



Volume 1
Spring 2013

Peppermint Rooster Review

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Dear Reader,

This is the first issue of *Peppermint Rooster Review*, an annual publication that publishes fiction, poetry, and essays by Lewis and Clark Community College students and former students. We hope you enjoy this book. We would like to thank Jill Lane, who wanted to showcase outstanding written work from our students and who secured the financing for this project. In addition, we would like to thank Lori Artis for assisting our staff in the production of this magazine. This magazine would not have been produced without the help of Jill Lane and Lori Artis.

When we were looking for a name for this magazine, we considered many different suggestions. The name “Peppermint Rooster” was suggested by Michael Barnett, a former Lewis and Clark student, and his idea resonated with us because of the odd juxtaposition between the two words. (Also, it sounded more interesting that “Lewis and Clark Literary Magazine.”) This book, as you’ll see, contains some interesting juxtapositions, too. We hope you enjoy reading this and that you will stay tuned for next year’s book as well. If you are a LCCC student, please feel free to submit your work to litmaglc@mail.lc.edu. We will be reading submissions year-round and we look forward to reading your work.

Sincerely

The Staff of *Peppermint Rooster Review*

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Joseph Evans

Warriors Die Inside

Peppermint Rooster Honorable Mention Story

The Beast tried to convince me to kill myself today as I was driving to work. I was stopped in the middle of the street, waiting for the right of way to complete my left turn when it proposed, “What if you just pulled out in front of this oncoming silver Honda?”

I mashed the accelerator, attempting to time my take-off with the approach of the small sedan. The tires on my truck screamed, almost as if begging me not to go through with it. The car was so close now that I could see the drivers face, a younger woman. She wore a shawl that covered her hair and face. Only her large brown eyes were visible, and I watched them slowly widen in fear. She smashed her brakes and jerked the wheel. Not enough to avoid my pick-up, but enough to turn the fatal crash into a less lethal one. Her sedan smashed into the front passenger side of my truck. The crunch of metal on metal engulfed everything, and the world went black. Unfortunately, it didn’t stay that way, as I awoke to EMP’s moving me from the entangled pick-up and sedan to the ambulance. There was a stretcher next to us, covered with a blood splattered white sheet, the broken body of the woman. I had failed.

I snapped back to reality in my driver seat as the Beast whispered, “Well maybe instead of just cutting the car off, you could ram it head on! Do it! You know you want to!”

Again, I mashed the gas, but instead of cutting the sedan off, I veered right toward it.

The Beast muttered, “Come on! Come on! You got to get more speed than this!”

I raged at the monster to shut up as we rocketed towards that silver Honda again, but it just laughed. The young woman’s face once again contorted into a look of fear, but before she could hit

the brakes or twist the wheel, my pickup and her sedan smashed into each other head on. The crunch of metal was more distinct this time as my truck smashed through the front end of the car.

I bounced forward, but felt myself stop. The airbag then deployed and pressed me back into my chair. A very serene scene when compared to what happened to the woman. She, unfortunately, was not wearing her seat belt. The impact of the truck into the sedan launched her so suddenly that the shawl around her head stayed where she once sat. She travelled up and through her windshield, through mine, and into the seat next to me. Her broke and lacerated body bled out onto my upholstery.

Her head, while twisted at an impossible backwards angle, looked towards me. She held a look of inquisitiveness, and her lips mouthed, “Why?”

The Beast shrugged its shoulders, “Eh...why not?”

Once more I snapped back to reality where I waited to make my left turn. I went through the same head-on motions again, except this time I removed my seatbelt. The entire scene played out the same, except this time when the two vehicles hit, my head bounced like a pin ball between the back of my seat and the steering wheel, turning my brains into scrambled eggs. The woman didn’t mouth “Why?” The beast didn’t speak. The world went black and stayed that way.

I slowly pushed my foot down on the accelerator as I prepared to end my life, but the knight intervened, “No. You know this isn’t right.”

The Beast fled; I took a deep breath. The silver Honda passed by; I completed my left turn, and then continued on to work.

It had been like this for a few years now. Ever since I went to war. I was once a normal person, just like anyone else. I laughed, cried, got angry, pissed even, and then I got over it. I felt things like attachment. Now I just felt like an empty shell. The burnt down, destroyed remnant of a battleground. One in which a battle still raged. Enter The Beast and The Knight.

The Beast came first. A culmination of the horrors I had witnessed,

and even committed. It was sly, angry, instinctive and ferocious. It often whispered things in my ear. The ugliest things whispered in the slyest of ways can have strange effects on people. That was probably the best way to describe it. The first time I met The Beast was in Iraq. I was on patrol, in a three Humvee convoy, and halted at a market. A boy, he could have been maybe thirteen at most, walked up by the rear Humvee and casually tossed a grenade up and into the gunner's turret. Before he could react, my buddy in the turret was dead. Blown apart, and scattered over the immediate area. Then from some dark recess of my mind, a voice whispered, "Don't let that fucker get away! Charge that SAW and cut him down!" I did. I also hit this younger woman on accident. I don't remember much about her, other than she was wearing a shawl, and I could only see her eyes. I think that was probably the last time I felt bad, seeing the young woman's mother weep over her daughter's body. The Beast laughed, "Collateral damage! Wrong place, wrong time! Shoulda' bobbed and weaved! It helps to not jump in front of the bullets! She really 'Bit the bullet!'" There were more one-liners, but I can't remember them all. Some made me laugh.

The Knight was different. He would show up only in response to the Beast. In time of need, you could say. He never professed virtue, or righteousness, or selflessness. He would just show up, do what was right, and leave. The first time I can remember him showing up was also in Iraq, after The Beast had arrived. My NCO was waking me up, telling me to get ready for mission. It was five-thirty in the morning, and we had just gone to sleep maybe two hours earlier after playing some cards.

The Beast screamed as I sat up, "Tell that NCO to go fuck himself! WE NEED SLEEP!"

A firm voice interrupted, "Get up and go to work, guy."

The Beast was stunned, "Who the hell are you?" It asked me, "Who the hell is he?"

I just shrugged my shoulders and got ready for mission. The Knight was not always on time, and occasionally he would not even show up. They fought a never ceasing battle for dominance and supremacy against one another. The Beast attempted to get me

to do dark evil things; The Knight, bound by honor, attempted to stop The Beast. The more I pondered it, the more it seemed I was a hostage in my own body.

I remember when I came home from Iraq. All the returning soldiers had to go through this thing called PDHRA, Post Deployment Health Re-Assessment. They packed us all into these gym bleachers like sardines and had us take a ridiculous exam in which they asked seemingly random things. Afterwards they had us meet with counselors individually where they would go over our results and see if we had any questions or concerns. I sat in this little cubicle while I waited for the counselor to come in. There were silly posters on the walls, I suppose to be inspirational. They came off kind of like an episode of reading rainbow, “You can do it! Take a look! It’s in a book!” After a few moments the plump lady entered and took a seat at her desk across from me. She prattled on for around ten minutes or so about the results of my test. I didn’t really listen. The Beast and The Knight were struggling against each other. The Beast thought it’d be a good idea to grab a pen off the woman’s desk and jab myself in the eye. The Knight didn’t. The woman finished with the results, made a few health appointments for me and then I left. I think I went and got Sonic afterwards.

I remember one night I cried myself to sleep. I was in my barracks room by myself. I had gone earlier to the commissary and bought myself a bottle of Jack Daniels. After a couple of drinks, The Beast, almost nonchalantly, began to talk with me, “So how’s it feel to be a sick loser fuck?”

“What?”

“Ya, how’s it feel to be a sick loser fuck?”

“What do you mean?”

The Beast giggled, “You know it’s your fault right?”

“What’s my fault?”

“Your buddy, Strack, and that young woman. They’re dead because of you.”

“That’s not true!”

The Beast hissed, “Bullshit, and you know it. It’s your fault. You stayed up late playing cards the night before mission. You were heavily fatigued. You didn’t notice the kid walking up to the Humvee. Hell, if you weren’t so tired, you wouldn’t have hit that young lady either.”

I looked down at my feet, and wiggled my toes before downing a gulp of my drink, “Yeah, maybe.”

“So how’s it feel to be a sick loser fuck?”

“Not very good.”

The Beast walked off, taking one last parting shot, “You’re such a piece of shit.”

I cried myself to sleep wishing I could somehow escape the torment of my life, escape my shattered mind, and the war it waged with itself.

I thought about writing a story today, about my war experiences. I imagined the characters and the names I’d use. I even went so far as to plan the perspective. I ultimately decided that I’d try to make it a first person perspective. I mean anyone can be a veteran--you, your mother, and your father, or hell even your neighbor. Maybe a first person perspective would put them into the character, force them to feel what it might be like.

It would be disconnected; since it’s based on some messed up memories that are pieced together. Some parts would make sense, and some parts wouldn’t. At first glance it’d be like the author must have got something wrong, but upon closer inspection it’d reveal some crazy deep thing. I don’t know what yet, but it will!

Then The Beast says, “Naaaaa. That’s fuckin stupid. No one cares about this shit anyway. Let’s do a story about a clown. Ya, that’s cool, a clown. A fucked up clown who hates himself and his life. We could do some funny snippets about how his life sucks so much, and he just despises everyone and everything, most of all himself! It’d be so much easier! The best part is that you can base the character on yourself!”

I think the worst thing about the war was coming home from it. Everybody makes this big ass deal out of it, like you won the lottery. Families put up signs, NCO's aren't as big of dicks as they usually are, and soldiers smile as they pack their bags. Everyone talks about what they will do when they first get home, or when they first see their family, or wife, or mom and dad, or dog. Everything will be so great when we get home! I start to buy into it, the cheer and merriment of it. It's almost like Christmas. Maybe I crack a little smile, just a small smile. I go through one hell of a hassle to get home. There are all kinds of customs checks, and inventories, reshuffling of gear, signing equipment over, training the guys replacing your unit. I get on the plane, so happy I could shit. The excitement builds and builds until I can barely stand it. I haven't felt this good since before I went to war; and that was a lifetime ago. It reminds me of how a child must feel when playing in the kid zone at McDonalds. The plane lands, and there is a marching band playing, and a line of generals that shake my hand. They tell me things like, "Good Job!" and "Welcome Home! You made it through the war!" I get on a bus that takes me to the headquarters of the division. There the families of the roughly one thousand soldiers that travelled with me wait patiently until they can hug their loved ones. The busses move. I march in rank and file until told to halt. The division commander walks up to this podium and just goes on and on about the great things everyone did. Everyone cheers, but in reality we all want him to hurry the fuck up and finish. Then finally he calls up a guest speaker. It's Strack's wife. She's holding the baby he'll never meet. Inside me, everything goes to shit. The Knight and The Beast toss and turn in a monumental battle so ferocious that I feel my insides turn. I don't hear a single word she says. The only thing I remember is, by the end of her speech, she's crying. I realize I'm not married, so there's no wife here for me. I have no children waiting to hug me. There is no one here for me. As the Beast and the Knight struggle, I realize: these assholes aren't even real, just manifestations of me. Then, in that moment, the truth hits me hard: I'll never make it home from the war, because the war is inside me. I'm fighting against myself.

I tremble for a few moments until finally I wish I'd been in that Humvee instead of Strack.

Mark Ax

I Saw the Sign

Peppermint Rooster Grand Prize Winner

I step into the local Steak N Shake and begin to scan the waitresses, looking for the prettiest one. Not that I am going to stalk her or try and get her phone number: I already have it. She just so happens to be my girlfriend.

Standing next to the ‘Please Wait To Be Seated’ sign, I spot Sienna in the server station, in-between two older servers methodically making drinks and putting straws into them. She looks up and smiles when she sees me before mouthing the word “purple,” indicating which color-coded section she is in. I smile back and nod my head in acknowledgement before walking across the familiar black-and-white-checked floor to her section, looking for an empty booth. Being in this restaurant at least three times a week, Sienna has trained me to know which tables are in which section, and currently I am being schooled as to what side work is attributed to each section. I’m so lucky!

I plop down onto the cushioned seat and scoot to the middle. And even though I order the same thing every time, I grab a menu and thumb through it, gazing at plates of assorted food combinations under bright lights. Sienna appears moments later, Coke already in hand.

“Here ya go, honey,” she chirps.

“Thank you, thank you.”

“Hey, I gotta favor to ask you.”

“Oooh, you goin’ on break soon?” I ask, wiggling my eyebrows up and down.

“Pfft, you wish.”

I laugh as I take a paper napkin and fold it in half to put under my drink before it sweats. “So, what’s this favor you speak of?”

Sienna jerks her head to the right, showing me where to look.

She speaks, but in a much lower register. “You see those two guys over there? At my two-top against the window?”

I glance over and see two guys around my age intently studying the menu. “Yeah. What about ‘em?”

“They are both deaf.”

I lean in to Sienna and respond in the same tone as her. “If those two are deaf, then why are you whispering?”

Sienna laughs, embarrassed, her cheeks turning a pretty rose color. “I don’t know, Cody. Shut up. I just figured since your mom is deaf, you wouldn’t mind translating for me. Pllllease?” She bats her long eyelashes and flashes her pearly whites.

“You don’t need me. Just go over there and give them your pad of paper and pen so they can write down their order.”

“And they won’t be offended by me doing that?”

I look over again and see that the guys are now knuckles deep in conversation, so I reply, “No, not at all. In fact, when they get done ordering, do this...” I extend my four fingers--keeping them up against one another--and tuck in my thumb before tapping my nose with the side of my index finger. “This means ‘thank you.’”

Sienna mimics the sign. “Cool. Thanks, baby. I have to go take their order, but I already put yours in when I saw you, so it should only be a couple more minutes.” She starts to walk away.

If she was *anyone* else, I wouldn’t have stopped her. But since she *is* my girlfriend and since I do want to get laid on a somewhat consistent basis, I speak up, “Sienna, wait!”

She turns around, concern spreading across her face. “What is it?”

“Don’t do that to them. The sign really stands for ‘bitch,’” I confess, a smart-ass smirk across my lips.

Sienna’s eyes widen to the size of dinner plates, her blue eyes sparkling under the fluorescent lights. “Cody Joseph Morgan! You are such an asshole!”

I laugh victoriously. “Hey, at least I stopped you, though. Consider yourself lucky.”

“Well, there’s gonna be some secret sauce on your Frisco melt, buddy.”

“I love it when you talk dirty to me,” I say as Sienna walks away.

