

The Write Place At the Write Time

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Crusade

By Bill Mesce

The priest's murmured Latin wafts up into the church's vaulted roof where clouds and sky are painted on the panels between the exposed wooden beams. Dennis' father doesn't much care for the clouds. An influence of "the bloody dagos," he says. The Latin comes back down from the roof upon the heads of the faithful in an indecipherable thrum, the sound of the machinery of God.

But Dennis has spent hours propped up in his bed under the night table lamp, running the *Canon Missae* over and over in his head until the humming alien syllables are clean and clear in their meaning:

The day before he suffered, he took bread in his sacred hands and looking up to heaven, to You, his almighty Father, he gave You thanks and praise. He broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: Take this, all of you, and eat it: This is my body which will be given up for you.

Dennis looks up at the Communion Host the priest holds in the bars of red and blue colored light slanting down through the stained glass windows of the Sanctuary. Then, the priest holds up the chalice and the colors of sky and blood flicker in the polished sides of the gold cup.

When supper was ended, he took the cup. Again, he gave You thanks and praise, and gave the cup to his disciples, and said: Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me.

The priest takes the chalice filled with Hosts and turns to those filing down the aisle to kneel at the altar rail. Dennis turns with him, standing at his elbow, holding the gold paten below the cup. His other arm fiddles with his altar boy robes, trying to clear them away from his legs. He had protested they were too big. "You'll grow into 'em, boy," Monsignor had declared, punctuating the prediction with a painful twist of the boy's round cheek.

For a moment, the boy takes his eyes away from the priest and has a quick picture of his mother and father, side by side, at the altar rail. The tiny, round face of his mother is twisted in a small smile. There are tears in her eyes and Dennis remembers her standing by the aisle as he'd marched away from the altar after his First Holy Communion, chafing in his black suit, partnered with a girl his age he didn't know who looked beatific in her white Communion dress. "They looked like they were getting married!" his

mother would say with a catch in her voice whenever she told the story.

His father does not smile. Whatever he feels – whatever satisfaction or pride, if any – hides behind a stony glare which simply declares all is as it should be. The perfection he expects and demands has come rightfully to pass.

Dennis is still young enough to have not yet grown accustomed to his father's hard edge, and it always unsettles him that even in doing what his father wants, tacitly commands, he cannot bring a smile to the gray-flecked head. So it is that Dennis holds his glance too long, waiting for some complimentary acknowledgment from his father on this, his first service, some approving nod, and his legs tangle in his robes.

He stumbles, but does not fall, and it is only the smallest stutter in his step. But it is enough to turn his father's stony glare into a disgusted shaking of his head.

Dennis has seen it before, nearly every day of his short life, over one or another large or little thing. That disapproval is not his province alone. His mother is subject to it regularly.

It takes little to draw it. There is always something about the meals she prepares, something about the house she keeps, and the clothes she washes and irons and darns, always something Dennis' father feels warrants public disapproval. For the boy, there is his schoolwork, his Latin practiced for church, the way he spends his time and whom he spends it with, the way he sits and talks and walks...all is somehow always flawed and indictable. His father works mother and son with short, blunt criticism the way a blacksmith bends metal with hammer and fire.

But neither he nor his mother is metal. Dennis sees the disapproval and he

hurts knowing that afterwards, around the breakfast table, between a critique of the toast and another cup of tea, his father will articulate some deplorable bloodline connecting inadequate mother to stumbling son and all but disavowing any connection between himself and his offspring.

Dennis has hurt before, but no matter how many times he never grows used to it. It does not dissipate. It builds, like a wave massing out in deep water, and now it's rolling toward the shore ready to break. Where the wave becomes surf, Dennis' hurt turns to anger.

Dennis follows the priest along the altar rail, holding the paten beneath the chalice to catch the Host should it fall. The priest stands before each supplicant kneeling at the rail and holds out the Eucharistic wafer.

The Body of Christ, the priest announces in his humming Latin.

Amen, they answer and hold out their tongues.

The children strain their little necks upward, trying to stretch their little tongues to catch the Christ, trying to open their little mouths wide enough for the Host, and sometimes they bobble the wafer and it falls with a gentle ringing sound on the gold of the paten. It is hard for the brittle old people as well, their movements limited and stiff, and sometimes the host also falls from their tongues, but, again, the wafer falls safely with its tolling on the bed of gold.

And always the priest smiles down at them, offering another, trying to smile away their embarrassment. It is a small mishap, there is no sin. The Body of Christ has landed safely on gold; not fallen to the floor.

Dennis and the priest stand in front of Dennis' mother. She turns her face

up to the priest, that white, oval face that reminds him of the stained glass images of the Virgin that circle the baptismal font, a fragile mix of bottomless love and infinite pain.

The Body of Christ.

Amen.

The priest lays the Host on her tongue and she takes it into her mouth where she will hold it until it softens enough to swallow without chewing. Her eyes open and they are still wet and glistening as she looks proudly up at her son.

Dennis does not return the look. He takes a step with the priest and then they are standing in front of his father.

The Body of Christ.

Amen.

His father does not turn his face upward or close his eyes in supplication. His father defers to no one. He holds his head still, his pale, gray eyes staring boldly into the gold-laced folds of the priest's surplice.

The priest holds out the Host and Dennis' father extends his tongue.

Dennis' fingers loosen on the handle of the paten. The metal plate hits the marble altar rail with a clear, bold knell which echoes round the church followed by a ringing clatter as it falls to the marble floor where the Hosts dropped by the little children and the old people skitter across the cold stone.

stone.

Later, at home, his mother's entreaties cannot stay his father's hand as his father strikes him hard enough to chip one of his front teeth. His father does not hear his mother's cry that it had been a simple accident.

His father does not hear the cry because there, kneeling at the altar rail, he had looked up and seen his son's face when the Body of Christ had fallen to the cold marble. He had looked into the boy's eyes which, for the first time, did not turn deferentially or fearfully away but had stared directly back, brilliantly hard. His father had looked into the boy's eyes and seen anger and defiance and purpose.

And he had also seen pride.

A Simple Solution

By Gary Ponzo

The stark white laboratory sparkled with rows of stainless steel counters full of test tube racks and glass beakers. Claire Jenson watched her husband flitter between the microscope and the incubator on the main lab bench. He held a micropipette in his left hand while typing data into a computer keyboard with his right. His movements were jerky and forced. His experiment was redundant and everyone in the research lab knew it.

"What are you doing?" Claire asked.

Dr. Brian Jenson didn't seem to hear her. He busied himself with the

Dr. Brian Jenson didn't seem to hear her. He busied himself with the fourth extraction of a primate's DNA molecule. It was exactly two more than he needed.

"Brian?" Claire repeated.

"I'm proving a theory," Jenson said without looking up.

"Honey, you've done everything you could. Now it's up to the FDA to make the decision."

Just the mention of the impending FDA approval caused him to glance at the phone once again.

Claire grimaced. It was all she could do to contain herself. She was standing in the room where her husband spent more than half of his day. Every day of the week. She was there to tell him goodbye.

"Honey", she said, "...we need to talk."

"It's not a good time."

Claire was aware of her timing, but if she waited until Brian had a free moment she might be on social security. When they were first married his work ethic was a source of pride for her. Back then Brian would bring his work home and they'd discuss it late into the night, naked, in bed, with a half-eaten box of pizza next to them. But lust could only take them so far. Brian's work ethic turned into his obsession and Claire became invisible. Unable to compete with his lone mission in life.

Now, ten years later, Brian looked past her and Claire followed his gaze to the west end of the lab where a solitary couch seemed out of place in the clinical setting. Sitting on the couch was Brian's younger brother, Billy, who stared out of the picture glass window with a huge smile on his face. Even to a casual observer the smile alone could give away his condition.

"Beautiful," Billy said as he gazed out over the valley and watched the sun sink below a distant range of mountains.

Claire made eye contact with her husband and saw his determination rise to a new level. Jenson placed his pipette in a wire rack and walked over to his brother who greeted him with a beaming smile. "It's beautiful isn't it, Brian?"

Jenson looked out the window. "Yes," he said, "...it's beautiful."

Billy had nothing more to say and appeared satisfied to view the vista.

Jenson turned to Claire. "You see why this is so important?"

Claire didn't say a word. They'd argued this point for so long that she'd lost her appetite for the fight.

"He's the reason I go on," Jenson said.

Here it comes, Claire thought. The evasive conversation.

"Just once," Jenson said, "...I'd like to have a meaningful conversation with him. Just once."

She bit her lower lip.

"How can I stop when I know I can reverse his condition?" Jenson continued. "I might be the only person on the planet who can help him."

That was enough for Claire. She'd had his obsession intrude on their lives for too long.

"Do you know what he has that you don't?" Claire asked.

Jenson waited. His face was rippled with tension.

"Freedom," Claire said. "He's free to express himself however he chooses. He enjoys everything little thing he does."

"Oh, come on, Claire. Just look at him, he's..."

"Yes, look at him. He's the only one in this laboratory who is appreciating the Arizona sunset. He's the most caring and sentient person in the building."

As if on cue Billy added another, "Beautiful."

Claire sat next to Billy and reached her arm around his shoulder. He leaned into her and smiled as she delicately moved aside loose strands of hair from his drooping eyes.

"What did you need to talk about?" Jenson asked.

Claire sighed. She touched Billy's face. "I came to tell you that I'll always be there for him."

Jenson's eyebrows rose. "And?"

Claire looked at Jenson straight on. "I'm not sure I can say the same about you."

Jenson stood motionless.

"I'm thirty-six, Brian. I love Billy and I'll always be there for him. But I deserve to have kids of my own. I deserve to have a husband there to help me raise them. I always thought that person was going to be you, but now . . ."

Her thought dissipated into the purified laboratory air.

