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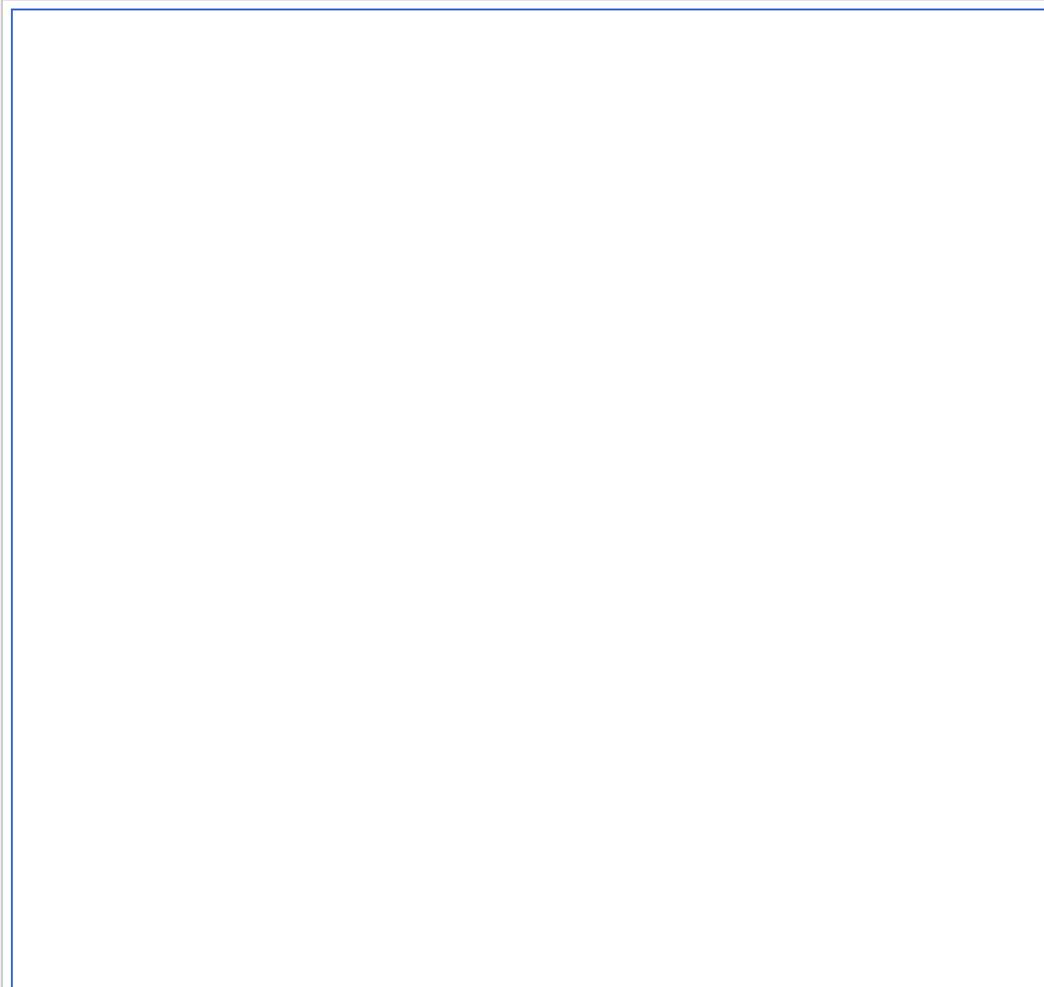
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"Anticipation" by Dale Tremblay Begley; <http://www.dalebegley.com/>

Welcome to Our Fiction Section!

Featured Stories:

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"The Music Box" by Michael Tidemann

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The Painting

by Joe Kilgore

Austin Gray thought he was feigning interest rather well. He wasn't.

"Why don't you go get another drink," Carrie said. Then added, "And don't bother hurrying back."

Her venom-laced remark stung, but it had no lasting effect. Their relationship had failed to progress enough for Austin to be particularly upset over Carrie's annoyance; or, for that matter, pleased, on those rare occasions when she actually seemed to enjoy his company.

"She should have known better," he told himself, sipping his vodka. "Dragging me to some snooty art gallery."

Austin had as much interest in art as Carrie had in baseball. And Carrie's interest in baseball was nonexistent. So Austin heeded her suggestion, refilled his glass, and wandered back through the chattering cognoscenti at a somnambulist's pace. Preferring the clean taste of his vodka to the pretentiousness of the crowd and the canvases, he paid scant attention to the prattle on their lips or the paintings on the wall.

Until he came upon a painting hanging ignominiously between the stockroom and the toilet.

Upon first glance it appeared to be nothing more than a desert landscape dominated by a giant saguaro cactus standing on a pockmarked hillside. In the foreground, a huge, fluted columnar stem bore branches curving skyward. In the background, an iconic Southwestern sunset sprayed a pink and orange glow into the darkening sky. But for some reason this painting not only caught Austin's eye, it held him transfixed.

He stood staring at the creamy white flowers with bright yellow centers that bloomed on the tops of the cactus's ribbed appendages. He peered, virtually mesmerized, at the White-winged Dove, Gila Woodpecker and Gilded Flicker that sat astride the branches. He found his hand reaching up cautiously and moving inexorably toward the painting itself. It was as if he could feel the prick of the spiny needles even while his fingers were still inches away. And it wasn't just the saguaro. It was also the sand, dirt, rock and hillside surrounding it. Nothing seemed flat on the canvas. All the elements appeared ridged, raised, and beckoning. As he gazed upon it, Austin actually felt that somehow the painting was reaching out to him.

In that moment, Austin Gray knew that he had been in that exact location. It was an environment that had been indelibly etched in his mind for the last twenty-five years. How could it not have been? It was the last place his father had ever taken him. The last landscape the two of them saw together. The last locale that held in the air the very last words that passed between them when he was only ten years old. The morning after, his mother told him that his father left in the middle of the night and would not be coming back. She was right. Austin never saw or heard from his father again.

Now, here, at this pompous art show his date had forced him to attend, thoughts, dreams, and visions that had been dormant for years began to overflow their banks. Thoughts of the big smiling man who swung him up on his shoulders and let him ride there. Dreams of the tall, thin man in the grainy black and white photos who posed proudly with a boy in his arms. Visions of the empty hat rack he checked every morning, month after month, waiting for the fedora that used to hang from the highest hook.

Austin wiped away the tear that had begun to run down his cheek. How could a painting cause this ache in his heart? This yearning he had convinced himself he'd never feel again. He had to know more about it. Where did it come from? How did it get here? Who painted it? Why was it so incredibly lifelike? He put his drink down and set out to find the gallery owner and answers to his questions.

"It's not part of the exhibit."

"But it's hanging back there, near the men's room."

"Just to fill the space. It's not part of the show."

"I don't care. I want to know about it. Who painted it? Why does it look so real?"

"The artist is called Calveri. He's a virtual hermit. His technique is controversial."

"I must meet him."

"Impossible."

"I want to meet him."

"There's no way."

"I'll buy the painting if I can meet him."

"Well...why didn't you say so?"

The owner quoted a price. Austin continued to say he'd purchase it if, and only if, he could meet the painter. The owner said it would take him a day or two to contact the artist. On the third day, Austin got word that Calveri had agreed to the sale price and the meeting. He delivered the check, took the painting home, and sat staring at it in his apartment until he caught a plane for Phoenix the next morning.