I lean back in the booth and internally congratulate myself for my trickery. The truth is, I do this joke to anyone who meets my deaf mom, or anyone who asks for my sign-language advice. Not that it makes me angry or annoyed when someone seeks my counsel in deaf-relations; I just think it’s funny. I imagine the person I just tutored going up to their deaf acquaintance later on and signing *Whattup my big, black bitches?* when they think they are motioning *I am learning sign language just for you.* When my friends meet my mom, I teach them the “bitch” sign and tell them it means hello or good day. I even had one friend convinced it meant *My Lord, Mrs. Morgan, you look smashing this afternoon!* People are easy to trick--especially my dopey friends--and I find that hilarious.

I look at the other patrons inside Steak N Shake. It is relatively slow, with the blue section consuming most of the tables. I see the deaf guys, one wearing a Chicago Cubs t-shirt (another imperfection) while the other is sporting a Fighting Illini visor, his blonde hair spilling out onto the bill. Living in this part of Illinois, we are about forty-five minutes away from the only deaf college, so it is not uncommon to see deaf people here and there. And in a small, po-dunk town where the cows outnumber the people, you’re more likely to run into a deaf person than perhaps a Mexican or Asian.

Sienna approaches the hearing-impaired table and waves at them. They wave back before she hands Visor Guy her pen and pad of paper. He jots down his order, slides the pad over to Cubs Fan so he can do the same. He hands the pad back to Sienna, and, although I can only see the back of her head, I know she is smiling as she walks away from the table. She glances over at me and gives me a wink.

I smile at Sienna and start to resume looking at the menu when I see Cubs Fan taking a long, hard look at his server’s--my girlfriend’s--ass. He turns to Visor Guy and signs, “Wow, did you see the ass on her?”

“Yeah man, I saw it earlier when we came in. It’s pretty sweet.

I'd like to make her scream so loud that maybe we'd hear her!" They both laugh and give each other a high-five.

Those sons of bitches! I am fuming and want to go over there and pummel them. Or wait until they leave and bash their heads in from behind. *They won't even hear it comin'*. But before I can scoot out of the seat--to either confront them or to go to my car to find a strong, blunt instrument--Sienna arrives with my food. "Here you go. And since you gave such helpful advice, I made you a Chocolate shake."

"What'd you do to it?" I ask suspiciously.

Sienna giggles. "I knew you were gonna say that!" She sucks on the straw to verify it is not poisoned. "Those deaf guys are really nice. They even put smiley-faces next to their orders."

She sets her paper pad on the table and I glance at it like I give a shit. "That's nice of them," I say through gritted teeth.

Sienna smiles. "Oh, and guess what? Rita says that since we're so dead tonight, I can leave after I give those guys their food and do my side work. And tonight my side work is...?"

I swallow what food I have in my mouth before responding in a robotic drone. "Purple's side work is bathrooms and shake machine."

She laughs at my imitation, totally enamored with me. "Correct! Gosh, babe, you're the smartest moron I know."

"I is smart," I reply. "So you don't have to wait for the deaf guys to leave before you can go? What about your tip?" The way they have been gawking at her, she deserves a few bucks.

"I don't have to stay. Rita will just put it in an envelope and I'll get it the next time I work. I don't think I'll be any more than twenty minutes."

"Sounds good. We can go to the movies." A bell dings from the kitchen, interrupting our conversation.

"That's their food. And a movie sounds great."

She leaves to go retrieve the Deafies' food while I return to eavesdropping on them. Visor Guy sees Sienna leave my table again, taps his friend on the arm to get his attention and signs, "You think our waitress is dating that guy sitting by himself over there?"

Cubs Fan takes a drink from his soda, staring at me from over the rim. I don't look away, and he doesn't seem all too concerned that I'm eyeballing him, but he's probably used to it. I know any-time when my mom and I would go out somewhere--the grocery store, gas station or restaurants--and converse, we'd always have a few spectators that would be hypnotized by the art that is signing. And my sisters and I would regularly take advantage of situations like that, signing ferociously (it can be done) accompanied by overly dramatic facial expressions. He sets his drink down, wipes his mouth with a napkin, and responds, "No way. She is way out of his league."

Sienna arrives at their table and sets plates of food in front of them. She walks away and they both take another healthy stare at her ass. Visor Guy asks, "What do you mean 'out of his league?'"

"Look at how hot our waitress is and then look at him," Cubs Fan explains with his right hand while stuffing his face with a steak burger with the other. "He looks like he weighs about a hundred pounds, his hair isn't combed, his face hasn't been shaved in days or weeks, and his shirt is even on backwards. Plus, he reeks of nasty pot. I can smell it from here. He's a goddamn loser, and I'm hoping our waitress doesn't date losers."

That deaf motherfucker. I wait a few seconds before pretending to wipe something off my shirt. It is on backwards and I take a quick whiff and receive a mild contact high.

It is no lie or myth about someone who is without one sense that the others become heightened. A few months prior, my mom went into my room and sniffed out my bag of weed tucked away in the finger of my baseball glove. When I found out the next day--nearly ripping the glove apart--I didn't know how to respond. I didn't know whether to be pissed off or impressed. At one point, I even had my cell phone in my hand, contemplating calling the police to see if they had a position available in their K-9 Unit.

My anger leads to self-pity as I eat the rest of my food, sulking. Here I am, an able-bodied individual with all my able parts working, getting ridiculed by a couple of imperfect, diseased Deafies. I ponder this as I finger my plate, licking up the excess melted

cheese from my fries. I do this once, twice, then remember my current odor and attire and promptly stop. *Wow. I must look like a homeless person. Maybe they're right; maybe Sienna is out of my league!*

Sienna comes to my table, reaches into her apron and pulls out her pad of paper and my bill. "Here you go. It's \$10.42, like always."

I get a twenty from my wallet. "I need exact change back."

She rolls her eyes and puts the bill in her apron. "I'm all done with my side work. I just need to let those guys know I'm leaving and to pay at the register. How should I write it down?"

A familiar smart-ass smirk scrawls across my face. "Tell you what: just go clock out and give me their check and I'll go over there."

"Seriously? That would be so awesome."

Sienna starts to walk away, and I dart my eyes to the Deafies to find them still staring at us, so I get her attention. She turns around and I raise my hand and extend my thumb, pinky and index fingers outward while the other two rest against my palm: the sign for *I love you*. She knows this sign and trusts its meaning, so she returns the signed sentiment before proceeding to go clock out.

I shoot a look back at the guys and see their mouths open in shock; scared that they'd been caught. Getting a pen out of my pocket, I see Cubs Fan sign to his friend, "Do you think he saw what we've been saying?"

I draw a crude picture on the bottom of their check and wait for them to look over at me. When they do, I smile and sign, "Yes." Their mouths drop open once more as I head to their table.

"Here you go," I sign, slamming the bill on the table. "My *girl-friend* (dramatic sign, of course) wanted me to give this to you; the smiley face is courtesy of me. And I expect you two to give her a very, very nice tip for visually raping her with your eyes the entire time you've been in here."

Cubs Fan begins to respond, but Sienna emerges and waves at them again. They wave back timidly before returning their attention to me.

We're going to the movies now," I inform them, my fingers moving so rapidly they sound like those windbreaker pants swooshing between your thighs. "And then later on tonight I'll make her scream so loud that maybe I'll turn deaf." With that being said--and my temper returning to its normal, simmering position--I wrap my arm around Sienna and we make our way to the parking lot.

"What did you say to them before we left?" Sienna asks.

"That I was going to bang you so hard I'd be left for deaf."

Her eyes bug out again before she gives me a good slug on the shoulder. "Cody! That is horrible! You didn't really say that, did you?"

"No. Not at all," I say, fingers crossed.

Caroline Leathers

A Peaceful Bliss

A loud crack of thunder woke Carlene. She rolled over and lifted the smooth window shade. The cool synthetic material slipped from her fingers and the weight at the bottom made a clicking noise as it hit the sill.

“What are you doing?” Nora’s tired voice asked from across the room.

“I heard a noise,” Carlene said.

“It’s just the storm. Go back to sleep,” said Nora, “We have to get up in,” she glanced at the portable alarm clock on the bed-side table, “two hours.”

Carlene rolled back over to face the figure of her sister. The twin bed across from hers was illuminated by a tiny night light her mother had plugged into the wall socket. She was drowsy, but the events of the past few days seeped back into her memory as she woke. Her mother, Tess had taken her older sister Nora, her younger sister Blake and herself out of school for one week to arrange and attend a funeral service. It was not an acquaintance that died, not a family pet, nor was it even an elderly neighbor. It was her father. He had not died from an illness. It wasn’t a car accident and it was not a random shooting. The family had been told he killed himself. Carlene did not know any details. What she did know was some kind of poison was involved. She hadn’t seen him in nearly a year. She hadn’t really missed him. She thought that he would be there if she needed to call him. Plus, this summer, she and her sisters were planning to go stay with him for a good portion of school vacation.

Her father had moved to the neighboring state of Illinois, leaving her mother, her sisters and herself behind in Missouri. Her mother said there were no hard feelings. She claimed they just couldn’t work together anymore, and other excuses she and her siblings were supposed to accept, but she sometimes heard her

mother stifle a cry from behind her bedroom door at night and on more than one occasion, she had witnessed Tess with puffy red eyes in the morning. She would give Carlene the allergy excuse, but Carlene had never known of her mother to suffer with sniffy nasal passages or itchy eyes before. Another thing that made Carlene suspicious that her parent's split was not mutual, was the fact that only a few weeks after her father moved out, he came back to get some of his things. A thirty- something dark haired woman was with him and she seemed a bit too close to be considered just a new friend. Carlene didn't understand the attraction either. The woman was kind of cute in the face, but she had small rolls of flab, that could not compare to her mother's slim petite physique. This other woman reminded her of a cartoon character for a tire commercial on television.

The woman was introduced as Bliss. She said hello in a dismissive way such as to exclude all of them. She was not one to try to make a good impression. She seemed not to care whether she was liked or not. She didn't notice Tess wince when introductions were made. Her teeth were flashy and bright. They were very straight, and she appeared to have extra because of the size and perfect shape of them. Carlene did not observe this by seeing her smile; Bliss did not give the impression she even knew how to smile. She just talked a lot. Bliss asked her father numerous questions. When will you be finished? When can we leave? What are you going to do with this house? These people do have somewhere else they can live, don't they? It is your house isn't it? When will we be back on the road? Where are you taking me for dinner? On and on she rambled, as if Tess and her three daughters were invisible. Carlene just focused on those straighter than straight white teeth.

The rain pattered hard against the window, and Carlene squinted, trying to make out the shape of the wooden-framed bench swing that sat in her father's back yard. Since her mother and father's divorce was not finalized yet, it had been decided they were to stay in his house in Illinois until after the funeral. Bliss had shown up at the funeral home earlier that day and made claim to the house but offered it to them for the week so they wouldn't have

to stay in the small motel in the quaint town of Corkville. Tess's drawn face, puffy blue eyes with blood shot vessels, pink nose and down turned mouth were in direct contrast with Bliss's smooth made up face, wide, clear brown eyes and, of course, flashy white teeth.

Earlier that day, at the town's only funeral home, Carlene sunk in an overly padded, fake vinyl, green chair which was underneath a flimsy looking shelf holding several models of cremation urns. She hoped it wouldn't fall on her head, making it necessary for them to hold a double service.

The funeral director, Mr. Anton Karnosky, stood as expressionless as a poker player with a winning hand. While Bliss barked orders, he nodded with silent understanding. His composure was admirable. If someone blew up his house, he would probably just raise an eyebrow at the culprit.

"Bertram told me he wanted to be buried in a cheap urn and put out in the old part of the cemetery. He insisted that when he died he would not want to burden me with high expenses so I would have enough money to be comfortable," Bliss said firmly.

"I understand, Miss Bliss," Mr. Karnosky said.

She then turned to Tess and said, "You realize, of course, that you will be paying for all costs since the divorce is not yet final, but since it still cuts into Bertram's share of the assets, I want to be clear that I will have a say so in however much money you spend now and in the future until everything is finalized."

"My dad didn't like to be called Bertram. He said it meant bright raven, and it reminded him of Edgar Allen Poe, and that's psychotic," Nora interjected. "He also told me on the phone last week that he was about done with you. He said you were too high maintenance. Plus, I might only be sixteen years old but a lot of my friends' parents are divorced, and isn't it true that if one of the people die in the middle of the divorce, the other one is widowed and that makes the divorce null and void?"

"Excuse me young lady, I am being nice enough to allow you and your family to stay in my home, until after things are settled. The least you can do is allow me to conduct these arrangements

according to your father's wishes," Bliss stated as she turned on a heel and headed to the powder room before anyone could say anything else.

Mr. Karnosky stood looking at Tess and her daughters without changing his stoic attitude. He addressed Tess and spoke easily. He could probably communicate with the most notorious of serial killers without batting an eye. "Mrs. Brada," he began, "I knew Mr. Brada from church and he never expressed to me his final wishes. I only know that legally, you have some rights. I don't know if you wish to exercise them, but you might wish to speak with your attorney in this matter."

"I never hired one," Tess managed to push the words out of her constricted throat.

"Well then, perhaps you would like to consult with my cousin here in town. He is an attorney and he may be helpful to you in this situation. Here is his card." He reached in the breast pocket of his grey striped suit, lifted out a shiny blue business card and handed it to Tess.

Bliss returned shortly after, handed Tess a house key and said, "I cannot continue with these plans right now. I have an appointment for a manicure. I will return this afternoon Anton and we will finish up. In the meantime, please get together some reasonable ideas and I will be back to finalize, say, around one o'clock?"

Mr. Karnosky nodded once, walked back behind his desk and sat. As the group left the office, Carlene glanced back in time to see the old gentleman wipe his forehead with a handkerchief, a hint of relief on the old man's face. It made her smile just a bit.

Carlene woke to a loud noise coming from alarm clock. She had not remembered falling back to sleep and now she sat up in the warm twin bed and stretched her arms over her head and yawned. She looked at the other bed and saw the unmoving figure of her sister Nora. She wondered how anyone could sleep through the loud bleeping sound.

"Nora," Carlene shouted over the alarm. "Shut that off."

"Wait a second, will ya?" Nora covered her head with a pillow.

Blake entered the room and picked up the black, plastic alarm clock.

“Give it to me,” Carlene said.

The small seven-year-old girl obediently walked the clock over to her sister and Carlene hit the floating button on top, silencing the clock, then searched for the off button in back.

“How did you sleep, Blakey?” Carlene asked.

“Well, not that good,” Blake admitted. “The storm kept waking me up and I would rather be at home. But I really like Shotzie.”

She was referring to the black Labrador puppy, which had belonged to their father. When they arrived at the house after leaving the funeral home, the four month old dog bounded up clumsily, and, when they caught sight of him, the four females automatically dropped to the floor and let the pup circle them. He licked each of their faces with a happy greeting. The pup had overturned a large bag of puppy chow. He was blocked off in the entry way and the spilled food had mixed with gold urine and brown puppy poop. There was no sign of a water dish, and Blake ran to search the kitchen cabinets. She retrieved a bowl, filled it with water and placed it in front of the thirsty pup. He lapped at it gratefully.