"Oh, come on, Claire. I'm on the threshold of reversing the effects of OTC and you're threatening to leave me?"

"No," she said, "...I'm not threatening anything. You left me a long time ago. Only your body remains behind."

"What are you saying then?"

Claire rubbed her temple. "I don't know, I'm just having a discussion. That's what husbands and wives do; they discuss their issues and come to

resolutions, but you don't do that. With you everything is black and white. We put everything off until you're finished with your work. Except you're never finished with your work."

"Please don't," Jenson said.

Claire wanted to stop, but she there was too much history. "You handle me like a test tube, Brian. Only more clinical. You know more about your nude mice than you do me."

Jenson sighed.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "What color are my eyes?"

She waited. As the silence lingered, she heard a sniffle. She opened her eyes to see tears trickling down her husband's cheeks.

"I am so sorry, Claire." He pulled off his latex gloves and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "I don't know how to shut my brain down. Even when I try to get four or five hours of sleep I lay there with my neurons going warp speed. I've tried every anti-anxiety, every anti-depressant and they all give me side effects. I can't afford to have my senses dulled, yet I can't keep going on like this. I need help. I know it."

Claire had never seen her husband cry before. Never. It only confirmed the fact that he was losing it. The stress was killing him. She stood and approached him.

Jenson pulled her into a hug. Drops of sorry seeped down his face and she could feel them settle into the base of her neck. He trembled in her arms.

"Please don't leave me," he whispered.

Claire didn't want to let the emotion of the moment skew her plans. She remained quiet.

"Claire?"

"You used to say you needed me," she replied with exhaustion in her voice. "All you need now is a molecule and a microscope."

"I can change."

Claire had heard those empty words before. Jenson had enough patent money coming in to allow them to retire years ago. There was no reason for anything outside of his obsession.

"Dr. Jenson," a female voice called from the doorway. "They're waiting for you."

Jenson whimpered. Claire rubbed his back and acknowledged his assistant with a nod.

"What are you going to tell them?" Claire asked.

Jenson took a deep breath and stood back. "I don't know. I thought we'd have heard from the FDA by now."

"You can cancel."

"No. That'll only give them incentive to fill the gap with something negative."

Jenson kept an even gaze on her eyes. "They're a beautiful shade of hazel."

"That's cheating."

Jenson forced a meager smile. For a moment the silence seemed natural.

"You know," Jenson said, "...we still have our dreams."

"Dreams don't count. You have to live your life today. You can't spend decades living for tomorrow."

Jenson bent over the sink and splashed water on his face. When he stood he was back in scientist mode. "I need to go."

Claire nodded.

Jenson started to leave, then turned. "Are you going to be here when I'm through?"

Claire shrugged. "I'll be there for Billy. He'll always need me."

"Dr. Jenson?" his assistant's face returned to the doorway.

"I'm on my way," Jenson said. He held Claire's shoulders and stared into her eyes. "What if I needed you more?"

They stood there and stared at each other. A stalemate of emotions hung between them. When Jenson didn't get what he wanted, he nodded a discouraging nod, dropped his hands from her shoulders, and quietly exited the lab.

Claire stood in the back of the room and watched the reporters crowd the small University auditorium. Brian Jenson stood behind the wooden podium just as he did five years earlier when his nomination for the Nobel Prize in Medicine was announced. It was a happier and less stressful Jenson back then, who smiled and answered questions as if he were a Hollywood star. Now tension drenched his face. He squinted past the glare of the high-powered lights and appeared to search for Claire among the pack of journalists hungry for a story.

"Dr. Jenson," one reporter called out, "...have you truly discovered the cure for mental retardation?"

The question got Jenson's attention. "No, no, let's not get ridiculous. Specifically, with the aid of gene therapy, I've been able to reverse certain genetic disorders. One of those disorders is called ornithine carbamoyltransferase deficiency, or OTC for short."

"How does it work?" another reporter asked.

"Well," he smiled a confident smile, which Claire knew meant his stomach was turning, "...I replace the abnormal gene with a normal one."

"How is that done? Through injection?"

HOW IS THAT DONE: THROUGH INJECTION:

"Yes, I inject the normal gene within the confines of a virus. The virus is sort of the transportation for the new gene. To discover the specific gene, I actually had to work in reverse. I synthetically created the abnormal gene, then injected primates to create a test subject."

"So, you are able to actually give someone mental retardation..."

"OTC," Jenson snapped. "And yes I can inject the virus into a primate and create a home for the disease."

"These primates... Were you able to cure them?"

"Yes, we had a ninety-five percent success rate."

"How prevalent is this OTC?"

That was the question that always brought tension to his face. Years of hunching over a microscope, crunching data into a computer, monitoring mice and eventually working around the clock with primates. All for just one person.

Jenson cleared his throat. "Well, it's believed that one in every eighty-thousand."

"Excuse me, Dr. Jenson, did you say one in every eight thousand, or eighty-thousand?"

"That would be eighty. But I must say that ultimately there will be testing done to treat other diseases, such as Downes Syndrome and others more common."

This answer seemed to slow the buzz that was going around the hall. A couple of reporters were busy tapping their miniature computer screens, while others were scribbling notes.

From behind him, Jenson's assistant approached the podium apprehensive, her head down, a piece of paper in her hand. She handed the sheet to Jenson and his face went cold as he read the page. His assistant gave him a look of consolation and stood next to him until he shooed her away.

"What is it, Dr. Jenson?" a reporter asked.

Jenson opened his mouth to speak, then faltered. He stared down at the sheet of paper as if it were a gravestone. It seemed as if he needed to be alone, but the reporters were relentless, barking questions at him until finally he looked up into the glare of the lights with moist eyes.

"Apparently," Jenson said, "the FDA found our research lacking in quantity of trials. They've denied approval for the OTC project."

Claire gasped. She held her hand to her mouth and watched as her husband's eyes turned dull with shock.

"Dr. Jenson, do you have a comment?" the reporter said.

"It hardly seems possible," he murmured.

"How many years have you been working on this project?" a reporter shouted.

"Too long," Jenson said. His eyes roamed the crowd. "It's cost me a great deal of my personal life. Maybe too much."

"Does this mean you won't be able to move toward human testing?" a reporter asked.

Jenson licked his lips and searched desperately for the one understanding face in the room. Claire tried to maneuver herself into the open, but Jenson couldn't find her.

"Has this ever been tested on a human being?" the reporter rephrased the question.

"N-n-o," Jenson stammered. "That's what the FDA approval would have been for."

Claire tried elbowing her way to the front, but the crowd was experienced at the art of pinching their competition back. Jenson appeared shell-shocked.

"What will you do now?" another reporter asked.

Jenson was deteriorating right in front of her eyes. Claire raised her hand to get his attention, but it was lost in a sea of raised hands.

"Was there anyone in particular awaiting this ruling?" a reporter raised her voice.

Jenson's shoulder's slumped and Claire could see him thinking of only one thing. Billy. His eyes glossed over as he gave one last attempt to find his wife.

When it appeared he'd lost all hope, he leaned into the microphone, and with a small voice, he said, "That's enough for today."

Jenson looked down, stepped away from the podium, then turned to leave the stage.

Claire screamed, "Brian!" But it was too late, he was already behind the curtains and gone before he could ever know she was there all along.

Claire ran back to the exit and hurried through the halls leading back to the lab. She didn't know what she would see, but she needed to be there for him. For the first time in years, she knew that he needed her. She navigated her way between students and faculty members who appeared completely oblivious to the disaster that had taken place in the auditorium. When she rounded the final turn she saw three lab techs milling around the entrance to the lab. They seemed confused and spoke with shoulder shrugs and open palms.

"What is it?" Claire said as she approached.

Jennifer, the lab tech with the most tenure said, "Dr. Jenson kicked us out."

The sound of a solid object crashing into lab equipment came spilling through the thick oak door. Claire tried the doorknob and found it locked. She turned to Jennifer. "Get Phil Johnson over here with the security keys."

When Jennifer hesitated, she added, "Brian's in trouble. He didn't get FDA approval for the OTC project and if we don't get in there right away he's going to give Billy the trial formula."

Jennifer's eyes widened and she turned and ran down the hallway.

Claire futilely fought with the locked door. "Brian!" she yelled. "Please open up!"

The cacophony of clanging metal continued unabated.

"Brian!" Claire jimmied the lock and pressed her ear to the door. "Brian?"

Suddenly, it became quiet.

"Honey," Claire said, "...please let me in."

Silence.

Claire sniffed something in the air.

"I smell smoke," one of the lab techs said.

She was right. There was a definite aroma coming from the lab. Something was burning.

"What's he doing in there?" the lab tech asked.

"I'm not sure," Claire said. Her stomach twisted, while her fingers trembled around the doorknob.

Phil Johnson and Jennifer came rushing down the hall. Johnson had his large set of keys extended out from his right hand.

"Back away, Claire," he said.

Johnson fumbled the key into the lock. A click sounded as he turned open the deadbolt, then he pushed the door open.

The sight was enough to make Claire suck in a breath. Jenson's main lab bench stood undamaged, but every piece of equipment on top of the bench was demolished. The most striking item was his computer. The hard drive had been pulled out of the tower and then crushed to bits. Little splinters of metal were sprayed all over the desktop.

Phil Johnson blew a low whistle. "Holy mother of..."

"Look at this," Jennifer said. She was already at the stainless steel sink. Flames bubbled out of the sink and Claire could see a pile of Compact Discs burned beyond recognition. It was undoubtedly the backup data from Jenson's computer.

"Why would he do that?" Jennifer asked. "That's years of hard work up in flames."

Claire shook her head. An overwhelming sense of regret made her flush with fear. Why did she have to choose today to press him? He'd been wound so tight for so long. How selfish could she be?

