

The Write Place At the Write Time

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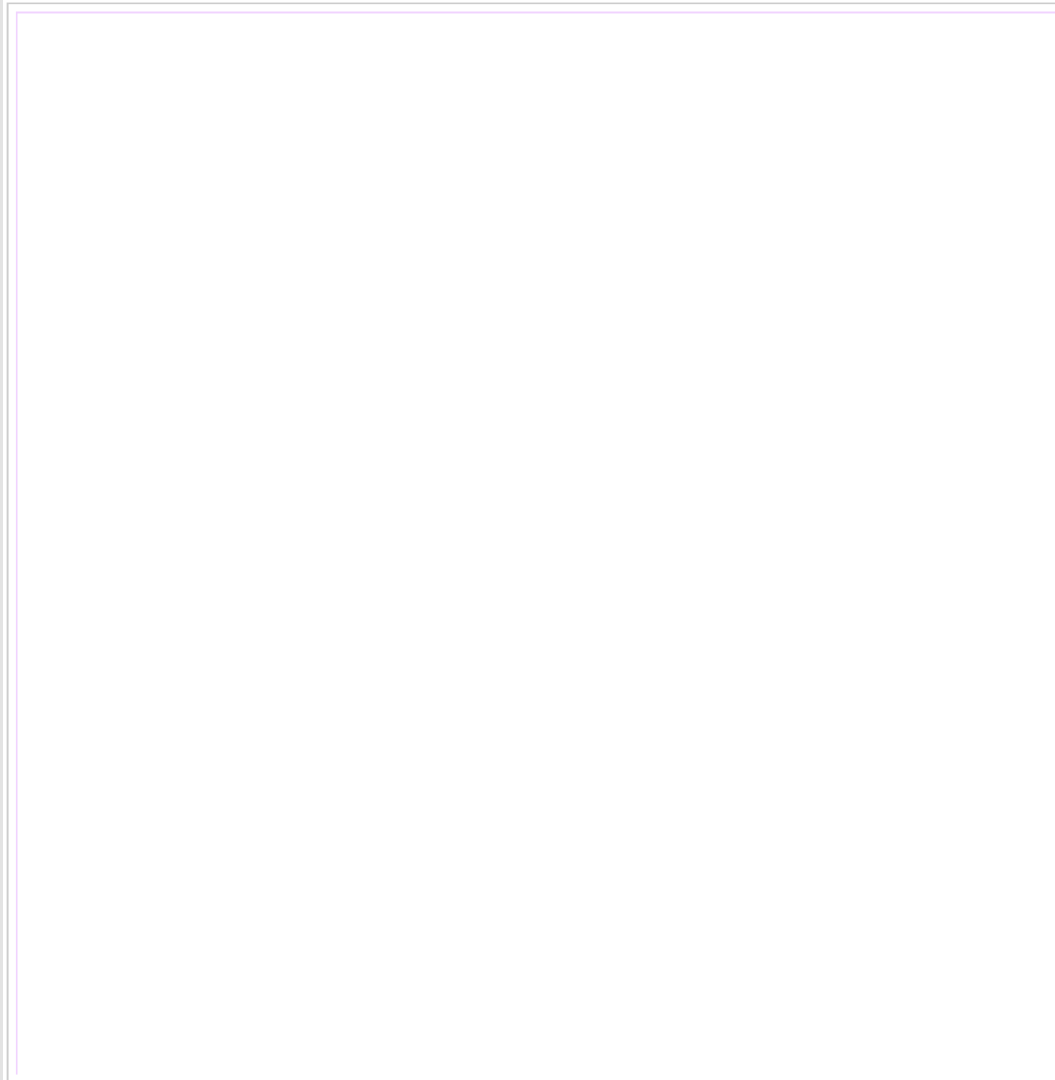
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"Blue and White Lace" by Jim Fuess; www.jimfuessart.com

Welcome to our Fiction section!

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Missing Words

By Natalie Campisi

"Maybe that's why you're the way you are," she wondered aloud, fingering the lace camisole that was not hers. She found it camouflaged among the sheets and blankets; weeks old, wrinkled and forgotten. It was too small, too delicate. She wasn't envious, bad taste, she thought to herself, immediately relegating the owner of the camisole to a breed of women so tawdry and boorish they couldn't possibly be competition.

She tossed it aside. The light was pale and the man, Frank, wanted to enjoy its inherent sadness. He didn't want to answer insipid questions. He turned on the radio. Bebop. Every night; he was glad for it and there weren't any commercials and he didn't have to bother himself with choosing a song or finding a scratch.

"Do you even want to know the truth about what happened to him?" She asked, arching her back, the light sadder now across her chest, every bone nestling a faint gray shadow.

Frank was trying to concentrate on the song; it scattered around the room in puzzle pieces. Was it Parker? It sounded like Parker. He wished he knew, the way his dad could pick out Vivaldi in a waiting room.

He chuckled to himself. Parker on the radio, or close enough. The dingy apartment. The half-naked girl. Except now he was a lawyer. An attorney.

Which sounded better? He wondered. He hated both. She wouldn't even be here without those words. She said lawyer. The only thing missing was a cigarette and one last glass of wine. She didn't know his cigarette vice. Things would be different if she did; graver. There would be talks of lung cancer and premature aging and how it's really just a blue-collar, college-girl habit now. No one smokes anymore. Not even the French.

He regretted telling her anything. As soon as he said it, practically. He had too much to drink. It was fall. Things felt more significant; he got sentimental. He hadn't had a woman around in a few months. She wasn't a soft, listening woman. She had a list of requirements. For herself and her men. Her nails were always polished, that was the first sign. Red mostly, sometimes shades of beige. Never chipped. You can't trust a woman with perfectly polished nails, he knew that.

"I feel like getting out of here," He said, finally, avoiding any further conversation on the topic. His legs were big and strong and pale, they spread large across the wrinkled sheets. She moved out of the way, just enough.

"Where?" Her thoughts were grand: Paris or Lausanne. She read a lot of magazines.

"A diner... there's a good one on 42nd," He said. They were in New York. He had just gotten to the city and was already itching to move. (Singapore was on his list, he had friends there.) She assumed he was just getting started. This crumby apartment was only because he was cheap; he was one of those people who are used to money, she surmised. She was good at picking out people with money. The kind of money that passes freely from one generation to the next, not walking-around money like so many guys in New York have and then brag too much about. She could tell by his things, the way he always had nice handkerchiefs and good socks. He had an Undergrad degree from Brown and graduated from Yale Law School. Soon he'd have a respectable place near the park, she imagined, with a view. She could help him pick it out. She had dreams.

"We're already in bed," She whispered, recoiling, a small harmless snake, cool and tired. Her brown hair was rolled into a twist, pinned with a small thin clip. She took out the clip and let her hair fall around her. He wished she knew how to be seductive. She was too skinny. Holding her felt like hoisting a bag of bones

up from an old grave. There was no flesh.

His twin brother, Bax, was also a lawyer. Except he lived in Connecticut, near the rest of the family. Bax was already engaged -- to a lawyer. He had an impressive home. One of those old, set-back houses; sprawling front lawn, grass green and soft. He had a boat, too. Everyone in the family had a boat. Sailing is what they did. After law. Bax was humble and good and seemed to relish in tradition. This girl here, Frank thought, would love Bax. She would eat him up. She would wear that cheap lace camisole if he asked her to. That was the kind of guy Bax was and the kind of girl she was.