Tess and the girls joined together to clean up the puppy’s mess, then walked down the street to the E.G.P., which stood for Economy Grocery Place. Nora laughed at the silly name for the store. They walked up and down the aisles looking for goodies to stave off starvation while they resided at their father’s house for the week. A thirty-two pound bag of dog food was dumped into the grocery cart along with peanut butter wafer cookies, skittles, potato chips, popcorn, heat-and-eat taco meat, tortilla chips, ice cream, pizza, and assorted chocolate candy bars.

When the bags and boxes were loaded on the conveyer belt, the middle-aged woman behind the register raised an eyebrow. “Stocking up for the winter?” she asked.

“Oh,” Tess stammered, “We’re just picking up a few things. We won’t be in town long.”

“Yes, I was very sorry to hear about Bertram Brada’s passing,” the woman said. “We all thought he was a nice man.”

“Yeah,” Tess nodded, “He was a really nice guy.”

Nora and Blake grabbed the plastic grocery bags and headed out. Tess was left to struggle with the puppy chow while Carlene held the door. They stumbled awkwardly into the bleak fall day.

“How did that lady know we were here about Dad? How did she even know about Dad? I have never seen her in my whole life,” Blake expressed.

“You’re only seven,” Nora said, “not a hundred and seven.”

“She’s a stranger. She shouldn’t know who we are,” said Blake, ignoring her.

“Honey,” Tess said, “It’s a small town. Everybody knows everyone else’s business.”

“Looks like it is gonna rain, Mom,” Nora observed.

“Yeah, we better hustle,” Tess said as Carlene helped her mother turn the canine cuisine sideways so they could share the burden of the heavy bag.

They just made it to the edge of the yard when the rain came. The grey sky turned black, then powerful rain started to fall without even the hint of a sprinkle. Nora ran for the door with the key stretched in front of her, and Blake held it opened. Tess and Carlene maneuvered the large bag through the door and dropped it on the floor.

They fed the puppy fresh food, replenished his empty bowl of water and watched him eat ravenously.

Carlene rubbed her tired eyes and faced her mother and two sisters seated around the kitchen table and waited for Tess to give them instructions for the day ahead of them. They ate pancakes Tess prepared from biscuit mix she found in the half empty pantry. They sipped orange juice, which tasted bitter and rancid. Tess claimed she checked the expiration date on the bottle, but Carlene felt it must have sat open in the fridge for a while.

Blake smacked with her mouth open, talking baby talk to Shotzie and feeding him bits of pancake under the table.

“That’s probably not very good for Shotzie,” Tess said absently.

“Yeah squirt,” Nora said, “You’ll make him have diarrhea. That

is really hard to clean up, and you will be the one to clean it up if that happens.”

“I don’t care,” Blake said, “I will clean up after him any time.” Then she added, “Hey mom, can we take Shotzie back to St. Louis with us?”

“I don’t see why not, sweetie. You and your sisters need to promise to take care of him though. You can’t just leave him in a small space without food or water.”

“You mean like we found him,” Nora added bitterly.

“Yes, that’s what I mean,” Tess said. “Now, we should all think about getting ready. We will have to take turns in the bathroom.”

Carlene stood in the shower. Warm water ran over her as she rinsed her mousey blonde hair and let her mind wander. She thought about Heaven. She wondered if her dad was there. She wondered if it was like earth, or if it was something different. She thought of their new puppy. Her mom said they could keep Shotzie and that made Blake really happy. She could tell it made Nora and her mother happy. She realized it made her happy, too. Shotzie was friendly and it was funny the way he ran through the house sliding on the linoleum floor, unable to stop. She liked the way he looked at them with big brown, sad puppy eyes. She thought he must be so confused. He didn’t know who they were, and he was probably so used to her father and Bliss. Maybe he would be as happy to live with them as they were to have a snuggly new friend.

That afternoon, after a morning of shopping for suitable funeral attire, they sat in Aggie’s flower shop on high stools at a bar that looked like it had been saved from a salvage yard. The store’s proprietor, which they assumed was Aggie herself, lifted binders with pictures of wreaths and arrangements and placed them in front of Tess with explanations of possible color and flower alternatives. She looked so old to Carlene. She saw folds and wrinkles in the woman’s face that reminded her of a special she had seen on the Dog network about a Chinese breed called the Shar-pei.

“This arrangement is only two hundred dollars,” said Ms. Aggie Shar-pei. “It says goodbye with dignity.” She straightened as if she were going to salute the flag.

“It might be a little out of my price range,” Tess said, “considering we were in the middle of divorce.”

“Oh, yes honey, well we have some more modest styles here in the back of the book.” She flipped toward the back and on the last page there were several bouquets that ranged from sixty to one hundred and seventy five dollars. “This might be more what you had in mind,” she said as she fiddled with the silk collar of her blouse.

Tess pointed to the sixty dollar arrangement a bit fast to have even really looked at the flowers, color, or arrangement and said, “Yes, that is perfect.”

“Davy,” Ms. Aggie Shar-pei called out toward a grey curtain, which seemingly divided the front half of the town floral shop from the back half. “Come out here, laddie.”

A boy, who looked to be about fourteen, the same age as Carlene, peeked out from behind the threadbare curtain. He had on headphones, and the music coming from them was so loud that Carlene could practically make out the words from where she sat across the room. She wondered how the boy could even hear Aggie Shar-pei calling for him. He was tall and slender, with wavy, brown hair and green eyes. He looked at the group and then his eyes fell on Carlene who was staring at him with her mouth agape.

“This is my grandson, Davy,” said Ms. Aggie Shar-pei. “These are Burt Brada’s wife and kids.”

“Hi,” Carlene blurted an octave too high, as she realized the old dog lady called her dad by the name he had always preferred.

“Hi,” the boy named Davy said back. He pulled the headphones off and was rubbing his ears. “I’m David. I mean, you can call me David. My grandma calls me Davy.”

“Okay,” Carlene said and continued to stare at him.

“Hello? We are here,” Nora said.

“Nora,” Tess said in a scolding tone. “What is wrong with you?”

“Well, Carlene is just being weird,” Nora said, “and look, she’s blushing. Turning a bright shade of maroon there, sister dear?”

Carlene turned and looked at Nora and Tess. She was mortified.

Ms. Aggie Shar-pei defused the situation by continuing to speak to David. “Davy, you need to get in the cooler and fill this order. Get on it, laddie,” she said.

Yeah,” he paused to look back at Carlene. “It was nice to meet you.”

“Carlene,” she managed to say and pointed to herself.

After Tess forked over her MasterCard, paying extra for delivery, handling, and some other unknown charges, they literally bumped into Bliss on her way in to assumedly purchase an arrangement.

“Oh, how nice of you to remember Bertram with a floral tribute,” she said brushing against Tess nearly knocking her to the ground. “Excuse me, I’m in a rush.”

“Who the hell does she think she is?” Nora asked.

“Nora,” Tess began.

Nora cut her off. “No mom, really? I mean seriously? She is not Dad’s anything. He is dead. She wasn’t even married to him. Why don’t you just kick her to the curb?”

“What do you expect me to do? Suggest pistols at high noon?” Tess said in a low voice meant for only her daughters. “I mean, nothing will be accomplished by a confrontation. I mean... I don’t really know what I mean. I just know that nothing will be solved if I make a scene in front of your dad’s neighbors and such. We came here to bury your dad and that is what we are going to do. I know it is hard on you all, but we just need to get through it and then we can go on. Don’t you see that?” Tess was almost in tears.

“Yes,” Carlene spoke up. “We see that, Mom, and that is what we are here for. The good news is we will be going home with Shotzie, right?”

Bliss walked back to the opened door. “Oh,” she addressed the group, “by the way, later I will come to collect my dog. I forgot about him in the chaos of planning all this stuff.”

Tears welled up in Blake’s eyes, and Nora’s hands balled into fists. It was Tess’s turn to stand with her mouth agape.

“Mom,” Blake wailed, “You’re not gonna let that...bad woman take Shotzie are you?”

Tess looked at her youngest daughter and wiped the streaming tears from her small red face. “Of course not, honey.” She turned toward Bliss. “How much do you want for the puppy?”

Bliss put a brightly polished, red fingernail to her mouth and tapped on a large white tooth, “I’m sorry, Tessa, but that mutt is not for sale. You see, Bertram bought that puppy whilst we were together, so it is our money. Since you and your little family were not--how should I put this...*dealt* with yet, I really don’t want you spending any assets ‘til they are divided.”

Tess cringed at the mispronunciation of her name. She looked over Bliss’s shoulder to see Ms. Aggie Shar-pei anxiously waiting behind the counter. She then glanced around where she stood with her daughters and noticed a couple of cornpones standing about listening. “C’mon girls,” she finally said, “let’s go home; we will talk about it there.”

“You mean you will talk about it at my home,” Bliss interjected.

“It is my father’s home,” Nora called over her shoulder, “My father told me you live in an apartment somewhere down the street. You don’t own my dad’s house or his dog!”

Tess ushered a hollering Nora, and a hysterical Blake down the road in the direction of Bertram Brada’s home. Carlene followed quietly behind the group, only glancing back once to see the figure of David retreating back into the small flower shop.

“I don’t understand how Bliss can take Shotzie,” Blake said, still shaking from the experience that had taken place an hour before.

“Honey,” Tess tried to reason with the child, “We will figure something out.”

“Well we have to do it fast. Bliss will come for Shotzie,” Blake said, snuffling snot through her nostrils. Shotzie was lying across Blake’s legs oblivious to the continuing flood of tears, which was dampening his fur.

“I don’t understand why we couldn’t buy the dog from her,” said Nora. “I mean, if she doesn’t want us to spend money, why doesn’t she just give us the dog? It isn’t like someone hasn’t paid

for it already. She will probably dump him or give him to the pound for God's sake."

"Okay girls, you go on and take Shotzie for a walk so he don't pee on the floor again. I need to think about things right now. I am going to make dinner so be back in a half hour. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," said Nora.

The three girls went out through the back door. Blake was in the lead with Shotzie pulling her down the road. Carlene walked to the mailbox, and Nora sat on the bottom porch step, which was still damp from the last night's rain. Carlene looked up to see David leaning against a tree just five feet from her. She jumped.

"You scared me," she blushed

"I'm sorry," he scratched his head and looked down at the ground.

"You're David from the flower store." She felt she was turning a deeper shade of red if that was possible. She wished she could see herself, but maybe she didn't want to. She pictured her head as a big red apple on her neck.

"Well," he was saying, "I'm David, but I am not really from the flower store. I just help out my Grandma Aggie once in a while."

Carlene firmly bit her lip. She almost made reference to David's grandma looking like the Chinese Shar-pei dog. Instead, she just nodded and kicked at a loose gravelly piece of cement on the curb and waited to see if David was just passing by or if he had anything else to say. She looked across the yard. Nora had a big smile on her face as she sat twisting a long blond curl and giving Carlene a look she knew well. She might as well have said, "I'm going to tease the heck out of you later."

"Carlene," David said. Now he was the one blushing a bit.

"Yes," she blinked.

"Well, Carlene," David said, "you wanna go for a walk?"

"Sure," she glanced up the yard at Nora who was nodding.

"I'll tell Mom," she said. "Go on you crazy kids. Have fun."

Carlene and David walked across town. It wasn't far, but Carlene thought it was a good adventure anyway. Her nervousness eased and was replaced with a silent comfort. She was en-

joying the small town in spite of the fact that the rest of her clan was homesick. They walked past a white house, which sat on a corner lot. She looked at the dilapidated structure. There was a large rectangular opening in the side of the house. A pro football player could easily crawl through in full dress with room to spare. There were missing boards and visible wood rot. The windows were cracked and brown with muck and nicotine stains. The door looked old and splintered. The house itself sat close to the sidewalk and a little front yard was visible. Carlene wondered if it was a crack house. She had seen crack houses on footage of news reports in St. Louis.

David stopped walking and was looking toward the old house. He cleared his throat. Carlene looked into his large green eyes. She waited for him to speak, and when he didn't she said, "What is this place?"

"No one is ever here. I go past here a lot and--nothing. No activity. My grandma said it should be condemned," he looked at her and smiled.

"It looks kinda creepy." Did she really say creepy?

"Yeah," he was looking toward the structure and shading his eyes from the now visible sun. "You know, I deliver flowers for my grandma's shop. Well about a year ago, I brought one yellow rose and yellow dandelions to this address every Friday. I remember this because my grandma would complain that she had to get the dandelions out of the back yard and she said that they were a weed and ruined the whole bouquet. And I remember, of course, because it was Friday, weekend time. I didn't stick around; I would just put the flowers there on the front porch, and knock. No one ever answered, but on Saturday mornings when me and my friends walked by, they were always gone."

Carlene smiled at David. "It would be kinda cool to have a look, huh? That is, if you think it's vacant."

David hesitated. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then he nodded and they walked gingerly through the overgrown wet grass around the side of the house. They stayed close to the wall and David looked into each window searching for signs of

life. When they reached the large back yard, he tested the rotting boards, which appeared to be a small back porch at one time. It was sturdy against his weight. So he stood on it and walked to the back door, which was standing wide opened and hanging from one hinge.

“Umm, I think I’ve changed my mind,” Carlene said in a hardly audible voice.

“No way, young lady. We have come this far. Let’s take a peek,” David said playfully.

It seemed she had known David for a long time, instead of them just meeting that afternoon. He was so easy to hang out with. They entered through the opening, avoiding the hanging door altogether. Once they were inside, the house was enclosed in shadows with the sun streaking through the filthy windows at intervals. Carlene and David carefully walked across the hardwood floor toward the front of the house. She felt something brush against her leg where she had rolled her pants up so as not to get them wet when they waded through the tall grass.

“What was that?”

“Huh?” David was focused on a dangerous looking staircase.

“I felt something on my leg.” Carlene was feeling her bare, damp leg and reaching with her other hand for something to lean on to balance herself.

“We probably need a flashlight,” an edge of excitement was in his voice, “There’s one in my mom’s car. I don’t live far, just a couple of blocks. Wanna go get it?”

“Sure,” Carlene smiled.

When they returned to the broken down house with the flashlight, they almost needed to use it to see the sidewalk in front of them. It was getting dark, and Carlene was starting to worry. She knew she would be in trouble for being gone so long without checking in. Her mom’s orders to be back in half an hour echoed in her mind. She looked up at David and the thought was gone. He had such amazing brown wavy hair. They slid against the wall toward the back of the house like pros remembering the route from before. They easily entered the house and David clicked on the

silver flashlight and pointed the beam to the floor. They ventured into a small bathroom to the left of the kitchen.