That's when she spotted the empty syringe wrapper on the lab bench. Next to the wrapper was a small empty vial. The label on the vial read, "Virus K-42". Her mouth went dry.

Jennifer picked up the vial and inspected it closely. "No," she whispered. "Not that."

"What?" Claire said.

Jennifer placed the vial down and looked up at Claire with pity.

"What is it?" Claire repeated.

"Claire," Phil Johnson called to her. "Over here."

Jennifer said nothing. She simply stared at the sink and shook her head.

Claire discovered an envelope with her name on it sitting on Brian's lab bench. It was definitely Brian's handwriting.

"Claire!" Johnson called again.

Claire picked up the envelope and followed his voice to the west side of the room. It was dark outside and the long expansive window exposed the city lights sparkling in the valley below them. She approached the couch and

saw Brian sitting next to his brother. Brian had one arm around Billy while he stroked his face with the back of his free hand.

Claire scrutinized Billy's appearance, but couldn't detect any change. She wondered how long it would take for the gene therapy to take hold. That's when Brian turned his head back to face the dazzling display of the downtown lights. Brian's expression was light and blissful. His smile was the exact duplicate of his brother's. He had the same droopy eyes.

Brian raised his arm and pointed to the endless twinkling of lights. "Beautiful," he said.

"Yeah, beautiful," mimicked Billy with the same long drawl.

Claire looked down and saw Brian's sleeve rolled up and an empty syringe on the floor next to his foot. She could feel her eyes fill with moisture. Her lips quivered. Now she understood why he destroyed all of his data. Without him pushing for a cure, no one would ever find the formula that could reverse his condition.

In a state of shock, the envelope slipped from Claire's hand. Phil Johnson picked it up, saw her name on it and handed it to her. Claire looked at it and realized what it was. With trembling fingers Claire opened the envelope and read the handwritten note from her husband:

Claire, you won't go away now, will you? Because now I need you more, don't I?

Brian looked up at her and smiled with pure delight. There was no anxiety on his face, just the unadulterated enchantment of watching the city lights glow below them.

Claire looked out the window and tried desperately to appreciate the same view while teardrops plopped onto the letter in her hands.

Editor's Note: There are some sexual references in this story tied to one character in the interest of comic relief in a writers' course, integral to the plot. In the event that any young adults are reading this, this one's rated "R".

Physical Education

By Vince Corvaia

Carl graduated—barely—from Miami Norland High on a rainy afternoon in June. While many of his classmates went on to Florida State in the fall, Carl's grades prohibited him from attending a four-year university. So he enrolled at the local community college and made sure that creative writing was one of his first courses. English had always been his only decent subject. He was good at writing poems.

The instructor's name was Mr. Perkins. On the first day, a Monday, he had the students pair up and interview each other so each student could introduce the other one in front of the class. Carl's partner was a woman named Patty. Patty asked Carl some simple questions, and then it was Carl's turn.

"I can tell you everything you need to know," Patty said as Carl held his pen above his notebook. "I'm probably the oldest student in this class. I'm twenty-six. My husband is forty-seven. We've been married for eight years. We sleep in separate rooms."

Carl started to write but then decided not to take down what she was saying yet.

"Where are you from?"

"My husband is Swedish. I grew up in Miami Lakes. We met in an emergency room. He was having chest pains, and I'd dislocated my knee doing cartwheels

on my cheerleading team.”

“Um,” Carl said, “I’m not sure how much of this I can use. What kind of writing do you like to do?”

As she spoke, Carl couldn’t help noticing the way she looked. Her eyes were dark and wide-spaced. Her hair was strawberry blond, and she had a slight overbite. She was wearing a sheer white blouse with a white bra underneath.

“I write science fiction,” she was saying. “Colonizing Mars is a favorite subject of mine. I’m a big Ray Bradbury fan.”

Carl was relieved to have something to write down.

Mr. Perkins called time, and two by two the class presented itself. Carl said that Patty was from Miami Lakes and enjoyed writing science fiction. She was a big Ray Bradbury fan.

Patty said to Mr. Perkins, “Do you like Bradbury?”

“I’ve never read him.”

They returned to their seats. The class continued making its introductions. One student enjoyed reading romance novels and hoped to write one herself someday. Another said she was a poet and enjoyed writing sestinas and villanelles. (Carl felt intimidated.) And a student named Brice said he was working on a pornographic novel and hoped to present chapters in class for feedback.

Just before the class ended, Mr. Perkins told them to put a sample of their work in his office mailbox, and he would photocopy a few and distribute them for workshop on Wednesday. He told the fiction writers to keep their stories short enough to allow for feedback as well as other stories and poems.

Patty caught up with Carl as they left the classroom.

“Can you believe he’s never heard of Bradbury?”

“That’s not what he said. He said he never read him.”

“Same thing. He’s supposed to be a writing instructor. By the way, I’m looking forward to reading your poems.”

Carl didn’t have the heart to tell her that he hadn’t read Ray Bradbury since he was twelve years old.

On Wednesday, Patty sat beside Carl, who was pleased to see that Mr. Perkins had photocopied a poem of his called “Long Goodbyes.” He also saw a three-page story by Patty among the handouts. It was called “The Tyrant of Phobos.”

Mr. Perkins called first on Patty. She stood up at her seat and read her story, an account of the first earth explorers to land on one of Mars’ moons, only to be vaporized by an enemy the explorers had mistaken for a rock formation. When she finished and sat back down, the room was silent. Mr. Perkins asked whether anyone had any comments, but no one did. Carl felt bad for Patty, but like everyone else, he didn’t want to be the first to speak. What if Mr. Perkins asked him questions?

“That was very creative,” Mr. Perkins said. “Thank you for sharing it.”

Patty looked over at Carl. “That’s it?” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Carl whispered, thinking she meant him.

The next student was Brice. He stood up and apologized for submitting a work in progress. Then he started describing two male and female physical education coaches doing sixty-nine on a pile of dirty towels in a high school locker room.

Carl and Patty found themselves stifling laughter until their faces turned red and Patty’s eyes watered.

Carl wrote Patty a note and discreetly passed it across the aisle. “I DON’T BELIEVE IT,” the note said.

Patty wrote on the back of his note and passed it back. Her note said, "MY GOD HE HAS A HARDON."

When Brice finished reading and had taken his seat, Mr. Perkins said, "Comments?"

"Yeah," Patty said. "I think I just came."

The class exploded in relieved laughter, all but Mr. Perkins.

The aspiring romance writer raised her hand and said, "Mr. Perkins, I don't mind saying that I feel offended by that. What purpose does it serve in an English class?"

"Well, Meg, I'm assuming everyone here aspires to marketability. Erotic literature is as saleable and legitimate as poetry or—or science fiction. We must respect one another's work equally."

Carl could tell that Meg wasn't buying it. Brice looked nonplussed, as if he had just finished reading a grocery list.

"I think it shows great potential," Mr. Perkins said. "It's vivid, it's visceral."

"It's vomit," Patty whispered.

"Carl?" Mr. Perkins said. "Why don't you share with the class."

Carl stood up and read his poem.

"Long goodbyes always get me in the end / I can't know what to say / just to show what I'm feeling for a friend / who has to go away. / When you left, phrases ate at me / all those things that I could have said. / When I smile and they think I'm in love / it's you I'm thinking of."

The girls in the class sighed aloud.

"It's a lyric," Carl apologized to Mr. Perkins. "There's music."

He sat down. Patty reached out and squeezed his hand.

“There’s a terrific command of the language, and a perfect rhythm,” Mr. Perkins said. “I think it’s the best work of the day.”

“I loved it,” Meg said.

After class, Carl and Patty carried their sack lunches out to a rectangular pond in the middle of the campus and sat on the grass.

“I’m going to make an appointment to meet with Perkins in his office,” she said. “He didn’t have anything substantive to say about my story. I’m taking his class for the feedback, not to be ignored. And did you get that speech about the marketplace? I don’t care if I sell books. I just want to be a good writer.”

“Well, I write poems, so I’m definitely not in it to sell books.”

“Did someone really leave you?” she asked him.

Carl took a big bite out of his bologna sandwich. “It’s just poetry.”

Friday morning Patty and Carl were the first two students to arrive in class. Not even Mr. Perkins was there yet. Patty slammed her books down and said, “What am I doing in this asylum?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I met Perkins in his office yesterday afternoon and asked him what he really thought of my story. You know what he said?”

“No.”

“He apologized and said that he didn’t ‘get’ science fiction. He said he wasn’t in a position to be critical. He’s my teacher. Am I supposed to depend on a class full of mutes?”

"I'll be sure to always have something to say," Carl said. He wondered how easy that would be.

"Hey," Patty said as they sat down. "Why don't we be our own creative writing workshop?"

"What do you mean?"

A couple of students entered the room and took their seats.

"What do you usually do on Saturdays?"

"Nothing," Carl said. "Maybe go to the movies."

"Why don't we meet on Saturdays and go over each other's work?"

"Where?"

"How about the beach? Then we could have fun at the same time."

"I guess so," Carl said. "Sure, why not?"

Mr. Perkins came in, followed gradually by the rest of the class. Because not many students had submitted work to be read, Mr. Perkins called on Brice again. This time, the male physical education coach was mowing his lawn and sweating profusely when an Avon lady pulled up. They did it on a chaise lounge beside the swimming pool in his back yard.

Carl didn't have his driver's license yet. His parents called it a fear of responsibility, but he called it a fear of crashing. So Patty picked him up at his parents' house the next day, and she drove the two of them to Miami Beach and the Deauville Hotel, where they sat on upright wooden chairs at the sea wall and looked out over the Atlantic. She wore a black string bikini that showed off her well-proportioned figure. Carl wore short pants and a T-shirt and felt overdressed.