The drive through the desert to the foothills of the Grand Canyon was filled with memories Austin thought he had stored in some long forgotten attic. But sons never completely forget fathers. Particularly fathers who abandon those sons. *How can gods just vanish?* Austin remembered questioning. *How does laughter fill a room to the ceiling one day and then be nonexistent for the next and the next and the next? How long does it take for pain to turn to sadness, regret, anger, eventually disdain? Some questions may indeed be unanswerable,* Austin thought. *And perhaps they shouldn't be revisited.* But he never, even for an instant, considered turning round and going home. Hope is the most addictive drug of all.

Two hours later he was knocking on the front door of 100 Sunrise Drive in Sedona. His mouth was dry. He felt unsteady. His heart was pounding in his chest like a frightened child pounds on a locked door. Who else could have painted that scene? Who else would have seen it exactly as he had? Felt it as viscerally? It had to be him. It had to be his father.

When the door opened, a wizened little man, bald with wire-rimmed glasses, looked up at Austin and smiled. "You must be Mr. Gray. I'm Calveri. Please come in."

Austin stood in the doorway. His legs heavy as bridge pilings. He simply continued to stare at the little man in disappointment and disbelief.

"You're awed to be in my presence," Calveri said. "That's understandable. Many collectors are. Please compose yourself and come with me."

The artist took Austin's sleeve, closed the door, and led him into his studio. He motioned toward a chair and Austin virtually collapsed into it, his brain still spinning. He had been so sure. So positive.

"I'll get right to it. I'm sure you're fascinated and want to know how I achieve my technique."

"What?"

"I never mix the ashes. Each work contains only one individual. Of course the ratio of ash to paint and pigment will vary."

"Forgive me. I'm not following you," Austin began. "The truth is I only came here because I thought someone else was the painter."

"Someone else? My dear young man, I assure you, I am the only artist doing gallery-level work with cremated ashes."

"What?" Austin was startled. "You paint with ashes? You mean human remains?"

"Yes. It is my way of honoring individuals. I make them immortal, you see."

Austin paused for a moment, then asked haltingly, "And, do you actually know who is in each painting? I mean do you know who the person is...or was?"

"Of course. Take your painting. The poor man was indigent. Estranged from all who had known him, apparently. We talked in the county hospital before he passed. He liked the idea. Said he thought if he could stay in one place for eternity, someone might eventually find him. I am not exactly sure what he meant by that. But he even suggested the setting."

“What...exactly...did he say?”

“He said it was a place he had never forgotten. And it must have been so. For he described it with absolute precision. And he said one more thing. He said it was the sight of the saddest day of his life.”

Austin’s pain was almost unendurable. He somehow managed to stutter, “You don’t...have his name...do you?”

“Certainly. Meticulous filer, I am. Just one second.” The little man went to a wooden filing cabinet, thumbed through manila folders in the top drawer, pulled one out and said, “Here.” Then looking at the paper within the folder he said, “Oh my! Gray. Thomas Gray. Well, well. Same name as yours. Did you know him?”

Austin paused before he answered. Paused to realize that his father’s dying thoughts were of him—the son he could never forget, nor ever stop loving.

“I knew him,” Austin began, “long, long ago. But I’m not sure how well I knew him. I’m not sure how well we can ever really know anyone.”

Bio- Joe Kilgore lives and writes in Austin, Texas. His short stories have appeared in various creative journals, anthologies, magazines, and literary publications. He is also the author of two published novels, *The Blunder* and *The Golden Dancer*. You can learn more about Joe's fiction at: <http://joekilgore.com>

Bodies

by Joseph Barro

She slipped into the one that she had never worn before. The one she had kept hidden from her husband for a special night. As she looked into the mirror, her imagination came to life. She felt the same as she did when the delivery service man hauled the package up to her doorstep the day it arrived. She had mixed emotions. Of her eight major purchases, this was her first and most prized. Because she bought it just before they became popular possessions of the public, it was a steal. She knew its value, and because of this, she chose to never set her eyes upon it until a special day came. Her husband only had four for a few different occasions. He was

completely unaware that his wife had made her first purchase before he had.

The night he received his first package delivery, the two of them celebrated over an old bottle of wine. The house was usually very quiet, but this particular night demanded light music from the old century. Despite the occasional low strike of the grandfather clock and the high purr of the kitten, the two sat in silence and listened. This kind of celebration wasn't unusual. A celebration required antiques from the old century. For him, the wine was enough. For her, the music was nice.

"Shall I open it?" he said rhetorically with the wine still dry on his tongue. "I still can't believe it's here," she said in response. The clock rang. "This is the first step; we'll be on our way," he said as he turned in his chair and pulled the package between his legs for leverage. After staring for a hesitant second, he slowly and carefully removed the tech tape. The package was perfect. Opening it was almost as painful as it was exciting. The anxiety in the expectation was something that he did not want to relinquish. He removed the protective lining from the box and carefully lifted it out of the package. He stood up, and in one motion he let the new executive suit unfold gently down from the hanger to its shiny new executive toes.

The new executive suit would become the first, and wisest, investment he would make. It marked the beginning of his new, and soon to be, illustrious career. Within four years he would become a partner in one of the world's most successful marketing companies. His company helped other companies convince people that theirs was the company of choice. Image was the key to success. In five years, he would buy another suit for himself, and five for his wife. Business continued to soar. In seven years, he secretly bought another suit for himself. He kept it from his wife and left it at his office. To escape his guilt, he bought his wife two more. They both called the seven suits he bought for his wife "gifts". He gave her the money.

The common term was suit. Early on, the company who developed it determined the term 'body' was too grotesque and would never sell. Eventually his company would buy the company that developed the first suit (body). By the time she bought her first suit, (the hidden one of the eight she would come to own), the suits had evolved to perfection. They

were ready for public everyday use; or rather, ready for the everyday use by those who had the money.

The visionary pursuit began at the end of the twentieth century. It began with simple fixes: noses, breasts, lips, calves. The torch continued to burn through the twenty-first century as people began to change entire appearances. If one had enough money, he or she could hire a trained doctor with a knife to provide an entirely new look: new face, new chest, new hands, new lips, new nose, new cheeks, new hair, new eyes, new belly, new buttocks. People felt good. By the twenty-second century, surgical procedures were only designated for illness, disease, and other body malfunctions. Cosmetic surgery became obsolete after the development of the first body (suit). Going under the knife for cosmetic surgery was considered crude and out of date.

The suits became alternatives to cosmetic surgery because they only required a payment, albeit a very large one, without any recovery or permanent change to the original body. Suits could be worn with ease. By slipping into a suit, a person could wear an entirely new body. Inside the new body, a person could still maintain his or her own thoughts and mind, while at the same time projecting an entirely new image to suit any occasion or desire. In the 22, short for the twenty-second century, people who had more money typically had an expansive body wardrobe. It was rumored that the richest man and woman in the world had hoarded fifty-two suits. She had thirty-two and he had twenty. They each only typically wore a half dozen regularly. A typical upper-middle class family usually had two, his and hers.