The smell of sewer entered Carlene's nostrils and she fought back the urge to gag. She swallowed several times and cleared her throat. The sound startled both of them as it reverberated off of the solid walls of the room. Carlene took a step to her right to avoid going further into the small room, but her foot slid on something wet. She tried to balance herself, but all she could reach was the sleeve of David's jacket. Before she could register what was happening, they both went down. She tried to scramble to her hands and knees to push her way up. The flashlight had fallen from David's hand and was rolling toward the vanity where it came to a rest. The beam shined about four inches from Carlene's face. Her eyes focused on something about two inches long. Legs sprouted from its back and its long face and beady eyes appeared to be looking right at Carlene. It was a mixture of dark and light brown and had stripes on its back and hind legs. She wanted to scream at the sight of this large spidery looking insect but thought better of it. What if it could jump? What if it jumped into her mouth? She stayed completely still with her hands resting on the slimy floor. Her eyes felt as if they could explode. She was staring hard at the creature. She realized she was holding her breath. Not because of the stench in the room, but because of the fear. Fear of the strange little thing before her eyes.

David was up on his feet, apparently not noticing the mutant bug on the floor so close to Carlene's face. He tugged at Carlene and lifted her off the floor like a rocket ship blasting into space. Her eyes didn't leave the insect and just as she was about to breathe easy, it jumped. It leaped as if it were blasting into space as well.

"What the hell is that?" Carlene said with a shaky voice.

David answered her with a question of his own. "What is what?"

She pointed toward the vanity but didn't see the bug anymore. Wildly, she looked around the dark bathroom. The beam of the flashlight was still shining on the spot where the bug had been

twitching his long two feelers and staring at her with its demonic eyes. She reached down, carefully picking up the small silver flashlight and shining it on every surface of the four walls and in every corner, ceiling to floor. Then she found it.

“There!” she exclaimed loudly, “What is that?”

David looked at the bug. “Oh,” he said with relief. “That’s just a spider cricket. No big deal. You’ve never seen a spider cricket before?”

Carlene looked at him as if he had two heads. All of a sudden, this beautiful boy, who now smelled of sewage, was not as appealing to her. “No,” she said in a small voice, “I have never seen a spider cricket before.”

“They won’t hurt you. I see them sometimes in our garage.”

“What happened? Did a spider mate with a cricket and make a new bug? I mean, it is so gross. I have never seen such a disgusting thing in my whole life.”

“No biggie, Carlene. Really, I don’t know why you’re freaking out. Are you scared of it or what?” He smirked at her with a teasing upturn in the corner of his mouth.

She looked at his expression and smiled. At that moment, he was every bit as appealing to her as he had been when she first saw him at the flower shop. Her smile turned into a laugh, and then they were both laughing. He reached for her hand and as he gripped it in his own, their palms fused together with a suction created by the slimy sewer remnants from the floor. She still kept a careful eye on the spindly-legged bug that hadn’t moved from the spot on the wall.

“I think that is all the exploring I want to do for one day,” Carlene said, looking down at the front of her dirty shirt. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark, and there was just enough light to reveal the muck covering her.

“I agree,” said David with a smile plastered on his face. He had not let go of her hand.

They made their way to the back door and started out. Blake was kneeling down on the porch with her arms encircled around Shotzie’s neck. The puppy was silently panting and its tongue

hung from the side of his mouth.

“What are you doing here Blake,” Carlene said, “and how did you find me?”

Blake looked up at Carlene, her face wet with tears. “I saw you guys getting something out of a car. Me and Shotzie tried to catch up, but we never could. I saw you go behind this house and then you were gone. I was afraid to go in there, so me and Shotzie have been waiting for you to come out.”

“Okay, so why are you crying? Did you think I wasn’t safe?” Carlene asked.

“No. I was walking Shotzie and when I went back to Dad’s house, Nora told me not to go in there. She said Bliss was in there and that she had come for Shotzie. Nora told me to find you,” she said her voice rising to a shrill whine. “What are we going to do? I want Shotzie.” She leaned over and kissed the dog on top of his head.

David had been silently watching the two sister’s exchange. “Okay,” he began slowly. “Carlene, I know you are dirty, scared of bugs and you don’t want to go back in there,” he gestured toward the house, “but I need for you and your sister to take that dog in there and wait for me to come back. Can you do that?”

Carlene’s mouth turned up in distaste and she visibly shivered, “I guess so,” she said, “but where are you going?”

“I am gonna get my grandma. She knows Bliss and she might be able to help you and your sister. That lady isn’t very cool.”

“Tell me about it,” Carlene said.

“You are going to need to go back into the bathroom. That’s the only place in the house where no one will see the flashlight.”

Then David was off the rickety back porch and sprinting around the corner before either of the girls or the dog had moved. Carlene reached for Blake’s shoulder and led her through the back door. She shined the flashlight down the hallway, and they moved swiftly to the bathroom. She pointed down at the muck on the floor, silently warning Blake to avoid it, but the dog tromped right through, leaving paw prints in the thick fluid. Carlene shined the light around the windowless room, searching for the spider cricket. It was gone.

She breathed a sigh of relief and motioned Blake to sit against the wall furthest from the door. Blake settled next to the vanity in a dry, dirty spot opposite the goo that seeped from the broken toilet. She scooped Shotzie into her small lap. The large puppy spilled over the sides of her legs and rested his head in the corner of the room. Carlene sat down in the doorway to the small bathroom and clicked off the flashlight to save the battery. The three of them started the waiting game.

Carlene woke with a start and tried to guess how much time had gone by. It was completely dark now, and panic rose inside her. As she became fully conscious, her hands were empty so she felt around for the silver flashlight. Instead, her hand found the puddle of oozing sludge, so she knew she was near the toilet. She closed her fingers around the shaft of the flashlight and she hurried to flip the switch before nausea overtook her. Her sister was tipped over slightly, and Carlene knew she was sleeping. The dog was still in her lap with its eyes opened looking at something on the floor by the vanity. Carlene's eyes widened with horror as she realized it was a spider cricket. This couldn't be the one she saw earlier, because it was bigger and wider. This bug had to be at least a half an inch bigger all the way around. Carlene could not move. She sat, frozen and held her breath. The insect appeared to be holding its breath too as they had a stare down. She feared the puppy might lunge for it and make it jump at Carlene. Then she would have to scream. She would have to scream so loudly that it would alert everyone in town.

She looked around for something to get rid of it. Toilet paper would be great since they were in a bathroom, but the long deserted house couldn't possibly have toiletries. She saw the corner of a napkin peeking out from under the swung-open door and reached for it very slowly. Then she noticed, through a crack in the bottom of the vanity, a squirt bottle filled with clear liquid. She reached for it instead. The bug twitched just as Carlene closed in on the bottle. In one flowing movement, she grabbed the bottle, praying it would work and sprayed it full force at the scary insect just as it was retreating under the edge of the vanity. It was slithering

and slipping toward the edge of it and its squirming legs were still visible. The puppy let out a small, sharp bark, which caused Blake to become alert. Carlene grabbed the napkin and reached for the slimy legs of the bug, which had now almost disappeared under the jagged wood. She grabbed it, pulled it out from underneath and threw it in the toilet. She shined the light in the bowl and saw through the rusty water that the bug was squirming and flailing and pushing its way toward the side. She said one more silent prayer as she pushed the silver handle down. Relief flooded through her as she heard the loud flushing noise. Then the water swirled sucking the bug under and it was gone.

“What was that?” Blake asked.

Before Carlene could open her mouth, Bliss stomped in through the opened back door. Blake tightened her grip on Shotzie, and tears immediately started rolling down her cheeks. Carlene still held the squirt bottle in one hand and the flashlight in the other. The beam reflected off Bliss’s teeth, which were emphasized by her mad snarl.

“What are you doing in my house?” she started.

“This is your house? I don’t understand.” Carlene shook her head in disbelief.

“Yes it is my house, although I wouldn’t be caught dead living here. It belonged to my late father, not that it’s any of your business and never mind that--I just knew you were here with my dog. Give him to me right now.” Bliss’s face was lit up by the flashlight and it reminded her of a jack-o-lantern.

“I don’t understand,” Carlene repeated.

Bliss exhaled slowly, put her hands on her hips and said, “I went to Bertram’s to collect my dog. You imbeciles have my property. It was obvious you would not be returning any time soon, so I left. I was on my way back to my apartment when I saw Davy from the flower shop coming from the back of my house. I figured you might be with him since it was so obvious you had a thing for him at the flower shop today,” she said as she pointed a long, fake fingernail at Carlene. “After a bit more contemplation, I decided to investigate and I hit the Jack pot. Here you are and there’s my

dog and you girls are trespassing. Look,” she continued, “I am not unreasonable and although I can appreciate the fact that you both just lost your father, that puppy is mine and I should be able to do whatever I wish with it. If you don’t have any objections--actually, even if you do have objections, hand it over. I’m waiting,” Bliss stood in the door way to the bathroom where Blake, Carlene and Shotzie were still holed up.

Carlene and Blake reared back toward the wall of the bathroom as far out of reach as they could. Carlene wondered where David was.

“Okay girls, enough of this waiting, and quit shining that light in my face.” She took the flashlight from Carlene. In the beam she caught sight of the squirt bottle in Carlene’s hand. “Where did you get that?”

“What?” Carlene asked.

“Don’t play stupid with me. You kids have no respect for anyone. I am sick to death of your big mouth sister with her snide remarks and you with your self-centered attitude. You do not have the right to take anything you want and to go snooping through my private things.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Carlene.

“I don’t know what anything she said means,” Blake said tightening her grip on Shotzie, “but can we go now?”

Carlene looked into her sister’s wide frightened eyes, and her usual passive nature fell away as she returned her gaze to Bliss’s bright teeth. “Yes we are going,” she said as she pulled Blake toward her with her free hand, “I don’t know how our dad could have ever got involved with you in the first place. Our mom is so sweet and you are so not.”

“Oh,” Bliss cooed, “I can be sweet. Just ask your dad. Oops, I guess you can’t.”

The girls tried to exit the bathroom but Bliss was focused on the squirt bottle once again. “This changes everything,” she said holding the flashlight on the girls.

“I don’t understand,” Carlene felt the hair on the nape of her neck rise.

“You don’t, you don’t. Well, let me explain it to you,” Bliss said still staring at the bottle in Carlene’s hand, “Dandelions. My old boyfriend Donny sent me one rose and dandelions. He said I was a perfect flower among weeds. He sent them every Friday. He loved me, but he turned out to be like all the rest. He always had to go out with his friends on Friday nights. He just couldn’t stay in. I just thought if I could make him sick, he would settle down. I could take care of him. I didn’t know that I sprayed too much of that poison on his food. It wasn’t my fault. Then when I met Bertram, everything made sense again. But then he started talking about you stupid kids coming to live with him. Then he got that stupid dog and everything went south,” she looked at Carlene’s face, “what am I going to do with you horrible kids and that horrible dog?”

She reached out and grabbed Shotzie’s tail. He yelped and pawed toward Blake to save him. Carlene intervened and almost slipped on the bathroom sludge.

Bliss caught ahold of Carlene’s hair and said, “You are on my property. Therefore, I can do whatever I want with you and I am going to start by kicking your teenage ass. Then you can have a taste of my squirt bottle. Give it to me now!”

Water was streaming from under the toilet. One of Bliss’s high heels caught on a warped tile, and she slid. Before she could regain her balance, she started to go down. She grabbed a rope, which hung from the ceiling. A trap door, leading to an attic, pulled down and a rope ladder fell from the hole in the ceiling, knocking Bliss to the floor. Dust and dirt fell onto her hair along with dozens of jumping spider crickets. Carlene and Blake started to scream. Bliss pulled herself to a halfway sitting position and shook her head. Bugs were flying from her hair as she swatted at them on the front of her clothes. The guts from one she nailed splattered against her right cheek. Her mouth was open, but she was soundless. A silent scream formed on her mouth as she continued to flail and fling off bugs, dust and dirt. She was still sliding in water and muck from the now flooding toilet bowl.

Carlene looked up just in time to see flashlight beams moving

toward her. Leading the way were two officers, followed by Tess, Nora, David, Ms. Aggie Shar-pei and Mr. Anton Karnosky, the funeral director.

After they were all outside, David walked over to Carlene. He brushed a clump of hair away from her cheek and looked down at her, smiling.

“What took you so long to get back here, David?”

“I went to get my grandma,” he said. “I didn’t know Bliss would find you. My grandma told me it is her house. Can you believe that? Anyway, we went to your dad’s house and your mom was there with Mr. Karnosky. Nora told me she called him ‘cause he is the only person in town she could think of to call. She was worried when you and Blake didn’t come home. Then they called the cops. When Grandma and I got there, I told them where you were, and well, here we are.”

Carlene stared at the squirt bottle and started to cry.

Mr. Karnosky, along with one of the officers, walked up to the pair. “What is that in your hand young lady?”

“It’s a spray bottle. I killed him.”

“Killed who?” Mr. Karnosky said evenly.

“I killed the spider cricket. I sprayed him with this poison. Bliss told me that she sprayed it on her old boyfriend Donny’s food. I flushed that bug down the toilet,” she said, and the tears continued as she realized that her father had succumbed to the same type of fate at the hands of Bliss and her poison squirt bottle.

“Donny Karnosky?” David asked.

“My grandson,” Mr. Karnosky said choking out the words bitterly. “We always suspected as much.” He glanced at the officer who gave a slight nod.

“Why don’t you let me take care of that for you,” said Mr. Karnosky. The officer took the bottle from Carlene with a gloved hand and dropped it in a plastic evidence bag. The other policeman, who had been standing idly with the others, walked over to Bliss and started to escort her toward their vehicle. He was speaking to her in a soothing voice.

David walked Carlene over to her mother, her sisters, and their

new dog. Tess put her arm around a filthy Carlene's shoulders.

"I would have never let her take that dog," said Tess, "and I don't want you girls to ever run off like that again, okay?"

Carlene nodded. David took Carlene's still squishy hand and they watched quiet, peaceful Bliss as the two officers ushered her into the back of the police van. They all stood together for a long time as the red and blue lights faded in the dark.

Donald Reynolds III

Smoking Kills

The pale form shambled ever onward. A dull rat-a-tat could be heard as the loose foot bounced off of the pavement, barely being held to the bloodless severance site by a scant amount of muscle tissue. Densely fractured bones strutting out of a pallid leg splintered further still as they were repeatedly stabbed into the black-top road in place of the disconnected foot. Dirt-infused tatters of clothes clung to the soulless creature. Three exposed ribs jutted from the left side of the shuffling corpse. A mound of flesh thrust outwards from a dislocated shoulder. What skin remained was fissured from sheer lack of moisture, and tightly gripped the rotten meat beneath it. Flies swarmed around this creature like a cloud. Cracked teeth lay exposed by a gaping mouth. A fetid odor seeped out from a small crater where the right eye had once been. Thick patches of filthy brown hair sprouted from the scalp, which had been stripped of flesh in many places.

