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Come in...and be captivated...

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"Beach 8" by Jim Fuess; <http://www.jimfuessart.com>

Welcome to our Fiction section!

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Incident At 258

By Tony Wayne Brown

A brisk March wind swept swirls of dust across the road as the woman whose black hair was streaked with silver drove her old Chevy the last mile to her hairdresser's. As usual, a cell phone was glued to her ear. A farmer going the opposite direction on a John Deere tractor shook his fist at her as she swerved perilously close to the wide tobacco harvester he was moving to the next field of bright leaf tobacco that was ready to be picked. The lady with the aging hair didn't see him at all as she continued chatting.

"You simply have to do something about my hair, Doris! You will not believe how many gray hairs I've gotten since I saw you last month. It's awful...simply awful!" Glancing in the rear view mirror to check her appearance, she shook her head. "You'll see what I mean." Her eyebrows furrowed at her own image as she listened for a moment. "Yes, uh huh. You will be shocked."

Nodding as she jammed the phone between her cheek and shoulder, she started applying lipstick while steering with her left hand, alternately scanning the mirror and road, pursing her lips as she tried to get the lipstick exactly right.

Somewhat satisfied with her efforts, she returned the tube to her purse and took out a hairbrush. The phone slipped out and she bent over to pick it up off the floor in front of her seat, swerving off the asphalt and then back into her lane as she straightened up. With the phone between her shoulder and cheek again, she began stroking her hair while listening, shaking her head again at the signs of age that would require Doris' attention.

"Oh, I agree with you one hundred percent," she said, nodding again as if the hairdresser could see her. "That Vanna White is so good on that show. I don't think she's aged a bit since the first time I seen her. You never see gray hairs on

her. Oh, and what about that Regis Philbin...he's been on television since it was invented, seems like, and he ain't aged nare-a-bit. How does he do it?" She listened; the white of her eyes showing.

"You don't say! So he colors his, too, you say. Don't matter a whit to me, Doris. I'd marry him in a heartbeat if he won't already took. But that wife of his is cute as a button! I can't blame him one bit for marryin' that gal."

She looked at the road quickly, maneuvered back off the shoulder of the road, then returned her attention to looking nice for Doris. Two over-sized signs stating "STOP AHEAD" whizzed by without notice.

He was glad to be on his way home after a hard day of supervising a crew of men pouring a concrete slab for a new office building in Greenville. It was Friday afternoon, and that normally meant a weekend of time with his girlfriend, but only half the job had been done due to only half the crew showing up for work. The job had to be completed before Monday so; Saturday would only mean another work day.

"Just three more miles, Jack," he said to his co-worker, who commuted to work with him since they were friends and lived near each other. "I am so pissed off at those guys who didn't show up for work today. I knew it was a mistake to pay them early. I tried to tell 'em, but you know how those guys in the front office are."

"Damn right I know. They're not the ones who have to work on Saturdays just because half the crew's gettin' high on Thursday night, instead of Friday."

"And what about Phil and Jeff? Where the hell were they?"

"I forgot about those riffraff. They're just as bad, huh? They're probably sucking down Wild Irish Rose over there in Ripple City. One of these days one of 'em'll wake up floatin' down the Tar River, wondering where the hell Greenville went."

"More'n likely wake up dead, you mean, and more a-floatin' in hell, not on no damn Tar River."

The driver's glaring eyes were glued to the asphalt ahead, his mind focused on how his Saturday would be spent. Darkness would come before his work would

be done. And no woman to rub his aching back.

"Only two miles now," Jack said. "Let's stop at the store to get a couple brews and some square nabs."

"Naw. Got nothin' on my mind but getting home so I can spend time with Jean. She called me this mornin' and told me she's gotta work tomorrow because somebody's on vacation."

"Her again? What is it with you and that woman? Seems like you're always at her place."

"You got a woman who's gonna draw you a hot bath, wash every inch of your body, then jump in the tub with you so you can wash every inch of her body and make her hot?"

Jack scratched his neck. "HmMMM...can't rightly say I have. I suppose you were plannin' to spend all weekend in that big brass bed of hers you're always talkin' about."

The driver laughed as he poked Jack with his right hand. "Damn right! Now I just got tonight."

Thoughts of her filled his mind as he stared straight ahead, thinking only of that hot bath that awaited him, and her warm body pressed against his. He had traveled this road so often that the pair of flashing yellow warning lights strung across the intersection ahead at Cobb's Crossroads didn't register in his consciousness. His many trips down this road made him feel as if he could make his way home blindfolded.

The two had never met--the lady with graying hair and the construction foreman with someone else on his mind--but their paths would soon cross. She had finished the conversation with Doris and had immediately started applying makeup. Her eyes traveled from the rear view mirror back to the road ahead.

"Oh, my God!" she screamed when she saw two overhead flashing red lights mere feet ahead. Before she could even touch the brake pedal two large stop signs that flanked the road ahead went rushing by.

In the Dodge Ram pickup, Jack, irritated because they weren't stopping at the store ahead to grab a cold one, was jerked from his thoughts by an old Chevy sedan coming toward the intersection from the right. He started to say something, but not wanting to sound like a back-seat driver, thought better of it. Surely that driver would see all the stop signs and warning lights. Jack tilted his head to the right, thinking any second the car would come to a stop. Still it proceeded unabated, with no indication it was slowing at all. Jack looked at his buddy to make certain he saw the oncoming car. There was no more indication their truck was slowing down than there was for the car. His eyes sprang open.

"WATCH OUT!" he finally screamed. "That bastard ain't stoppin'!" Instinctively, he shielded his head with his arms.

Jarred from thoughts of his girlfriend, the truck's driver saw the white car coming full-tilt towards N.C. 43, less than fifteen feet ahead. The brakes screamed in agony as his feet crushed the brake pedal to the floor. The squealing of tires lasted only seconds as the front of the pickup skidded to the right. It smashed into the Chevy sideways just at the driver's door of the truck, striking with such force that it almost separated in the middle as the rear bent and swung into the side of the car.

The truck's airbags instantly inflated, but did little good for the driver, whose head smashed against the side window. Glass and pieces of metal were still flying and spinning in the air while several hangers-on at the country store on the corner yelled, "Call 911!" as they ran toward the intersection. A cloud of dust and smoke gave the scene the look of war. The air was pervaded by the stench of burnt rubber and spilled gasoline. From the store and cars that had stopped at the scene, people ran to see what could be done to help.

The windshield in front of the Chevy's driver was smashed from the impact of her head since she had no seatbelt on and no airbag. Blood was spurting from her forehead. Her hair was no longer gray. Doris wouldn't need to color it after all.

"You alright, lady?" a man said, tapping on the driver's side window, which through some quirk was the only unbroken window left on the car.

The woman didn't respond, so he tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. The faint sound of a woman's screaming voice was coming from a cell phone lying on the floor in front of her. The men tried all the doors in turn, but none

would open.

"Better wait until the rescue squad gets here," someone said. "We might get sued or somethin' if we go in there without knowing what the hell we're doin'."

"Nothin' else we can do," a voice responded.

Over at the truck, the driver's head was rolling around, his eyes blinking.

"What happened?" he asked a man who was trying to open his door.

"You was in one hell of a crash, man, but you'da been shot out of this truck like a rocket ship to Mars if you'd hit her slam head-on."

Jack had fared much better, suffering little more than a bump on the back of his head, and a wide mark on his stomach from his restraint. He tried to shake the double-vision from his head as he turned toward his buddy. "You okay, man?"

The driver looked in his direction without seeing anything. "It hurts, Jack. It hurts real bad," was all he said before passing out. A bulging knot on the left side of his head looked like an overripe pumpkin about to burst.