Not only could a person escape the reality of an aging body, but the suit also provided an entirely new identity. Although it was conceivable that a person could wear a suit with a completely unknown identity, friends and family were typically aware of the different suits worn by those close to them. Legally, all the suits were registered in a government-run database, and retina identification was the common method used to identify a person and any of his or her registered suits. Crime rates were no different than the rates in the twentieth century. The black market suits made for more crime, but eventually those rates were offset by suits worn by crime fighters. Everything levels out.

While the cosmetic surgery industry bottomed out, many industries soared. Entertainment and marketing industries sought to expand the virtual

landscape as their success and power reached unimaginable heights. Social media outlets and many other internet communication companies continued the advance through every common household as the world became smaller and smaller. Online dating services skyrocketed as people began to use their newfound personas within their suits to connect with others looking for romantic fantasy. For many people, the suits provided a disguise and escape. For others, the suits offered a chance to live, truly live.

She had always imagined her special day to be one filled with romantic bliss. Maybe on a sailboat in the Caribbean somewhere, or in a quaint chateau in the South of France. A day that would mark the climax of a surprise her husband would give for a special birthday, or an even-numbered anniversary year. Maybe New Year's 2150. She thought that when the day came her husband would surprise her, and lavish her in such amorous euphoria, that she would finally reveal her very first suit to him. She didn't plan to tell him when she bought it. Her other suits had made him happy, but this suit was something more; it was special. Like an actress from the twentieth century.

Now she stood before the mirror in the room at the Hollywood, staring through her original eyes at her beautiful look. She thought one last time of her husband and the New Year's Eve that never came. The romance that never happened. Her emotions were similar to her husband's when he opened his first suit: the excitement hurt. Her anxiety was something she couldn't understand. It was out of character. She needed what she was doing, but wanted so badly not to need it.

These feelings hadn't surfaced when she first logged on to meet her match. She had uploaded an anonymous profile with uninhibited ease, and any nervousness had always been simply smothered by the many romantic exchanges between her and her projected match. They had agreed to remain anonymous because they were both married, and their connection always seemed to distract from the notion of physical attraction. They each assumed a suit could resolve any aesthetic incompatibility. But now the comfort of virtual anonymity had subsided. This was real. She waited nervously for her match, the one who had originally yielded the best results on the online compatibility report, to arrive. She hoped he would like the suit she had saved for the special night.

As he sat in his car in the parking lot of the Hollywood, he left the engine running and stared at the doors leading to the lobby. After gathering his courage, he turned his car off and plugged it in. He grabbed the suitcase containing his suit from his office: the one he kept from his wife. Before stepping into an elevator he entered the lobby bathroom to change into the suit he had saved for the occasion. If he had changed at his office, his secretary and other partners would have been alarmed by the unfamiliar face: certainly not one of executive superiority. More like an actor from the twentieth century.

He took the elevator up. Standing in nervous inhibition, he thought of ways he should deliver his knock. He hoped that when the door opened his imagination would be exceeded by the image never present online, and that he would find complete harmony in his match. Holding an empty suitcase and a bottle of vintage wine, he gently knocked and adjusted his posture. The door opened slowly. She had light music from the old century playing quietly in the background. It was nice.

Back at home, in their "real" lives, they both lived in inescapable guilt and fear of exposure. They continued their everyday life with one another, and never paid attention to the mysterious absences each would have had if the other were there to notice. Neither would have suspected the other a stray; blinded by the secrecy of their own affairs. They were both always busy at the same time and oblivious to the coincidence. Within the new personas they assumed by virtue of their suits, they had discovered a way back to one another. They believed they needed their suits now, and could never relinquish the happiness they had found; nor could they escape the shame. It lasted a lifetime.

Bio- Joseph Barro resides in Southern California with his wife and family. He is a high school teacher, as well as a life long musician, songwriter, recording, and performing artist. While Joseph has written hundreds of songs and a variety of recorded albums, this is his first short story publication.

The Music Box

by Michael Tidemann

Even approaching death, Isabel was lovely. Her daughter, Ann, had taken pains to apply a touch of makeup and blush so she retained the doll-like prettiness for which her mother had been known all her life. Despite being a farmer's wife, whenever Isabel had gone to a different town or city everyone was struck by her beauty. Not that she ever put on airs or tried to live beyond her station, but Isabel always prided herself on her appearance, even back when her husband Maynard had nearly lost the farm. Whether she was visiting friends or relatives in the city or baking at home, Isabel's blond hair was always in perfect curls, her green eyes with a hint of shadow, bright red lipstick giving her a slightly pouty look.

And now, those blond curls had turned gray, her cheeks sunken, her breath shallow as the cancer ate through her body, carting her toward death. Isabel had adamantly insisted that no respirator be placed over her face. She wanted everyone to see her as she really was when she left this world.

For days, now, Ann had held her hand. Luckily, she had just retired from her job with the City of Seattle and was able to come help care for her mother. Allen was there too, taking time off from his Boston brokerage. When he had lived at home, relations with his father, long passed, were far from good, giving him good reason to settle halfway across the country. Both children had their mother's eyes and father's hair and facial features. Perhaps that was why when their mother looked at them, when her eyelids fluttered open, she looked into their eyes, their features most like her own.

"How are you doing, Mom?" Ann asked, stroking her cheek.

"Tired." Isabel's gaze shifted from her daughter to her hospice room window where snow fell steadily. Down the hall, Burl Ives crooned a Christmas tune. She smiled. "I always liked his singing." She turned to her daughter. "It must be getting close to Christmas."

"It is," Ann said.

Isabel had counted the days since she had entered hospice. Though no one had told her why she was here, she knew. She knew by the way people came and left, the way families cried both day and night, the way it was always quiet—deathly quiet. She knew too that Christmas was two weeks away and she would not live to see it.

"If you're tired, maybe you should sleep," said Ann.

“Yes,” Isabel said, squeezing her daughter’s hand before she let go. “Maybe I should sleep.” And so she turned her head from her daughter and Burl Ives and the snow and Christmas and the pain and sought peace in a better place she could not yet find.

Just as Ann was about to go to the local diner for a bite and respite from her vigil, Allen came into his mother’s room, black wool coat caked with snow, carrying a small plastic bag. “I found this in Mom’s bedroom. I thought she might like it.”

“Shh,” Ann whispered. “She’s trying to rest.”

Allen pulled up another chair beside Ann’s at their mother’s bedside. “Look,” he whispered, handing Ann a music box.

Ann recognized the round, aqua-metallic music box that had sat on her mother’s bedside table for years. The art deco pattern of concentric circles was accented by fake glass diamonds, rubies, and emeralds.

“It’s really pretty, isn’t it,” said Allen.

Ann touched the music box delicately, lovingly, as though it were a part of her mother that had already gone. She touched a latch and the top flipped up to reveal a makeup power puff. A slow, plaintive tune began, lilting, sad. Ann closed the music box lid, afraid it would awaken her mother, but Isabel had already turned to her with not a smile as Ann would have expected, but a hurt, betrayed look. “I see you found it.”

Ann set the box on the bed stand. “I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“That’s all right.” She glanced grudgingly at the music box. “Do you want it...when I’m gone, I mean?”

“Don’t talk that way, Mom.”

A sudden strength surging through her frame, Isabel sat up in bed. “But do you want it?”