A thunderous clap echoed between tall, stone buildings. Grey matter exploded onto the street surface as two holes opened up in the creature's head, one above the left eyebrow and the other just beneath where the neck met the back of the head. The monstrous figure dropped to the ground, finally motionless.

"Yes, got it!" sang out the balding man, who sat atop a small stool. His hunting rifle was perched upon the windowsill in front of him. Taking one last peek into the scope that was fastened atop the gun, he looked upon the still corpse that lay in the middle of the street four stories beneath him. He brought the rifle back inside the window and rested it, barrel up, against the wall next to where he sat. The man, in his green camouflage jacket, let out a long sigh as he grabbed a pack of cigarettes off of the floor and ruffled through his pocket to produce a silvery Zippo with the words "To Daddy from Earl Jr." engraved on one side. He tore away the cellophane like a professional; then he hungrily unsheathed one pale white

cigarette. Flicking the lighter to life, he placed the butt of the smoke between his lips and lit the end. Earl took in a long drag, and the end of the cigarette blazed a bright orange. After which, he placed the metal lighter and the pack of smokes on the windowsill, turned from the bleak view outside, and leaned against the window frame. Letting out a light gray puff of air, he began coughing. “Ahh, that hits the spot.” Taking another long drag on his cigarette, he looked at the landfill that had once been his apartment. All of his heavy furniture was bottlenecked against the door that led out into the hall. Sweeping his gaze over the trash that occupied the place his couch had once been, his eyes caught on a bright red section of the mound, which consisted of emptied cigarette packs. Earl thought for the millionth time how he ought to quit smoking. Shrugging to himself, he continued his scan of his living space. Against the wall, he had stacked hundreds of cans of food and many cases of water. Being paranoid had really paid off. He sat there relaxing as he continued to smoke his cigarette.

Hardly allowing breathing room between sucking on the smoke-filled stick attached to his mouth, he burned through the cigarette in no time. “Shit, these just don’t last long enough,” he mumbled. Earl, a man with a plump beer-gut, turned around to reach for another cigarette and bumped his hand into the lighter, which sent it cascading outside the window. “Fuck! My son gave me that for Father’s Day!” he exclaimed to no one. Placing another cigarette in his mouth, he stood from his stool to search the apartment for another light. Earl strode through the trash that lay strewn across his floor to his small kitchenette. He pulled open a drawer and began to rummage through it. Seconds later, he pulled out a blue Bic lighter and gave it a flick. Not even a spark. The frowning man tossed it over his shoulder. He continued his frantic search through the drawer until he pulled out a box of matches. Sliding the box out, he saw that it was empty. He threw the small paper container to the ground and stomped it flat with a loud “Shit!”

Several minutes went by as Earl searched every place he could think of to find the fire he so desperately desired. He ran to the window and peered out. It was dead outside. Nothing moved for

the duration of his speedy viewing. Quickly, he turned from the window, all the while mumbling curses under his breath. Earl grabbed the pack of cigarettes he had just opened and thrust them into his pocket. He then grabbed the handgun that sat on the floor next to the rifle and shoved it into his beltline.

Desperately, he rushed into the one bedroom the apartment had, lunged over the heavy armchair he had placed to hold the twin bed propped against the window, and slung it aside. Earl then lowered the angled bed down onto its side so that he could see the fire escape behind the window. The balding man lifted the window up in its tracks. Earl crept onto the black metal stairway. He tried to quietly descend the stairway. After several flights of rattling stairs, he came upon the already let down ladder and placed his feet on the first rung. He lowered himself as quickly as he could, almost slipping more than once. As soon as his feet were set down on the ground below, he let out a nervous sigh. Frantically, he swept his eyes across the area, looking for any signs of trouble before walking to the bush that sat beneath his living room window. Still cursing, he squatted down onto his hands and knees and crawled into the large shrub to search. He padded around, trying to feel the small metal lighter. The hot headed hunter began to get frustrated. Earl started to make more noise than he would have wanted to if he hadn't thrown caution to the wind.

Just as he felt his palm rest over a rectangle of cold metal, pain erupted in his ankle as skin and muscle were torn away from bone. He let out a hoarse scream as he reared around to see what had once been a beautiful young woman, now a flesh-eating monster, chewing on a hunk of meat that had been part of his lower leg. He immediately retrieved the gun from his waist, just as he had done in front of the mirror so many times, aimed the sights at the foul creature before him, and let loose two quick shots that brought the ghostly undead girl to a halt mid-chew. He crawled backward with his wounded foot, leaving a thick trail of bright red blood as he went. The wounded man braced himself against the stone wall and took notice of the rate at which blood was flowing from his body. Having survived long enough to know what a bite from one of

these monstrosities meant for him, he openly wept for the first time since his ex-wife had left him so many years before. The grimness of the situation set in. Earl knew that within minutes he would die, but not for long. Soon, he would be one of the mindless monsters he despised so fervently. Knowing there was nothing he could do about it, Earl withdrew the pack of cigarettes he had recently crammed into a pocket, took one last smoke from the box, and put it to his lips as mechanically as ever. Grabbing the now-dirt-covered lighter from the ground in front of him, he lit the cigarette and flipped the case of the Zippo shut. The quickly paling man dropped the lighter to his side and took a long draw on the tobacco-filled cylinder lovingly nestled between his lips. Taking it away from his mouth with two fingers, he placed the still warm barrel of his handgun against his pursed lips and pulled the trigger one last time. The smoke emptied from his lungs from the two holes now in his face as Earl Sr. lay dead in a puddle of his own blood.

Madeline Kohlberg

Guardian

Many will know who I am, for I am Nathan's child. It is my lot to float through liquid, guardian of our briny vast Pacific. It is my pursuit to play watchman for so many individuals who subsist in our aquatic world. My captain is illustrious, and outstanding, known for his bravado and skill. In sync, our mission is to acquire information. Command talks of diplomacy and pacification. I know that no human is as first-class at such things as my captain. It is my duty and my honor to aid as his craft. For my duty tops that of a simply ordinary ship. I am an addition to Nathan. Captain and ship: a daunting pair to guard all living.

Derek Kerr

So It Goes

You wake up one morning and you're freezing. You look around the room and notice your wife is missing and that the bedroom is a mess. You call out to her, but you don't hear an answer. Looking at the clock, you realize you're going to be late for work. Trying not to worry about your family's whereabouts, you rush to get dressed. She probably just drove the kids to school anyway. A quick peek out the window reveals that there's an inch of snow on the ground. Something strange is happening. When you went to sleep, it was August.

You get to the office after having checked the calendar. It seems you've fallen back into consciousness at the tail end of November. Racking your brain to fill in the missing months, you suddenly make the terrified realization that you may no longer be employed. As you enter the office, your co-workers' surprised glances confirm what you've feared: You haven't been to work for the better part of two months. Your best friend working a cubicle over says he tried to call on you several times, but no one ever answered the door. He asks you if you and your wife had worked out the marital troubles you were unaware you'd been having, and tells you that it's nice to see you acting like yourself again. Your boss rounds the corner, but, before he can say word one, you've taken off like a bullet out the door.

The drive back to your home is the longest one you can ever remember taking, and you waste no time once you're there in bursting in the door and setting to work in deciphering the missing weeks. You tear apart voice-mails, dozens left unchecked. You scroll hurriedly through e-mails unopened. Newspapers uncurled. Mail unsorted. None of which gives you even an inkling of an idea of what has become of you and your family. It isn't until you go, in a shivering fit of rage and panic, to shut the window that had, by all evidence, been open since the last time you could remember that

you get your first clue: The light in the shed door in your back-yard is open. In what has become evening since you've gotten home, the light from the little wooden shed spills into the darkness cutting a swathe through it.

You pull on your boots and rush out into what has since become a full on blizzard, lifting your legs high into the air to make the difficult steps through the snow. You come upon the shed in your backyard and are immediately come over by a sense of dread. For a moment, you stare at the shed, the wind nipping at your ears and tussling your hair. And then without giving yourself a moment for hesitation you rip open the doors all the way and are confronted with the unmistakable dismembered corpses of your family. Your wife. Your two children. Cleaved into little pieces for who knows how long. It's really a mess. Like someone ran a box of red confetti through a shredder. Save for the heads, which are preserved as perfectly as they could have been on the workbench in the shed. It's here that you collapse to your knees and cry.

And cry.

And cry.

Deep sobs punctuated by draining snuffles. Painful and long, harder than you ever have. Suddenly, something black and slender rushes from behind the junk stored in the shed and tackles you, knocking you off your balance and causing you to roll over yourself into the snow outside. On top of you now, it rips your shirt open, grinning with small dagger-like teeth as it makes a deep cut in your stomach and forces its way inside. You can feeling it coming in, its long, small body expanding to fill the entirety of your insides, wrapping its formless being around your bones and your mind.

It shows you how it had done this before. It shows you how it had taken control. Caused you to kill, and that it can do it again, even without your consent. And then it leaves the way it came in, and the grief comes pouring back, only worse this time because you know the last thing they saw was you. You look at your fingers and see the dried blood under your nails, and the thing looks at you as if it doesn't know what it did. But it knows. And you know.

You know that when it was inside, you felt nothing. And that feeling nothing was better than feeling this. And that if it can promise you nothing, you'll let it have you forever. So you bare your stomach to it once again and the thing leaps at you and you lose control. Only this time, it makes you live it. You kill, and you kill and you kill. With your bare hands. With bludgeons. With knives. With nothing so impersonal as a gun. Too easy. Every time, you see your victims scared faces looking back at you as the last of their life drains from their eyes.

Every once in a while, it tries to leave. To make you feel your actions to remind you what it would be like if it wasn't there. And every time is more crippling than the last. Every time, the body count is a little higher. Every time, you need it a little more. Until eventually, the police show up, and you kill a few of them. So it goes. Eventually they overpower you and the thing and they take you in. And they lock you up. And the thing, sensing it will no longer get what it wants from you, leaves. And you're left a sniveling mess on the interrogation room floor.

And the thing moves on.

Kevin Strange

The Hairy Chicken

Blake passed Jobe the joint. This act ignited a chain of events that would leave the two young men questioning the very nature of reality, and would end, most unfortunately for the teenagers, in total sobriety.

“The fuck are we listening to?” Jobe took quick, tentative hits off the tightly rolled paper, coughing quickly off the harsh weed.

“Tom Waits, faggot.” Blake snatched the joint back and took a long, sure drag, holding the smoke in expertly. He’d been smoking weed far longer than his best friend.

Jobe looked at the dash skeptically from behind thick-framed black glasses. “Sounds like some weird ass carnival music to me.”

“That’s ‘cause you’ve never heard Captain Beefheart. Waits was heavily influenced by him.” Smugly, Blake swept the thick, badly dyed black hair from out of his eyes, a motion he performed countless times throughout the day, an act that made Jobe want to take a pair of scissors and cut his friend’s bangs right off. “Heavily influenced by his cock, maybe. Can we listen to something non-sucky for once?” Jobe half-climbed into the backseat of Blake’s beat up little Mazda. The car was older than both teenage boys by more than 10 years, the best Blake’s father could afford on a single parent, union salary income.

Jobe’s hips bumped into Blake, the cramped space not nearly large enough to warrant such action. The car swerved ominously toward the guardrail that separated four lanes of traffic. It was pitch black night, and drizzling rain to boot. Not optimal driving conditions. Downright life-threatening when handled by a sixteen year old, slightly high on Alabama Kush, pushing eighty-five miles an hour at two AM on a school night.

“Get your ass outta my fucking face, man!” Blake pushed Jobe off, causing the skinny, bespectacled kid to lose his balance and fall all the way into the compact backseat with a resounding “*oof!*”

Jobe popped up almost immediately, shaggy red hair a mess. “Check it bro! Found a Skinny Puppy CD! Definitely full of non-suck!”

Blake, more annoyed by the second, reached back and grabbed the CD out of Jobe’s hand. “Gimme that shit and get back up here.”

Jobe kicked the back of Blake’s seat. “Fuck’s your problem, man?! The ‘tude ain’t necessary.”

Blake shot an angry look at Jobe from the rearview, causing his plump, pasty features to bunch up, making him look like an emo version of the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. Then those features relaxed. “I’m just afraid you’re gonna try to fuck me from back there. I want a fighting chance when you pull your cock out!”

At that, the two boys burst out laughing, until it was cut short when the car jolted upward violently. The accompanying *Whump!* sound made it clear that Blake had just run something over.

“Fuck!” Jobe yelled, rubbing his head. He’d smacked it on the roof, bending his neck awkwardly, sending a warm feeling through it that he knew would mean a stiff neck in the morning. “What’d you hit dude?” Jobe craned his head around, trying to see into the blackness.

“Prolly a squirrel. C’mon man, get up here, for real. Let’s finish this joint. I need to get back. I’ve got a bit of homework to do before I crash.” Blake toked the doobie again.

“No way that was a squirrel dude. I hit my damn head we bounced so high! Turn this piece around. Let’s see what you killed, you god damn murderer.”

Blake hung a U turn at the next opportunity and doubled back down the long stretch of River Road that connected their hometown of Hopp’s Hollow to the tiny tourist village of Bluff’s Shadow. Soon enough, the two (now fully stoned) youths were parked, out of the car, and standing above the Hairy Chicken.

“Dude.” Jobe cracked open a can of Bud Light.

Blake said nothing, reached over, took the can from Jobe, and drank it down in three hard swallows. The creature resembled nothing the two had ever seen. It was the size of a small dog. Its huge rear legs resembled those of a quadruped mammal, but ended

in claws matching more closely to a predatory bird. It had no forelimbs; or, more correctly, it had none, save a pair of thick, taut wings, which took up the bulk of its frame. These wings ended with enormous claws, which brought to mind features of a bat, and yet wholly different. The head sat at the end of a long, skinny neck. Its eyes bulged, unblinking and vicious in their lifeless stare. Its mouth was a beak, but housed many tiny, pointed, long, quill-like teeth, and a serpentine tongue hung lazily out one side. The most disturbing feature of all, though, was its shaggy, coarse brown hair.

“A hairy Chicken,” Jobe said, finally. He pulled out his phone and snapped several pictures. “Wicked.”

Blake bent down and gently nudged the creature. “This is no chicken.” His voice was full of wonder and imagination. “This is something...*special*.” He looked up at Jobe with a childlike expression across his face, searching for a companion in his experience.