"Do you have any pictures...of him?" She ventured, her eyes wide and sympathetic. Frank looked at her for a second, the light was so flattering, he thought. In the restaurant she wasn't this pretty. She was one of those plain Dutch-looking girls with skinny legs and good hair. She loved to show off her legs. They were long and smooth and half made up for her face which was ordinary. Small blue eyes, thin lips, roundish nose. Even now, in the fall, she wore short plaid skirts to show off her legs. She didn't wear stockings. He wished she did, that would at least be interesting.

"Pictures..." she repeated, catching Frank drowning in a stare, "...of Sam?"

He couldn't concentrate, not in this apartment without a cigarette and glass of wine. He had to get out of here. It felt like being an undergrad, his first shithole apartment containing all that was important: books, cigarettes, wine and bread. Sometimes cheese, too. He was a long way from then. If Bax saw me now, he thought, this place, he chuckled to himself again. There were a couple years between undergrad and law school when the brothers traveled together: the Czech Republic, Nicaragua, South Africa; places like that, places guys like Bax and Frank are wont to visit. Frank was the one who applied to law school first. It was ironic in a way. He knew the end was coming. His folks weren't going to float them forever. Bax knew that, too. Frank occasionally wondered if he hadn't applied to law school if things might have been different. They talked about opening a surfboard rental shop in Chile. They talked about hiking the Fitz Roy, the Shackelton Crossing; mountain climbing, moving to China, opening a restaurant, buying a small newspaper, spear fishing, living off the land. They drank wine and did ayahuasca and picked up women and hitched rides. They never talked about Sam.

Some days, Frank wondered if Bax even remembered Sam. They got so good at not talking about him, they both wondered if he even existed, mostly when they were on acid or some other psychotropic they were apt to stumble upon from new acquaintances. They were skilled in making friends like that. Sam was sacred. As sacred as a thing got for them. More sacred than any god or curse or fear or taboo.

She was yawning, her body twitching with tiredness. She was trying to stay awake. Within the wake of his silence, she felt she had an in. The captain had drifted away from his post. She was at the wheel. She had to navigate this ship where she wanted it to go while she had the chance.

Frank stopped looking at her. She wasn't Bax's type either, even though he was prone to like plain girls. He always picked the quiet, mousy one. The one who looked like she hadn't rubbed more than two sentences together her whole life. Girls like this one, Frank thought, are worse than whores. At least a whore defies something, rallies against everything people tell them they ought to be. This girl doesn't care who I am or what I want, she'll do anything to put an esquire on her wedding invitations. Doesn't she know she's not my type? Frank thought, full of annoyance now. People know. We're animals, for crissake, he thought, his mind going in a million directions.

"You were so talkative at the restaurant, anything wrong?" She asked, her eyes wide again.

"I'm good. I'm just fine," Frank smiled. He got out of bed, his white boxers sticking to his legs. He was tall and broad.

Frank had picked her up at a bar. He was there with a bunch of guys from the firm. They were all married or engaged or about to be engaged and Frank had this shithole to come home to. He knew her type before he said hello. A few dates later and a whole lot of liquor and he told her about Sam. Not everything. Just that he had a brother named Sam who died when they were kids. Sam was the middle of the triplets, right between Bax and Frank. He looked like a cherub from a Renaissance painting. A cherub with small wire-rimmed glasses.

She was still asking about pictures when he finally tuned her back in. The music was so good. They didn't stop playing it all night, too. Frank thought he might donate money to the radio station. No commercials, no bullshit. Just jazz all

night.

"Listen... You should probably be getting home. You're tired. I'll call you a cab, okay," Frank offered softly.

"What? A cab? Are you serious?" She raised her voice.

"It's late for you..." He started.

"...And now you want to call a cab in the middle of the night?" Her eyes were watery slivers, the shape of cashews, angling down at the ends.

There wasn't a tender thing about her, Frank thought. Bax would've asked her to leave and then called the cops. Bax liked things neat. He didn't mess around. He would've just called the cops and waited for them quietly while she wailed her arms and demanded and looked all insulted. Not Frank. Frank liked to draw things out. He liked the pain of it, he knew that. So he told her that he regretted everything he said at dinner. He told her to forget what he said. He told her he was dumb and drunk.

"I won't forget it! I care about you," Her voice trailed off.

She wasn't going anywhere. She was planted in his tiny bed, pushed against a dirty wall, beneath a window facing bricks. You can't look for infinity in a place like this, he knew that too. He was looking for that small gap between the platform and the train, between standing and moving. That suspension before gravity remembers to do its job.

He couldn't talk about Sam, about what happened and what didn't happen, if he wanted to. Not even if a gun were pointed at his head. Not even if he didn't care if he died. Because those boys don't exist anymore and if they don't exist they can't remember. It's a funny thing memory, you can ignore it into silence. Into death maybe. That's what Frank hoped for anyway.

The closest he came to remembering was when he was in some old shack down in Tennessee. It was raining and he and his girl at the time, Martha, were on the porch, sticking their bare feet out in the rain. Frank loved Martha. She was crazy. The thing that bothered Martha more than all his drinking and cussing and feeling sorry for himself was that Frank said she was gray. She hated that,

especially after he told her that her best friend (a tall beanstalk girl with blonde hair and beautiful full breasts that pushed against chiffon every time she left her house) was lavender, like a cool sky. Martha hated being gray, but Frank thought it was a compliment. Grays are serious and stormy and interesting. Grays are sad alleyways and faraway horizons and days that feel so miserable you wish they'd never end.

When they broke up after a couple years of never getting serious, she asked him one last time if he still thought she was a gray. Truly, that was the foremost thing on her mind. And he told her the truth, a gray she is and a gray she'll always be, can't change your color. That never ceased to piss her off and it never ceased to disappoint Frank, he gave her the most worthy acclaim, held her in the highest regard and what does she want -- to be a rainbow, a f#\$king flower.

"Maybe I would like to go out," she offered, grasping. Adapting. Trying to reel him in from the precipice into the lost world of indifference. Squirring into a tiny ball, so tiny she would be invisible in his fist.

"I'm going to go whether you leave or stay," Frank said, searching for matches, half-hearing what she said.

"Wait... what about work? We both have to be up in a few hours," She reasoned.

She was in sales. He never could remember what it is she sold, despite her telling him a few times. It was something you can't buy at the corner store, like circuit boards. She was a burgundy, Frank thought. Dusty and old-fashioned. The thing is, she wouldn't even flinch probably. He could tell her she was shit brown and she'd laugh and ask where they were going to dinner next Friday. He could never be with a woman like that; a woman who didn't care about the important things.

Frank and Bax were practically identical looking, it was Sam who looked different, the blonde hair and all. Sam was tall like his brothers. As much as Frank didn't think about Sam in the past, he sure did think about him in the future. He figured Sam would be an artist and better looking than him and Bax, maybe a faster runner. He could run faster when they were kids. All the way to the end of the dock, to the end and beyond. To the bottom of the lake, to the bottom and then gone.