In less than ten minutes a Tarboro Fire Department truck arrived, then a Pinetops Volunteer Rescue Squad truck seconds later, then another, and another. Some firemen hosed down the pool of gasoline that had spilled, while others used the Jaws of Life to carefully extract the woman from the mangled metal that once was a car. As she was laid on a stretcher, a rescue squad member picked up her cell phone and listened a moment, then said, "The lady you were talking to has been in a serious accident over here on U.S. 258. If you know her family you better get'em to Pitt Memorial on the double."

From over tall pine trees to the east a sleek new helicopter with "EastCare" painted on its side appeared moments later, creating an immense cloud of swirling dust as it landed on the high-banked field bordering the road, amidst a huge patch of henbit weeds, their small flowers painting a purple picture in the blade's wash. The unblemished surface of the helicopter contrasted sharply with the mass of crushed steel the two vehicles had become.

Pitt County deputies and volunteer firemen had cordoned off the four corners of the intersection. After listening to the paramedics from the helicopter who were

tending to the woman in the midst of a knot of rescuers, one of the firemen walked away, shaking his head. "She's on the highway to heaven," he said to a deputy.

The deputy placed his hat against his heart, pursed his lips, and looked at the ground.

The North Carolina Highway Patrol was there in force now, along with more deputies. They talked to the witnesses, measured skid marks, took photos and did all the other routine items that are a part of every accident investigation. As EMTs were loading the foreman into an ambulance, Jack, strapped to another gurney, said, "His girlfriend's supposed to be on duty at the hospital tomorrow. Do you think he'll be able to see her?"

"I'm sorry to tell you this, man, but he's not likely to be seeing anything tomorrow," a medic said. "If you've got her number, I'll try to get her there tonight."

Jack gave it to him as the ambulance's door slammed shut. Its sirens wailed into the gathering dusk, followed more slowly by the one carrying Jack, and a highway patrol car.

With traffic having been backed up in four different directions, most drivers had turned around to find a different route, but others simply parked on the roadside so they could gawk. Two tow trucks appeared, having gotten the word from their emergency frequency scanners. The rescue and police vehicles' radios filled the air with a Babylon of competing squawks. At a state trooper's signal, the tow truck drivers winched the vehicles onto rollbacks and took them wherever smashed cars are taken when it's likely a fatality is involved.

With no easy access to the injured woman from where the chopper had landed due to the high embankment, the pilot revved its engine, took off, and landed on the road in the open spot created by the tow trucks. One paramedic held an IV bag above the woman while her stretcher was loaded. Soon the helicopter whirled back toward the large hospital from which it had come and traffic was allowed through again. The men who had been hanging out at the old store returned to slouch against the front wall, now armed with something more to talk about than the sultry spring weather.

Five minutes later the traffic was whizzing by as fast as ever, the flashing yellow

lights on N.C. 43 and the over-sized double stop signs on U.S. 258 once again ignored. Like life itself, happening every day, all around, warning signs that should have been heeded just went unnoticed as the scattered fragments of glass began moving to the shoulder of the road to join those from the previous week. They would lie there in the sun like tiny lighthouse beacons, awaiting the next incident at 258.

Promises

By Linda J. Nordquist

The first and last time I saw Santa Claus I was seven years old. I thought it was amazing. My mother, Bettylu, and a host of strangers that day might not agree. But I saw him. He picked me out of a crowd and winked. And a wink from Santa is not easy to forget.

Christmas reminded us that we were have-nots. Bettylu found this especially difficult. She tried hard to mask her sadness by taking me to visit Santa on the 12th floor of the J. L. Hudson Company on Woodward Avenue in Detroit. The year that Santa winked at me was the year Bettylu stopped going.

Santa never visited the tenement flats and boarding houses in my neighborhood. So when I heard that he would come only if a plate of cookies was set out, I knew my goose was cooked. We couldn't afford a single cookie. And, if through good fortune, one had landed on my plate, I would've snatched it up.

Bettylu and I moved to Detroit from a holler in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia. She said she needed to start a new life. We left later than most; but being late for life-changing events was not unusual in my family.

My daddy used to set on the rotting slats of the front porch, plucking his banjo and singing mournful tunes of loves and good times long gone. Not that he had experienced either. Meanwhile, the Great Migration of white and colored folks passed by. They were going north in search of factory jobs.

"Jessup," Mama would say, "I'm usin' the last of the flour for supper. You got any plans to bring in some money before breakfast tomorrow?"

"Yep, Bettylu, I do," he would answer, not missing a beat, a wolfish grin

spreading across his face. “Been thinkin’ of removing some savings from the bank.”

She would sit on his lap and mess his hair with her floury hands, and they would laugh in sync like they were a musical duo.

Then one day he took himself serious. The problem— it wasn’t his savings he withdrew at the point of a rusty old rifle. The defense, “desperation in the face of starvation,” brought on a coughing fit so bad, the judge’s face turned the color of a fire hydrant.

“Mister, these are boom times for any man willing to work. I’ve got no truck with the likes of you. I’m sorry fer yer missus, but maybe a little prison time will set yer attitude right. Five years hard labor.”

The gavel came down, the cell door slammed shut, and Bettylu and I were cast adrift.

A month later, after we had exhausted our supply of tears, we tromped out to the main road totin’ a paper bag with our valuables: a pair of patched coveralls and an old winter jacket from the second-hand store for me, and a cotton dress worn thin from scrubbing for Bettylu. We were traveling light—just like we lived.

“Where we goin’?” I asked, kicking a stone.

“Oh, I dunno,” she hummed, rubbing a dandelion under her fine-boned chin. “Pick a letter. Maybe that’ll help.”

That was so like her. The world was tumbling around us: daddy in prison, seven borrowed dollars in her dress pocket, everything we owned in a sack and her wantin’ to play a game. Years later I would understand that escape was her way of coping, no matter the consequence.

“I don’t know no letters.” Had she forgotten I was only four and hadn’t started school yet? “And I don’t wanna play no stupid games. I’m hungry.”

“Come on now, Monkey-face. We got some serious planning to do. This ain’t no time for a moody toody. Here, we’ll put five stones in a row. The one on the left, that’s A, on the right is E. B, C, and D are in the middle. Now you close your

eyes and turn around in a circle.”

She put her hand on the top of my head like I was a spinnin’ top while I did a one-legged twirl. “OK. Bend down and feel for one of them stones. That’s right. You got it,” she cried. “You picked D.”

She grabbed me up in a big hug and we spun around laughing. For a moment I forgot the heavy-hearted look on my daddy’s face when we said good-bye. I could tell he knew that talk about “keepin’ in touch” and “meetin’ up soon’s he got out” was a bunch of crap.

Bettylu put me back on the ground with instructions to put the stone in my pocket.

“Don’t lose it. Someday it’ll bring you right back to this spot and you’ll remember clear as day how we decided to go to...to... to De-troit!” She jumped up and down, clapped her hands, and waved the dandelion in the air as if this muddle-headed decision was anything but.

We arrived at the Detroit bus station early on a Sunday morning. Bettylu handed me a soggy peanut butter sandwich, the last of eight she had stuffed in our bag. I hadn’t brushed my teeth in three days and the foul odor of rotting peanuts reached my nostrils and turned my stomach.

“Here, rub some soap in your mouth,” she said, activating her maternal instincts.

We stepped from the station into a cement, brick and asphalt landscape so gigantic, it gave me the jitters.

“Mama,” I whimpered, raising my arms, signaling a pick-me-up was in order.

Bettylu never could read signals.

“Hush, now. C’mon. Let’s see, which way should we go?”

I could sense another twirl coming and began backing away.

“You want to go in that direction? Sure. One’s as good as another.”

Years later I wondered what she would have said if I'd skipped south towards the Detroit River.

We strolled north on Woodward Avenue, passed tall office buildings and department store windows full of the biggest dolls I'd ever seen. They were dressed up in what Daddy would have called "some high falutin' airs." Bettylu, her mouth hanging open, stared at those clothes. She ran her hand down her dress with its memories of pink flowers; her face scrunched in pain as if she'd lost something and just realized what it was.