“Oh fuck, here we go again.” Jobe turned back toward the car.

“I’m serious, Jobe! This is some kind of monster! Just look at it!

Jobe was already seated in the vehicle again. “Fuck you, Blake. It’s always monsters and aliens and conspiracies with you. Let’s go home. You killed a chicken. Get over it.”

“No fuckin’ way, man! This thing’s a find! People are gonna go ape-shit over this little guy!”

Suddenly, the hairy chicken was in Jobe’s face, weird purple fluid pouring from the thing’s mangled mouth. “What the fuck!” Jobe flinched away, panicking.

“Move the fuck over, man!” Blake yelled as he crammed the dead bird-thing into the car.

Jobe frowned. “Aw, come on, dude. You’re taking it home?”

Ten minutes later, Jobe sat on the twin-sized bed in Blake’s small attic computer room, which sometimes doubled as a guest bedroom when Jobe stayed over. He couldn’t help but think of all the loads he’d blown late at night in the same computer chair Blake sat in now. Quickly, his attention turned to the dead thing that rest-

ed on a pile of unfolded newspapers in the corner of the cramped room, oozing thick, purple fluid.

Blake was already hard at work, in research mode, scanning websites and internet forums for information about the strange creature. “There’s gotta be something out there about this thing. I can’t be the first retard in Hopp’s Hollow to accidentally run one over. Gimme your phone so I can download those pics.”

Jobe handed it over. “Enjoy the pics of my hard cock I took this morning before school, buddy.”

“You’re fucking gross, shithead.”

What followed were several intense hours of internetting that bored Jobe to the point that he finally dozed off near four AM. His sleep did not last long, but contained weird dreams that unsettled him to the point that, upon waking in a fevered sweat, he could not bring himself to inform Blake of their contents, but instead sat quietly, staring at the dead bird-thing in front of him.

The dream took Jobe deep into the wooded bluffs above Hopp’s Hollow and had him wandering through dark underbrush, until he came to a clearing which glowed with an eerie purple light that matched the Ichor draining from the bird-creature’s corpse. But in the dream, the beast was very much alive, perched atop a stump in the center of the clearing. As Jobe approached, the thing turned to him and, in very plain English, spoke three simple words: “Kill your friend.”

Jobe stood on shaky legs. “I think I’m gonna jet, bro.”

Blake swiveled in the chair, snapping out of his electronic trance. “What dude? C’mon. I’m onto something here. I just found this podcast by a dude named E. Rupert Rockwell. He’s some kind of Conspiracy guy that specializes in myths and folklore surrounding ancient animals thought to be either made up or extinct. The website’s called MythicalMonsters.org. Check it out, dude.”

“No, I’m good. I’ll, uh...see you at school.” Jobe turned to leave, then stopped. “Hey, Blake. I don’t like this thing. It’s bad mojo, dude. You should throw it in a ditch and forget about it.”

But Blake had already started the podcast audio. He was back in his techno trance. He didn’t even hear Jobe leave.

* * *

Blake was alone in the house, as he always was on weeknights ever since his father began working third shift at the steel mill. Rockwell's radio show was blaring from the computer speakers, but Blake did not hear it. He'd found the message board forum at mythicalmonsters.org.

Minutes later, Blake had finished signing up as a member and had posted the pictures from Jobe's phone under a thread he titled "WTF is this?????" The post was set upon almost instantly by the typical forum wolves accusing him of being too much of a noob to start his own forum posts, calling the pictures fake, loading down the thread with image and video pornography. Finally, by page three, the entire discussion had degenerated into a flame war between several forum regulars involving subject matter far removed from Hairy Chickens.

Blake was about to give up, to take Jobe's advice and dispose of the weird creature in a ditch, when he received a private message through the message board from a longtime poster and sometimes contributor to Rockwell's program, named VADERSCOCK.

VADERSCOCK: *Yo. These pics for real?*

Blake quickly responded.

BLAKESHAIRYCHICKEN: *Yup. Hit the fucker with my car 2nite. Know what it is?*

VADERSCOCK: *Ur info says Ur from Hopp's Hollow, Illinois. That's right by the Great River Road outside Bluff's Shadow right?*

BLAKESHAIRYCHICKEN: *Yeah. That's where I hit it. What is it?????*

Blake didn't get a response back for a while. He found himself absorbed in E. Rupert Rockwell's show. The host was ranting about UFOs impregnating livestock with genetically enhanced DNA when Blake heard a thump from across the room.

He spun his chair around quickly, feeling for the first time very alone in the big creaky three-story house. Just as he decided he'd imagined the noise and thought he'd better call it a night, VADERSCOCK responded to Blake's last message.

VADERSCOCK: *Did some checking into the local history.*

Turns out there's a legend from half a century ago that matches up with your Hairy Chicken. Seems a tribe of natives that called Hopp's Hollow home some-six hundred years ago had a story about a bird God called Traeloteph. Some nasty shit, Broheem. They say in their lore that ol' Traeloteph used to snatch babies from their mother's arms, contaminate the water supply with its toxic urine, cause floods, and all kinds of other nasty shit unless they offered it a blood sacrifice twice a year. This God was a real fucker.

Goes on to say that a brave warrior finally got fed up with Mr. Bird God's bullshit and shot him out of the sky with a magic arrow, sending the thing to the bottom of the river, banishing Traeloteph from the land for--guess how many years? Six hundred.

So yeah, I think you might have yourself a deity on your hands there, tough guy. I suggest you get rid of it ASAP before you land yourself a serious case of the bad karmas. The most important thing, according to legend, is that you do not look the thing directly in the face. It says here over and over again that Traeloteph is a master deceiver with unreal hypnotic powers. Watch out for that shit! One more thing. What's the size of this thing? The perspective is all off on these phone pics. I can't tell if it's 6 inches or 6 feet. Hit me back pronto, boss man!

Blake glanced back at the creature, wondering how something that small could terrorize a whole tribe of Indians. He turned back around to reply to the message, when he heard a distinct and wholly real wet smack from behind him. Blake jumped out of the chair, turning around as he did so.

The hairy chicken had flopped over onto its stomach. It was now slowly raising itself up onto its hind legs. Blake reflexively grabbed and threw a stack of loose CD-Rs at it. "Fuck you!" he yelled. The CD-Rs landed with a splat in the growing purple puddle and did not deter the chicken from its movement. The creature raised up fully onto its haunches and began to shake, as though straining to expel something. Expel it did, as a thick wad of purple gunk squirted out of the bird-thing's anus and landed directly into Blake's eye.

Blake wailed aloud and pawed at his stinging eye, fearing blindness or contamination. But what he saw next made him forget all about the muck dripping from his face.

After a series of farting and squishing sounds, a single, slimy, purple tentacle forced its way out of the bird-thing's buttole, followed by five more.

Blake looked on, astonished, as the thing sprouted a pair of round, half-ovals from beneath the thick hair above its hindquarters. Thin, veiny, membranous lids peeled back, revealing two disquietingly clear and fully intelligent-looking eyeballs.

Too late, Blake realized with shuddering horror, as the six purple tendrils began to sway back and forth hypnotically, that for the first time, he was looking at the true face of the hairy chicken.

Suddenly, and without warning, Blake found himself in a wooded clearing, staring at the hairy chicken. He was looking, blessedly, at the normal chicken face, not the one on its ass. "Where am I?"

Even though he'd asked the creature a question, he was still startled when it responded. Its voice was modern, of American accent, and all around sounded as though it belonged to a man in his mid thirties.

"Listen buddy, I could be real formal here and speak about fathomless cosmic consequences and everlasting mortal torment, but, truth be told, you did a real number on me when you ran me over with your little beater. So let's just cut to the chase, why don't we?"

Blake nodded dumbly.

"Great! Complacency. I *love* complacency! Let's go ahead and smash up that computer there, OK?"

Before he registered what he was doing, Blake had picked up his laptop and smashed it on the ground; which was odd, because, a moment before, there had been no computer, only trees and grass...and the hairy chicken.

"And the cell phone. I don't need to be phoning home." The chicken chuckled to itself, enjoying some inside joke that Blake didn't get.

Blake's phone appeared in his hand, as if by magic. He dropped it, stomped on it, and rubbed it into pieces with the heel of his foot. Only as an afterthought, he said, "Please stop making me break my things."

"Just a precaution, kid. This communication age is a real bitch. Back in the day, it'd take like a week before anyone suspected something like this had happened." The bird-thing hopped from its tree stump.

"What exactly *is* happening?" Blake felt sick to his stomach.

As if in response, the east side of the clearing disappeared, revealing a breathtaking view of a great waterfall. "You're gonna go ahead and kill yourself for me."

Blake nodded and began walking toward the waterfall, only vaguely sensing the outline of the window in front of him. Only offhandedly did he feel the sensation of opening it, of sticking his foot out the window, before he stopped himself. "Wait," he said, dreamily.

"No waiting, dude," the bird-thing said. "Let's get this over with. I don't need somebody coming in here and finding me with my asshole inside out while you beg for your life. Just jump off the cliff like a good boy."

"Why? Why make me kill myself?"

"Oh, it's nothing personal, my man. Shit's just not ready to pop off yet. You happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that really blows, but there's really nothing I can do about that, kiddo. Mankind can't know about my existence just yet. If you were to live, well, you'll end up telling so-and-so, and he'll tell so-and-so, and before you know it, I'll have every god damn SyFy Channel paranormal show out here in Hopp's hunting me in the woods, and, well...I just can't have that. I have gates to throw open, kid. Dimensional portals and whatnot. Real end-of-the-world type shit. So go on, just get to it, jump off the damn cliff!"

While Blake listened to the chicken speak, he'd pulled his other leg out the window. He was now dangling three stories off the ground, directly above a huge wrought iron fence that ran the perimeter of the property.

Fighting back panic and vertigo, Blake shut the hairy chicken's voice out of his head. The chicken continued to yammer on about Great Old Ones or some such gibberish. Blake forced himself back into the small room. He closed his eyes and felt for the window, which had already vanished from sight the moment he stepped out of it, replaced again by the false image of the majestic waterfall.

Keeping his eyes closed, Blake stumbled over the wreckage of the laptop to a trunk situated at the foot of the bed, just inches away from the chicken.

"Come on, kid. Just jump for Chrissake! There's nothing to be scared of! Well, the Keeper of the Void is kinda nasty, but he's a good dude once you get to know him."

Blake threw open the trunk. He groped around for a few agonizing moments, fearing that he was mistaken about its contents. Then, at last, he closed his hands around his dad's old aluminum baseball bat.

"Wait a minute now! Wh-what do you think you're gonna do with that?"

"Keep talking, you little fucker!" Blake swung the bat, but it bounced off solid ground.

"Get away from me with that thing! Let's-let's talk about this, kid! You don't need to die, I-I can just be on my way, and we'll both forget we ever saw--"

The bat came down with a sickening crunch. Blake lifted it up and brought it back down with increasing force, again and again, until his hands ached and he felt no more chunks of flesh beneath its weight. Only then did he chance opening his eyes.

The whole room looked as though a big purple grenade had exploded. What was left of the creature no longer looked like a hairy chicken. Morning light crept into the little attic room as Blake collapsed onto the bed, exhausted.

Before Blake even had a chance to fully catch his breath, Jobe burst into the room, red-faced and out of breath himself. Clearly, he'd run the entire ten blocks to Blake's house.

"Oh no, Blake! What did you do?"

Blake sat up on the bed. “It’s cool, dude. I killed it. It attacked me, but I beat the fucker. No hairy chicken’s gonna take me out.”

“Blake! You stupid fuck!” Jobe sat down on the edge of the bed. “I went to that website after I got home. I couldn’t sleep, couldn’t shake this fucked up dream I had about the chicken. I joined the forum too, and posted in your thread, defending you. After he didn’t hear back from you, VADERSCOCK told me the rest of the story about Traeloteph. Blake, I tried to call you, tried to text you, to instant message you. Why the fuck did you break all your shit?”

Blake was in no mood to talk about myths and legends. His days of monster hunting were over. Still, he humored his friend. “Well? What’s the rest of the story about this little carpet stain?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you! *This* isn’t Traeloteph. The legend says that Traeloteph had a wing span of *sixty feet!*”

Blake was confused. “That doesn’t make any sense, this thing’s tiny. It’s-”

“Just a baby, Blake! The story says that Traeloteph laid twelve eggs at the bottom of the river. The Indians were able to fish out and destroy eleven of them, but they never found the last one!”

Blake looked at Jobe in horror. “So the hairy Chicken was...”
Jobe nodded. “Traeloteph’s baby.”

Suddenly, the sunlight disappeared from the attic window. A moment later, the whole house shook with a mighty boom, as though something had slammed directly into it. Something *big*.

Blake was too scared to turn around and face the window, but he knew what was there, what looked inside. He knew by the dumbstruck look his friend now held, that Jobe was staring directly into the true face of Traeloteph.

Andrea Heckler

Commitment

His eyes are blue. I know it even though the lids are now closed, his pale face perfectly still and peaceful. No one else notices a thing out of place, but to me, it's not even him. I've never seen him so still.

I hear the preacher's voice from somewhere in front of me, a monotone stream of sound in a room of silence. If it were Sunday morning, a child would be crying, an old man's head drooping, but here it's as if there is no audience at all. Only a preacher and a still man in a coffin.

I blink, slowly so the water in my eyes doesn't spill. Everyone expects it, and his mother and father have already given in, sitting beside me sniffing and blotting their eyes every few minutes. No one else makes sound, only sits motionless as if they too were ready for burial.

I take a ragged breath, my eyes locked on the strange, peaceful face that the preacher calls my betrothed. But I can't believe it's him.

I have never seen him in a room so somber.

• • •

We met for the first time at a cafe on a busy Monday morning two years ago. I was sitting alone at a table for four, where I always used the extra space to spread out my bag and my textbooks. This particular morning, I was studying for a Spanish final and completely oblivious to everything—and everyone—around me.

"Excuse me," a man's voice said.

I looked up from a chart of verb conjugations to see two blue eyes focused on me. He was dressed in a suit without a tie and held a cup of coffee and pastry bag in his hand.

"Would you mind if sat here?" he asked. "There aren't any tables open."

I looked around absently, now hearing the bustle of conversa-

tion around me in the packed café. “Yeah, of course,” I said after a pause. “Sorry, I’m just cramming for a test right now.”

“Spanish?” he asked as he put his coffee in the open space I cleared. He slung his briefcase into the chair across from me and pulled out the one next to it. “Your book,” he explained.

I looked at the stack of books I had shoved to the edge of the table. The one on the top was my Spanish-English dictionary. “Right,” I said, shaking my head to try to think in English once again.

