attempt to fight it, wistfully trick it into nothingness. She knew completely, brutally clear, that Robert wouldn't come back, had never meant to come back.

That night, after she'd washed the dishes, she thought of suicide as she had in the first week. Now, however, she thought of it without emotion, dully, as one clear alternative. It didn't matter. It didn't matter to the world at all. Her parents, maybe. For a while. Robert would read of it in the papers. Would feel terribly guilty. For a while.

She thought about it. But she was too tired to think about it too much. It could wait.

On Wednesday and Thursday night, she considered packing for the trip back to the Midwest. She began to make a list of the necessary steps, but stopped. It was too much, too tiring. It could wait. There was no great reason to hurry. No reason for anything.

On Friday, the day the month was up, she expected nothing at all to happen. There were irritations at work that day and she thought once about telling her supervisor she was quitting, but the day went along and she survived.

When she got back to the apartment she hesitated at the door, then opened it, went inside, changed into the dress she had sewed, put on some of the perfume Robert had given her, and then sat down and read the paper.

At six o'clock -- Robert had always arrived before six o'clock -- Jena got up and left the apartment. Outside, she looked up and down the street once and then started walking toward the main street by the campus.

At six o'clock Robert was in the florist shop a mile away getting a dozen red roses. The Friday night traffic had been heavy and he'd stopped off at the apartment to change his shirt and shave. Now the florist was taking too much time wrapping the flowers. "She'll wait," the lady said, looking up, smiling. "You know you're about the happiest looking guy I've seen in here for a long time."

"I am happy," Robert said, feeling a little foolish because he knew he was beaming. "Going to get married," he called back as he left with the flowers - "if she'll have me."

"She will, young man," the florist said. "She will."

Jena walked along the main street looking at the people. They all seemed happy to her. Even those who weren't smiling. Most of them were couples, young people.

She finally went into a large restaurant which had an open front and chairs on the sidewalk. She and Robert had had a Turkish coffee there one time and talked for over an hour. She waited in the line, got some coffee and a muffin, and then went to a table near the rear.

Robert set the flowers down and removed his hand from the pocket where he had the boxed engagement ring. He knocked again harder at Jena's door, this time not whistling the little tune that was their special signal.

"Jena," he said.

No answer.

He felt dizzy for a moment and leaned against the door. Then he hurried

outside to her mail slot. Her name was still there.

He went back and knocked again. "Jena!" Then he picked up the flowers and went outside. He looked blindly up and down the street, then moved up onto the lawn next to the front window of her apartment. The window was closed and the drapes drawn.

He turned back to go inside the apartment house, then stopped, waited a moment, and finally walked across the street to his car. He put the roses on top of the car, unlocked the door, and got in. It was too warm in the car, but he wasn't aware. He stared at the window of Jena's apartment across the street.

Finally he turned on the ignition, bumped the car behind, then made a U-turn in the street and started toward the main street near the campus. The red roses slid off the roof of the car onto the street, but he didn't notice.

The other tables were filled and Jena knew the man would ask to sit down. He was shorter than Robert and wore glasses.

"May I sit here," the man asked.

Jena nodded.

He didn't begin to speak right away and when he did, Jena didn't encourage him, though it was innocent enough. He was a history professor -- "associate," he hastened to add, smiling -- new to the campus. Jena had been working on her master's in history before she'd met Robert. She found herself talking a little. It was pleasant knowing the answers to his questions about the campus and the department. He was thirty-two, younger than Robert but he looked older. His smile was something like Robert's, shy and a bit lopsided. Jena talked a little and watched the people passing by on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. Mostly, she listened.

Robert walked rapidly along the street, looking wildly to both sides. He dimly sensed people were turning back to stare at him. His left hand was in the pocket which held the engagement ring.

It was on his second trip down the street that he saw Jena. He was on the opposite side and he wasn't sure it was her at first. She was half hidden in the rear of the open restaurant, people on the sidewalk and in the restaurant constantly passing by in front of her.

He crossed the street slowly, ignoring a car which honked at him. Halfway across he was sure it was Jena and she was looking at a man sitting with her. She was listening to every word he said.

Robert went into the restaurant and stopped. He looked around quickly, then saw an empty table to the rear near a column which partially obstructed the table from Jena's view. He hurried there and sat down. He could see Jena and the man by carefully looking around the column.

He was a lonely man, no friends here, no roots, Jena discovered. He didn't like it here so far. The people were cold, they didn't seem to care if you were alive. He'd been married once. Two years ago his wife had run off with another man. He needed help. He was worse off than she was, Jena thought. A reject. She remembered the time she'd told Robert she always ended up with rejects. He had looked hurt and she had comforted him. It was a wonderful thing to comfort a man. Nothing else made you feel so alive, so needed. But Robert no longer needed her. He had stayed away the month and not come back. He was strong now. He must be strong now. She had done that, helped in that, by not going to him, but not tempting his weakness.

But for a terrible moment, she remembered. The love, oh God how she had loved him, ready to give up her life for him, done everything the best she could to please him. Why didn't he come back? *Robert!* she said to herself, the tears in her eyes now. *Come back, please, please come back before I -- Loyal, I'm loyal to you, always will love you, but myself I've got to have something, someone to love, someone to give to, someone to hold me, just hold me...*

Other people sat down near Robert's table and stared at him as he peered around the plant and column at Jena and the man. He could see them, but couldn't hear them. He waited, started to get up, waited. It was nearly seven before Jena and the man got up from their table.

Someone I can comfort, someone to hold me, Jena said like a prayer as she followed the man from the restaurant.

I love you, Robert, she said in her heart as she walked with the man to her apartment. *I'll always love you the same. Not disloyal. You're strong now, don't need me. But this man, so much like you, he needs me. I will care for him as I cared for you and hope he will love me and want me always. He will be my child, and I his child, and we will hold each other tightly in the night, comforting, protecting...*

Robert followed a block behind and saw when the man dashed out into the traffic near her apartment house, rescuing the roses where they had fallen in the street, and brought them to Jena. Saw her dip her head to them, the man's arm around her waist, her arm slowly rising to his.

Robert waited across the street after they went into the apartment. He saw the shadows against the drapes. Later, an hour, two hours later, he saw the lights go out.

The lights were out, there was silence.

The month was over. The month was over, Robert now understood. He knew everything. He knew all the truth in the world.

© 2012 *The Write Place At the Write Time*
This on-line magazine and all the content contained therein is copyrighted.