What I remember most about that walk was standing on tiptoe with my nose pressed against the glass that separated me from paradise: tiers of milk chocolate caramels, pecans soaked in dark chocolate, decorated cakes, cream puffs, cookies, and photographs of ice cream sundaes drenched in hot fudge. I threw my arms in the air and raced back to Bettylu. She was dancing in the middle of the sidewalk in front of a window of ballroom dresses.

I grabbed the bottom of her dress and dragged her in the direction of my supreme happiness.

"Look! Look!" I squealed, pushing her up close to the glass. Her smile grew with the discovery of each chocolaty delight until finally her delicate lips spread out wide.

"Oh, Monkey," she moaned. "We will come back here someday. I promise. We'll sit on a stool at that counter and slurp that fudge sauce. And then..."

She let out a gasp and stepped back from the window.

"You girls lost?"

I whirled around and gulped. In front of me was a red-faced giant in high black boots sitting atop a horse that dwarfed any sway-backed plow horse I'd ever seen. We had been so caught up in our prospects for a life filled with fancy dresses and sweets, we never heard the clippety-clop of hooves coming up the street. My lower lip started to quiver. I raised my hands for a pick-me-up, and settled for clutching air.

"No...no, not lost, officer," she said barely above a whisper. "We're lookin' for a room to rent."

He nodded towards the store behind us and chuckled.

“In Sanders Bakery?”

The tension in Bettylu’s body gave out. She put her hand over her eyes to block the sun and gave the giant one of her best smiles that, up till then, had been reserved for my daddy. It made me mad to see her beaming at the policeman like that.

“What you’re looking for is a boarding house. You’ll find them on Second and Third Avenues just past Cass Park.” He gave us directions, put a gloved finger to his hat, winked at my mother and swung the horse around. “Good day, ladies,” he said in parting.

We continued along, taking in the strange sights and sounds of the foreign country we found ourselves in, and turned onto Third Avenue.

“Oh, Lord,” Bettylu groaned as she surveyed the neighborhood. “Jessup Haynes, I could wring your bantam rooster neck!”

She took a deep breath, puffed up her chest where she kept her courage and muttered in my ear, “Don’t you say nothing. I’ll do the talking. You just stand there and look sweet as you can.” She ran her fingers through her flaxen bangs and gave me a weak grin. “Somewhere along here I’ll find us a room. It’ll have to do for now but we won’t be here long. I promise you that!”

She took me by the hand. We climbed rickety steps. Women with stiletto faces, lips smeared with Saturday night lipstick, and small stones for eyes answered our knocks. They looked Bettylu up and down and seemed pleased, until they saw me hidden in the folds of her dress.

“This ain’t no place for kids.”

“What’s wrong with you? Don’t you know no better than to bring a kid around here?”

“This is Whore’s Alley, Hon. You walk up a couple blocks and you’ll find what you’re lookin’ for.”

Bettylu held her head high, but I could tell she was scared. My hand was caught in her sweaty grip and her body bent sideways towards me like I had suddenly become a guide dog for the blind. It was one of many role reversals that would define our relationship over the years.

Finally, we came upon a boarding house with a furnished room to let. It had a double bed, wooden chair, small table and hooks on the wall to hang our clothes. There was a picture of Jesus Christ taped to the wallpaper. The bathroom at the end of the hall had a tub with lines of scum. And it had something we'd never seen before—a hot water faucet.

Best of all, the room had a built-in window seat that looked onto the street. Outside was a busy world. Inside it was just sad Bettylu and me.

Within a week she had smiled her way into a job as a waitress for the breakfast and lunch shifts at a nearby Greek restaurant.

“I don't know what Greeks eat, but whatever it is, we get to eat it for free. And, Monkey-face, I've signed you up for kindergarten. You start tomorrow.”

She had gone and done it again, forgot that I was only four, and signed me up to walk alone to school. I balked.

“I'm too little to go to school,” I cried. “And I'm waaay toooo little to walk there by myself.”

“Hush. I told the principal that you had just turned five, which ain't too far off.” She bent down and pinched my cheeks. “And in December I've got the biggest surprise for you. You're gonna be so happy.”

“What?” I sniffled, eyes down, not wanting to appear too interested.

“We're gonna go see...”

“Daddy!” I squealed, racing in circles, whooping and clapping my hands. “Daddy!”

Bettylu got a pinched look on her face. “No, we can't visit Daddy. He's too far away. We are going to visit Santa Claus.”

“Who?”

“Santa Claus, silly. He comes every December at Christmas time...”

“I don’t want no Stannacas. I want my daddy.”

“But Santa brings toys to all the little children.” She busied herself yanking my hair into a braid and muttered, “...that’s more than yer daddy ever did.”

“What kind of toys?” I asked.

“Anything you want,” she said, teetering between realistic expectations and private fantasies.

Anything? Could it be true? My chest pulsed with the promise of unimaginable riches. “When is Stanna coming?”

“On Christmas Eve. But first we have to go visit him at the J. L. Hudson Department Store, OK?” She turned me around and smoothed the bib of my coveralls. “Don’t look so glum. This is our new life and Santa will be expectin’ us. I promise.”

On a cold Saturday afternoon a week before Christmas, we took a bus ride downtown. I had been hearing all about Santa Claus in my kindergarten class and had colored pictures of him with my crayons. My teacher said Santa brought presents every Christmas to children who had been good all year. I found that piece of information worrisome. I sat in the window seat watching the snow fall. I remembered how I cried from being hungry and how that caused my daddy to be sent away. That would sure count as being bad.

Our excitement was explosive when we stepped from the bus. The sidewalks glistened with ice crystals, and frost collected in the corners of windows. Moving shoulder-to-shoulder with the crowd crossing Woodward Avenue, we saw Hudson’s revolving doors.

Suddenly Bettylu slowed down. With people bumping into us, she saw an opening and bolted through it, yanking me along with her. She leaned against a lamp pole and gasped for breath. Her eyes had a wild, desperate look and, despite the cold, tiny drops of perspiration formed on her forehead.

“Mama, what’s wrong?”

“Can’t...breathe,” she panted. “Just...give me a...minute.”

I stood there, scared, while laughing adults with happy-looking kids raced passed us and disappeared into Hudson’s.

We boarded the bus for home.

Bettylu regained her senses after an hour of rest. “I’m so sorry, Monkey-face. Next year. I promise.”

Santa did come that year even though we didn’t put out cookies. I didn’t see him. He left me a pair of mittens. But no toys.

The following Christmas Bettylu came up with a plan to avoid the crowds. We waited until the day before Christmas, hoping most people would be finished shopping. The crowds were smaller but still moved like a marching band towards Hudson’s.

“Look, Monkey-face. Look what’s in these windows,” she said, pulling me away from the rotating doors. The display windows had been transformed into a glittery world of fairy tales.

“Mama,” I screeched. “Look, there’s Snow White and her dwarfs.” I ran ahead to the next display window. “It’s Tinker Bell and she’s flying! Oh, and Minnie Mouse.”

Round and round the block we went, pressing our noses to the windows, our breath fogging the panes.

“Look at the train, Mama, and all those little people. And Santa’s elves.”

“Wow, it’s Cinderella.”

“Oh Mom, it’s the gingerbread house with Hansel and Gretel....”

Before I knew it, we were back on the bus without having set foot in that store.

“I’m so sorry, Monkey. I have such a headache. It must have been all those

lights. Next year. OK Sweetie? We won't stop at the windows. We'll go straight into the store to see Santa. I promise."

Something occurred in the fall of the following year. Rumors spread among my second-grade classmates that Santa Claus was a big fat fib. It was easy to believe since I had never seen him. Yet many of my school friends had seen him at Hudson's. They talked about his eating the cookies they put out on Christmas Eve and the gifts he left under their Christmas trees. Had they all been duped? My universal trust cracked.

Bettylu, however, took up the banner of Santa Claus with gusto.

"Of course he exists, silly. This year I will prove it to you. I promise. This is the year we are going right through those doors and ..."