“Well...sure, Mom.” Ann touched the music box delicately. “I think it’s lovely.”

Isabel looked at the music box as though it were the cancer cut from her body resting there, awaiting her loathing. “Did I ever tell you how I had to quit school when I was in eighth grade so I could stay home and take care of five of the other kids?”

Though they had heard this story many times, Ann and Allen both shook their heads.

“Well,” their mother said, looking at the outline of her frame withering beneath the comforter, “...there’s something I left out. Something you should know.”

It was 1937, and for two years, Isabel had helped care for her younger sister and four younger brothers so her mother could take in laundry and bake for wealthy families. Isabel’s older brother, Jack, had left home for the Army as soon as he was old enough and her older sister, Roberta, had refused to quit school and care for her siblings. *Just try and make me, then watch me leave*, she had told their mother, Mabel.

Their father, Henry, had run a meat market out of a shed behind their house. He bought beef halves and quarters and slaughtered live hogs, their squeals raucously terrible down the alley as he slit their throats to bleed them.

Henry had taken to drink not long after they had married. Mabel had borne their first child, Alberta, a little less than a year before and the three of them had taken the train from Hazelton to Bismarck for a wedding. Henry was hardworking and prosperous with a new meat market on Hazelton’s front street. Just around the corner sat a new home filled with new furniture shipped all the way from Chicago. They could easily afford a sleeper car. That all changed, though, when on the way home from the wedding in Bismarck, Mabel awoke to find Alberta’s little blue body between them.

Henry’s drinking started in the bar, and after Prohibition passed, moved to the barn where he hid a still inside the hay bales. A daily ritual began in which he would come home every night, talk sweetly to Mabel until she slept with him, then make love to her, passionately, violently, until he planted another Alberta inside her. Another eight children issued—five boys and three girls—but no Alberta.

Isabel had to quit school to care for five other children, cook, clean, and do the family's never-ending mountains of clothing and diapers as her parents fought and made love constantly, one action begetting the other, until her mother had had enough of lovemaking and children and poverty and kicked their father out of the house for good.

Henry found work as a bouncer at the Snake Pit in Grand Forks, the only proof he was still alive the envelopes of money he sent Mabel. As Henry's drinking increased, the money decreased, and soon the envelopes stopped altogether.

Just as the blizzards ended, the dust storms of '37 began, piling fine silt in the road ditches, blackening the sky, sifting into the houses so babies and older people had difficulty breathing, coughing up dust-soaked, blood-tinged phlegm. They called everything from the Rockies to the Great Lakes the Dust Bowl, for how the sky looked when one stared upward—a never-ending bowl of darkness that covered the earth for a seeming eternity.

Crops failed, something that should have increased prices but didn't since people couldn't afford food. Cattle and hog prices plunged, and hunger gnawed ceaselessly at the people and the land.

One night Mabel returned from a laundry delivery and counted the coins in her hand carefully and put the money in a crock in the cupboard. She turned to Isabel, gaze flat except for a poverty-fixed hardness. "Times are really getting tough. I really have no idea how we're going to make it."

Isabel turned from her youngest brother, Jimmy, who made a face at the flour mush she was trying to feed him. "I wan' buttah an' suga'," Jimmy demanded.

"There isn't any butter or sugar," Isabel insisted. "You have to eat it the way it is or go hungry." She looked to her mother. "Maybe I could get a job. I hear they need people to work at the horse cannery."

"That's men's work. Besides that, I need you here, to take care of the kids." Her eyes dropped down Isabel's form, as though just noticing her. "You're really growing up, do you know that? You haven't gone out in a long time, have you?"

Isabel had always wanted to tell her she had never gone out, but knowing her mother was prone to a terrible temper, held her tongue. "I guess not."

“I know of a nice, young gentleman who’s looking for someone to go with him to a wedding... Would you be interested?” she asked, her gaze strangely insistent.

“I suppose. What would I wear, though?”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter so much as that you go out with him.”

“But, Mother,” Isabel said, almost in tears. “I don’t have a dress or shoes or anything good enough for a wedding.”

“You can wear mine. I’ll just take in my red dress a little bit and you can wear that.”

“Your red dress, Mother? Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. So what do you say?”

“Well, okay. When do I need to be ready?”

“He’ll be here to pick you up at six tomorrow night. His name is Harold,” she said as though it were an afterthought.

Isabel didn’t sleep at all that night, thinking only of Harold. All that evening before turning into bed she had asked her mother what he looked like. Was he handsome? Did he have a job? Did he have a car? All she got from her mother were brief replies, grunts, I-don’t-knows, as though she scarcely knew Harold.

Her mother was more than helpful the next day though, feeding and bathing the other kids so Isabel could get ready for her date. It was when her mother called into her bedroom, a room that until now had been restricted to her mother and father before he had left, that Isabel truly knew she was being treated special. Piles of costume jewelry were arrayed on the bed. “Do you see anything you like?” her mother asked.

A pearl choker and matching earrings stood out from the others. Isabel picked them up and fondled them delicately. “Oh Mother, these are beautiful. May I wear these?”

Mabel smiled slightly, perhaps seeing her daughter as a forgotten version of herself, and helped her try them on. She turned Isabel toward the mirror above her dressing table. “You’re really beautiful, do you know that?”

“Thank you, Mother.”

Shortly before six, Isabel waited at the front door just off the kitchen, her mother’s faux fur in hand. Everyone was eating, even sullen Roberta, who smirked at her younger sister between bites. “You look just like one of the working girls down at bar row.”

Mabel’s face pinched with anger. “I’ll have none of that talk in a Christian home.” Had Isabel said anything like Roberta had, she would have received a severe slap to the face—or worse. For some reason, though, their mother was afraid of Roberta, even though she was just three years older than Isabel. Perhaps she knew Roberta would fight back.

“But look at her, Mom. That lipstick and those silk stockings. And look at how tight that dress fits—it’s even above her knees. You’d never let me leave the house looking like that.”

Mabel fumed. She stood and threw her napkin on the table just as a knock sounded at the door. “Girl, are you lucky!” Mabel’s mood changed instantly as she let in winter’s cold draught and a very tall man, easily 6 feet 4 inches tall, in a suit and trench coat and wearing a fedora.

Harold nodded and smiled at Mabel and the kids, his smile broadening even more as his eyes rested on Roberta. “Hi.”

“Hi,” said Roberta, glancing at her mother then back to Harold.

Mabel hurried to Isabel, taking her arm and pushing her toward Harold. “Isabel is the one that’s going with you to the wedding tonight. Isn’t that right, Isabel,” she said, squeezing her daughter’s elbow.

“Why, yes.” When Harold removed his fedora to reveal thinning hair, Isabel looked stunned at her mother. Her mother had told her she couldn’t date anyone until she was sixteen. And here she was going out with a man, what, twice her age? Or more?

“Harold is a very successful businessman,” Mabel said, sensing her reluctance. “He’s the Muller Mop district manager.”

Isabel smirked as she thought how much Harold looked like the purple plastic letter opener in her father's desk embossed with the Muller Mop man carrying a briefcase. Her mother's grip tightened on her elbow to the point of pain and Isabel dropped her laugh into a steady smile.

Mabel turned anxiously to Harold. "So where's the wedding?"