They were racing and then the brother pushed Sam. There was a push. Mrs. Jerome came running because she thought she saw something from her kitchen window. One time she said she saw a push, but then she stopped telling that story. No one wanted to hear it. Even though it was an accident. His head hit the boat propeller. Mrs. Jerome couldn't tell the difference between Frank and Bax; most people couldn't who didn't take time with them. One of them pushed him off the dock, I think...that one...no, maybe it was the other?

They allied themselves against Mrs. Jerome, against her story. If she wouldn't have pointed they probably would've cried and told everything. Maybe they would've been different if they did tell. Maybe it was her pointing finger that drove them into silence. All they knew was that there was no going back. They made an unspoken promise. It was funny to Frank for a lot of years that this one most important thing in both their lives, this one crucial fact was sealed without words, without a nod or a handshake. Bax was better at it, Frank thought.

"It doesn't matter what happened!" His mother screamed. She screamed like a lunatic when she saw what happened. The blood was still there, I wanted to clean it up before Mom came, I knew it would make her upset. Her skinny body was bent crooked. She scared both Frank and Bax and Mrs. Jerome. Her face was dark and grim and if they didn't know better it was almost as if she grew fangs the way she screamed. Her head shook and her arms were straight and strong, locked at the elbows. Frank never forgot that. Never. He knew that she didn't want to know. And that scared him more than anything. That scared them both.

Frank put on his shoes. He poured himself a glass of wine and took a long, steady drink. She was out of bed now, scrambling for clothes, afraid of being left in this terrible apartment. He finished the glass. He grabbed his coat and thought of Bax, probably asleep long ago in his big, warm Connecticut house. Probably wrapped in an expensive down comforter, everything quiet and peaceful. It was almost four in the morning. Frank wanted to be passed out before the sun came up. He pulled out the pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket. He knew this would not go over well. He knew from past experience. It was easier to conceal the truth. It was easier to let people believe what they want. He knew that too.

"What are you doing?" She asked, now agitated. Her eyes were trained on the cigarettes.

She was half-dressed. Frank picked up his single key, the only key he had in the whole world. She was scurrying. Her bag. Her shoes. Her phone. She worried about finding a cab now.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" She demanded.

He smiled at the irony of the question. It was precisely not saying anything that got him here, wherever here was -- circling some kind of mysterious possibility from above. People are funny, Frank thought as he pulled out a cigarette and tapped it against the counter. She was staring now. Just like his mom stared and Mrs. Jerome stared and the cops stared and everyone else in that little town stared. The truth is obvious without words, but people need the words to hang onto like a souvenir. Something they can point at to prove to their friends that they went to Paris and saw the goddamn Eiffel Tower.

He and Bax were part of a club that had no words. Frank often wondered how many people were in clubs like that, most of them by themselves without anyone to share the silence with. Without anyone who didn't need to speak.

He lit the cigarette, realizing that this was the most honest thing he'd done all night; something that expressed his revulsion, his eagerness to get away, something he knew she'd hate. He'd learned to distrust words. Nothing more than confessions masked as honesty. Frank knew that sooner or later people wanted in. No matter how hard he tried to conceal the trap door, (covering it in all kinds of fancy language and degrees and promises) people saw it and wanted to know. He had to trade minor discrepancies for his silence. The way she would make herself invisible for an Esquire.

"Hello? Frank! Aren't you going to tell me what's going on?" She pleaded, clutching to the tattered remnants of power she thought she had.

Frank chuckled.

"Yeah... I smoke."

Arrêtez

By Denise Bouchard

The young soldier came in from the frigid, rank latrine.

“It’s f#\$king cold out there!” he said, trying to warm his hands around a bad cup of coffee.

“Sorry, La Rue,” the sergeant called out. “It’s your morning to keep watch.”

He was with the 83rd infantry stationed in La Madeleine, France during the winter of ’44 and the war was becoming increasingly more real to him.

“Yeah, well, if I get out of here alive, I’m going to build a house with heated toilet seats.”

“I always said you were a ‘hot shit’, La Rue!” a nearby acquaintance chided.

He was trying to make life there at least somewhat comfortable for himself. In the spirit of molding his experiences more to his liking, he befriended a French family nearby or rather they befriended him when they found out that he had the same last name. They’d had him over for dinner several times and in return he had gotten them tires. Good food, fine wine, made him feel at home. He was a La Rue like them, after all; the closest thing to family he had on that side of the Atlantic.

His friends at the barracks all teased him about his love of food. Packages from the U.S. filled with fudge made by his fiancée arrived on a regular basis and though he was usually generous, he did not like to share this particular confection. This was his, a comfort item for his tender nineteen years of age.

Out on maneuvers one day, it became evident that he’d hidden some of the fudge in his backpack. There was a conspicuous line of ants following him right up into his pack. It became a thing of legend in his infantry company.

Being out there in the cold wasn’t the worse, he thought. It gave him time to think about his life. He sat building his dream house in his mind. The very worst was being in the foxholes, even worse than fighting on the front lines. You could hear your heart pounding as the enemy walked by

speaking in thick German accents. He'd heard the saying that there were no atheists in the foxholes and it was the damned truth.

As he stood watch, he thought of home and what he would do with his future, when and if God saw fit to give him one. La Rue had just gotten a letter from his girl the day before. Her letters were always interesting; a good trait in a future wife. It seemed she had just gone to a fortune teller. It wasn't the sort of thing she usually did but she had been with friends from work in Boston at the early Christmas party held for employees of the Internal Revenue Service and she was goaded by them to sit with the woman who always sat in the back booth of the restaurant where the party was being held, known to be very gifted. The letter related what the old woman had foreseen... "You will have four children, your marriage will be a very happy and prosperous one. The man you marry will wear a white coat with a caduceus imprinted upon its upper left-hand pocket. A man of medicine. He will be your soul mate."

The young soldier feared for a moment that she would marry someone else but ironically, he had been thinking of becoming a pharmacist like his future father-in-law.

It seemed of no concern to him that he had neither the money nor the time. What he did have was intelligence, ambition and Laura. He was intent on marrying her as soon as his tour of duty was over. There were programs for G.I.'s to get their diplomas in less time. He'd have to work day and night to go to school on top of keeping a regular job if he wanted to marry Laura as soon as he could afford to.

His mind always went back to the way she would come into the drugstore where he worked the fountain and talked to him over her coffee, so easily, before she took the bus to Boston. He thought she had the prettiest face and the best legs he'd ever seen. La Rue was shy about asking her out on a date not because she was the former mayor's daughter but simply because she was her.

Finally, her father gave her two tickets to the South Eastern Mass Ball and she asked him to join her. 'She invited *me*,' he would think to himself with pride and affection. He bought her a corsage of gardenias to match a light green and white gown. They'd been together ever since, summering at her

family's summer cottage, boating, dancing, swimming...

In the winter, he'd helped her father add on a wing to the house on High Street. A lot of people told him that it wouldn't be easy to marry the former mayor's daughter, a man who had a close friendship with FDR himself and who was now running for lieutenant governor. 'Why not? I'm just as good as he is,' La Rue would shoot back. Truth be told, though, this bravado belied his nervousness when he first met her parents. He'd been so nervous that he'd sat too far back in the rocking chair on the porch, making it fall backwards, leaving him to stay there in that position with his legs up over his head for a few moments before collecting himself.