But I had become jaded what with all the failed excursions and this new information ladled on top.

"OK, Mama," I said, with little enthusiasm. "This is the year."

The day before Christmas was cold and bleak with a hard-driving sleet that stuck on everything like globs of pudding. But Bettylu was not to be denied. She had a new strategy: go late on the last day when most people would be returning home for family festivities.

The bus slid to a stop across from Hudson's one hour late due to icy roads. I hadn't slept the night before and felt anxious. I dragged Bettylu across the avenue. We were a few steps away from the truth when we stopped. My eyes settled on the locked doors. The lights in the display windows went out.

Bettylu didn't say a word. She just turned around and made her way over the slippery sidewalk to the bus stop. She had a faraway look on her face. I took her hand.

"It's OK, Mama. Maybe next year." I don't think she heard me.

We sat a few rows behind the bus driver. I looked out the window at a dreary world. Bettylu stared at her galoshes.

At the next stop a ruckus occurred as the doors opened and a blast of arctic air

blew down the aisle. The noise drew our attention.

“Ho, Ho, Ho. Merry Chrishmas,” the voice rang out. Santa himself crawled up the bus steps. He clung to a pole, and, hand over hand, brought himself upright. Lurching across the aisle, he slumped onto the seat behind the driver.

His body rolled side to side in sync with the swaying of the bus. He smiled at a buxom woman who sat across from him. Her lip curled in disgust.

“Ho. Merry Chrishmash,” he said.

The woman blanched, grabbed her packages, and hastened to the rear.

The words “Oh my God” whooshed out of Bettylu’s mouth as she grabbed my shoulder and ordered me to stop staring.

A foul odor of alcohol, tobacco, and pee moved like a fat old snake down the aisle. Santa, straddled on the seat with his legs wide apart, had a big wet spot around his crotch.

I studied every inch of him. He didn’t look like all those pictures I had colored. The white fluffy beard was scraggly with a brown stain circling his mouth. His cheeks were sunken and pale, not at all fat and rosy. And his muddy boots were cracked open around the toes. He clutched a crinkled package of Lucky Strikes in his hand.

I began to see the reality of it. Of course this was Santa. His red suit sported a layer of soot and grime from shimmying down all those chimneys. And he was so skinny that his big black belt wrapped around him twice. It all made sense. Whoever thought that a fat Santa could slide down chimneys, stay clean and not scuff his boots was mistaken.

My excitement verged on hysteria.

Santa’s chin rested in his beard. His head bobbed. Suddenly, he jerked awake. With some effort, he pushed up from the seat and staggered towards the door. Hugging the pole, he turned, looked straight at me and put his finger to his nose.

“Mer... Chrishma...,” he said. And then he winked at me!

I gasped. As he spun around to negotiate the exit, I leapt from my seat.

“Bye-bye, Santa,” I yelled.

While Bettylu, tears rolling down her cheeks, struggled to pull me to her, I gave one last triumphant farewell.

“See you next year, Santa. I promise.”

The Death of an Atheist

By Mike Clough

He would not tremble at death. After all, there would be nothing afterwards – no brimstone, no chirping angels, nothing. And at least it would be quiet. There’d be no nurses fussing around his bed, no doctors offering dire prognosis. That was something at least.

The man in the next bed was gray and withered. He’d barely spoken a word in all the time he’d been here. He leaned over to him anyway and gasped, “Perhaps we’ve no choice but to believe in these fanciful conceits. Do you see what I’m saying, old man? We’ll be out for the count, you and me. Imagine if we didn’t have these stories. With Darwin we’re just vessels of reproduction. Our dangly bits are of greater importance than our minds.”

The man’s eyes jangled in their sockets and although he didn’t say anything, there was understanding.

“All our art, our poetry – it doesn’t matter one jot because we should be casting around for a mate. Any old gobbledygook is better than that. I’ve told you before haven’t I, how I used to lecture at LSE? Well that doesn’t seem so very long ago. Time passes too damned quickly if you ask me. Except here that is. Here we’re just waiting to die. Yes, you close your eyes and have a good nap. It’ll go quicker that way.”

The results came back. It was obvious anyway. He knew in his heart that he didn’t have long. It was why they’d arranged all these visitors – one last look at the silly old bugger before he passes away. Worse, they thought it somehow appropriate to send him a priest.

He leaned up against his pillow and offered a firm stare. "I am an atheist, you know. So why they sent you I really can't fathom."

The priest fingered his rosary beads in a way that was second nature to him. Down below in the dusky streets the wind whipped and a volley of rain lashed against the trembling windows. He didn't have the heart to send him away, not on an evening like this. And anyway, he felt too weak for that.

"I'll be a materialist until my last dying exhalation. And there'll be nothing after that – no heaven, no hell, nothing. That's how it is and really we all have to accept it."

The priest put a hand to his head.

He wanted to push him off but there was a natal comfort to it, the sensation of not being alone, and surely the priest meant well by it.

His eyes closed. In the swirling darkness of his mind soft and beguiling faces appeared. He saw his wife who'd passed away long ago. Slowly she took shape before him, so real that he tried reaching out to touch her. Soon there were many others, warm words falling from their translucent mouths. It took a moment or so to identify them. As he did so, fond memories swept over him.

Here was his father nestling a frothy pint of bitter in his lap, a pipe simmering between his lips. "Accept it for what it is. A purely chemical reaction, all that dopamine flooding your cerebellum. Nice, isn't it? You have to thank hundreds of thousands of years of evolution for this."

He wanted to correct him, to say that it was more like millions, but now his mother was speaking. Her hair flowed long and black; she hadn't changed at all, not since he'd last seen her more than forty years ago. At the periphery of his vision he could see the priest making incantations.

"It's a lot more than that, a lot more than biology. This is God at work, my son, soothing your passage into Heaven. Praise the Lord and Hallelujah."

"Chemical reaction," his father coughed, bashing the pipe against the heel of his shoe. "Purely physiological. Don't listen to such hogwash."

The figures were multiplying and becoming a vast mumbling chorus: there were old school teachers, university professors, work colleagues, aunts and uncles, friends he hadn't seen in a decade or more, all dead.

"An absurd inference," he grumbled to the priest. "This is nothing but hallucination brought about by dopamine, imagination. You shouldn't be doing this to me. It won't change my mind at all."

Lastly, his grandson emerged from the ether, holding out a hand. He knew then that it was a dream. He'd fallen asleep listening to the priest, that's all. It was the only explanation, his grandson being alive after all.

Yet there was a strange maturity about Michael. Gray wisps of some unimaginable substance curled about his face; he looked much older and somehow knowing, despite the baseball cap and the bright green tee-shirt that identified him. The day before there'd been another killing: a fifteen-year-old stabbed in the chest, and on the TV, shockingly, you could see one of those baseball caps in a pool of blood.

"I've come to take you, Granddad," Michael said.

"What's happened to you? Tell me what's happened. Are you okay? Not in any trouble are you?"

"I got into a fight, Granddad. Stabbed. The funny thing is I didn't have far to travel to see you, accident and emergency's only down the corridor. You might have heard me arriving, a right racket the ambulance was making. But I wasn't bothered about that. I was already gone by then. I've been drifting around all night looking for you. We're going away from here, Granddad. We've a journey to take. An adventure. Like Blanchard and Jeffries."

"Mallory and Tensing. Just like those stories I used to tell you. I thought you'd forgotten about those."

"Always loved them, always."

"But then you grew up."

"I had to, living in a place like that. Had to."

“Good God, but you're nothing but a kid really, nothing but a boy. That stupid gang, that stupid bloody gang. Why, Michael, why? What about your mother? Did you ever stop to think? Dead now. There's nothing left for you.”

“I'm at terms with that, Granddad, with her, with the life I've left behind. Now come on, we have to leave here.”

“Good god, what a mess. I can't go now. I really bloody well can't. I should have stopped you, put my foot down.”