He laughed—not like some guys do, loud and demanding, but soft, genuine. “I took French,” he said.

I watched him sit down as my brain shifted into the rhythm of small talk. “I wanted to in high school,” I said, a few seconds too late to sound natural.

He didn’t seem to notice. “What made you do Spanish instead?”

“My best friends wanted to take Spanish. So I did, too.” I shrugged, reaching for my coffee and taking a sip. “And here I am, the result of too many all-nighters and energy drinks.”

“You would’ve gotten that in French, too, believe me,” he said. “I’m Daniel, by the way.”

“Melissa,” I said. “Do you go to KU?” I nodded to the keychain I’d noticed hanging from the zipper of his briefcase.

“Good observation skills,” he said sincerely as he opened his bag and pulled out a vanilla scone. “I’m a GA there. I teach a class at eleven.” He glanced at his watch as he said it.

“It’s only ten-fifteen,” I assured him. “What do you teach?”

“Just a basic math course. What about you, are you a grad student there?”

I shook my head. “Undergrad, but I’m a senior.”

He nodded, breaking off a bit of the scone with his fingers. “I hope I’m not being too much of a distraction.” He motioned to the book still open in front of me on the table.

“It’s fine, I’ve pretty much been at a roadblock for a while now.” I closed the book, then propped my elbow on top of it and put my chin in my hand. “I need to get to class anyway. The test starts at ten-thirty.”

He looked disappointed for a second—or maybe I only imagined it—before saying, “It was nice meeting you, Melissa. Maybe we can share a table again sometime.”

I smiled. “I’d like that.”

• • •

In a row somewhere behind me, a paper slides, off of a lap or perhaps from someone’s fingertips. I flinch as I hear it hit the floor, interrupting the flow of sound from the pulpit. It’s probably one of the memorial pages that are stacked on a table near the entrance of the church.

I think of his picture there, one from about a year before the car accident. His eyes are bright, his face lit up in a smile. There is a paragraph of pretty words below it, I remember, though I never finished reading them. I couldn’t stop looking at *him*.

I take a breath, turning my foot, feeling the indentation the small high heel is making in the carpet. There is a photo display on a table within my sight, just a few feet from the open coffin in front of me, but I keep my eyes straight ahead.

Still, the picture lingers in my mind.

• • •

I was never quite sure when we began dating. We saw each other again at the café the week after we met—both of us returning to the same place at the same time—and he asked for my phone number. After that point, we saw each other almost every day.

It didn’t take long for him to start introducing me to his friends, and a few weeks after we met he invited me to come with him as his date to a friend’s Christmas party.

He arrived at my apartment on time, as I had come to expect. I pulled on the high heels that I’d left by the door, then gave myself a few seconds to find my balance before opening the door.

“Hi.”

“You look great,” he said.

“Thanks.” I smiled but watched him closely. Something was wrong. I had known him long enough to notice when his smile was different, when he shifted on his feet more than usual.

“You ready?” he asked.

I nodded. “Just let me grab my bag.”

It wasn't until we reached the car that he gave up his act. “You want to go to dinner?” he asked me suddenly.

I looked at him, my hand pausing with the seat belt halfway across my body. “What?”

“Let's go to dinner. Just you and me.”

“I thought there would be food at the party.”

“I don't want to go.” He didn't look at me, and I could tell he was angry. Not at me, but at someone else. Skipping the party would be some kind of revenge.

I twisted my foot, feeling the high heel pressing a mark into the floorboard of his car but not wanting to move. I studied his face, waiting for him to say something more.

Then he turned toward me. The anger was still plain on his face, but more subdued now. “Dinner?”

A protest was forming in my mind, but I hesitated, unsure of what to say in the moment of silence that stretched between us.

“Okay.” My voice sounded strange breaking the uncomfortable silence, but it was steady.

Daniel smiled now, and I did too. He shifted the car into drive, then reached across the car's console to take my hand.

I felt the hum of the engine as I laced my fingers through his.

• • •

I see movement from the corner of my eye, the preacher opening the black book in his hands, announcing the location of a passage he will read. He has probably invited the congregation to do the same, but my hands are locked together in my lap. The diamond of the ring on my left hand presses into the palm of my right, probably leaving an impression in my hand that will sting when I finally pull it away.

The ring is a thin gold band, adorned with a small but elegant diamond. I have always liked pretty things but nothing flashy, and he proved he knew that when selecting the ring. I usually twist it on my finger when I talk or read, and he used to tell me I did when I was deep in thought too, although I never noticed.

Now my hands will not move.

• • •

I didn't even think before saying yes when he asked me to marry him. It was exactly a year after we met, to the day, and though I was expecting some kind of surprise from him on the day, I hardly expected a proposal.

That night, after he dropped me off at my apartment, I barely slept. I twisted the ring on my finger as I lay in the dark, imagining his face, flushed with anxiety before the proposal and with happiness afterward.

Cars hummed by on the road, occasional alcohol-induced shouts and laughs bled through the walls, but I couldn't fall asleep for more than five-minute intervals. When the clock finally reached 5:00, I got up and called him.

He picked me up at 5:30 and drove to the café. A group had already taken our special table, but still, as we sat at a table for two, his blue eyes focused solely on me, I could think only of that moment, our first meeting.

"Melissa." He put his hand on top of mine, which were together on the table, the fingers of my right hand twisting the ring on my left.

I smiled at him. "You haven't changed a bit, you know."

He tilted his head curiously. "What do you mean?"

"From the day we met. You're exactly the distraction that kept me from studying for my test."

He laughed softly, staring down at the engagement ring on my finger. "That's not true, though." He sobered, and I paused, waiting for him to continue. "I've changed. I have you now."

I watched him, but his eyes did not leave my ring. "That doesn't mean you're a different person."

Now he looked at me. "Not completely. But... I love you, Melissa."

I could feel my face blushing, but I couldn't help but smile. "I know you do," I said. "And *I love you*." I lifted my left hand and waved it in front of him. "See? This is proof. That's more than you have." I laughed, but he didn't smile.

"I'd like one," he said suddenly. "An engagement ring. I think I

should have one.”

I looked closely at him. “I was only teasing, Dan. You don’t really need proof.”

“I want to prove it to you, to everyone.” His jaw was set, his eyes determined as he met my gaze. I had seen that face a few times over the short time we’d known each other: when he told me his decision to take a local job instead of a better one in the city two-hundred miles away; when he encouraged me to apply for graduate school; when he convinced me to go to his friend’s Christmas party even though we hadn’t been dating long and I wouldn’t really know anyone.

When he looked like that, there was little or nothing that could stop him from following through on his decision.

“Are you sure?” I asked, though I knew the question was unnecessary.

He nodded. “I don’t want anyone to have a reason to doubt how much I care about this. *Us*.”

I felt his thumb rub the back of my hand and put on a smile, meeting his eyes, still bright from his passionate decision. That determination was one of the things I loved most about him.

But his last words still resounded in my head.

• • •

His mother sniffs next to me. Out of the side of my eye, I see her raise the tissue in her hand to blot her eyes, then lower her arm again, resuming the same position she has held through the ceremony so far. I wonder if she notices what I am looking at, the little piece of gold in the casket.

The engagement band is still on his finger, perfectly still, the gold of the ring matching my own band, the one that is still digging into my palm. It seems silly to bury him with it, yet I have no intention of taking it off before the casket is closed forever, despite how much his parents have assured me that he wouldn’t mind, that he would want it that way.

Though I want to agree that he would, something in the back of my mind makes me doubt it. I can’t bring myself to take away what he wanted so badly.

They say that funerals are for the living, not the dead. It can't really make a difference to them now what clothes they are buried in, what kind of flowers are put on their grave, how many people come to see them—as if through a one-way mirror—before their body is lowered into the ground.

But still the ring rests on his finger, and I know that I will not disturb it when the preacher runs out of words and it is time to say goodbye.

His mother sniffs again. Then her shoulders shake, and I know a new wave of sobs is coming. I blink the water in my own eyes back. I can't interrupt her with my own self-pity.

I don't deserve it.

• • •

I was the cause of our first fight after our engagement. We had just visited his parents to tell them over dinner of our future plans. I was nervous for the dinner, of course, but he didn't seem to be at all, holding my hand the entire hour-long drive to his parents' house.

We had all sat down at the table when Dan's mother noticed the ring on his left hand.

"Daniel," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

I felt my body tensing as I twisted the ring on my own hand under the table.

"Daniel, what are you wearing?"

Dan followed her eyes to the golden band. I saw a hint of a smile on his face as he took his seat beside me. He cleared his throat, and I knew it was coming. I could feel both of his parents' eyes flicker from him to me.

"Dad, Mom," he began, "I need to tell you something."

His father shifted, leaning back in his chair.

The room was so quiet. I almost flinched when Dan took my hand.

"We're engaged." His face broke into a huge grin, and I felt him squeeze my hand.

I waited for his parents to respond, ready for the worst possible reaction from them: tears, shouts, anything.

His mother put a hand over her mouth, her eyes suddenly wide. “Oh honey,” she said. Her eyes filled. Here came the tears.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” his father said. His face was blank, which intimidated me more than a scowl could have.

Dan nodded, seeming oblivious to what I expected would be a complete disaster in a matter of seconds. “We’ve talked it through. We’re both sure about this.”

I swallowed but tried to imitate his confidence, nodding.

Dan’s mother shifted her watery eyes to me, and I waited for her to tell me I couldn’t have her son. Instead, she said, “Congratulations.” She looked back to Dan. “To both of you. I can’t believe you’re going to be *married!*” The tears came now, but they weren’t the kind that I feared.

“Congratulations, Daniel, Melissa,” his father said. His face—the features almost identical to Dan’s—softened into something between acceptance and sadness. “You both make a fine couple,” he said.

I felt Dan squeeze my hand again, and then he leaned over and kissed me.

Of course, after that I couldn’t relax. Every second I was ready for his parents to change their minds, for one of them to suddenly burst out with, “No!” Despite my anticipation, neither ever did.

In fact, his mother wouldn’t stop fretting over the details I hadn’t even considered yet. With every suggestion, I grew more and more annoyed, my stomach twisting, my frustration threatening to bubble over in anger, tears, some extreme that would ruin this moment, mess up what was going so well.

“Have you decided on your groomsmen, darling? And of course, Melissa, you probably have some ideas for the bridesmaids. If your colors were blue—oh, blue would be lovely, wouldn’t it?—then a nice pale shade for the bridesmaids’ dresses would be nice, don’t you think? Blue and white would make a pretty cake too.”

“Honestly, Mom, we haven’t thought that far ahead yet,” Daniel said, his face still drawn in a smile, as it had been the entire dinner since the announcement. “Blue is your favorite color, though, isn’t it, Mel?”

I nodded, thankful for a question I could answer. I met Daniel's stare; his face was bright, perhaps happier than I had ever seen him. "And it matches your eyes," I added quietly.

He gave my hand another squeeze as his mother went on.

As we were driving back to town, I sat in the passenger seat with my eyes straight ahead. I didn't realize how quiet I was until Dan spoke up.

"You okay, Mel?"

"Mmhhh," I said, but I knew he could see through my thin lie. The events of the dinner played over in my head.

His mother hadn't had a single protest. His father was so quick to accept our decision.

"Did you tell them before?" I had known the question had been on my mind, but it surprised me when I said it aloud.

Dan was still. "What are you talking about? About us, you mean, our engagement?"

I nodded.

"No, of course not. They didn't know anything about it. That's why it was such a big deal."

I chewed on the inside of my bottom lip. "They didn't seem too freaked out about it."

"I'm twenty-five," Dan said. "They know I'm old enough to know what I want."

"But they didn't even ask us how long we'd been engaged. They barely looked at my ring."

Dan shrugged. "They probably expected it. I mean... I talk about you all the time, Mel." He reached for my hand, but I didn't let him pull it to his lips, didn't weave my fingers with his.

"They wanted you to get married, didn't they?" The question slipped out of my mouth before I could stop it. I felt his hand freeze.

It was a moment before he asked, "What makes you say that?"

I knew my anxiety had nothing to do with his parents or even Dan himself, but I blurted, "Didn't you see them? They were glowing through the entire dinner."

"That's because their only kid is about to get hitched. Come on,

Melissa, it's exciting for them too.”

“Exactly,” I snapped, now almost convinced in my own anger. “They were thrilled!”

Dan's face was darker now, and I knew he was fighting his temper. “I proposed because I love you, not because my parents wanted me to. Really, they *didn't* want me to.”

The car fell into a dead silence. I stared at him.

He glanced from the road to my face, which must have betrayed my surprise. “Yeah,” he said, looking back to the road, “they didn't want me to get engaged.” He swallowed, shifting his eyes to me once more, then back ahead.

I waited for an explanation. I knew he could tell what I wanted, and after a few more seconds he gave in.

“They knew I was serious about you,” he admitted. “I didn't tell them I was going to propose, but I think they saw it coming. They told me to wait until after I paid off all my college loans and really got settled before making any ‘big decisions.’ By which they meant marriage.”

I couldn't think of what to say. All of the anger I'd convinced myself was his fault had evaporated, and I was left with only the truth: It wasn't his parents, or him, or anything outside of our relationship.

It was me.

• • •

There is movement in front of me. I look away from the still form in the casket to see the preacher close his black book and step away from the pulpit. I hear someone get up from a seat behind me and start walking to the front, and, when the person steps into my view, I see it is one of his best friends, a man I met soon after that day in the café.

I watch him, fighting tears just as I am, only he is losing. He steps up to the microphone on the pulpit, but after opening his mouth to speak, he has to pause to swallow his emotion.

I look back at the casket, at the gold ring that is catching glimpses of light. It looks brand new, even though he has worn it for almost a year.

His friend has found his voice now and is speaking, a low, raspy sound, rougher than I have ever heard it before. I look down at my hands, which are still frozen in my lap. I remember—so long ago, before I was committed to him, before *he* was committed to me—when I first met this friend and considered him, even over the man who had shared a table with me.

But, as I had with so many other things, I lost interest, then moved on and accepted the attentions of the one who now wears a matching gold ring with me.

My eyes focus on my hands, and I feel the band on my left ring finger and the print it's making in the palm of my right.

I want to forget.

• • •

Soon after we began dating steadily, we started a tradition of going out to a different restaurant every Friday night. It was two weeks after we had told his parents of our engagement when it happened once again.

We were at a dimly-lit, cozy restaurant, made just for occasions like this. Every table was a couple, and Dan and I sat in a far corner, my back against the wall facing the rest of the room. A yellow flame flickered from the table, lighting up Dan's face across from me in a gentle glow.

He held my hand on the table. "My mom called today while I was teaching," he was saying. "I called her back after class and she told me the neighbor just got a new pup. I guess he's getting into their flowerbed though, driving them crazy."