"Dawson." Harold's gaze darted from Mabel to Roberta then Isabel.

"Oh, that's a long way from Tracy," said Isabel.

"Well then, you'd better get going." Mabel led Isabel to Harold. "Be sure to put on your cloak or you'll catch your death."

"Yes, Mother." Harold led her to the door and she smiled over her shoulder at her mother and sister. "What time do you want me home, Mother?"

"Oh, I'm not sure." Mabel looked curiously to Harold.

"I'm sure it will be a decent hour," Harold said, tilting his fedora with a smile as they left.

Her mother's heels seemed to nearly slide out from under her as Harold led her down the icy sidewalk toward his car, a brand-new gray 1937 Pontiac coupe. She smiled up at him as he opened the door for her. "Thank you."

His eyes flickered down her form and a cool, steady smile creased his lips. As he leaned back to usher her inside, his steel-gray eyes that matched the car and gathering clouds overhead drank her in. "You're really beautiful. Do you know that?"

No boy had ever called her pretty—cute, even. And here a man was telling her she was beautiful? It was a fairy tale come true. Having had humility beat into her with her father's strap and her mother's hand for as long as she could remember, all Isabel could manage was a simple "thank you".

Harold chuckled and went around to the driver's side, and Isabel settled into the warm seat. The car had been left running and was so comfy she didn't want to get out.

Because of the snow, Harold took the road west from Tracy to where it turned north toward Marshall. Somewhere north of Ghent, he took her hand.

“You’ll really like this wedding,” he said, talking now just to be talking, mere words filling the huge space created in her mind as his hand went to her knee and up her leg. “The bride and groom are both really good friends of mine.” His hand stayed on her leg all the way to Taunton.

Isabel was relieved when they pulled up a block from the Lutheran church. Harold’s hand on her leg bothered her—a lot. Now they would be around other people and he would have to act more appropriately. As he went around and opened the door, she stepped out and nearly fell on the ice, his arm catching her waist. “I guess I’m...not used to these heels,” she apologized.

“No, that’s fine. I can walk,” she insisted, gently turning away from his grasp.

A yellow glow emanated from the church windows, tingeing the snow banks that gleamed like diamonds with the huge, sparkling flakes. The glow welcomed them as Harold opened the front door of the church, spilling voices and well-worn oak church smells all around. A man took their coats and an usher led them to one of the back pews as the church filled.

The organist played the prelude, marking time to the flower girl and ring bearer, the groom and bride’s mothers, the maid of honor and bridesmaids, and the rest of the wedding court. Then, finally, the Wedding March played and the bride floated down the aisle in her gown and train. It was the most beautiful wedding gown Isabel had ever seen, bedecked with rhinestones and pearls, sequins and lace, a light veil shadowing a face so beautiful it looked as though it belonged in a magazine.

Harold had removed his suit jacket and laid it over both their laps. As the minister began the sermon, Harold’s hand crept up her leg, pushing her dress back, going all the way to her crotch. The minister’s words lilted harmoniously, finding a tune and a rhythm that came only after doing hundreds of weddings, as Harold’s fingers snaked past her slip and girdle.

Isabel glanced down the pew at a young boy in white shirt, pants, and suspenders standing, whining naughtily to his parents who were too busy quieting him to notice what was going on.

“No,” she yelled at Harold, just as the minister asked whether anyone objected to this union.

The whole church laughed and Harold quickly removed his hand. The recessional played, and the bride and groom processed down the aisle, husband and wife.

Angry and embarrassed, Isabel went with Harold downstairs where milling guests filled the tables as the bride and groom lifted their glasses. Prohibition hadn't been long over, and as though to celebrate, some churches even allowed champagne in their dining halls for weddings. Everyone toasted in unison to their long and happy life, and toasted again to many children. Again and again they toasted, and again and again Harold filled her glass until she proposed a toast herself, hoping that the bride would never lift a finger doing housework and that her new husband would do everything—even have their babies, something the guests found amusing. Then Harold took her up to meet them.

“Sophia and Armand,” Harold said, introducing her. “This is Isabel.”

The bride, blond, blue-eyed, high-cheeked, obviously Nordic, looked starkly from Isabel to Harold and bit her lower lip. Armond, a Clark Gable look-alike, turned from Harold to Isabel then back to Harold with a smirk.

"Isabel's from Tracy," Harold said.

“Oh...” the bride said, still sorting out their relationship in her mind. “Do you work there?”

"I, uh..."

“She's a teacher.” Harold squeezed her waist firmly, face pressing close to hers. “Aren't you.”

“Uh, yes,” Isabel said, telling the second lie of her life, the first when she had stolen an extra cookie from the cookie jar only to be beaten by her mother.

“Well.” Armand clapped Harold’s shoulder. “Maybe you can teach this character how to behave himself.”

“I doubt that,” Harold said, then remembering Isabel beside him, he sweetened his tone. “I’m so happy for the both of you,” he said, shaking their hands, kissing Sophia’s cheek then playfully putting up his dukes as though to ward off a blow from Armand. Then he turned to Isabel, his look firm and determined. “Let’s go.”

As Harold opened the door for her and Isabel sat in his car, she realized the only thing she knew about this man was that he had put his hand up her dress and that she didn’t like it. Her mother would never have let her date a boy she knew so little about. Harold said nothing as he got in, started the car, and drove past the people milling from the church. Isabel wondered if there were a wedding dance, and if so, why they hadn’t gone. She turned to Harold whose steady smile creased his face, but it was not a happy smile.

Instead of taking the road toward Monte then Marshall, Howard drove straight south from Taunton. She thought that was strange, because she didn’t remember the Taunton road going straight to Marshall. Maybe he knew of a shortcut.

The snow was heavier now, not in flakes but clumps that fell faster than the windshield wipers could push it aside. Harold went faster so the vacuum-powered wipers would move snow. The front bumper struck a drift, scattering snow across the hood and windshield. Another drift, and the wipers struggled to keep up. Harold drove still faster.

For a moment, the clouds parted, and a full moon lit the countryside. Harold turned west toward the lowering moon, away from Taunton and Marshall. Isabel was afraid to ask, but she had to. “Where are we going?”

Harold, face pressed over the wheel and nearly against the windshield, glanced at her. “This storm is getting really bad. I thought we’d stay at my parents’ house.” He looked at her frankly, almost coldly. “That would sure beat freezing to death, don’t you think?”

Isabel nodded to herself. His parents. Thank God, that would keep her safe.

The car ascended a giant hill, away from the icy, curving banks of the Yellow Medicine on its stillborn winter journey toward the Minnesota River, uphill further to a ridge where a great, north wind broke, spitting

squalls southwest and southeast, toward the Missouri and Mississippi. Harold pulled into a long, rutted drive, bucking drifts, and stopped in front of an unpainted, two-story house, darkened against the cloud-shrouded moon.

“They must have gone to bed.” Harold nodded at the house as though just realizing it himself. Isabel searched for other cars but there were none. “They don’t drive,” Harold said, reading her thoughts.

She looked steadily at him. “I should call my mother.”

Harold shrugged up a laugh. “This is the country. There’s no phone service here.”

Isabel looked at the dark house and nodded slowly to herself. His parents were home, though. At least that’s what he had said. She wished they would hear their car and wake up and turn on a light. But the only sign of life in the house was Harold’s word. “My mother is really going to be worried.”