“I've been to see her already. I sat next to her, whispered to her. Oh, that was not so long ago, must have been no more than ten hours since. She'd come to see you, all tearful she was, knowing you didn't have long. As for me, I think she knew already, or at least sensed it. She'd called my mobile twice, left messages. I put my arms around her and asked her to find it in her heart to be strong. I placed a hand on her forehead then and right away she fell into a deep, comforting sleep. I can do that now, Granddad. I can do all sorts of magic. I can pass through walls if I want to. I can see a soul lifting up and out of a body like yours is doing now. There are plans for me, Granddad, big plans. He says that I am to accompany the dead on their last journey. That's to be my job, in the afterlife, a real purpose for me. Come, you must take my hand.”

"This is an illusion. I'm dreaming this."

"No. I am dead, Granddad, dead. But it's not all bad, you know, not when you have a purpose. Please, this is my first job and I don't want to get it wrong."

“Not two, not two in one day. I must stay. I really must stay.”

“Better this way. Come, take my hand. It's a new morning already.”

The pain and the tension eased from his bones. He felt his corporeal form lifting from the bed and the muttering of the priest grew faint. He couldn't help but think about the sadness of it as he grabbed the boy's hand. “What the hell did you think you were doing? You haven't reached any age at all. I think you're a fool to come to terms so easily.”

“What choice do I have, Granddad, what choice?”

They were shifting along the corridor, unseen by the arriving visitors, unseen by the nurse at her desk, unseen by the receptionist.

Outside the streets were deserted, black rainclouds bubbling across the sky.

“Look at the contours, the way the clouds are rolling away, the faint glimmer of light at the edges. You take it for granted but just look at it. As good as any painting, any masterpiece. You don’t get better than that.”

The wind ruffled his pajamas but he felt no cold, only the warmth of his grandson’s hand. “Where we going then? Where you taking me? Heaven is it, or Hell? And by what means? Float away on a fluffy cloud, do we?”

“The number seventy-two, Granddad. It’ll be arriving shortly.”

“The seventy-two, eh? That goes by way of the airfield, doesn’t it?”

And there it was, a bright red Routemaster trundling towards them, the ticket collector clinking the bell.

“I’m so sorry I seem to be without cash. My wallet, see.”

“No need, no need,” the collector said, raising his cap. “This is a free service, sir. Hop on board.”

“Samuel? Samuel isn’t it? Black Sam. I haven’t seen you in years, Sam. What’re you up to these days?”

“Just doing my job, man. Just doing my job. A service comes through here twice a day, what with it being such a large and busy hospital.”

“You always wanted to be a bus driver, didn’t you? Oh my, Sam, Sam, Sam. How wonderful to see you again, my old friend. How wonderful.”

As they passed along the aisle, everyone smiled; familiar and not-so familiar faces, hands patting his back, this fellow and that telling him what a good chap he was and saying how he was in for a treat.

“This should be all quite frightening,” he said. “But I don’t feel that. I don’t feel anything like that at all.”

By the time they reached the airfield the sun had driven away the clouds leaving clear blue sky. The space balloon towered above the flat fields, its thousands of tiles glinting in the afternoon sun. All manner of activity could be seen through the wide Perspex windows of the hangar: figures in lab coats consulting charts and twiddling buttons. The burners were being tested and with each bright yellow whoosh the balloon lifted two feet off the ground, straining at its moorings.

“My god, just look at it. Always been my dream to fly one of these contraptions. Read all the books about it, you know. Got all the documentaries on DVD.”

“I know that, Granddad.”

“It really is quite something.”

“We have to get suited up first.”

“Suited up?”

“Yes, we’re going flying. Your dream is coming true.”

He was led through the hangar past the lab coats, along a bright white corridor to a door that said ‘Pilots’.

“Are you sure about this? I mean, well, we could get into terrible trouble.”

“Fine, fine. They’re expecting you.”

Two suits were hanging on the wall. His grandson helped him into one, fastening the clasps, before climbing into his own. Once they’d put on their fishbowl helmets there could be no telling they were impostors.

The lab coats were peering into monitors and hurrying around making last-minute checks. They stood aside to let them pass. When one rather frosty-looking lady scientist grabbed his arm he thought the game was up, but she merely tightened his helmet.

There were two silver pods large enough to accommodate a single passenger each. In perfect synchronicity the Perspex doorways were drawn open and three short metallic steps descended. His grandson helped him in, making sure that he was fastened into the lift-off position, before attending to himself.

He heard the voice of the controller crackling through his earpiece and then the burners ignited and the floor began to tremble. He'd had balloon rides but none had ascended this powerfully. Usually the upwards pull is gentle but with the space balloon the pressure from all the bubbling hydrogen had him thinking the entire contraption was about to explode. The pod was vibrating so much that everything was a blur. And then they were shooting into the sky. It felt like his stomach was escaping his mouth.

The airfield, houses and roads were shrinking fast, and soon it was impossible to believe they were anything other than models.

“Are you okay there, Granddad? Wonderful isn't it?”

“Yes, yes, truly wonderful.”

The balloon broke through thin patches of cloud. Dusk was setting in, the sun fading into a dull orange orb leaving behind a prism of darkening indigo. By now they must have been at forty to fifty thousand feet, Concorde height, not so very far from the lower reaches of space.

He knew all the specs. They'd be returning now, back to terra firma. But how great it would be if they could continue on, to go where only a hundred lucky few had ever been— to the Moon, or perhaps even further than that, away into distant unexplored space.

There was a control panel with dials, switches and flickering diodes. The temptation grew inside him, simple curiosity and a desire for adventure. For all he knew pressing the wrong button, turning the wrong dial, might jettison them into the never-never.

“It's fine, Granddad, fine— we've come this far already. You just do whatever you want.”

He reached out, turning dials, pressing buttons.

Below he could see the burners glowing with great intensity, a blur of orange flame.

“I’ve made a terrible mistake.”

“No, no you haven’t. You just have to have faith.”

Across the panel the diodes flashed and whirred, elaborate patterns of blue, green and red. And then they were catapulted upwards, with enough force for him to think his atoms were disassembling.

The Moon flashed by as a speck, Mars with its great arid swathes of pink dust and gray shifting cloud, massive Jupiter, Saturn with its blinking red spot and wide, translucent bands. They were traveling fast now, many times the speed of light, the gas giants Uranus and Neptune expanding before them and then disappearing. As they dodged through the Kuiper Belt’s boulders of thick black ice, he understood that they were being guided, and soon enough they were out the other side, leaving the carriageway behind. Looking over his shoulder, he saw it as a thread of shimmering silk winding around the solar system and then it was nothing at all.

They were hurtling along spirals of stars bleating with color, when all of a sudden they stopped with enough force to snap the fastenings. They floated free of their seats, faces pressed up against the Perspex. There was only blackness, nothing to see other than the silver glow from the pods, the flicker of the control panels.

Slowly it revealed itself. He supposed, in a way, it was like switching off a light and having to get accustomed to darkness. You see nothing at first but then vague shapes form, and details.

And what details....the vastness of the universe stretching out before them, between its faint ripples of cosmic radiation a trillion dots of flickering light. There were so many galaxies, and clusters of galaxies, that it defied comprehension. Everywhere were numerous shapes - spirals, orbs, daggers, splodges - and such colors you couldn’t imagine, from the faintest grays through to the deepest blues, purples, pinks, yellows and reds. It was the universe, vast and sprawling, truly infinite.

How long he gaped at all that bewildering loveliness he could not tell. Minutes may have passed, centuries, a billion years – it was impossible to know.

No words were necessary. Only reverential silence.

And then a gentle tiredness crept over him, soft and warm, and he had the sensation of a hand passing over his eyes.

“Sleep now. Time for a long, long sleep. I’m happy now, happy in my knowledge.”

“What of, Granddad?”

“The loveliness of it all. The infinite beauty. God, Nature, call it whatever you will.”