Patty's story was about a male Martian diplomat and a female French

correspondent who meet and fall in love during an interplanetary conference on the red planet. It was called “Nothing in Common.” Carl’s poem was about the unrequited love of a soldier for the girl he was about to leave behind. It was called “Diversionary Tactics.”

“They’re both about love,” Patty said. “Don’t you think that’s an awesome coincidence?”

“Well, most of my poems are about love,” he said. “I think a sci-fi love story is unique. It’s very good.”

Patty blushed.

“Thank you,” she said, though to Carl it seemed she wanted to say more.

Each Saturday went much the same way. They exchanged their works and were fulsome in their praise for each other. One day Patty presented Carl with a poem of her own about two lovers, a sonnet that lacked concrete imagery and strained too hard to rhyme. But Carl was encouraging and flattered that she was moving into his genre. When they were done with their private workshop, they looked out at the ocean and talked about trifles, which had also become a part of their routine. But on this particular day, Patty said, “I want to have an affair.”

She said it so matter-of-factly, and they had become such good platonic friends, that Carl didn’t stop for a moment to imagine that she might be speaking about him. Anyway, for all he knew, she wasn’t.

“But what about your husband?”

“Oh, he’s been having affairs for years. Did I tell you we sleep in separate rooms?”

“Yes, you did,” Carl said. “The day we met.”

He let the subject drop, and she didn’t pursue it.

The following Saturday, she said the same thing. He asked her if she didn't know anyone who might want to have an affair with her, and she said, "I don't know many men at all."

The following Saturday, as they sat looking east, a fly landed on Patty's left breast, just above her bikini bra. It sat there and didn't move.

"Patty you have a . . . thing there," Carl said delicately, pointing toward her chest. "A fly."

"Where?" she said. As she looked down, it flew away. But Patty put her fingers to her breast and looked up at Carl. "Here?"

He hadn't seen that look in her eyes before. It made him agitated. He tried to smile and said, "It's gone."

Her look changed to what Carl perceived as disappointment, and she let her hand fall to her side. He knew very well what she had been doing, but he was too shy to act on it. He knew now with whom she wanted the affair.

Meanwhile, the class went on. Brice's characters were now involved in an all-out orgy backstage at an off-off-Broadway musical. It turned out that the coach had some limited acting ability, and the rest of the cast, both male and female, lusted after him. On the Monday following the incident with the fly, Patty didn't show up for class. Mr. Perkins announced that her absence was permanent. Carl was mortified. He was sure, in his own mildly egocentric way, that he was the reason for her disappearance. He saw her crossing the campus near the pond the following Wednesday, and he called out to her, but she didn't reply. He knew she had heard him.

He didn't have her phone number, and she wasn't listed in the phone book. On Saturday, she didn't come for him, and he rode the H bus down to the Deauville and sat by himself by the sea wall, realizing how much he missed her. Here I go again, he thought. More unrequited love. Probably another song out of the deal.

One Wednesday in November, Mr. Perkins called on Brice, who stood up and

said, "This is an excerpt from a new thing I'm working on. I'm trying to go in a different direction." There was an audible sigh from the class, as if expecting that perhaps they had heard the last of Brice's pornographic tales.

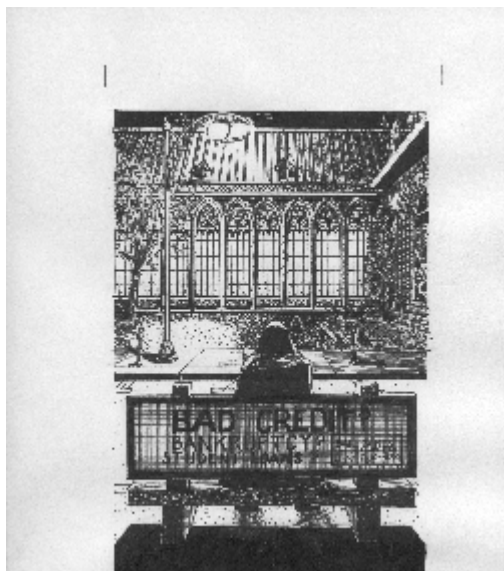
But they were wrong. Carl listened as Brice read the handout Carl had been too disinterested to read to himself in advance.

Brice's voice took on a new quality as he read- no longer the apathetic 'grocery list' tone: *When he got to her house, her husband was out of town, and she was in the back yard, sunning herself in a skimpy black bikini that revealed her awesome breasts and her perfect thighs.*

"I thought you'd never get here," she said, rising to meet him in a fiery embrace. She broke away and said, "Not here. The neighbors."

"Where, then?"

She took his large hand and led him through the kitchen door and across the living room. "This is where I sleep," she said. "...we've always had separate bedrooms."



Nor Anything Bad

By Mark Barkawitz

Outside, the fog had settled into a light mist. It was nearly midnight, as I pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head and walked with my hands in the pockets of my jeans. The street was quiet. Christmas lights twinkled on the fronts of houses. At the end of the block, I opted for the most direct route—through the schoolyard—to the church where my former girlfriend worked as the organist. Things hadn't worked out for us. But it was Christmas



Illustration by Kevin Cloud Brechner

Eve and I was lonely. It was weird going back there for the first time in so long. I hadn't been to church in years. My heart beat faster, as I weaved between two, tall buildings—like monoliths—that reached up, disappearing in the darkness of the night sky.

Suddenly, the peal of a bell sounded from above— a singular, clear note resonating through the fog, followed by a chorus of other notes. The not-so-distant church bells announced that it was midnight; Christmas had arrived.

I wasn't really dressed for church. So instead of going inside, I sat on the bus bench—like a hooded monk in the mist—across the street from the Gothic, cathedral-like building with its pointed arches, flying buttresses, and laughing gnomes. I could hear her playing the pipe organ inside and the choir singing. I imagined her long fingers reaching, pressing each key in a designed pattern of melodious harmony. The tension lifted from my shoulders. I let my lungs collapse themselves, then breathed in deeply, taking in, consuming each note she hung in the moist, night air. I lifted my face towards the black sky—closed my eyes—and let its mist settle on my bare skin. I don't know if you could call it a religious experience, but everything suddenly—like an epiphany—became

quite clear to me.

I don't know how long I sat there, thinking, being. But eventually the well-dressed parishioners began to pour out of the church and my former girlfriend stopped playing the organ. I suddenly felt out of place on the bus bench—dressed more like a perp than a parishioner. I didn't belong there—amongst the faithful. Besides, I somehow felt as if I'd already gotten what I needed that night right there on that bus bench. And even though still alone, I was no longer lonely. So I was neither disappointed nor anything bad when I walked away . . .

Revolting

By Malerie Yolen-Cohen

Right after they posted the results, I tried to fade into the woodwork. It's not like I'm a superstar or anything but hey, when your name's at the top of a list – any list - people sure treat you like one. And it's not like I'm proud of this award – I had nothing to do with it, except maybe as a member of the Unlucky Sperm Club. The REINING member of the club, so it seems.

I didn't send my photo in to the website – why would I do that? Embarrass myself like that? Chalk it up to some office-mates who thought it would be a hoot to submit an unauthorized photo of someone they felt to be “The Ugliest Man in the World.” Why would a website launch a contest like that, anyway? It's humiliating and ugly, for want of a better word. Cruel.

It's not as if I don't know how homely I am. Every day I look in the mirror and I'm reminded. My whole life, I repelled women like Dawn does grease.

But something happened after I was voted the Ugliest Man in the World. Once you make it to the top of some list people pay attention. For those fools who thought they were wreaking havoc with my life, destroying me, well, have the tables turned on them!

You've heard the saying, "so ugly, he's cute." Well, I must admit, I never made it over the ugly hump into cute territory. Ugly men don't get good jobs. Ugly men don't get girls – unless they are rich, in which case, it's amazing how unlimited credit can pretty up the foulest of faces.

But now, as a result of my notoriety, I'm the new "it" boy. Supermodels can't get enough of me. They are actually calling ME for dates! I don't delude myself into thinking that these women (these stupid women – just for the record) have actual feelings for me. I know that they are just glomming on to the next new thing, like celebrities to hybrid cars. But, since I'm along for the ride, why not enjoy it?

Take Stacey for instance. If not for her face, that body, she'd probably be sweeping up dog hair in some pet salon. But she's living the life...one that doesn't require the use of brain cells.

She calls and we go out. In public. Turned a few heads, let me tell you. Interracial couples have nothing on Mac-Truck faced men with Revlon cover girls. Naturally, several seconds into the date, she's berating me to

cover girls. Naturally, several seconds into the date, she's doing me to tears. Conversation, such as it is, dries up. And that's the way it goes with all the Staceys. They say, "you sure are ugly," and I say, "You sure are vapidly beautiful," and that's basically all there is to say.

As I mentioned, after my big triumph as Head-Honcho of Hideous, my cell phone vibrated more than a Rabbit™ on a lonely night. Writers wanted to write about me. TV reporters asked to interview me. It got to the point where I just wished to be left alone. But when people aim to find you, they will.

This morning, I found a post-it-note on my windshield; "UPFB Meeting; Tonight; Morley's Tavern; 8pm"

What the hell is UPFB? My curiosity was aroused.

So, I mosey on over to Morley's - my favorite haunt because the light there is so faint, it's impossible to get a fix on anyone's face. Before all this award-winning shit, if I ever had a chance to score with a girl, it would be at Morley's where dimness and booze converge to create one damn nice looking bunch.

"What's this UPFB?" I ask the first person I see. He has mismatched eyes and a big wart on the end of his nose.

"Ugly People Fighting Back," he replies.

“Fighting back? Like an army?” I can think of nothing more pathetic than an unattractive soldier. Even during peacetime, he’d be at risk for getting shot just because his looks would piss someone off.

“Not with guns, or anything,” he lets me know. “More like a Union. An organization. A lobby group. For our rights and everything.”