His own father had been a skilled craftsman and though his future father-in-law had helped a lot of people to get jobs during the Depression, his father hadn't had to turn to anyone because of his skill with his hands which he'd passed on to his son. Worst case he could become a craftsman as well but he wanted to give Laura the life to which she was accustomed.

Thus, he was planning a future life when he heard Sarge and the over-sized 'Tiny' come to relieve him of his watch.

"Hey La Rue," Sarge called. "Why don't you get that adopted French family of yours to send over some whiskey?"

The snap of a branch brought them all to alert attention and rendered them silent. They came forward as they heard the crunch of snow under the tires of a bicycle straining along the secluded path which led into town.

The sergeant spoke first: "Looks like a French schoolboy," he said, "...we get them on the path time to time."

Something didn't feel right to La Rue.

"Arrêtez!" La Rue commanded as the young man was passing.

The smile disappeared from the boy's face which upon closer inspection was not so young and had a slight beard stubble.

"Où allez-vous?" La Rue asked.

“Je vais à l'école,” he replied.

“Qu'est-ce que dans le panier de vélo?”

“Mes livres.”

The American soldier looked through the school books and everything seemed in order.

“Vous ouvrez le manteau.”

The young foreigner looked frightened at the command to open his jacket.

“Qu'est-ce que c'est?” La Rue confiscated important documents from what turned out to be not a school boy at all but a German soldier who was gathering sensitive information about the Americans.

The sergeant gave the order to shoot.

That night, everyone congratulated La Rue. They called him a hero, brilliant, slapped him on the back... He did not laugh nor feel like a hero. He slept uneasily.

The American soldier did not think of a future house that night. He thought instead of his best friend who had just been taken the month before as a POW and was now in Neurenberg, Germany, suffering torture and relentless cold. He thought also of a young foreign soldier like themselves, just doing his duty to his country and the 'roles' of engagement. The sights, the faces of war, most of them about his age...

Neither his friend nor the German soldier of that day would be going home for Christmas. La Rue thought of a foreign mother's tears over the loss of the kind of a son she'd always wanted and horrific war that she had never wanted.

P.S. The fortune teller would be correct in her predictions for the American soldier. There would be four children, two sons and two daughters. She would be correct in predicting the white coat, the happy marriage and the

foretelling of a man who was a hero not because of a Bronze star or a Purple Heart, but because throughout his life he helped those around him. This was not just due to the fact that he was a man of medicine but because of another word intrinsic to him that contains the word 'science'- he was a man of conscience.

Bring the Wind

By Elisa Doucette

Logan stared out over the meadow as she put the car in park. In the early spring the flowers were barely green nubs, which gave a sense of promise for a beautiful future bloom. She was used to that, the exact moment when things gave the appearance of a promise. For most, the hint of green after a winter of gray was a welcome release. For Logan, it was just another change to pass through without incident.

She glanced at the box sitting in her front seat, mocking her with its velvety richness. Like the barely green nubs it also promised something wonderful to come. She couldn't think about that now. Couldn't think of the answer it was begging or the face of the person who gave it to her. For now she needed to plod through the verdant meadow and climb into the clouds to clear her mind.

As a final thought she grabbed the box to toss it into the glove compartment. The texture of the exterior tickled at her fingertips and she paused before hiding it in the darkness. It wouldn't be anything new for her, hiding the promise in the darkness. Knowing in some far recess of her mind that it was there, but waiting until another time to face it. A small part tugged at her, urging her to put the box back on the seat, put the car in drive and rush back to the apartment. It was only a small part, though. Not nearly enough to make her do it.

Shoving the box a little too forcefully into the glove compartment she stepped out of the car and slammed the door. The shake startled her; she had once smashed the window of her driver's side door slamming it into the frame of the body. That would be just her luck, to try to escape some of the confusion, adversity and complications that currently plagued her only to be hit with a \$250 glass repair bill.

The climb up the mountain was easy; she could have done it blindfolded for all the times she had made it before. With all the thoughts racing through her mind she might as well have been, she didn't really see any of the scenery. She crested the top of the tree line into the rocky clearing and the cold April air slapped her across face. "Great," she muttered. "Bring the wind." It would have been foolish to think that she could peacefully sit at the top, to face anything without resistance.

She sat down on a small cluster of flat rocks that looked out over the lake. The center was so still, like a looking glass you could jump through. The east end where the river connected was bubbling as the winter thaw rushed in. Early spring was Logan's favorite time to come hiking to this spot and run away from everything else. It was still and safe, away from the rushing of life upon her.

She knew the answer to the box in her glove compartment; she had from the moment it was posed. Ethan was the clichéd best thing that had ever happened to her, like a field of wildflowers. Some days the flora was vibrant and lush, others it was cold and hidden under feet of snow. Logan had hiked the mountain for years, she had watched the meadow change like clockwork every twelve months. There were no guarantees that flowers would come, yet somehow nature always followed through. She knew that she should take the box and everything it promised, because the guarantee it held was unfounded but true.

As she stood up to trek down the mountain towards the rest of her life, the wind came off the lake and knocked her onto the rocks. And she knew. She would return to their apartment, greet him at the door and try not to cry too

much as she gave him back the box. She had never had a guarantee, never had anything that came naturally. Hers was not a life of wildflowers in a field, hers was a life of thorny bushes that eventually would bear gorgeous blossoms. Only after the hardened shells could shed.

The Auckland Assignment

By Joe Kilgore

Like clockwork, the headache begins with the plane's descent. He looks out the window and tries to ignore it, focusing on green rolling hills running down to the sea. Small houses are visible in the mist. Sheep, white as cotton, dot one emerald hillside. Lion Rock stands stalwart on the black sand beach. The docks near Princess Wharf abound with sailing ships, motor craft, ferries, and tankers. It is as he remembers.

The taxi driver who takes him downtown is mercilessly silent. He appreciates that. Idle chatter irritates him. Though he never lets it show. Tradesmen recall people who are rude to them.

Up and down steep hills, the cab makes its way through crowded streets. Sidewalks teem with people. He studies their faces. Kiwis mostly, but many Asians too. Now and then the occasional Maori. It was a Maori the last time he was here. A newspaper reporter who had assimilated, he recalls. It went as planned.

"That's the Hilton," the driver says. He sees a seven-floor complex stretching at least seventy-five yards from the shore into the bay. It is designed to give the appearance of a cruise ship. Milk white with lots of glass. He has not stayed there before. He never stays in the same place twice.

Checking in, he asks if there's a package for him. There's always a package. The desk clerk locates it and he takes it with him to his room. Once there, he removes his clothes from his travel bag and lays them neatly on the bed. He will press them later. People in rumpled clothes attract attention.

He takes a whiskey from the mini-bar, pours it in a glass and walks out on the balcony overlooking the water. Black clouds hover on the horizon. Rain is

coming. He watches it approach and his mind wanders. It's psychosomatic the doctor said, probably brought on by too much stress. He remembers having smiled.

It begins to rain hard. The wind gusts. He goes inside and watches sheets of water spray across his balcony. He likes passing storms. The calm they leave in their wake is a reassuring reminder that violence is temporary.

He turns to the package. A crush-proof box is inside as usual. Within that, a manila envelope, closed but not sealed. Beneath the envelope, die-cut foam cradles a nine millimeter Ruger and ammunition. He removes the black steel pistol and inserts the loaded magazine. The click as it locks in place intensifies the pain above his eyes.