“Aw, she knows you’ll be alright with me.” Harold reached over to stroke her cheek in the subdued moonlight.

Isabel looked straight at him. “How do you know my mother?”

The question seemed to baffle Harold who shrugged up an answer. “I just know her.”

“It seems like you know my sister Roberta. How do you know her?”

Harold laughed. “Everybody knows Roberta.”

That was something she had heard the boys at school say—before her mother made her quit school, of course. Everybody knows Roberta. Though it was terribly rude, she could understand high school boys saying it. But a grown man? She turned to Harold. “How old are you?”

Harold’s smile crumpled. “Don’t you know that’s not a polite question to ask someone?”

Isabel sought refuge on her side of the icy chasm between them, as icy as the howling gale buffeting the car, sending stinging snow crystals through

the window. The wind began to roar, whiting out the farmhouse on the hill not fifty yards away.

“We need to go inside,” Harold said, an edge to his voice.

Isabel thought of being in the car alone with Harold or inside the house with his parents and chose the latter. “Alright.”

“Good.” Harold went around and opened her door. Her heels useless in crossing the huge drifts and a little wobbly from the champagne, he picked her up, his arms and shoulders massive, and carried her as though she were nothing through the snow and wind beneath the whited-out moon, a weak glow soon wiped out entirely.

He grabbed the front door handle, the wind snapping the door back from his grasp, then grabbed it again, opened the inside door, and carried her in.

The house was only a bit warmer than outside, just a refuge from the wind. Harold set her down, tugged off his gloves, and fumbled in the match box. He lifted the globe from the kerosene lamp on the table and lit the wick, adjusting it so it no longer smoked, and replaced the globe. He went to the kitchen cook stove, and finding it cold, filled the firebox with newspaper and covered it with kindling. Another wooden match glowed sulphurously as he lit the fire, adjusted the chimney damper for draught, and held his hands over the warming stove. “It’s warmer over here,” he said over his shoulder.

Isabel edged toward the stove and found it warmer. As useless as they were, she had left her shoes at the front door. She wondered if she shouldn’t start to trust this man beside her, the man who most likely had saved her life by driving through a blizzard and carrying her inside.

“I’ll bet it’s freezing upstairs,” Harold said, seizing what bit of warmth he could from the cook stove. “I think I’ll go check the parlor stove.”

Isabel stayed for a bit to warm herself, then followed Harold to the parlor where he was banking up that stove too, lighting a match to some newspapers that orange his face in the dark room. He set the draught and heat spread through the room. Isabel stepped up to the stove to warm her hands, the glow spreading through her body and face until she was hot. “That feels nice.”

Harold stood before her. His smile was even now, not crumpled by anger as it had been earlier. Filtered light from the crackling fire flickered in his eyes, making him almost handsome.

“Why don’t you sit beside the fire while I get your room ready.”

“Okay.” Isabel watched Harold go up the narrow, creaking, wooden stairs as she sat in a wooden rocker not far from the parlor. The first thing she had worried most about was what her mother would say when she came home late.

Harold’s feet creaked downstairs a few minutes later, his tall, wide frame filling the doorway. “Your room’s ready.”

Isabel followed him up the stairs that struck a landing, turned left to another landing, finally reaching the second floor. An oil lamp on a hallway table lit the way to a bedroom where another oil lamp atop a bureau warmly revealed the room and a neatly turned-down bed. A floor register just above the downstairs parlor stove emitted heat so the room was just getting comfortable.

“We have to be quiet or we’ll wake my folks,” Harold said.

“What?”

“Oh, look at the moon.” Isabel followed Harold’s finger to the ridge broken by the moon, the same ridge that divided the Missouri and Mississippi watersheds. The moon, whole and blue in the cold winter light, glowed brightly, the storm now reduced to harmless, light, dancing swirls. It seemed now that they were on a mountaintop, and with little imagination, she saw herself as a princess atop that mountain, ruling her winter domain.

“It’s beautiful.” She continued to gaze at the blue, moonlit countryside for several minutes.

“Yes it is,” he finally answered, approaching her from behind. As she continued to look at the moonlit countryside, Harold reached around her waist and slid his hands up to cup her breasts.

“What are you doing?”

“Shh...you’ll wake my parents.”

She struggled and tried to scream, but his hand covered her mouth. She bit him and he slapped her so hard her ears rang and the room spun. He threw her on the bed and was atop her, tearing away her mother's dress and undergarments. "No..." His fist cracked her jaw and he covered her mouth as his other hand forced her legs apart. "Quiet," he whispered deafeningly. His knees kicked her legs aside. Her muffled scream sounded as though it were someone else's. "Quiet," he ordered, loudly enough that his parents must certainly have heard, then entered her.

When he had finished, he rolled over and went to sleep. Isabel lay beside his huge, snoring body in the dark, feeling the dying warmth from the parlor stove, driving her to seek the heat of the man she loathed beside her, her consciousness still hovering at the ceiling where it had been since he had attacked her.

"His mother made us breakfast the next morning." Isabel laughed bitterly as she recalled. "Her son had raped me the night before and she wondered how I liked my eggs." She looked from the snow falling out the hospice window to Ann and Allen. "Don't you think that's odd?"

Ann touched her mother's shoulder. "Oh Mom, I'm so sorry."

Isabel looked again out the window, seeking an answer from the storm. "When he drove me back to Tracy, the roads were fine. He saw me inside, and I went straight to my room just off the kitchen. I left my door open a crack and do you know what my mother said to him?"

"What, Mom?" Ann asked.

"She asked how I was." She turned to her daughter and son, eyes darting from one to the other, seeking an answer. "My mother had never asked me how I was before. She never cared. So why did she ask him? And do you know what else?"

"What, Mom?" Ann whispered.

"He gave her money. A lot of money." She looked pleadingly at her son and daughter. "Why would he do that?"

Allen swallowed hard. "I don't know, Mom. Maybe he knew the family needed it."

“Maybe,” she said, eyes blank, expressionless. “The next day, my mother brought me that music box,” she said, turning to the box on the table. “She said it was for all the help I had been with the kids. What I couldn’t understand was why when we didn’t know where our next meal was coming from she would buy me a music box.”

Ann took her hand. “Maybe it was because she loved you.”

“No,” Isabel said, looking at the box, still seeking that vague connection between it and her mother. “My mother never loved me. She even said she hated me.” Her eyes drifted to the music box. “That was the only thing she ever gave me.” She paused to look out the window. “It wasn’t long after that when I left home and went to work for a family in St. Paul. They treated me better than my mother ever did. It was there that I met your father. He was a good man, a really good man.” Her eyes glistened. “I really miss him.”

“I’m sure you do, Mom,” said Ann, taking her hand.

Isabel sighed and closed her eyes then opened them as though her lids weighed tons. “I’m tired. I should sleep. Do you mind?”

“No, Mom, that’s fine.” Ann fluffed up her pillow then went with Allen into the kitchenette across the hall.

Isabel died a week later, the ground frozen so solid it took an extra day to dig her grave beside her husband’s. And so, after nearly twenty years apart, they embraced once again in the eternal earth.