Even through the darkness, I see that this guy is more repulsive than I. They all are – the whole group of them looking, with hope, in my direction. There must be thirty or forty of the most unattractive people I’ve ever seen gathered in one place.

“What is it you want from me?” I inquire, conscious of the fact that for the first time in my life people are seeking my counsel. It’s a pretty damn good feeling.

“We need a spokesperson. Someone to mobilize us, articulate our cause,” Nose Wart says. “We need a slogan and media attention, and you can give that to us.”

This is the first time anyone has wanted me so badly –so how can I turn Nose Wart down? Dating uber-beauties only goes so far and the novelty, to tell you the truth, has already worn off. With UPFB, I can head up a revolution – a revolt. A revolt of the revolting. For those who think war is ugly, they ain’t seen nothing yet.

The Very Thought of You

By Denise Bouchard

She was the daughter of a very prominent man. That wasn't the reason Arthur wanted to ask her to the prom, however. He simply thought Laura was the loveliest girl in the school.

If you'd asked everyone else who they thought was the most beautiful, Laura's name probably would not have come up in that conversation. She may have had the designation of being the sweetest of girls but that would only have served to cement Arthur's feelings that her particular kind of beauty came from the inside out. Not that she wasn't lovely, but compared to the obvious classic blondes and brunette bombshells of the 40's, she got lost; though not on him. For it was exactly that quality of unassuming humility in a girl who could've been quite conceited, that had caught hold of his heart.

Arthur on the other hand, would have been at the very top of the list in any conversation of *who's who*. It was not for his suave demeanor nor handsome good looks. He was known simply as being the smartest person they knew. This also made him awkwardly socially and the target of a bit of teasing. Still, despite any awkwardness, he was admired as well. Thus when he managed to ask Laura to the prom, she could hardly say no to someone of his academic stature, even though it went against her own personality type.

She came from a family of near nobility. Her father had a friendship with Roosevelt. He ran things in the city that was prosperous during his reign as well as on the state level. And perhaps that is why "what people thought" had become such a concern for Laura. As one of the Mayor's many children, she was analyzed, studied, photographed and judged.

It was no small feat for Arthur to have summoned the courage to even ask her out for it would be his first date and he was, as a high school senior, completely clueless.

The evening of the prom, he arrived at her door with a wristlet corsage and his mother; who, to Laura's horror, drove them to the restaurant where the prom was being held.

Laura only hoped to keep a low profile and wished that the rest of the evening would go off in an unnoticeable fashion.

Contrary to his normally shy nature, Arthur led her to the dance floor which surprised Laura as she hadn't pictured him to be a dancer.

But dance he did. It seemed that Arthur had taken lessons for the occasion and surprised the entire class with his new moves of finger twirling in the air as he spun. Everyone crowded around and the more they crowded, they more Arthur spun and twirled. Laura wanted to be invisible as the cameras flashed. Graceful and demur, Laura's cheeks reddened slightly as she smiled and tried to dance carefully around him.

Later in the evening, he walked her up to the huge front door of her home. As she went to tell him that she'd had a nice time, as was her way, he raced down the front steps to his waiting mother as though his pants were aflame.

A few years later, Laura met the man of her dreams. He was called to service in WWII and she waited. They married and had four children, living a full life that most people only dream of.

Arthur also served in WWII as an interpreter and stayed in Hawaii to live where he became something of a Hemingway in looks and talents, as well as that same penchant for reclusiveness.

Far along into their lives as they each approached their mid-seventies, Arthur heard that Laura's husband had passed away. He'd remembered her and thought of her often. He decided to give her a call- again, no small feat. He thought perhaps they could meet and talk about their lives. Perhaps more.

He dialed her number and explained to her who he was and asked whether she remembered.

"Yes, Arthur, I do remember!" she replied in the same pleasant tone he recalled from their high school days, yet now the voice held the partial weight of the years in it. He asked how she was and spoke of his new life.

She didn't have a lot to say and he knew they'd never get together. She seemed now an empty vessel. Arthur realized that Laura had lived and loved deeply in her life and she had given all she had to give to her family, while he was a late bloomer who had only in recent years fully come into his own.

In acknowledging the differences, he wished Laura well and bid her a warm goodbye.

Somewhere in the South Pacific, a man hangs up the phone and picks up his Scotch, not so much for bravery now as for comfort. He stares out at the ocean and his mind drifts back to a pretty young girl... her hair swinging as they danced.

Laura is going back in time as well. After they hung up, she reminisced a bit. She smiled as she remembered the prom. She then recalled having seen an article about Arthur in a local paper recently and was proud of how

much he'd accomplished and how he'd grown into himself. The article had even mentioned her as being his prom date in the 40's.

But as she went back in time, her mind always took her to the same place... The first time she met her husband. Their first date at the Southeastern New England Ball. Their first Christmas together after the war.

Somewhere on the upper East Coast, an elderly woman gets up from her chair and walks over to her husband's picture, reaching out to touch the frame. Then she puts on the recording of their favorite song. This is all that keeps her going now. For you see there was only ever one man in her life and as the scenes from their life played out in the strains of "The Very Thought of You", she waits to continue the dance she and her husband had started long ago.

Treasure Hut

By Linda Emma

The porch was strewn with the dimly golden remains of oak leaves and the crumbled corpses of red maple leaves; they crunched underfoot as David passed through the glass slider and onto the well-worn deck. David took in the expanse of the overgrown yard, frosted weeds in the once meticulous flower gardens, overhanging tree branches edging the property line and granting unsolicited privacy to his mother in her final days at the house.

David inhaled deeply, the chill stinging his lungs with peppered ice molecules. He smelled the distinct scent of a wood burning stove. Familiar. Memory inducing.

He stepped off the porch, reaffixing the large black buttons of his dress

coat.

David doubted his progeny of hearty New England stock. Even the hint of cold crunched his shoulders in anticipation of a shiver, of wind and winter. He believed in the winter, that it would come, settle in, and stay. Spring was the harder sell. All evidence to the contrary, David was never fully convinced that it would return.

David walked through the yard, leaving a parted trail of leaves in his wake. In appearance, David was a force of a man. Six foot five, 225 pounds, broad-shouldered, well-postured, fit. Handsome, too. He had a square jaw with a Tom Brady cleft, hazel eyes and short, sandy hair that went its own way more often than David's. Straight, white teeth hidden beneath a reluctant smile. And a baritone of a voice, the potential to be deep and resonant, but more often merely quietly articulate.

He came over the crest of the hill, and descended into the eclipsing shade. He blinked, adjusting to his darkened surroundings.

Still there.

An involuntary smile pulled at his lips.

Despite their shedding coats, the trees still offered it some camouflage. In summers past, it had always been well-hidden, albeit not as fully as it must be with two decades of growth engulfing it. David wondered if it was now invisible to adults who trekked this far into his old world.

Ambling down the path, he came to the base of the tree supporting the structure. He untwisted the rope from a rusted cleat hammered into the oak, let the weight of the trap door slide worn fibers through his bare hands. The interior of the door revealed, it held an inverted table that cleverly hid a collapsible ladder. David unfolded it and checked its rungs for weight-worthiness with the heft of his polished black shoe.

He nodded to himself. *This, my father did well.*

David's father could build or fix anything. It was the piece of his father's legacy upon which he and his mother could agree. She offered no other salvos, ever. David had eventually been able to give, if not praise, then at least a measure of forgiveness to the man. It had come slowly, painfully and he had fought against it for years. It wasn't until he was a man, married, with a child of his own that he could release the anger, let it pass like the fluttering leaves skittering by his feet, off and away, mixing with life's debris.

He climbed into the fort and pulled the stairs up, locking them in place. He stood only slightly stooped. His father had built the structure grand by a four-year-old's standards, assuring David that Daddy would be a frequent visitor. The wind whistled outside but the old fort offered surprising refuge. And darkness. The tiny window was dirty, filtering in only splotchy light. David allowed his eyes to adjust, then reached to the hook that still sported an old lantern. His hands felt along a shelf for the lighter that once sat there. He found it, lit the lantern and looked to the portal of his youth.

It's virtually untouched.

He would have thought neighborhood kids would have claimed it as their own by now. A clubhouse, a retreat.

Like it had been for David.

David's mother had been upset with the notion of the tree fort project.

David's too young; he doesn't need a tree house in the woods...

But David's father had fully circumvented his wife in his campaign. Then, with David as enthusiastic enlistee, it was impossible to deter the pair. Eventually, she'd given in, becoming an enabler of sorts, supplying sandwiches and lemonade, yielding her old comforters for a sleep out.

It was hard not to be sucked into the light of such a wanted image, of David and his father together. She looked at that picture of them and knew that this was exactly the way it should be, could be.

That was before David's father left. The first time.

It was before the fort became refuge and comfort. It was before David would sneak, under twilight's cover, to be where his father had been, to be near the feel and smell of him as he pulled the man's jacket on his tiny shoulders and took the few tools his father left in the fort to his chest, cuddling their metal bulk as if they were fiber-filled and soft, like a favored stuffed bear.

David was his father in potential. The spitting image of his dad, he could have been his clone: brawny and gregarious, the life of the party, the soul of the moment. But David's DNA was pock-marked by his father's jaunts in and out of his life, scarred by anger and sadness, and confusion. It made him wary, tentative. It turned him from the fearlessly exploring toddler to a solitary young boy with an imaginary best friend.

Johnny Chickshaw.

For years, David went nowhere without Johnny. He was the invisible guest at dinner, the backseat companion, the bunkmate. David's mother had at first ignored his presence, then begrudgingly welcomed Johnny into their lives. But when it went on for too long, she felt Johnny's presence as a crowding intrusion, too much the reminder of the void he was filling.