The envelope is next. It feels lighter than usual. Opening it, he realizes why. There is no photograph. There is always a photograph. But this time, there is none. There is the direct deposit receipt. Made out as usual to his private account in the Caymans. Also as usual, there is a single sheet of paper. But it too is decidedly different. No name and address at the top of the page. No summary dossier on the subject's schedule. No timetable for completion. Only a short note instructing him to be at 721 Lavender Hill at eleven the following morning. I'll be there, the note closes. It is signed, Treavor. Were it not, he would be on the next plane.

The sun rises at 7:05. When it does, it finds him sitting on a bench at the corner of Orchid Drive and Lavender Hill. He is fifty yards away and four hours early. But the covered bus stop affords an unrestricted view of the house to which he has been summoned.

At 8:15 the garage door opens and a sedan backs out of the driveway. When it moves past him a few seconds later, he eyes a young man at the wheel who pays no attention to him. Not a field operative, he decides.

By 9 o'clock others are arriving. Two men and a woman in a four-wheel drive. Three men in a station wagon. A woman in a sports car. Fifteen minutes later the first man returns. He enters the house carrying what appear to be grocery bags.

The next two hours pass slowly. No one arrives or leaves. His concentration

strays. I'm overlooking important details, he recalls telling the doctor. Missing little things people say or do. Unimportant things to them. But signals they unintentionally give out, you know? That's unacceptable in my work. Stress often leads to mental fatigue, he remembers the physician responding. Feelings of tightness and pressure in the skull, as well as diminished perceptiveness, are unlikely to go away until the stress is relieved.

He's jolted back to the present when he sees a man walk outside. Even from the distance, he recognizes the man is Treavor. He rises to move toward him, but Treavor turns as if he's been called and goes back inside. He waits until 11:15, then walks to the house and rings the doorbell. The shrill sound reawakens the dormant pain.

The young man he had seen at the wheel of the car answers the door. He tells him he's there to see Treavor. The man asks him to wait. He stands in the doorway surveying the house. The people who arrived earlier are in a large open area off the kitchen. Some are making phone calls. Others are busy at computer terminals. The young man returns and leads him to a room at the back of the house. It looks out over the water now shimmering beneath the midday sun. Treavor is there. The man leaves them alone.

"Why the deviation in protocol?" He immediately asks.

"Couldn't be helped." Treavor responds.

"I assume there's a subject."

"You just met him."

"Eating our young now, are we?"

"He's compromised the entire section."

"Still doesn't explain the deviation."

"Who do you think prepares the packages for you?"

"What did you tell him about this one?"

“Nothing. Prepared it myself.”

“Operational plan?”

“There’s an abandoned soccer stadium on Ponsonby and Jervois Road. He’ll think he’s there to pick up information from a courier. Noon tomorrow. Take his wallet and his car. Abandon it in the city. Police will assume robbery.”

“This will be my last.”

“If you wish.”

“No explanation needed?”

“Everyone wants out eventually.”

“Not a problem, then?”

“You’re freelance. We always understood that.”

“Good. Care for a drink later?”

“Can’t. Have to tie up a few loose ends.”

He leaves the house in a taxi and tells the driver to show him a bit of the city. Along the way he asks about the soccer stadium and they drive past but don’t stop. The next day he will have a cab take him within six blocks. Then he’ll walk, leaving no record of having been brought there.

The following morning he surrenders his room but checks his bag. He’ll pick it up later on his way to the airport. He’s at the stadium by 10 a.m. He finds a field once green and fresh, now rock-laden, overtaken by gravel and time. In the wind he hears the echoes of past glory and the long-silent cheers of schoolboys, men reliving their youth and wives feigning interest. He takes a commanding view of the entire area at the top of the grandstands. There, amid the decay of peeling paint and rusting rafters, his head pounds as he waits.

At 12:05 a car pulls into the parking lot. The young man gets out and begins to walk toward the field. He times his descent so he’ll be in shadow as the young

man walks into the glare of the sun. His timing is perfect. The young man enters the stadium, raises his hand to shield his eyes and is shot at point blank range. Blood, dark as pitch, stains the concrete.

With gloved hands he finds the wallet and car keys. Later, he keeps the cash, drops the wallet and credit cards in separate trash bins and drives over a bridge where he tosses the pistol into the bay. He then drives to a theatre parking lot where he leaves the car with the keys still in the ignition. He takes a taxi back to the hotel, has the cabbie wait while he retrieves his bag, then rides to the airport.

Entering the terminal, he goes straight to the counter and checks in. Then retires to the toilet before going to his gate. Inside the stall he puts his head in his hands and presses on his temples. They'll stop now he tells himself. Now that I'm done, they'll stop.

Ready to go, he unlocks the stall door. As it opens, he spies the muzzle but has no time to react. The silencer mutes the sound. The impact blows him back into the stall. He stares wide-eyed but the only thing he sees is hot red light fading slowly to black. The pain is gone. Gone for good. And somewhere, distant as a memory or perhaps close as a whisper, he hears Treavor saying "Have to tie up a few loose ends."

The City of Amaranth

By Nicole M. Bouchard

When we are born, we yearn for the essentials. When we are hungry, our bodies ache for nourishment. When our throats burn for want of moisture, we crave water. Yet when we mature, our minds overshadow our basic needs and desires, adding nearly endless dimensions to them. We thirst for power, drinking wine over water in crystal goblets and we hunger for currency, selecting a more socially acceptable part of the same animal we gladly ate before. Even our faith is drawn toward new standards.

I was raised to dream of a city since I was old enough to dream of anything. It was reinforced in me that the fabled City of Amaranth, named after the flower of immortality, existed in the upper echelons of existence. We could

not see or touch it as mere mortals. Amaranth was the wide mecca of golden hills that acted as receivers of all our innermost prayers and wishes. Only a small portion of mortals in our realm were ever granted admittance to the city. It was a worthy life goal to aspire to with no hope of it actually being fulfilled. That was enough for most of them to live their lives with, but not for me. If Fate chose me to be one of a small blessed few, then I would graciously accept; but for most of my youth I couldn't wrap my mind around the constant worship and yearning toward a place I couldn't feel.

No one understood my apathy toward it. They understood least of all when I received the Summons.

I took nothing with me from the mortal world except the clothes on my back. I walked away from an over-joyous family who were more pleased at my having been chosen than sad of my impending absence. With my letter from the city in hand, I joined the small group of individuals gathered beneath the scalding sunlight in the valley. Our uniqueness struck me as we were noticeably varied in age, walks of life and social status. The only thing we had in common was the letters of Summons clutched in our hands. We each had a particular talent that had caught the attention of the city that sees without seeing. I kept the children in the group close to me. In my tall shadow, they were able to take in some shade and solace from the sun. A little boy in brown rags with matching shaggy brown hair reached for my hand.

A long walk to the outer edge of our realm awaited us. Our guide, a representative of Amaranth, counted us and checked our letters, but did not ask our names. Being a representative of Amaranth was one of the positions a chosen mortal could hope to be given. No doubt someone in our group saw themselves as a future guide to another group of disoriented strangers. Along the lengthy dirt road, the guide spoke consistently of the importance of our being Summoned, waving his hands between the ground and the clouds. In the distance, glittering gates of gold appeared. The guide rifled through his cloak to find his badge. We overlooked his awkward fumbling out of sheer distraction by the view surrounding us.