Author's Note: The following story takes the unfortunately still prevailing obedience training of girls and simply stands it on its head by changing the gender of the protagonists.

Marygirl

By Beate Sigriddaughter

Tom watches his father do the gold-rimmed dishes, singing to himself a gypsy song of longing, with tears in the song; but Tom's father, though he looks tired, is smiling even as he sings about the tears. Sometimes Tom helps dry the dishes, but other times he simply gets to sit on the kitchen tiles playing with blocks or with Play-Doh. His father has beautiful muscles and a warm, soft voice.

Mother is in her study working with papers or talking to important people on the telephone. They must stay fairly quiet so as not to disturb her.

Some hours later Tom's father, Tom following, walks to the bathroom where he combs his own hair, then Tom's, then tells Tom it's time to call his mother. Supper is ready.

Tom loves his gentle, devoted father.

"Daddy, Daddy," he whispers, wrapping his arms around his father's strong thighs before heading off to the study to summon his mother.

One day Tom dreams to break free. Sometimes he talks to his father about it. "I'm as smart as mother," he explains.

"That may well be," his father says. "We'll see." Gently he strokes Tom's hair. "But if you become too forward with your intelligence, chances are that no woman will ever want you and you'll end up an old boy. All alone."

"I don't care," Tom says. "I don't think I want to become a housekeeper like you, just a beautiful husband."

"I understand." His father's brown eyes are sad. "I really do. I too had big dreams once upon a time. But you will see, dreams change over time. The important part is, whatever dreams and reality are, you will be in good hands. The Goddess looks after all of us. Trust in the Lady and you will always be taken care of. I'm telling you this for your own good."

Tom swallows. He wants to be a hero like his mother, not a nicely muscled housekeeper meeting with the neighbor men for coffee from time to time.

"I used to drink beer now and again," his father confides. "But it always made me so angry. I can't do that to your mother. She works hard to make our life decent. There's no calling for her to come home to a depressed and angry husband."

Once Tom's father had in fact gone to see a psychiatrist, who first of all prescribed strong medication.

"I never wanted to take drugs," Tom's father explains to his boy. "But my depression got out of hand. It was another thing I simply couldn't do to her anymore."

After Tom learns to read, he reads about a spunky boy from time to time, who tests himself against the usual fate prescribed for boys and becomes a real Marygirl. For such a boy, being called a Marygirl is quite a compliment,

though it is usually said teasingly. And once in a while such a Marygirl finds love and marriage anyway, despite the odds. Tom holds on to that image as he turns out the light before falling asleep. Maybe, just maybe, he will be one of those exceptions.

A Christmas Memory

By Terin Tashi Miller

We were staying at The Windamere, a compound of bungalows with a main building and a dining hall near the top of the hill up from The Mall market area in Darjeeling. Darjeeling, home of The Government of West Bengal in the summer, is a quiet, sleepy little town often blanketed by a cold, gray fog in the fall and winter. It's where tea has been grown for centuries at estates that terrace down the hillside like dark green steps to the river valley and jungle below. Clouds form in the valley and rise up the hill early, so that if you get up early enough, you can watch them rise like mists that become clouds when they reach the Himalayas – the mountains next to Darjeeling's hill, that include Kanchenjunga, which you can see as you walk up to The Windamere from The Mall – really just a street with shops and stables and stalls, and a few bars on top of small hotels.

If you go all the way up the hill from The Mall, you wind up at the pillared gate that is the entrance to the Tibetan monastery.

Not far away is Tiger Hill, from which after a 4 a.m. jeep ride to get to it, you can see Everest in the morning light.

It was to this place my parents brought us – myself, my sister and my brother – that first Christmas.

Being in India – a country dominated by Hindus – arriving in Darjeeling did not feel like Christmas. Watching the little boys, some younger and certainly smaller than me at the time, fight and struggle and argue trying to

haul the heaviest bag from the Land Rover that had brought us from the rail head at Siliguri, in the valley below, up to The Mall, did not feel like Christmas. The walk up the switchback stairs from the Mall to the hotel didn't, either.

Nor did the room my brother and I shared in our parents' bungalow, a short walk on sidewalks next to manicured lawns and a low rail fence.

The owners' attempt to decorate the main building wasn't bad – a Christmas tree decked out in lights and ornaments just before entering what later became the reading room off of the main dining room, which always smelled of steam and clean, crisply stacked linen. Holiday music played on a piano by willing guests, and hot rum toddies or buttered rum in tall glasses were being handed out to new arrivals.

But in our shared bedroom sat a fireplace that had to burn chunks of coal, and rubber hot water bottles making a damp dent in our beds, and never enough scratchy wool blankets or hot water bottles to keep my sister warm in her separate room.

We had no tree in our bungalow, no sense of anything other than another trip with our parents to a slightly strange place where they would do their work and we would do our best to stay out of their way.

I vaguely remembered the first time I'd stayed there, when I was around 3, and distinctly remembered seeing dinner being prepared as I sat in the lintel of the back door. The cook sat next to me that afternoon, and had just taken the head off a chicken with a curved knife in one swipe. The chicken was literally running around with its head cut off, which was what the cook wanted to help bleed it so it would be less messy to prepare for the pan. I have never forgotten the sight, it coming back to me throughout my youth whenever my father accused me of running around like that without thinking.

Some evergreen garlands – made from stringing real, fresh evergreen bows together – decorated the dining hall, which as always had stiff white table

cloths draped over the tables and thick white plates with just a green line around the rim, and starched white linen napkins rolled up and placed in heavy crystal water glasses.

The napkins were made to look like birds, with corners forming beaks and tails sticking out of the cut glass. My brother and I learned to fold napkins that way, but it never worked as well without all the starch, so more often at home through the years our mother just used napkin rings and we just rolled the limp, soft napkins and put rings over them. But we had watched the waiters the last time and loved to practice even on the limp napkins our mother used.

We had joked at home about the waiters at The Windamere, in their white linen turbans with green trim, just like the dinner plates, their thick white uniform tunics and high round collars and matching pants. Their turbans were tied in the parade dress, rather than religious, style, with a pleated crest like a peacock's tail sticking out of one side and a tail hanging down to their collars.

The waiters used to appear eager to be useful, standing very near the dining guests and grabbing plates almost out from under the diner's chins in their zeal to bring another course. My father and mother, both of whom liked to linger over their food, talking, referred to such actions as being a "pushy waiter," which they declared was the norm at The Windamere.

Once, when I was still on my first trip there, my father pointed out a dirty dish to the waiter at breakfast, which for adults always consisted of eggs, cooked tomatoes, tea and dry, plank-like toast on which our father loved to smear orange marmalade.

The waiter snapped the empty plate from my father's place, turned around and rubbed it on his clean, white uniform linen covered right rear cheek, before turning back and presenting it to my father with a pleased smile and the words: "All clean."

So The Windamere was supposed to feel like home to me. But it did not.

Christmas Eve, my brother and I went to bed in our room tired and cold, wondering as always if our floppy rubber water bottles were going to leak or worse, lose their stoppers and soak our beds with luke-warm water that would soon make sleep on the sheets impossible.

Early the next morning, we awoke at the same time and, shivering, because naturally the fire in our room had died overnight, we threw on some clothing from our suitcases and crept into the main room of the bungalow.

Unlike Christmas mornings at home, where we could open only the toys brought by Santa Claus and wait for our parents to slowly come downstairs, our father's first task being to turn the heat up and next, grind coffee with the hand grinder, we discovered our parents already awake, and waiting for us in the main room.

In the main room, a warm, yellow fire glowed in the stone hearth, and our parents sat at the table having a pot of Darjeeling tea, with sticky buns, for breakfast.

They had wide smiles on their faces, expectant smiles, waiting for us to discover what Santa had brought. I was actually more interested in their breakfast, being an avid consumer of the real hot cross buns, which consisted of sweet bread and raisins coated with sugar and supporting a cross of white frosting.

In a small pile near the hearth were some strange-shaped packages, some wrapped in thin brown paper with twine.