If she had been of different circumstances, there would have been a therapist, perhaps a children's specialist. But the tools David's mother possessed were limited, borne from instinct, not intellect. She watched as a little boy drew away from who he was, from who he could become. Johnny wasn't merely a crutch; he was an obstacle, an eroding rot like the fungus that felled the old elm in the front yard, working from the inside out. She had to exorcise Johnny from David before he consumed her son.

It was a venting and a rant, the shatter of emotions after an arduous week of work and life, of barely holding on and holding it in. She spewed forth onto Johnny and David what she had never fully released on David's father. She called Johnny out as a pretend friend, and banished him, sending him out in a screaming fit of fury, and then tears.

David was wide-eyed and stunned. In all the times he had watched his parents throw their poison at one another, never had he been scalded by it. He had never felt the burn of anger directed at him. Countless times his father had turned his mother into a puddle of tears and sobs. David never imagined that he was capable of doing to his mother that for which he hated his father.

At the ripe old age of ten, David pulled off the cloak of his growing timidity and donned a new apparel.

David came up behind his mother and put his tiny hand on her slumped and defeated shoulders, pulling his own back reassuringly.

"It's okay Mommy, Johnny doesn't have to live here anymore, if you don't want."

She'd tried to take back the outburst, rewind the moment, but Johnny was

gone. And with him went little David, a tiny man left in his place.

But David knew that Johnny wasn't completely gone; he'd merely been evicted to the backyard fort. David would always know where to find him.

David gingerly fingered the fort's cobweb-covered contents, exploring forgotten objects with his hands, from rocks and seashells to matchbox cars and playing cards. There was a rusted knife and a whittled stick; a knotted rope and an ancient pack of bubble gum; worn baseball cards and a wooden yo-yo. He leafed through an old Sports Illustrated and a swim suit beauty floated from its pages. This was David's time capsule, choppy segments of his childhood, preserved in an untidy and dusty display.

Rising, David took the flickering lantern and let its light spill toward the high corner of the fort. David opened the shelved cabinet and pressed its false bottom for release. He let his hand search, felt the sharp edge of a tin box.

David couldn't suppress the small chuckle as he pulled down the tin. He jimmied its cover off and saw inside the feeble remnants of his bad-boy days, a plastic bag of seeds, browned leaves turned to dust, a crudely rolled cigarette. He laughed.

David had eked out a childhood, an adolescence, a teenage life. And although Johnny eventually withered to silent specter, the tree fort's refuge had remained a constant in his life.

Replacing the tin's contents, he carefully returned it to its hiding place. He extinguished the lantern, unlocked the door and descended the ladder.

It's time to sell.

David stepped from the fort's shadow; started to turn. But a flash of color caught his eye –bright orange against a backdrop of yellow maples, a shiny anomaly bouncing light like a prism –soft, lustrous, red –hair. There was a rustle of movement.

David blinked, rubbed his eyes.

The wind, David thought, opening his eyes. *Colored leaves...* Not hair, not a child's head. Not Johnny.

He blinked again, shook his head and took another chilled breath.

Just my imagination.

David turned to go but noticed the corner of a worn wooden board protruding through a pile of leaves. It was red-lettered in his childhood handwriting: David's Tree Hut, but a blue arrow inserted the words, "*and Johnny C's*". The addition wasn't David's handwriting. David furrowed his brow, tilted his head. He stared at the letters, and shook his head in puzzlement. Then, he wiped the sign free of its caked dirt and wedged it back onto the fort where it once was nailed. He backed up and looked at his little home, then brushed off his hands and followed the path back to his old house.

One Untruth

By Nicole M. Bouchard

"Ah, when to the heart of man was it ever less than a treason to go with the drift of things, to yield with a grace to reason, and bow and accept the end

of love or a season..." Robert Frost, from his poem "Reluctance" featured in *Early Poems by Robert Frost*

In a house, reaching down into its throat, past the basement door is a box. The box is full of photographs; photos of picnics, graduations, holidays and such things... except for one. This one photo I can tell you for certain is of a lie. It is of a life, intimately shaped, cornered and structured upon an untruth... Just one untruth; just one life of a family, set apart from the others in a box, in an abandoned house.

Reach down through the settling snow of dust and touch the yellowing photo paper. I dare you to stare into the scene set amidst a life of black to white extremes and discern my secrets. You won't, you know. You can stare into my frozen youthful eyes in shades of gray film and you still won't see it.

It was a fine parlor with emerald velvet upholstered chairs in swirling damask patterns. A white fireplace in the center seemed to anchor us, though looking back it was an added weight around my neck. There were sage Dutch tiles pressed into the mantel. They told a story of a courtship, though I cannot recall it now. Weren't there missing pieces? At least it ended up that way.

And there was a crystal chandelier sent over from France- an unofficial dowry. It was easier to look at my life through those multi-faced crystals; there were more versions, different views of the same scene or situation. It was not a flat reflection of a façade. They made the secrets mingle well in daily life, spinning round in delightful colors. There were oil paintings as well to play up the face of the room. Floral reproductions trapping the short-lived life of each blossom- an attempt to immortalize something that was not meant to last forever. My husband could never explain why I hated those paintings. I hated seeing those orange and yellow flowers caught year after year in the fake gold frames. No transitions, no choices.

In this photo, there was the wife. A struggling, but happy three-year old girl was on her lap, dressed all in navy blue. On the opposite end of the photo there is the husband. A healthy infant son, also clad in navy blue, sat upon

his father's lap. Deep within the features of the husband's face was a longing to be something more. He felt himself to be less of a man if he did not match the success of his neighbor or colleague. He felt this innate insecurity to the point of slapping his daughter one evening when he came home, because his former boss commented on how his daughter had learned to talk sooner and therefore, he must have the smarter child. The husband was not a cruel or physically aggressive man. He didn't strike his children; spare for that one occasion. The face of the wife was smiling and unsmiling at the exact same time. Her smile was for the nervous, clammy-palmed photographer who kept dropping equipment, for the appeasement of society standards, and perhaps, perhaps for her mother's wishes. The frown beneath was for the long hours until darkness would fall, dinner would be done, and she could retire in her private den where no one dared interrupt her reading. She felt so strongly about her alone time after dinner that as much as it might have pulled at her heart, she ignored her daughter's desire to come in one Thursday night and listened as the child flopped to the floor outside the door, playing with her stuffed bear alone.

On another occasion, she chose to ignore the sound of her young son crying.

So- here are the inherent truths in this photo: yes, we were married; yes, those are our children; and yes, that is our family home. The rest is dust and fragments of something fragile fallen to a dirty floor. No details were safe from invading lies.

Ours was not the only marriage that bucked against societal rules and blurred the quaint 1950's image of a husband and wife; seen through a warm window facing the street, sitting in adjacent chairs, smiling over tea and town gossip while the children frolic with a dog in front of the fireplace. The husband has a brandy in his hand and his slippers are carefully tucked under his chair. No, we were not the only un-idyllic pairing- there was the couple four streets away whose home was a battlefield on Saturday mornings. He constantly accused her of everything from the mundane mistake to the ridiculous undertaking of pricey escapades. She was cooking pancakes for her five children and her husband. She had added the blueberries for him as a peace offering. He

quietly came up behind her as though he meant to nuzzle her just beneath the hairline of her ponytail, where the tendrils spilled out prettily, and broke her neck. He sat back down to finish his coffee. The children didn't know their mother was dead for an hour.

Our marriage was not like that of course, it was far more subtly ripped at the seam. So subtly, that it seemed quite natural to me to want to slip beneath the water of my bath and never surface; or to ponder what life would be like...the emptiness of the house... if my husband caught one of the quick-killing viruses he so often treated in his practice. Dark thoughts hid behind my umber eyes when he would come home particularly uptight after some circumstance or other that had painfully wounded his nearly fatalistic competitive streak. After a presentation in which another doctor was chosen to represent the region at a conference in the mid-west, he told me in seething tones that he would leave me penniless and desperate if I didn't learn to cook the pasta properly. I nearly said, "Alright," but bit my tongue in front of the children. He threatened two or three times to take on a mistress because I couldn't satisfy him in bed. It never occurred to him that the blame lay in the fact that so often, he could not be aroused.

But there were normal days too. These I feared the most because they seemed inescapable. Days where he swore he loved me... I think in his way he did. Days we were both emotionally available to our children... I remember one day in particular when we had stopped at a newly opened toy store before church. It was still snowing, though it was early March, just weeks before the spring. We let the children pick two new toys each. As they sped around the store with the breed of wonderment that we only possess once in our lives, he grabbed my hand and said matter-of-factly, "I love you, you know."

It seemed as though we might have made it that day. No one can recognize or explain how it came to be that one week later, I left.

It had been a busy day for him. I packed his lunch much earlier in the morning to make sure that he had it by the time he left. I cleaned the entire house during the day, top to bottom. My tears worked well to break up the dust in the secluded corners. I hugged and kissed my children goodbye

after having walked them to school that morning. I remember not being able to plan the dinner menu as usual. I couldn't think. There seemed to be a vortex out in the world, more powerful than me, sucking me out my house, out of my entire life. I won't lie to you and say that my hands didn't fold the clothes that went in those two suitcases. I stood there in the hall, waiting for an hour. It was a tweed coat with pink buttons and a matching hat set atop my tightly spun up coiffure. I heard him on the step, the turning of the key, the opening of the door and then...

The moment he saw me, words came out as if on cue, pulled from between my red lips as if I wasn't the one saying them. I said, "I don't love you. I never did." I walked right past him with my suitcases without a further word. I imagine he stood there in the foyer for quite some time. He probably forgot to shut the door against the cold. Probably, he forgot to do many things that night and for many nights after. The children were young. So young still. They could forget me, I knew. They were safe, they were alive, brought into this world. That was my duty and I was done.