The city of gold materialized before our very eyes. We huddled together, pressing our faces to the gates where we could hope to glimpse the new home awaiting us. "Come through now, come through," our guide called

out in a condescending tone reserved for restless toddlers. “Despite your yearnings to wander off and explore, stay together!” I wondered just where he thought we might go in this unknown land. Palaces up on the hills captured the light and refracted it, throwing prisms of rainbow color left and right, carelessly. The smaller rows of homes and village marketplaces rose in ascension of status. Alley ways of golden brick had overzealous figures dressed in white, blue and pink fluttering by like wayward butterflies.

We continued to ascend until we reached the northernmost palace. Through a grate above our heads, I could see a man’s painted golden statuesque body glittering above, glaring down at us. “Watch out for him,” our guide warned, “...he’s a common deity who disperses gold. See, watch there, he’s perched and ready to throw down his golden coins at us...” As sure as he’d said, thick golden coins were hurled down through the spaces in the grate at our heads. I watched carefully, having to duck here and there to gaze at this majestic creature. Incredulous at how he’d been spoken of dismissively, I realized with a sickened feeling that there were not only the two classes of mortals and immortals, but sub-classes of immortals as well. I reasoned that our guide must serve someone higher than the gold-throwing deity.

“Now, now, yes, yes, keep together and don’t touch anything- particularly if it’s moving... Mmm, yes it seems that the being you were supposed to meet with is unavailable this afternoon, late lunch, so...stay here, all of you...just a moment.” The seven of us watched him skip up a swirling white marble staircase that led to an open lounge where I could observe that the most prestigious of the deities gathered to drink, recline, and discuss here. Our guide stopped at a large luxuriant white marble table that held the attention of an intimidating immortal with an immense gray beard and glittering blue robes.

“Ah, so Mercius has already forsaken them?” he inquired with a sneer of satisfaction over his fellow deity’s mishap. “Bring them forward... I will meet with them even if he will not...”

“But,” our guide began.

“Speak not, nameless, run along to your wayward master...you’re

inconsequential at this juncture.”

To see our guide so easily degraded and dissolved by the golden hand that disintegrated him down to a muddy nothingness gave us a clear indication of how low we would be regarded once our welcome was through.

“You, girl, come here,” he commanded. It took me a moment to realize that he was speaking to me, probably because I was wishing he would not. “Are you the talent Mercius described, or are you not?!” I stepped forward. His large hand tipped my chin up to look in my eyes. “You are nine hundred, assigned to Department Three. Step aside, now.”

My feet jumped up to obey his command before I could realize that I’d been dismissed. ‘Department Three, Department Three, number nine hundred...’ Eight hundred and ninety-nine souls had stood here before me... But what was Department Three? I didn’t have time to ask even if I’d possessed the courage to. Number nine hundred and one, an impenetrably silent man dressed all in black, had stepped forward.

When it came to individual nine hundred and four, it occurred to me that I was standing alone. Nine hundred and one, nine hundred and two, and nine hundred and three had all disappeared down the staircase. I left before listening to where nine hundred and five would be placed and hurried down the steps behind nine hundred and four. I thought we might speak quietly to one another in a sort of camaraderie, sharing excited confidences about what lay before us. But she always kept one quick careful step ahead to avoid me until she finally disappeared into the dark hallway leading to the department to which she was assigned.

It took me a few minutes of wandering aimlessly to put some structure to my search for Department Three. I hadn’t realized that it being a low number department meant it was located in the deep underground chasms of the palace. I gave up hope that my place of work would look out onto the light that made Amaranth famous.

Instead, a dark abyss of sorts with shoddy desks separated by thick walls would be where I would inhabit, seven hours of the day. However, I was rather delighted to learn my position. A groggy, reptilian looking woman with wide bulging eyes trying to struggle free from their sockets beckoned

me forth to explain my duties. “As a mortal citizen of Amaranth,” she explained, her raspy voice raking its rough texture like coarse paper through my ears, “...you are to be a wish keeper. You will be responsible for filing, sending, and sorting the prayers, wishes and pleas of the outer realms sent to Amaranth. Take desk three hundred.” She hadn’t dismissed me, but her large eyes were turned downward again, nearly closed, and her rough voice drained to a quiet murmuring to no one in particular.

I set off to find my desk in the furthest row with purpose. It delighted me that I would be a caregiver to the hopes and dreams of the worlds outside the city. Of course, I was not the only one assigned to such a weighty responsibility and such was made clear to me the moment the papers started appearing on my once desolate desk.

“First day?” a thin, red-headed young woman asked, peering over the short wall separating us.

“Yes!” I must have answered with too much enthusiasm because her face darkened to a sarcastic smirk.

“Don’t get too excited, honey. We’re all in the same boat, just filing one thing or another... Here...” she said and disappeared below the wall only to reappear at my side. “Let me fill you in. Your job is to discern through the piles of weepy wishes we get, which ones are properly addressed to the right deity, which ones are properly worded and formatted, and which ones should be tossed. The pleas often go in the tossed pile cause they’re too negative and desperate sounding. The properly addressed, worded and formatted ones you can send on to the individual deities’ offices. Got all that?”

I had to admit to myself at that moment that I was incredulous. Weren’t we to cradle the hopes and dreams of others, particularly those wrought with desperation? How could there be a system like this when there was no system to define our hearts, our souls...our yearnings? I decided not to play rookie to my seasoned, disillusioned co-worker and just nodded to what she’d said.

“Good. I think we’re going to get along just fine,” she said as she turned to leave, flinging her red curls behind her shoulders.

I had a decision to make about the unwanted pleas. By lunch I had completed my work according to the given specifications, except that I had hidden the pile I was meant to have thrown away in the confines of my desk. I was allowed to leave early as a reward for finishing my task. I walked through the golden alleyways I'd studied upon my entrance into the city and made my way down to the first, the lowest, row of little white houses nearest to the Gate. I'd been told that mine was the same number as I was. Nine Hundred Gateway Lane. Upon arriving at the site of my bed, I saw a soft pink robe left upon the white linens. So I was to become one of the fluttering, harried individuals I'd seen on my way in. One of many, but like none.

As the days passed, my hidden pile grew. I had taken to slipping some of them into the folds beneath my robe so that I could smuggle them home leaving more room in my desk for the others that I knew would come. At times I wondered why I just couldn't settle down and be satisfied doing what I was doing like everyone else. I wondered why I had been brought here in the first place. My wondering led to wandering, and on one after lunch walk, I found my way beyond the white marble stairs to a dimly lit hallway with no doors.

A clear vase of day lilies stood alone in amber light at the end of the hall. Tempted to touch the amber light flowing over the petals like water, I stuck out my hand and felt no moisture or resistance...only a cool kiss upon my skin like a breeze on a midsummer's day. I wound my thin figure around the vase and felt the pleasant coolness drift over my body, washing over my head, down to my feet. When I raised my head, I could see clearly that I was in the space designated as Department Nine.

Of course there had been rumors, lunchtime interrogations over who was assigned where and if anybody had ever been to Department Nine.

"Kitzy Marcles says she was in there once. She reports to one of the top immortals directly, you know."

"Oh, really? When? What possible evidential proof did she have from getting in there?"