"Merry Christmas!" they both shouted as my brother and I staggered, shuffling, tired and cold, into the bright room.

We dutifully stumbled over to the packages. My brother and I held a few and looked at them. As usual, though older, he waited for me to act. I started untying twine from a package in my hand.

“You don’t have to worry,” my father said, chuckling through the ubiquitous pipe in his mouth. “We’re not planning to save the wrapping!”

Again, my brother and I exchanged glances. Our father was unusually jovial this morning. Even our mother was smiling. We knew they’d had a few hot buttered rums the night before, but it was unusual for the effect to have lasted into the morning. I shrugged, and began tearing at the package in my hands.

I wasn’t careful about unwrapping packages because our parents had taught us to save the ribbon and bows and even wrapping paper for later use. I was careful because it seemed to me the easiest way to open packages – essentially reverse-engineering the wrapping process.

I’ve always felt a bit self-conscious trying to imitate the gleeful tearing at packages I’d seen others display, not really ever being in that much of a hurry to see what someone has given me.

But this package had a strange feel to it. It was fur. Rabbit fur. Santa had bought my brother and I rabbit fur mittens, lined in Cashmere wool. Another package contained thick flannel pajamas, tailor made in India with drawstrings instead of elastic waists. The last package was a pair of fur and wool slippers for each of us.

“Put it on!” our mother suggested.

My brother and I quickly exchanged our suitcase sweats for our obviously warmer new items. Our father took a picture, smiling satisfied behind his camera and pipe.

As it turned out, that was our best Christmas – we were warm, well cared for and happy. We hadn't noticed rugs our parents had picked up in Kashmir for our bedrooms back in the U.S. at the time he took the picture, but we were unaware we were standing on them at the time.

My sister emerged from her room a bit later, and being often more sensitive to cold weather than even my brother and I, was excited to see warm clothing on us.

Since that time, Kashmir has been beset by violence, as has Darjeeling and Nepal; the beggar woman my brother and I used to see so often we started looking for her every visit – the woman who had no nose and only one large, round hole that was both her nose and mouth – has probably died, and both my parents, my brother, and my sister have died.

But I have never forgotten how valuable one Christmas memory can be, especially now that I have a child.

Baseball Heroes, Skateboard Gods

By Mike Sharlow

I drove down the street towards my house, and I saw my son Ian and his friend Matt skateboarding in the driveway. My son's rail and small ramp was in the driveway, so I would have to park along the street. This annoyed me a bit because I knew, after the skating was over, the rail and ramp would still be in the driveway. If I wanted to park in the driveway again, I would have to move the skating apparatus or tell Ian to move his stuff no less than three times.

My son was wiry, small and physically immature for fourteen but I wasn't worried because I was the same way. I matured slowly but grew until I was twenty-one.

I got out of the car and my son greeted me immediately. He always did that.
"Hi, Dad."

"Hi, Son."

"Matt's over skating." He had a need to bring the obvious to my attention.

"I see that. Hey, Matt." Matt had grown a lot and had filled out towards manhood since the last time I had seen him which was sometime last fall. It was now the end of March.

"Hi," Matt answered. His voice had deepened.

"Playing ball this year?" I asked. I had coached baseball for as long as my son had been playing. He started when he was five. Matt had been on my team for the last three years; two years of 12 and under, and one year of 14 and under, last summer. There was one more year of 14 and under. This would be the last year for me, for my son, and Matt. The league ended at 14 and under because high school took over from there, if you were good enough. Ian might be. Matt never would.

Before I walked into the house I watched my son give himself two kicks on his skateboard then leap his board with him on it onto the metal rail six inches off the ground. He slid the length of the twelve foot long rail, the metal trucks of his board scraping steel. By the sound that it made I understood why it was called grinding. As he launched himself off the end of the rail he spun his board with him on it three hundred and sixty degrees then landed on the concrete driveway with a clack. Matt followed, attempting to copy Ian's trick but he missed the landing and took a fall. He hit the concrete as gracefully as possible and went into a roll. He sat on the ground for a bit, examined his right elbow, then rubbed it out. To survive, skateboarders learn how to fall like stunt men.

"You alright, Matt?" I called to him. Ian looked at me and then at Matt like he was wondering why I was concerned. Ian knew right away that there was nothing dire about Matt's fall. These kinds of falls were inconsequential and expected occurrences.

"Yeah," he shot back and got up.

I went into the house and turned on the TV to watch the news on MSNBC. For the next hour or so the industrial sounds of two teenage boys skateboarding were in the background while I watched Chris Matthews, but I thought about Matt. For the entire sixth and a good part of seventh grade Matt was regularly at our house. I saw him almost every day. He slept over more times than I remember. Then it ended. I didn't pay attention enough to know if it was gradual or sudden. When I realized I hadn't seen him in awhile I asked Ian about him, and he said, "He's with his girlfriend. He's always with his girl friend." Ian appeared more than annoyed. He was pissed. A girl had come between him and his best friend.

"Is she cute," I asked, not that I cared, but I was just making conversation.

"I dunno," Ian replied quietly. He didn't want to talk about it.

Matt didn't become a regular at our house ever again but I saw him in the mornings when I drove Ian to school. Matt would be walking with his arm around his girlfriend. I never saw Matt by himself. He was always with her, always with his arm around her. I told my wife, Lori, that it would be a sad day when that girl broke up with him and she would break up with him. That was how it almost always worked with relationships with kids. The girl decides that she wants to be free about the time middle school is over and high school is in the near future. She wants to date other boys, or maybe there's one particular boy she's had her eye on and he now notices her. Anyway, boys like Matt who become deeply attached to their first love, become gravely scarred by this heartbreak. I understand this. It happened to me. Tammy Moulis, I'll never forget her; broke my heart. I took it so hard it took me two years to get over a relationship that lasted a few

months. For a good part of the year after she broke up with me, I called her about four times a day. I was still in love with her but to her I had become a friend and confidant. It took almost a full year before I stopped calling her and then another year to believe there could be someone else for me. When I finally stopped calling her, she called me and wondered why I hadn't called her in awhile. I said, "I don't know." If I thought about it, I would realize I didn't care anymore. I didn't think about her much anymore.

On baseball draft night the sign-up sheets for the players were passed out. Of course, your own son and daughter were automatically given to that parent-coach first. Then the league tried to oblige the requests of players to play with other players. It was rare but some players requested a coach like Matt's mom did. On his sign-up sheet his mom had written, 'Please put Matt on Mike Miller's team'. Then we did player trades. By the time it was all over I had the same core group of players I'd had the last two years. My hopes were high this year. Last year we took first place in one of the tournaments at the end of the year. My teams always seemed to peak at the end of the season. Last season Matt did also. In the championship game, Matt's bat caught fire. All year he struggled at the plate but when he came to bat I didn't care how he got on, because he was almost always sure to score by either stealing every base or a single would usually be enough to push him home. Matt had "wheels". In the championship game, Matt's confidence at bat was the highest I ever saw it. He drilled three line drives to center. He lined out, hit a triple and in his last at bat, hit an inside the park homer in the last inning which sealed the victory for us. Matt didn't have a long leaping gait when he ran. His legs churned like the Roadrunner. As he crossed the plate, beating the throw home, our bench erupted and ran out to jump all over him.

Matt liked to play catcher like Ian. Matt didn't have as good an arm as Ian but he did a good job of keeping most everything in front of him. I always liked to have a couple guys to play catcher. Ian usually caught the first two innings then Matt caught the next two, leaving Ian to finish up the game. On hot summer days, I didn't like my catchers to go more than two innings at a time.