The next December, he contemplated how he would ever face the snow again after what I did, when I left... He was standing in the foyer, watching the children play and tilt their heads up to the sky in anticipation of the first snowfall. They waved to him. He looked back at them. Then he leaned forward in a strange curiosity and looked harder. He was seeing them—really, truly seeing them. His daughter, ever responsible and kind, lifting up her little brother, and his son, with such an enthusiasm for life, reaching out his palm and drawing it back to examine the visual composition of the first flake. It was then he knew how they would survive.

Only one photo, the photo, remains with my image in it. The rest he burned upon my departure and as to the others in this box, they were the future that happened after me.

Once the children left home, he retired. He was in the garden one day when a soft breeze drew his attention to the front gate. It had been left open by the mail carrier. But he felt something else about the open gate. He saw it as open for the first time. Getting up, dusting the dirt off of his trousers, he walked over to the gate. In between knocking against the fence frame, it

was blown open wide for a moment. He stepped through it, looking right and left, but not backwards. He kept walking that day and that is how the house came to be abandoned. No one ever returned to it. I heard that he moved near the children in a fully furnished apartment.

I know how one card taken away can topple a whole house and I also know how one untruth taken away can build the possibility of the pursuit of truth.

Olive Oil, Extra Virgin

By Alana Cash

Goya. The cheapest kind. Not that Nathan was cheap, well, not that he was ungenerous, he just didn't have a lot of money. Being an artist is like that. Feast and famine. Someone orders an entire set of custom-built furniture for a bedroom, and there's a sense of success, a need for celebration. So he offered me dinner – at my home of course—and being used to scrimping, he bought two bottles of a Chilean wine that was actually very good. And the Goya.

I couldn't tell the difference anyway. I mean, does a \$50 bottle of olive oil taste \$48 better than the Goya? I can't answer that question, but imagine the answer lies somewhere in the neighborhood of pretentiousness.

Some olive oils are green. I know that. And the Goya is golden. The bottle on the counter is almost full of gold because he only used a little of it to make the sauce for the ravioli – a sauce so delicate it would taste good on ice cream – and a little for the salad. But what difference does color or price or taste make when I look at that bottle?

I met him in November when he was blowing leaves to the curb in the yard next door. That was the famine part. Yard work in the neighborhood when no one was buying pricey handmade furniture.

He was polite when the neighbor introduced us, although I hadn't really been paying attention because of a bad telephone conversation I'd just had with a credit card company. And a week later, he frightened me when I was walking to

the post office and he came up behind me riding his bike and called my name. Not that he was forgettable, but I hadn't really expected him to remember me.

We became friends. Sort of.

At first, he made the effort. Coming to my door unexpectedly – what if I had company or been in the middle of a salt scrub and mud facial? -- offering brochures and newspaper announcements about art openings, photography shows, little festivals in parking lots with live music. Free events that usually included food and wine. Said he would meet me there.

I'd given that some thought. Was he making sure I didn't think of myself as his date or was he too shy or too broke to actually invite me to a film retrospective, live jazz in a club, dinner on the patio of Kitchen Fresh Chicken?

I liked to think of myself as old enough to be his French maid, which sounds better than old enough to be his young aunt. I drink less. I have placement in my personality that he is searching for. I know better. But if there is a way to make an ass out of myself, I have no trouble finding it.

I liked his attention when he came to the door and stayed a little while to chat about his work and mine. I was working on my PhD dissertation on sexism in body language. Ha! He kept inviting me to visit him at the little warehouse where he rented space to make furniture, and I made the mistake of going.

He had a series of chairs aligned against the wall. Each a masterpiece of balance and minimalism – just enough wood and metal to give support – the seat of each chair made of strips of ash, mahogany, oak or a solid piece of pine washed in forest green or thin sheets of copper on the seat. Like that.

A viewing of his soul. Breathtaking. I stopped by often after that first time, and in return, he stopped coming to my door, stopped inviting me to functions. But I was always welcome there to watch him work, to be his audience and fan. It reminded me of a musician I had dated as an undergrad.

With one exception. Nathan was insultingly respectful and admiring of me, and heartlessly lacking in desire. Or so it seemed. He never laid a hand on me. Not

even to hug me, except that once. Never leaned in to smell my neck. Never accidentally touched my leg when we stood together. Nada. And he isn't gay. Then he gave me a copper bracelet that he had woven out of wire for my birthday. Does it mean anything?

In self preservation because I felt older, old, I never gave him the look, the turn of the head, the slight touches that a woman gives a man to let him know she wants him. I did none of that. And hoped that there was no yearning in my eyes when I watched him work. Hoped that if there was, my glib conversation distracted him from noticing it.

I committed to focus more on my dissertation. I had to. I was almost forty and it was getting late. But my mind wandered, and I punished it by staying up all hours scrubbing floors and walls. Pouring something of myself into the mop water. Raking out closets. Playing music way too loud.

At night I took God's multiple-choice quiz. Would you rather:

1. have a deep, profound love for someone who dies suddenly, leaving you bereft for the rest of your life?
2. have a sexless, but pleasant marriage that lasts 30 years and leaves you with a nice retirement income and a condo in Boca?
3. love a younger man who is fabulously virile, terribly attractive to other woman, and who doesn't bother you with his sexual desire?

Etcetera

I felt ridiculous thinking about my young leaf-blowing neighbor at all. Had my isolationism in favor of doing something with my life turned me into a pervert?

Yes. And I had to fight it.

But I hadn't counted on him inviting himself to dinner and knowing how to make ravioli – the dough, the filling, the sauce. I hadn't counted on drinking so much wine that I noticed it was spring and he wasn't wearing a long-sleeved flannel shirt and a Phillies cap. No. He wore a black tank top that allowed me to see for the first time the muscles in his arms move as he pinched the ravioli with his fingers. As he poured more wine. His bed-head hair was a torment.

And that two-day beard. Damn.

Where was the mop water then? Where was the CD of Coldplay? Did he notice I was wearing the bracelet?

Stop that.

Oh, what a relief it was when he finally left after cleaning up all the dishes, because then, because now, I can tell myself I did the right thing. Oh yes. I did the right thing by keeping my mouth shut. Why risk an uncomfortable conversation about my foolish feelings when I can talk about my dissertation and his chairs. And then when he leaves and finally gives me a hug and I can smell his barely-irresistible personal smell tinged with turpentine, hours after his departure, I continue to discipline myself away from taking a risk and losing by staring at a bottle of olive oil.

What next? Sensible shoes?

Darlene Rudnick and Kiki Malone

By Vince Corvaia

When Todd was seventeen, his twelve-year-old sister Bonnie fell in love with David Cassidy. She had his posters on her bedroom walls. She had all his albums in her record rack. She never missed The Partridge Family on Saturday nights. Once at the dinner table her mother even asked her to stop singing "I Think I Love You" and eat.

Todd poked fun of her whenever she mentioned him. Todd was a serious boy who made straight A's and had never so much as gone on a date with a girl. Once when Bonnie was waiting for an autographed glossy of Cassidy to arrive in the mail and Todd saw her standing by the mailbox, he walked outside and chided her for believing that David Cassidy himself had been sitting somewhere signing his name personally on a photograph for his biggest fan. *Don't you know he has his minions doing that for him?* he told her. His real autograph is probably chicken scratch with that busy concert schedule of his. She asked him how he knew so much and he let it go.

HOW HE KNEW SO MUCH AND HE LET IT GO.

Todd and Bonnie had one thing in common, and that was the movies. Bonnie loved to go to Saturday matinees with her friends, and Todd usually went alone at night. He approached movies critically, as “cinema,” and had not laughed out loud or cried since he was Bonnie’s age and cracked up over It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World. Good movies opened up to him the possibilities of art the way paintings and music and even books didn’t. But as much as he appreciated the artfulness of Bullitt and 2001, he never saw a movie twice. What was the point, once he had seen and studied everything the first time?

When the Friday entertainment section of the newspaper arrived, Bonnie looked it over on the living room carpet to see if anything good was opening. Todd was studying his calculus homework at the breakfast nook in the kitchen.

“Todd,” Bonnie said.

“I’m busy.”

“What’s a ‘gaymin’?”

“A what?”

“Gaymin.”

“Spell it.”

“G-A-M-I-N-E.”

“Oh, gamine, you twit. It’s a girl. Like Audrey Hepburn. Why?”

“The Wayward Gamine starts today. I wanna see it.”

“Who’s in it?”

“Darlene Rudnick.”

“I think I’ll pass.”

I think I'll pass.

Rudnick had made several movies before this, in which she played dumb beach bunnies or virtuous hippie chicks. The movies were negligible, and Todd hadn't wasted his time on any of them.

"What's it rated?"

"Parental guidance suggested."

"Have a good time."

Bonnie came home late for dinner the next day. A friend's father dropped her off, and before she even closed the front door behind her, she was talking.

"That was the best movie I ever saw. Amelia and I watched it twice. You have to see it."

"I don't think so," Todd said. He was watching baseball with their father in the living room.

Their mother told Bonnie she was late for supper but that she would reheat it for her.

"Brush your teeth first," their mother said. "You have popcorn in your braces."

"Mom, nobody brushes their teeth before supper."

"Do as I say."

After supper, Bonnie went into Todd's room, where he was shining his school shoes.

"I'm telling you, Todd, you gotta see this movie."

"Have to.' And I don't have to anything." Then he added, "What's it about?"

"It's about this girl, and she's like, really funny and sad at the same time. She

It's about this girl, and she's, like, really funny and sad at the same time. She goes to college and doesn't have any friends except this one guy she really likes."

"How does it end?"

"No-o," Bonnie whined, "...you have to see it. Please?"

"What do you care whether I see a silly movie? And please get off my bed."

"Boy, you're no fun."

She left the room to go play her Partridge Family record. Before he went to bed, Todd checked the newspaper for the starting times of *The Wayward Gamine*.