“What proof do you have that she didn’t? Or do you just know everything?!”

“Case in point, Kitzy Marcles is an idiot. She wouldn’t know a transcendent place if it hit her upside the head. And yes, I do know everything. Everything worth knowing.”

I didn’t take part in the lunch hour conversations and as Kitzy Marcles happened to be the woman the red haired girl in my department reported to, I thought it wise not to. But the rumors that I heard from my fly on the wall perspective were these: it was accessible only to immortals so if they had anyone reporting to them go there on errand, they had to undergo certain protocol. What that protocol was, I could not say, but the space was sometimes deemed a rumor and a rumor alone about where the majestic dealings of the immortals took place.

But here I stood. Inexplicably, almost awkwardly, I was present in a place of mystery seeing things I couldn’t possibly understand. There was a bowl upon a silver pedestal. Instead of seeing its depth when I peered over the edge into it, I saw the sky. Not a reflection mind you from some overhead window, but the real sky. Endless, yet accessible. I left quickly, not wanting my good fortune of not being reprimanded to run out.

I wanted to know more. My hidden collection of supposedly discarded requests lifted up my bed, acted as a second mattress, filled my drawers so that my clothes were on the floor, and intrinsically, I knew that an answer had to be in that room. If the immortals really processed the approved prayers and wishes there, what if little by little, the unapproved slipped into the sanctioned piles and were fulfilled? I heard the sound of heartache pounding between my ears and it gave me the courage to try and visit Department Nine again, only this time, with a healthy pile of prayers concealed in my robes.

The watery moisture-less passage admitted me once again with ease. Yet I was not alone. The immortal called Mercius stood hunched over the bowl upon the pedestal. Had I not known about the bowl, I might have thought he was vomiting in that position judging from the greenish pallor on his face. I knew that immortals couldn’t fall ill, but there was a sickened trace of remorse on his face as he mumbled into the bowl’s endless depths. It

nearly sounded as though he himself was pleading for help. A few colorful forms were released from his fist. I hid behind a bookshelf until he left.

Neat, organized stacks of approved material from Department Three lay upon a long narrow table. On another table, were corresponding numbered responses. Each one contained a different platitude and in this, they all sounded the same; distant, impersonal and removed. There was another table, this one now bare, but the unsettled dust in the shape of a rectangle hinted that this was the table from which Mercius had taken the few forms he dropped.

I couldn't make complete sense of what I'd seen but instead of slipping the small pile I had with me into the stacks that were to receive meaningless responses, I dropped them into the bowl, hardly understanding what I was doing. After a few sequential visits like this, I learned that the different colors in the different piles corresponded with different immortals. After reading what had been sifted by my department, the immortals, each representing different causes, would reply and their replies were on the response table. However, at times, very rarely, an immortal would drop one or a few of the prayers into the bowl along with the pleas they made for themselves which I simply couldn't explain. Regardless, I dropped my hidden collection of rejected pleas and prayers into the bowl as often as I could. The pounding sounds of heartache lessened each time I did so, though I didn't know why.

Upon my ninth visit to Department Nine, I was caught by the throat from behind as I was dropping yet another pile into the bowl. I was spun around violently to come face to face with the immortal whom I'd encountered my first day in Amaranth.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” he demanded, his face flushed tanzanite blue with anger. Once again in his presence I lost my voice and my body reacted without me. I knew I had to escape or face certain death. Free of his grasp I grabbed a chair and threw it toward him. Retelling this story, I know how ridiculous and pointless my action must have seemed. Throwing a chair at an immortal being is by far one of the most ridicule-worthy ideas I have ever had.

However, at this time, it should be made clear, not to be spared criticism,

but to continue the story, that the chair indeed collided with him and sent him sprawling to the floor with a small red bruise forming on his brow. It was then I realized with equal amounts of relief and dismay that he was a fellow mortal. Now, although a bit late, I found my voice. "I could ask the same question as you...What are you doing? You are no immortal..."

As he struggled to rise, I thought he would come forward with the intent to kill. In his moment of weakness, he had revealed something that I, that no one had ever expected or wished to find. It undermined at least a century's worth of the worship those outside the city had offered.

"I... I knew you would come..." he stammered, much to my further disgust. "There was a prophecy...a dream...I dreamt it would come to this..."

"You were all playing the parts of magnanimous, all powerful immortals... undermining us...making us want, wish, wait and hold our breath thinking that only through you could our dreams come to be...thinking that if we put our prayers in a certain way to a certain someone that was to their liking that everything would be alright... What excuse or pardon is there for such a crime?"

"Compassion," he answered wearily. "Compassion is the reason why you came to us. That was your talent. That was why Mercius chose you, though you never knew it. We chose our own end... Ironic girl, is it not? The gods must have sent you, daughter of Heart..." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I wanted to block my ears and scream over the frail scheme of it all but I knew now that we had to know, had to start anew...together.

"Gods? If you are all but mere mortals, then..."

"The pedestal, girl, look inside and see truth." I peered inside at the endless white and blue light. "There is no perfect, set way to address the gods..." he continued, "... though there are specific gods they all hear a clear intention or desire and often work together as one...We selfishly thought that if we were to sift the streams of prayers and pleas, that the gods, being burdened with less, would only answer ours and those we thought worthy. I see now that their capacity is endless... Take my hand, child. Our Amaranth has wilted..."

The city is no longer, though the empty golden palaces still stand. We, the nine hundred and the imposing “immortals” alike walked through the gates together, teaching the outer realms anew, teaching them unity and reverence to a truly divine wisdom that exists within and without each one of us. That day, the golden gates of the City of Amaranth truly opened, though they closed for the last time.

Hilary

By Rachel Leonard

“I can’t keep doing this, Miriam.” Michael’s whisper was filled with guilt and shame. He sat in the dark, cold kitchen wearing a white t-shirt and boxers. “It’s too hard,” he added into the phone. He used his free hand to hold his head up, which felt heavier than usual.

“Think about what you’re doing.” Miriam’s tone was stern, almost angry. “You can get through this, Michael. Think about the repercussions this will have on that child’s life. On your life.”

“I can’t, Miriam. If she stays here with me, she’ll starve. We’ve got nothing.”

Miriam had no response.

“I’m sorry,” Michael sighed, barely audible. He wasn’t sure who he was apologizing to.

“I think you’re going to regret this, but I’ll always support you.”

“Thank you.”

Michael hung up the phone and buried his face in his hands. He began to sob, and he did not stop until he heard the helpless cry of a baby coming from the bedroom an hour or so later. He then picked up his head and wiped away his tears quickly.

“How can I give you up?” he asked, standing over the crib. He sounded as broken hearted as he felt. He wrapped his arms around her and cradled her, and didn’t put her down until long after she was sound asleep, when his own weariness began to set in.

Miriam called the next morning from her office. “I’m coming over tonight to babysit.”

“I appreciate that,” Michael replied, “but I’m not working tonight.”

“No, listen to me, Michael.” She took a deep breath. “You can’t give Hilary up.”

Michael froze in shock. To hear somebody else say it out loud was too real, and it took Michael a moment to regain his composure.

When Michael wouldn’t break the silence, Miriam continued.

“Michael, I found Denise.”

Michael dropped the phone. He wobbled backwards a bit. He extended both arms out and moved them around until one hand found a kitchen chair. Once seated, he picked up the phone.