With the minister’s last words still crackling through frozen air, casual friends departed while others stayed with relatives for minced ham sandwiches and coffee. Ann and Allen, their families inside the church, stood over their parents’ graves and looked past the reaching spruce to the farmland rolling for miles to the east. “It’s a beautiful place for a cemetery,” Allen said.

“Yes, for a cemetery,” Ann said, tears freezing as her gaze leveled at him. “Do you still have that music box?”

“Sure,” Allen said curiously. “It’s in the car.”

Ann nodded. "Let's go get it."

They went to Allen's car and he took the music box from the back seat. "What's up?"

"Open your trunk."

"What?"

"Open your trunk."

Allen did as Ann said, and she rummaged through unwrapped Christmas gifts, wrapping paper, and other Christmas accouterments until she found a good, stout tire iron. Ann looked around until she found a spruce stump and walked over to it and looked at the music box in her hand. "You know why her mother gave this to her, don't you?"

"Yeah."

Ann held the tire iron toward him. "Do you want to do this or can I?"

"Let's do it together."

"Great idea." Together, they gripped the tire iron and slammed it into the music box, fake jewels and springs flying. They hit it again and again, smashing it to splinters.

Bio- Michael Tidemann is a journalist and college English instructor living in Estherville, IA. His fiction has appeared in *Black Hills Monthly Magazine*, *The Longneck*, *Struggle* and *The Write Place At the Write Time*. His nonfiction has appeared in *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Writer's Journal*, *Snowmobile*, *Overdrive* and other publications. His novel, *Doomsday: A tale of cyber terror*, is available on Amazon Kindle at: <http://www.amazon.com/Michael-Tidemann/e/Boo8THMTIW>

Commitment

by Emily Attridge

"Another Botched Execution," I read from the headlines of the *Florida Daily Times*. "Some poor guy wouldn't die when they gave him the lethal injection. They had to inject the chemicals in both arms!" I announced at

the top of my voice. My husband Craig believed in the death penalty and hated any discussion that included how wrong it is, but I continued to summarize the article. "They said it was the executioner's fault. He missed the vein."

Craig finally reacted, peering at me over the sports page. "First, if he did something so bad to get the needle, then the guy deserved not only to die but to suffer. Second, anybody who is found guilty of murder deserves the death penalty."

I turned to counterattack but realized anything I said would be answered with such platitudes. I wondered when we became sparring partners instead of partners in life.

Disgusted by my futile attempt at simple discussion, I carried the newspaper out to the porch. It was early morning and the sun peeked over the tops of the bald cypress trees and down onto the smooth surface of the lake. I took deep calming breaths of clean air and tried to forget about the discussion, but I realized that my marriage was like the dusty pile of books lying in the corner of the living room: filled with promise of what might be inside if only the books were to be opened in the first place.

I sat on the chaise lounge and looked at the article. "It really sounds like he was tortured to death... The Associate Professor of surgery at the Ohio State Medical School said 'My impression is that it would cause an extreme amount of pain.'" I imagined the pain of the IV in my hand and the poison shooting through my veins. I threw the paper down.

I wish I had the nerve to protest the death penalty. An image from TV of a candlelight vigil at the state prison came to mind. *I really admire those people's conviction. Too bad I'm not like them.* I realized when I was still a girl that I have a big heart when it comes to any injustice but no courage to act upon my convictions. I wondered if my problem now, a long time after I left girlhood, was fear of reprisal from Craig. My mother's continual advice echoed in my brain: Keep the Peace. In fact, the thought of discord at home filled me with panic.

The screams of two ospreys broke my concentration. *Cheereek! Cheereek!* Their enormous nest sat precariously atop a utility pole about 1000 feet from my elevated porch. Year after year, the same pair returned in early spring and added new layers of debris to their home. I knew them as

neighbors, as much so as Mike and Jan who lived next door. I wanted to ask the ospreys where they'd been all winter. I could only guess how far they had travelled.

It was already early summer, and I wondered why the adults still behaved as if there were chicks in the nest. *Normally, by this time, they all have flown away*, I thought. I reached for a pair of binoculars that lay on the chaise lounge and watched the adults flapping frantically, seemingly suspended in midair directly above the nest. Then I refocused the binoculars on the nest. A tiny tuft of white feathers bobbed eagerly. *Ah, ha! There is one chick left*, I realized. Refocusing again, I searched the sky for the other fledgling. Far above, I caught sight of it. The newly-fledged bird soared majestically on invisible air currents.

I returned to the living room and, as usual, Craig and I pretended that our previous discussion had not occurred. He looked up at me and smiled while I fluffed the pillows on the couch and then sat down to watch TV. And with that, the emotional walls we had erected temporarily disappeared like so many times before.

Later that week, I returned to the porch and witnessed the same scene as before, the nonstop screeching and panicked flybys of the adult ospreys over their still occupied nest. I became worried. There was definitely something wrong in that nest, I decided.

Agitated and unhappy, I sat down across from Craig. "Are you okay, Martha?" he asked.

Desperate to vent my feelings, I responded, "I'm worried about the baby osprey in that nest on the pole behind the house. It obviously can't fly, and eventually its parents will abandon it. Then it will die slowly, painfully."

He laughed and said, "Another death penalty situation, huh?"

I bristled but managed to keep my tone even. "Don't joke, Craig."

"C'mon, Martha. You're going to worry yourself sick over a bird for gosh sakes."

I grasped the arms of the chair, trying to remain calm while the familiar pain of his rejection of my concerns as if they were childish stabbed like a

knife. But rather than defend myself, I simply rose and walked briskly to the phone. I dialed the number of the Seabird Rescue.

“Hello. My name is Martha Connelly and I live next to an osprey nest. One of the chicks is unable to fly. Can you send someone to check on it?”

“Where is the nest?”

“It’s on top of a utility pole near Lake Winnapaw, but I’m sure that someone could reach it with a ladder.”

“Unfortunately, we have no one who would climb up there on our staff right now, but that doesn’t matter at the moment anyway. I’m the only volunteer here today.”

“So what do you suggest? Is there anyone I can pay?”

“Not that I know of. I’m sorry.”

I hung up unceremoniously and looked for a phone number in the yellow pages and then on the internet. All I could find were numbers for pest control companies. Meanwhile, the incessant cry of the parent ospreys penetrated my ears like fingernails on a chalkboard.

Like the dissipation of the early morning mist on the lake, my fear of taking action lifted the next morning as I stood on the deck and again watched the frantic ospreys trying to rouse their offspring to flight. I set my cup down and headed for the garage, where I found an old pair of gloves, a rusted pair of scissors, and an extension ladder. I struggled to get the ladder to the tall pole, then struggled even more to position the long wobbly piece of aluminum against the pole and extend the ladder to the distant nest. As I peered upward from the base of the ladder, I imagined my newfound courage standing above me while doubt and uncertainty stood below.

One step was like liberation and I felt adrenaline rushing to my brain. Ten steps gave me more confidence, but at twenty, I stopped. The ground was far below and fear grabbed at my foot, tugging at me to descend and give up this mad plan. I rested my head against the side rail and began to whimper.

At first, I thought I was imagining it, but the faint *chirp, chirp* of the baby bird from above grew louder. As I listened to its small voice, a surge of

emotion swept over me. Strength struck deep into my body as if riding an arrow, and I began to count: one, take a step; two, take another step.