On Sunday, Todd drove to the Sunny Isles Twin Theater for the first matinee. The auditorium was at least half full, and Todd sat in the back row so he could leave unobtrusively if the movie was as bad as he expected it to be.

Ninety minutes later, as the lights came up and people filed out of the auditorium, Todd sat looking down at his hands until he was sure everyone was gone.

Darlene Rudnick had transformed herself into a real actress. No—she had transformed herself into Kiki Malone, the kooky college freshman nobody loved except the boy she threw herself after, who gave in to her aggressive personality until she exhausted and humiliated him. At the end of the movie, he broke off their affair by carrying her luggage to a bus stop on campus and sending her back home. The sweet, sad music swelled as the bus faded down the street and the boy stood watching it disappear.

Todd got up and left the auditorium to go to the restroom and wash his face. Then he bought a popcorn and soda at the concession stand and went back inside to watch the movie again.

He watched *The Wayward Gamine* four times and left the theater at 10:00. He was one year away from leaving home for the University of Florida, and he was completely smitten with a fictional character.

Todd's senior year began, and he landed a spot on the school newspaper as an entertainment reporter. Cassie Richards, another senior, covered all the school news except sports.

"I saw you around school last year," she said to him one day in class as they were typing to meet their deadlines. "You're pretty quiet, aren't you?"

"Not so quiet. I'm just busy a lot."

"A guy can keep busy and still not be alone so much. I've never seen you talking to anyone. Except me right now."

Todd didn't know what to say to this girl. He ignored her and blushed as he kept typing.

Todd's room by this time was a virtual shrine to Darlene Rudnick. Two posters of Rudnick as Kiki Malone were taped to the walls. On a table in one corner stood the paperback novel on which *The Wayward Gamine* was based, the soundtrack album of the movie, and even an autographed photo and other pictures of Rudnick as Kiki. He also had a brown accordion folder containing every newspaper and magazine clipping about her career, her movies, and her personal life. Crammed with articles from *Look*, *Life*, *Show*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Miami News*, even *Reader's Digest*, the folder swelled at its sides.

The movie had done well, playing for nearly two months, and was now relegated to second-run theaters. Every week since that first Sunday, Todd spent his money seeing *The Wayward Gamine*, first at the Sunny Isles, then at a small theater near Lincoln Road, where it was the first half of a double feature.

"Mrs. Rogers," he said to the school newspaper adviser one day in early October, "I'd like to cover *The Wayward Gamine* this week."

"Is that movie even still around?" Mrs. Rogers said. "There must be newer movies you can review."

"But it's very popular with teenagers," Todd said, "and it's still playing on the beach."

dean.

“It is? Well, if you want to.”

Cassie overheard the conversation and caught up with Todd in the hall afterwards.

“Hey, Todd,” she said, “I haven’t seen that one. Can I go with you?”

“I don’t know,” Todd said. He’d seen it alone every weekend for more than ten weeks. Taking a girl along almost felt like a betrayal of Kiki, the character he literally dreamed about twice. Besides, this would constitute a date, and he had never been on one.

“Come on,” Cassie said. “I’ll pay my own way. You don’t even have to drive me. I’ll meet you there.”

“No,” Todd said, capitulating. “It’s okay. I’ll pick you up. Just tell me where you live.”

It was raining when he parked the car near Lincoln Road, and he held his raincoat over the two of them as they ran for the theater. He picked out two seats for them in the middle of the auditorium (not the back—that would seem intimate), and Cassie offered to share her popcorn.

“So what have you heard about this one?” she said.

“Not much,” Todd said.

“Where’s your notepad? Don’t you take notes?”

“Oh. Usually. But I think I’ll be able to remember this one.”

“You don’t have to lean so far away. I won’t bite you.”

The lights went down, and the previews started. Todd felt inordinately uncomfortable sitting with a girl at this movie. He almost wanted to make up

an excuse for changing his seat, like maybe he needed privacy to absorb the details, but he knew that was ludicrous.

The opening theme began, and for Todd it was like a cat being lifted by the scruff of its neck. He was already lost in the picture.

“That’s pretty music,” Cassie whispered.

“Sorry,” Todd said. “I never talk during a movie.”

“Oh, sorry.”

Ninety minutes later, the lights came up, and Cassie was crying.

“What an idiot,” she said to herself, laughing. “Do you have a napkin or a handkerchief or something?”

He reached into his back pocket and handed her a handkerchief. She wiped her eyes delicately. He told her she could keep it, and she blew her nose into it.

“Let’s drive somewhere and get something to eat,” she said. “I’d like to talk about it.”

“I hope it didn’t upset you.”

“No, not at all. I liked it.”

Todd would rather have dropped her at home and remained in his somnambulant state, but that would be impolite. He drove them to a Coney Island, where they sat down with hot dogs and chocolate egg creams. The rain was lighter now, and the sun was shining.

“She was such a lost soul,” Cassie said. “I felt so sorry for her.”

Todd boldly said, “I guess you could say I love her.”

“She was definitely lovable. What kind of review are you going to give it?”

“Oh, great. It’s a great movie.”

“I liked it but I wouldn’t call it great. It was kind of minor.”

“What kind of movies do you like?”

“Oh, just about anything, as long as it’s excellent. I mean, I liked *Oliver*, but I also liked *In Cold Blood*. I guess you could call me eclectic.”

Todd smiled. “OK, you’re eclectic.”

“What other movies do you like?” Cassie said.

“Oh, not many. Just this one, I guess.”

“You’re an interesting guy. It’s really more of a chick flick.”

“Not really. Kiki Malone has a lot of appeal for a certain kind of guy.”

“I love that name. Kiki, kooky. Malone, alone. That’s great writing.”

“Thank you.”

She looked at him quizzically. Did he write the thing?

“Well, I should get going,” she said.

“Do you have to?”

“No, but my folks think I do.”

They lived in the same neighborhood, but Coney Island was closer to his house than hers.

As they got up to leave, Cassie said, “Let’s stop by your place. I’d like to see where you live. If you don’t mind.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll only stay a minute. I’d like to see your house.”

“My mother hasn’t been feeling well.”

“We won’t disturb her. Come on.”

His parents were grocery shopping, and Bonnie was out with friends. Todd was alone in the house with a girl for the first time.

“Where’s your room?”

“To the left here. But it’s really a mess. Do you have to look at it?”

“Don’t be a goof.”

She walked in ahead of him and stopped in the middle of the room. Her eyes slowly took in the two posters, and then she approached the table and saw all of the items about Darlene Rudnick and the movie itself.

“Wow,” she said softly. She turned around. Todd was standing in the doorway with his hands in his pockets, looking down at the carpet. “You’ve seen it already.” He wouldn’t look up. “You’re like a little kid with a crush.”

“It’s—it’s my sister’s stuff. Her room is full of David Cassidy. I told her she could use my room.”

She looked at him without speaking.

“I’ll take you home now,” he said.

“Yeah, I think you’d better.”

They didn’t say anything on the drive back. When he pulled up to Cassie’s house, she opened the passenger door and looked back at him.

“Why did you lie?” she said. He looked ahead at the dashboard and was just forming his answer when she shut the door behind her.

Todd didn't write the review for *The Wayward Gamine* after all. He told Mrs. Rogers he hadn't gone and that he'd see something else instead. Cassie was in the room when he said it, and during lunch she walked up to his table and said, “You should have written that review.”

“Why?”

“Because I'd already told Mrs. Rogers we saw it together.”

Todd's embarrassment gave way to an anger he didn't understand.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because I wanted to tell her about your room. So just in case she acts weird around you, you'll know why.”

She walked away, and Todd skipped the rest of the school day. He hadn't realized it before, but going to a movie with Cassie had made a big impression on him. He had liked being with her. He liked her.

Instead of going home, he drove to Haulover Beach and walked along the pier. He knew he was in love with Kiki Malone, a fantasy figure. It had possibly cost him a real relationship. In a few months he would be graduating and then going on to college. He was a grownup, for God's sake. What was he doing mooning over Darlene Rudnick's alter ego?

He went home before his parents got home from work. Bonnie had just gotten home from school. He took a brown garbage bag out from under the kitchen sink and carried it into his room. Bonnie stopped in his doorway just as he started collecting everything off the corner table and putting it in the bag.

“Where you going?” she said.

“I'm not going anywhere.”

“Then what are you doing with that stuff?”

The table now cleared except for the brown accordion folder, he reached up and pulled one of the posters off the wall.

“You want it all?”

“You gonna throw it away?”

He pulled down the poster from the opposite wall.

“That’s right.”

“Sure, I’ll take it all.”

“You don’t have the space,” he said as he rolled up the posters and stuck them in the bag.

“I’ll put everything in my closet.”

Todd handed her the bag and she looked inside.

“Not even the record?”

“Just take it all.”

“Okay, but what about that?” she said, referring to the accordion folder.

“That’s none of your business. Tell Mom and Dad I’ll eat supper out.”

He carried the folder around the block and started wading toward Biscayne Boulevard, where the North Miami Beach Greyhound station was.

Luckily, there was a bus idling outside the station, destined for New York City. The driver was standing beside the open bus door, waiting to take tickets from the last few passengers. Todd waved to a stranger in one of the windows and said to the driver, “Do you mind if I give this to my friend? She forgot it.”

said to the driver, "Do you mind if I give this to my friend?" She forgot it.

"Sure, go ahead."

He climbed up the steps into the air-cooled bus and walked along the aisle until he was at the rear, adjacent to the rest room. He reached up and shoved the folder onto an overhead rack. Then he got off the bus and thanked the driver.

After a few more minutes, the driver boarded the bus and closed the door. Todd stepped around it from behind and stood at the curb as the bus eased into traffic and headed north on Biscayne. The music came to an end.

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