“Michael? Hello?”

“Miriam.” He paused, trying to collect himself. “Miriam,” he started a second time.

“Yes?” she replied patiently.

“Miriam, you had no right -”

“Please, be reasonable.”

“How did you even... How could you think this was okay?” Michael asked, sounding desperate. It finally occurred to him that he was angry. He stood,

and began to yell. "There is a goddamn reason I stopped chasing her!"

"I understand that, but—"

"But what, Miriam? When will you realize that you've got to stop playing the big sister role and let me live my own damn life?" Michael's anger had escalated into full-on fury. "I mean, how the hell did you even do this? This has got to be the worst snooping around you've ever done."

"Don't you want to talk to her, even a little bit? It's been almost a year now."

Miriam was right. Michael was somewhat curious, and part of him wanted Denise to see Hilary. She was, after all, Denise's daughter. But she had run away from Michael more than once, and the last time she left she had walked out on the both of them. That was when Michael decided to stop trying to keep Denise around. He let his hopes get up even more than usual when Denise became pregnant. He thought that this time, she had a reason to stay around, and even if it wasn't Michael, at least it was a reason. He had been wrong, and the hurt he felt for his daughter was worse than the hurt he had ever felt for himself. That was when he decided to move on, once and for all.

Michael shook his head. "She would just leave Hilary, too. And she wouldn't do it responsibly the way I want to."

"Just see her tonight, please."

"Tonight? What do you mean..." Michael's voice trailed off. He could practically hear Miriam biting her lip, preparing for his realization. "You mean you actually spoke to her? Miriam, it was bad enough to track her down but you've contacted the woman? How much does she know, exactly? Does she know that I want to... about Hilary?"

"I didn't tell her that. I just asked her if she would see you, and I told her that it was important. She lives at 154 Phoenix Street."

Michael took a deep breath. "I'll see her," he said in resignation. "But it won't change anything. And I don't even want to know how you managed to hunt her down."

154 Phoenix Street was a flimsy looking two family house that desperately needed a paint job. Michael tried not to judge, living in a rather dump little home himself, but at least he tried to care for the place. The grass had overgrown into a tangled mess of dried green and brown blades, and the porch steps were cracked down the middle. Michael hopped up them quickly, using the equally broken railing for support.

He reached for the doorbell and hesitated. Just do it, he ordered himself, and so he did.

Denise took her time coming to the door, and didn't seem phased in the least when she eyed Michael. Her hair was just as wild as the day they had met - a large, dark mess of tightly wound curls which she had, apparently, added random streaks of burgundy to. Her skin was as smooth as ever, the deepest of tans.

"How are you, Denise?" Michael asked, clearly nervous.

"Michael," she said with a slow, warm smile. She stood almost as tall as him at five foot nine, but was impossibly slender, weighing in at only 124 pounds. She had the figure of a model, still managing to have the slightest of curves, with hip bones that jutted out sharply just beneath where her t-shirt ended. Without another word, she turned and disappeared into the apartment. Michael knew that he was expected to follow.

"I'm sorry my sister contacted you like that," he called out, closing the door behind him. A coat rack stood on his left, swallowed by vibrant scarves, patterned sweaters, and a worn-in leather jacket which he knew well. To his right was a closet so packed with unopened cardboard boxes, blankets, and cleaning supplies, which had clearly never been used, that the door couldn't be shut.

"It's okay," Denise replied coolly. He followed her voice and wound up in the kitchen. She was leaning over the countertop, rifling through tea bags in a wooden box.

"I would never have allowed that to happen if I had known what -"

Denise swiveled around quickly to face Michael, leaning her weight to her right so that her right hip popped out with attitude. Her hands remained on the counter behind her, one to each side of her.

“Michael,” she said with a wry smirk. “It was about time for one of your checkups.”

Michael’s face reddened instantly. True, in the past he wouldn’t have gone this long without chasing after Denise hopelessly. But this time was different.

“Denise, I had nothing to do with my sister’s actions. I had no intentions of finding you. Hilary and I are just fine now.” It occurred to him that she hadn’t asked about Hilary at all.

“Okay.” Her voice was dripping with sarcasm. She returned her attention to preparing tea.

“You don’t believe me?” Michael paused, forcing himself to focus on what was important. “Well, fine,” he continued. He ran his hands through his messy brown hair and inhaled the deepest breath he could manage. He sighed. Denise pretended not to notice and grabbed two mugs from one of the cupboards. Or, she actually didn’t notice. Neither would surprise Michael.

His next words he chose carefully.

“Hilary and I won’t survive at the rate we’re going.”

Denise placed the mugs on the counter and checked on the water.

“It’s not boiling, but I think it’s hot enough,” she said.

“Are you listening to what I’m saying?” he asked, enraged. “I can’t keep Hilary any longer. We aren’t going to make it. I can’t afford this. I’ve received as much help from as many people as I can. I can’t find a job, and even if I did I’d have to pay a babysitter or for daycare. Most nights I go hungry. She needs a better life.”

Denise had turned around by now. She walked over to Michael, and for a moment her eyes looked sad. “Michael, what am I supposed to do? I won’t be any better for her than you are.”

“I know that. I’m not asking you to take her. I wouldn’t want it that way.”

Denise raised one eyebrow at that statement.

“You know what I mean. But you’re her mother, and you have a say in this. And you need to be a part of the process.”

“Hmm,” she said, biting her thick lower lip. “Well, pick a good family, please. And whoever they are, I want them to send yearly photos of her to me. And I’d like to see Hilary one last time before she goes.” She turned and poured the hot water into one of the mugs. She hesitated over the second one. “Wait, did I ask you if you wanted tea?”

“That’s it? That’s what you have to say?” Michael stood and slammed his fist on the small plastic table so hard that it nearly collapsed. “We are giving our child up because we can’t afford to raise her and you just want pictures? I don’t even want to give her up. This is a last resort. I haven’t slept in two weeks thinking about this.”

“Michael.” Denise approached him slowly, with her head tilted to one side. “I knew the moment I found out I was pregnant that I wasn’t capable of raising a child. And now you’ve figured it out, too.”

The bus ride home felt somehow longer than the one to Phoenix Street. When Michael walked into the door of his apartment, Hilary immediately greeted him with a drooling smile.

“Hello, beautiful,” he said, scooping her up in his arms. He brushed away a strand of her dark hair from her mocha skin and she giggled joyfully.

“How was she?” he asked Miriam when she walked into the room.

“An absolute angel,” she replied. “How did it go?”

Michael shook his head.

“Well, I have to be going now. I have to pick up Jonah from his friend’s house. I’ll call you later so we can talk.”

They said their goodbyes and Michael picked up the phonebook. He found an adoption agency. He stared at the telephone number for a few moments before he dialed.

“Hello, you’ve reached the Brookline Adoption Agency located on 1800 Gaspee Street. We are currently closed. Leave a message or call back tomorrow.” Beep.

Michael hung up the phone without leaving a message. He turned to watch Hilary fumble around with her wooden blocks by the television, which was playing Blue’s Clues.

Once more, Michael shook his head, if only to himself.

“Not today,” he said. “We can at least make it until tomorrow.” He walked over to Hilary and began playing with her. “We can always make it until tomorrow, right Hil?”

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