Finally, balancing on the top rung, my head hit the bottom of the nest. I grabbed the pole and peered over the top, into the golden iris of the nestling as it, in turn, looked directly into my eyes. Its perfect face was covered in bright white feathers and outlined in brown and black. I noted that the left side of the animal was perfectly formed but the right wing and foot were stunted, incapable of performing the tasks they were intended for. The two extremities were wrapped in a solid mass of fishing line.

“You were doomed from the beginning.” I said to the trapped animal. “You need your wings to seek food, but even if you could fly, you need your talons to grab the fish.” I removed the scissors from my pocket and cut away the filament that held the bird captive.

I felt air pushed by the flapping wings of the adult birds on my face as they swooped close to my head. I knew they were defending their chick, and I cringed at the thought of their sharp talons penetrating my eyes. With one hand holding the pole, I waved the other over my head, which distracted them briefly and I grabbed the chick with my free hand. My fear crescendoed into panic, but I knew I had to move. I braced my feet and managed to descend one step. “Save me, please,” I whispered to the chick. Down I stepped, and then down again, one slow rung at a time in my clumsy descent.

Once on the ground, I was shaken and sweaty but the chick hadn’t moved, its golden eyes staring into my face. Inside the garage, I lay the bird on a soft towel and looked at the damaged extremities. The deformed foot was half the size of the normal one, the wing too. “You poor thing!”

I found a small cardboard box and placed the bird gently inside. Rather than calling the Seabird Rescue, I drove there. On the way, I noticed a new voice inside of my head, this one telling me that I was doing good and to keep going rather than screaming doubt and fear constantly.

When I arrived in the reception area carrying the box, I said, “I called earlier about an osprey that was stuck in a nest.”

“Oh, yes. I spoke to you,” said the young woman behind the desk. “How did you get the bird down?”

“I climbed a ladder,” I answered.

“Really? That must have taken some courage?” The woman looked like she meant her words and I simply nodded in response to her compliment. “This bird needs emergency care. Is there a vet here?” I asked. The volunteer made a call and an older gentleman appeared.

“Hello, I am Dr. Hewitt.” I reached for his outstretched hand.

“It’s a baby osprey. I saw that it couldn’t fly and so I climbed up to its nest and found it tied down with fishing line.” I opened the box and pointed to the bird’s obvious deformities. He bent down and peered closely at the bird. “Yes, I see the filament. It looks like it may be attached to the bone,” he said. “We’ll see if we can do anything for it.”

“Can I call in a few days?” I asked.

“Give us a week at least.” From the serious look on the veterinarian’s face, I could tell that the situation was grave.

On my way home, I couldn’t dispel the image of the golden-eyed and deformed bird. Knowing that the bird would never fly, I rationalized that it could live in a cage. Then I shook my head. No, it wouldn’t be right for it to live in a cage for the rest of its life. That bird was meant to soar and dive and fish. I knew that, in the end, my rescue was simply a humane gesture rather than a lifesaving act.

Returning home still sweaty from my acrobatic rescue, I checked to see if the bird’s parents were flying around the nest. Not finding them there, I picked up the binoculars and searched the sky, then the surrounding perches high up. Eventually, I spotted the three of them sitting on the telephone line. I figured they might hang around the nest another day or two, and when the other chick did not return, they’d be gone.

Later that day, I told Craig about my rescue. “You actually climbed up the extension ladder?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes, and you know what? I would do it again.”

“Isn’t that going a little too far, Martha? I know you have sympathy for every cause that comes along, but putting yourself at risk..?”

“I guess it’s just part of who I am. I believe in fighting for the rights of the poor and helpless.”

“OK. I get that loud and clear, but pulling a stunt like that doesn’t make sense. You could have fallen and broken your back, or even died.”

“Well, I didn’t, and I’m feeling stronger as a result of having climbed so high and survived.” I wanted to say more, to tell him everything I felt, but I knew it was useless, that he would deem my actions stupid no matter what I said. But then a very clear voice popped into my head: *You did good. Now walk away.*

A few days later, I again stood on the porch looking at the empty nest. A long white plastic fishing line dangled down next to the pole. *It’s a deathtrap*, I thought. I knew what I needed to do. Like before, I placed the extension ladder next to the pole, stuffed the scissors in my pocket, and climbed. Only this time, I was accompanied by the loud voice in my head shouting, *Climb up! You did it before and you can do it again.*

When I reached the nest, I dared to look around. On my previous visit all I could manage was to look at what was in front of me: the nest, the bird, the task to be done. I was surprised to realize that I could see through the clear water of the lake right to the bottom. Then I refocused on the nest and became angry. “You SUCK!” I shouted at the mass of intertwined debris, and piece by piece, I began tearing it down.

One week to the day after removing the baby osprey from the nest, I called the Seabird Rescue. My fingers shook as I pressed the buttons on my phone. The same volunteer at the desk from a week ago told me I could speak to the veterinary assistant. As I waited on hold, my stomach churned with anxiety.

“I’m sorry to say that the bird didn’t make it,” the woman who answered told me. “The fishing line had grown into the bone. We tried bone graphs, but the bird developed a severe infection.” When she heard my sharp intake of breath at this news, she added, “I’m really sorry.”

Tears welled up in my eyes and sadness threatened to overwhelm me, a response I could not really explain. I felt ever so slightly silly.

The woman must have heard the tears escaping too somehow, for she said, “Mrs. Donnelly, I know how you’re feeling. We go through the same agony every time we lose one. Just know that you did all that you could do.”

“No, you don’t understand. I climbed a 20-foot ladder to get this bird. I tried so hard.”

“Listen, your actions weren’t in vain. That beautiful animal would have suffered terribly if you didn’t rescue it. While saving it would have been better, of course, that you relieved the osprey’s suffering is important.”

“Thank you,” I said, “but I’m not convinced that I made any difference for that bird.”

“You might just have to trust me on that one, then,” the woman said. “I have seen much suffering on the part of birds that is caused, inadvertently mostly, by humans. I also know that most people would not lift a finger to help an animal let alone risk their safety to do so.”

I could only sniffle in response and the woman waited patiently on the other end of the line.

“Look,” she finally said. “We have hundreds of calls about birds needing rescue, and we could really use your courage and commitment.”

“*My* courage? *My* commitment?” I had never considered these words had anything to do with me.

“Yes. We need people like you,” she said. “Birds that are wounded need you.”

I began my volunteer work the next day. On my way out of the door, I searched the sky for the ospreys. They weren’t there, and the bare utility pole looked odd without the nest. I didn’t worry though. I knew that the ospreys would be back next year. They were committed. It was their instinct that guided them.

Like them, I felt the same instinct guiding me to my purpose. I would protest the death penalty, and I would put my safety at risk for another, and I would listen to my own voice rather than those around me. I knew that it wouldn’t be easy at first, but like the ospreys, I would soar.

Craig came to the door and watched me as I got in the car. He stared hard at me for a few moments, then slowly shook his head. I waved at him and smiled as I drove off to the Seabird Rescue.

Bio- Emily Attridge lives and writes short southern fiction in Clearwater, Florida. She is a single parent and works as a college consultant. Her unique characters will speak to you and entertain you. Her mantra is: *I write everyday. Everyday I write.*

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