Opening Day was the day the league had its team pictures taken and every team played a short exhibition game. Matt's mom, Daneen, followed me

around for a good part of the day. She was a nice woman. After games she helped pick up around the dugout. This wasn't a great job, but she was the only parent that ever did. I had a fairly long and intimate conversation with her on picture day. My marriage had ended a couple of months before and I told her about it. She said her marriage to Richard was far from perfect also, although the end of her marriage didn't occur by divorce. I apologize if my memory of this time frame is inaccurate. Less than a year ago, I think it was the summer of 2007, her husband Richard committed suicide by hanging himself. He worked for one of those financial services. In 2007 we were in the thick of the recession. There was a lot of money lost, and Richard's losses must have become unbearable. I don't know for sure why he committed suicide but he hung himself in his office for his partner to find him. I only met him once, when he came to pick up Matt. I walked out to introduce myself. He used one of those throat gadgets to talk. I heard that he had had throat cancer, and similar to the way I'm always particularly self conscience of the two missing fingers on my right hand at first meeting someone, he acted the same way about his disability. The conversation was short. He thanked me for having Matt over and commented on the first car he ever owned and how much he liked the red convertible Mustang he was driving and then he squealed the tires as he roared off. It was an uncomfortable exchange. I knew he wasn't Matt's biological father but I didn't know he was easily twenty years older than Daneen. He looked like he could have been Matt's grandfather. He was a pale skinny guy with thinning white hair.

I asked Ian why Matt's Dad, Stepdad, didn't come to the ball games to see Matt play.

Ian said that his Dad had a bad back. Without me asking her, Daneen once mentioned her husband's bad back and how it was too uncomfortable to sit. Personally, I believed that Richard wasn't that interested in watching Matt play. Parents suffer for their children, but I don't think Richard wanted to do this much suffering.

At the first practice I could tell that Matt wasn't the kid I knew. He had entered full blown puberty at the same time he lost his Stepdad, so I thought that was the reason for his unenthusiastic attitude and solemn demeanor. It didn't immediately affect his play. At batting practice he hit

the ball hard and far, although he was still a little too picky at the plate. "Matt, if it's close, swing at it," I told him after I pitched five balls in row that he watched. Not all were perfect strikes but definitely hittable. The next pitch he drove at me and nearly took my head off.

I always felt positive about my team after the first practice but I felt especially good about this team; still, it should have been with a note of caution because the team never acquired chemistry or cohesion. At any given game, two or three guys didn't show up. We had twelve players on our team. Missing two or three almost every game made it difficult. Parents went on vacation during the summer and with this team there were parents that went on multiple vacations. Some parents didn't realize or care that baseball was a team sport and that the team relied on the participation of their kid. Halfway through the season I finally sent an email explaining this simple concept. I told them that they shouldn't sign up their kid for baseball if they only planned to participate half the time. A couple of parents apologized but it was those who really didn't need to. Those parents of the kids that were absent most often never responded, except for Matt's Mom, Daneen. She explained that Matt was having a rough time. It was no surprise to me. I could see Matt's struggle. It came through as an icy layer of anger. He rarely smiled and even in the middle of a game he was preoccupied. Once, during a game while he stood on second base, I saw him text somebody, probably his girlfriend.

Before one game I stood next to the dugout waiting for that game to end before ours. My players milled around me, talking quietly amongst themselves, but I couldn't hear their conversations. I didn't care. My son walked up and said, a little pissed off, a little concerned, "Matt's not coming to the game again."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"He texted me."

"Why isn't he coming?"

"He doesn't feel well."

"Is he high?"

"I don't know. Probably," Ian said, annoyed that I had to ask. "Don't say I said anything."

I know he didn't want me to tell Daneen.

Far be it from me to get on my high horse about smoking pot. I had done my share, and likely wasn't completely through with it yet, although I didn't like kids getting high. Smoking pot was diametrically opposed to competition of any kind; athletic, academic, work... It took the edge away and replaced it with complacency, apathy, and ultimately the urge to nap.

Matt hadn't come to half of the games by the middle of the season. Finally, he quit. I was glad he did. He had become a negative influence in the dugout and it was obvious that he didn't want to play. I'm sure Daneen was making him show up, when he did show up. She must have finally conceded to him.

We won a little less than half our games. I was glad when the season was over. I had never felt like that before but this season felt hard for a lot of reasons. I had brought my own emotional baggage of an impending divorce and loss of employment into it. From there everything kind of cosmically acquired that tone of the fear of the unknown, sublime negativity, cosmic indifference, and a subtle but perpetual cloud of impending doom.

Over the next few months Ian would have a story about Matt's involvement in some scrape with another kid or his insubordination towards a teacher that would get him kicked out of class. Ian respected Matt's 'take no shit attitude'. Matt stood his ground with his peers and he crossed the line with his teachers. Teens live with constant fear and stress and when a kid like

Matt displays courage, even if it was destructive, other kids like Ian place kids like Matt on a pedestal. Matt wasn't a bully. He fought against the bully defending his friends. Ian was small and had barely tripped into puberty in 8th grade, so he was natural prey for bullies. Ian told me he made a game stand against the bully but Matt saw how outmatched Ian was and came to his aid on a few occasions.

In 9th grade the inevitable occurred and Matt's girlfriend broke up with him. He took it hard. He took it so hard he hung himself in his garage. His mom came home to find him. The paramedics worked on him for an hour to no avail. I envisioned Matt standing on a chair with a rope around his neck. About the time he decided it wasn't a good idea, the effects of cutting off blood flow to his brain took effect and he blacked out. It was a very small window to change his mind. Anyone who decides to hang himself or herself needs to understand this. If there's a change of heart, it should probably come before the rope is slipped around the neck.

Ian took Matt's death hard. He had been battling his own demons manifested in obsessive compulsive thoughts which led to feeling depressed. I was afraid Matt's death would not only tip him over the edge but give him an idea of how to escape his own pain. With kids, a suicide of their peer triggered more suicides. I hoped Matt's death would have the opposite effect. I hoped he would see the irreversible nature of it, the finality of it.

Daneen had Matt's funeral at an Evangelical Lutheran Church. When I walked into the vestibule, I saw a group of about ten kids crowded around looking in the same direction. It didn't immediately occur to me what they were doing because I didn't think the funeral would be open casket. Then Ian walked up to me, away from the group of kids. He had been freshly crying and I knew there would be more tears. I walked up to Matt and I felt emptiness and guilt. This was the ball player I didn't want on my team anymore. My eyes welled, but I didn't cry. Then I saw Daneen sitting near the casket. I saw her before she saw me. She looked drained for a moment, then consumed with pain, and then filled with dread and sadness. All of this pulled at her face. Her eyes were puffy and her nose was red. Her cheekbones were prominent depicting gauntness from avoiding eating in her grief. Her dark skirt and jacket, which probably fit nicely before Matt

died, hung slightly. When she saw me she got up and moved quickly towards me to give me a hug. "I'm sorry," I said. I felt like I had failed her, failed Matt. What if I had been determined to keep Matt on my team? What if I had tried to become more involved? This feeling didn't last long. It was the result of raw emotion at the moment. I knew I wasn't anywhere near special enough to save Matt.

Matt died on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and on the following Monday, the school made no acknowledgment of his death. They didn't have extra counselors available to deal with grieving students like my son. A year or so earlier, a very popular girl, the daughter of one the teachers, was killed in a car accident. The school acknowledged it and brought in extra counselors to help kids cope. The car accident occurred because the driver, her boyfriend, was speeding so fast that the car went air born over the top of a hill. Apparently, they were running late to school. Did she tell him to slow down? Did she encourage the speed because she didn't want to be late to class? Was this the first time that they were running late? I don't believe it was the first time her boy friend drove like this with her in the car.

So why did Matt get treated differently? Was it because he was a suicide victim? Or was it because he wasn't popular? If the popular girl had killed herself, how would the school have dealt with it? The school, any school, would have to say that one student is no more important than the next but everyone knows that's bullshit, especially the students. They know there are socioeconomic classes. They know where they stand. The school has football, basketball, baseball, volleyball, soccer, swimming, and wrestling teams. Kids like Matt and Ian might not be good enough to be baseball heroes but if skateboarding became a high school sport, they would be gods.

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