I smiled as he spoke, watching him but not entirely focused on his words. I looked past his shoulder at the other couples and wondered if they too wore matching rings.

I paused when I caught a glimpse of a man a few tables away from me. I saw his face for only a moment as he leaned in to whisper something to his date, whose long blonde curls over her slender shoulders must have captured the attention of every man in the room, except Dan.

"What is it?" Dan asked. He turned to look over his shoulder, trying to follow my eyes.

“Oh,” I said, “it’s nothing. I just...”

The woman shifted to reveal the man’s face once again, and I knew that it was him, the man I had dated my first year in college.

“Mel?”

I looked back to Dan. “Sorry. One of my exes...” I grimaced, and Dan cast another glance over his shoulder.

His forehead creased, perhaps in a moment of jealousy, but he asked, “Are you okay?” His blue eyes were focused intently on me. “Do you want to go?”

“No,” I said, “no, I’m fine. It was a few years ago. And, for the record, I ended it.” I smiled at him confidently, and he returned the look, squeezing my hand gently before letting go and opening his menu.

“I think it’s time we decided what to order. What do you think?”

“Absolutely,” I said. But as I opened my menu, I cast another curious glance at the table with the slender blonde, whose shoulders were shaking lightly in laughter, her blonde curls bouncing.

I felt a sudden rush of jealousy for the woman, sitting across from a man I used to care so much about.

“What do you think about the salmon?” Dan said.

I looked back at him dazedly, hating myself for what I had just felt, my stomach twisting into a hard knot. “Sounds good,” I said, hardly even realizing what I was agreeing to.

He glanced up, seeming to suspect me for a second. But I gave him a quick smile before looking down at my menu, and he didn’t say anything about it.

The knot in my stomach persisted throughout the entire evening. He drove me to my apartment after dinner, and after pulling up to the curb outside, he put the car in park and looked at me.

I reluctantly met his gaze.

“Are you alright, Mel?” He watched me closely. “Was it that guy, your ex? Is that what’s bothering you?”

I swallowed. “No, that’s not it. I’m just...not feeling well.”

“Are you getting sick?”

I shook my head. “No, I just don’t feel right.”

There was a silence, and I knew that he was waiting for me to

break it.

“Do you ever wonder...” I began. “I mean, do you ever think... maybe we should just wait?” I could hardly believe the question had slipped out.

He didn’t answer right away. “To get married, you mean?”

“Yeah,” I said, even though I knew he already understood what I was talking about.

“We *are* waiting. We haven’t even set a date for sure, yet.”

I twisted the ring on my finger. “Maybe we shouldn’t even think about it.” My voice was barely a whisper. “You know, just go back to being boyfriend/girlfriend. Not even think about marriage. If it’s so far in the future, why should it matter?”

I couldn’t see Dan’s face clearly in the dim light from the street lamps, but I knew he was probably frowning.

“I don’t think I know what you mean, Mel.”

I put a hand to my head, rubbing my forehead, trying not to allow the temper that Dan had encouraged in me to show. “Maybe we’re not ready for this yet.”

“But we are. I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t, you wouldn’t have accepted...?”

I bit my tongue to stop the tears welling up in my eyes. “I’m just not sure about this anymore. I’m not—I’m not ready for this.” My voice faded into a whisper on the last words, but as soon as I heard them I realized how true they were.

But Dan was shaking his head. “Don’t say that. You’re just upset from seeing your ex. It was a tough evening.” He reached for my hand. “You’re just tired.”

“Stop it, Dan!” I could hardly believe how fast my temper spiked, all of my frustration at myself suddenly directed at him. “Just stop it! I know you can see it. Don’t try and make excuses for me. I’m not ready. Can’t you just wake up?”

He pulled his hand back, and though I couldn’t see his face, I knew he was stunned.

I wanted to say more, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Pulling the band off my finger, I dropped it in my seat as I opened the door and got out of his car.

“Wait,” he said. “Mel, wait a second!”

I didn’t even know what I was doing, half-blinded by tears that were now streaming as I stomped through the grass to my apartment door. I heard him open his car door, calling my name, as I reached the building.

“Melissa.”

I unlocked the door and closed it firmly behind me, ignoring his voice from outside. My face was wet now, my eyes pouring waterfalls. Dropping my purse by the door, I fell against the wall and slid to the floor, my shoulders shaking.

I let myself cry for a few indulgent minutes, cursing myself for what I had just done but not completely sorry either.

There were a few moments of silence once my tears had subsided before he began to knock from outside.

“Melissa?” I heard him say.

I didn’t answer.

I woke the next morning to find a missed call on my cell phone. When I called him back, he asked if we could meet at the café at ten o’clock to talk.

I bit my lip as I heard his voice ask the question, but I already knew I would say yes. I owed him that much.

When I got there, he was already seated at the same table we had met, two cups of hot coffee waiting.

“Hey, Melissa,” he said, his voice cautious.

I sat down across from him. I knew it was my choice how this conversation would end, but I hadn’t decided how I wanted that to be yet. “Good morning,” I said coolly.

He paused before reaching into his pocket and pulling out my ring. He placed it on the table, exactly in the middle between us both.

It was an offer, I knew. Not a command, not a plea.

I stared down at the diamond, remembering when he had first given the ring to me. When I had said yes, he hadn’t even given me time to breathe before pulling me into an embrace, followed by a kiss that I had relived so many times after that moment.

His blue eyes were on me now, waiting. His mouth was a perfect

line, devoid of the smile that I had grown used to, grown to love more than anything.

I reached forward and took the band from the table. I slid it on my left ring finger, then twisted the diamond to the perfect center. Without a word, I stretched my hand across the table and he took it, his face creasing in a grin.

It was as if nothing had happened.

• • •

I hear movement beside me, see his parents stand up. I look away from the body to see that the preacher has stepped aside, and I realize the funeral has reached its end. I stand up next to his mother, and the preacher waves his arm to tell me I can now say a final goodbye before the casket is closed.

I take a step forward, my body numb. All eyes must be on me, but I wish more than anything that his could be. I want to see that brilliant blue once again.

But it is too late for that, I know. I approach the casket, stopping when it is within my touch. But my hands are still locked together in front of me.

I stare down at his face. No determination there, no gentle kindness. Just peaceful stillness. I raise my right hand and feel the sting when air touches the place where my ring had been. A dent marks the palm that I stretch out, as if to touch him.

But I don't, instead resting my hand on the side of the casket. I feel his parents moving behind me, starting the line that will proceed past his body before the lid is shut.

"Wake up." I barely realize the words have escaped, along with a few stray tears. "Can't you just wake up?"

His body is still. I know he never will.

I step back from the casket and the funeral line proceeds, a blur of motion between us.

THE
MAKING

OF...

DEBBIE KNIGHT
Natural Country



NATURAL COUNTRY
(FLAME INCLUDED)

DEBBIE KNIGHT
NATURAL COUNTRY
(FLAME INCLUDED)

1. JOHNNY DANGEROUSLY (3:10)
2. GIVE ME A RING (4:27)
3. MIDWEEK BLUES (2:39)
4. DADDY OF US ALL (3:51)
5. TEN FOOT MASON JAR (2:41)
6. GIRL ON THE RUN (2:48)
7. CALLING HIM MINE (3:24)
8. THE LORD KNOWS I'M DRINKIN' (3:15)
9. REAL MAN (3:17)
10. FAIRYTALE (3:46)

WRITERS AND PUBLISHERS INFORMATION
SONG 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10 (DEBBIE KNIGHT - DJ KNIGHT PUBLISHING - BM)
SONG 2 (DEBBIE KNIGHT / BRIAN WILLIAMS - DJ KNIGHT PUBLISHING - BM)
SONG 6 (DEBBIE KNIGHT / MELBA MCNEAL - DJ KNIGHT PUBLISHING - BM)
SONG 8 (BILL ANDERSON - BOB TREE PUBLISHING - BM)

By:
**Deborah
Knight**

Debbie Knight

The Birth of “Natural Country (Flame Included)”

(Note to reader: Keep in mind that this is a non-fiction article, at least according to the perception of the author, and it ALL took place in the time span of a 24-32 hour period. Some of the names have been changed to protect the not-so-innocent. Such changes are noted with an asterisk. *)

It was all arranged. After years of writing songs, on anything from a napkin while driving down the highway to sitting in a restaurant with pen in hand while sipping on a loaded and leaded cup of coffee, (“loaded” meaning well-stocked with cream and sugar, “leaded” meaning caffeinated), I was finally going to record at least a portion of my written labors. After years of singing mostly other peoples’ country and rock style songs, I was finally going to sing and record my own. And to think...the recording studio had already been paid in advance by my entrepreneur friend, Jimmy McClure! How exciting it all was! (I later concluded that paying the studio producer in advance was a mistake. Sometimes, paying someone in advance for a service not yet performed simply doesn’t make good business sense and the person can sometimes be guilty of botching and/or rushing the job). However, Jimmy paid him prior to this time since he knew he would be out of town for an undisclosed amount of time. Yes, it was all prearranged, right down to the copyrights and submitted pictures for the CD/album’s front and back cover. The project was soon to be published through DJ Knight Publishing-BMI out of Nashville, Tennessee ... a necessity for radio airplay. Nashville is also the home of MoonNight Studios* and my current destination.

So here I am, cruising down Interstate 24, slightly over the legal speed limit in my teal colored, T-top Camaro. (The one that I’m still making payments on by way of my singing gigs, most of which are in bars or at private birthday parties). It’s the year 2000, so if the world DOES end when the New Year arrives, at least I

will have already accomplished making my mark in the world! For what's normally a plush, green and scenic drive, today it's March 25th. It's cold, it's rainy, it's darker than usual and it's *very* windy. But I don't mind much since I can still see fairly well and hear Tanya Tucker singing about being "down to her last teardrop" on my radio. I've only got about forty minutes of driving left of my five and a half hour journey. I'm thankful that Jimmy will be at home until I get there and that he is providing me with my own private and free accommodations in his own home, as he always does for these frequent jaunts.

Just about the time Tanya was winding down her song, I saw the tire of a car go speeding past me. It was still raining hard, and I wondered what kind of an idiot would be driving even faster than I was! He was awfully close to me! When I looked again, I realized that the tire was missing something... a CAR! In a flash it came together in my mind: the tire was my own! I quickly maneuvered my car to the side of the road. I jumped out to look and, sure enough, the rear driver's side tire was gone! Fear consumed me, and my adrenaline shot through the roof! *Why did I wear this stupid dress instead of jeans and what if I'm in a gray area and my phone doesn't work?!* All these panicked thoughts raced through my head before I finally had the sense to get back in the car, turn on my flashers, and try the phone.

The phone reception wasn't good, but at least I was able to reach Jimmy who called the towing service that ultimately came to my rescue. Waiting for them to arrive was a frightening and excruciatingly long experience in itself. I was sure each passing big rig would be visually impaired by the weather and would flatten me like a pancake in spite of my emergency flashers. Or worse yet, a *murderer* would prey upon me... probably lurking in the vast amount of trees surrounding the highway... and no one would be the wiser, since, other than the occasional trucker, there was no visible form of life for as far as my eyes could see! But, after what seemed like an eternity, I finally arrived at Jimmy's place safe and sound.

"You picked a fine time to leave me loose wheel" was the tune I

was greeted by, sung by Jimmy's drunken, but humorous, brother Wayne to match the melody of the famous Kenny Rogers' song, "*You Picked a Fine Time to Leave me Lucille*". And so, the atmosphere was lightened and my tire was immediately replaced. Jimmy was not a procrastinator.

Jimmy McClure was the epitome of manhood: a cool, 6 foot 5 Texan who now resided in Tennessee, not far from the home of Reba McEntire. (As of the time of this writing, and much to my distress, Jimmy is recently deceased. The cause of his death is currently pending investigation for possible homicide, with his, now widowed, wife as the prime suspect). His demeanor was loud and boisterous, with boots and a full array of cowboy style attire to match. He sported a heavy chain with a huge chili pepper around his neck made of solid gold. He could frequently be seen holding, if not caressing, the pepper when contemplating something, and he claimed it brought him luck. The watch, rings, and other jeweled accessories were also made of gold, and, though his style was a bit on the flashy side, he was not a flaunter. He was an honest man who meant what he said and said what he meant. He had worked hard to become a successful entrepreneur in the business of marketing and manufacturing his own patented professional strength cleaning product called Zero.

The building in which Jimmy resided was split into two parts. Half was his home, which was neatly, stylishly and *modernly* decorated. Nothing to relate him to his heritage as one might expect. (He grew up in a remote, countrified area in Texas and was about as monetarily poor as they come). Jimmy never met a stranger in his life and, to quote his own heavily accented, southern words, his professional interest and financial investment in me was simply, "*Darlin', I've been in the restaurant business, limousine business, and soap business but I don't know a thang about the music business! I just want to be able to say I know a country and western singer.*" Clearly, he had money and generosity to spare!

The other half of his building was his manufacturing plant where his marketed product was made. In total contrast to the other side, it was filled with boxes, crates, machinery and huge vats in

which Zero was made, stored, and distributed. The fragrance of oranges, an ingredient in the product, was strong and could even be detected in the living quarters of the building. Jimmy himself is worth a full article. Perhaps another day, but the point here is that the making of my CD, *Natural Country (Flame Included)*, would not have been possible without him.

After I freshened up and settled my things into my quarters, in which could be found tasteful furnishings of brass and earth tone colors, (as well as a private bathroom and a tanning bed), it quickly became time for Jimmy to go on his business trip and for me to go to the studio. The weather was still dreary, but the wind had calmed, and the rain had ceased. It was getting dark and Jimmy gave me his best hand written directions, needed to get me where I was going.

I've arrived at MoonNight Studios* and it's now dark. I'm very nervous because I've never done this before. The studio itself is simply an elaborate bunch of equipment that's been constructed in the basement of the producer's home. His name is Dick, and it soon becomes clear to me that his name is synonymous with his personality. He was certainly not the same cheerful, positive man that he portrayed himself to be when Jimmy and I first went there for a consultation session a couple weeks prior. That was also the same time in which the deal was set and paid for in full. (NOT chump change I assure you, and, when he was paid in CASH, I thought the producer's eyes would surely pop out of their sockets!) Yes, he is still physically the same person of average height and about 350 pounds more in weight than his frame is supposed to have, but that's about where the similarities end. I'm now sitting here with this stranger who, instead of talking shop, wants to inspect my teeth!

"One of the things 'they' look for in entertainers these days are nice, white, straight teeth," says *The Dick*. "I can see that you will need to visit a dentist about that overbite and will need to shed some pounds". (*What? THIS is coming from HIM? Seems much akin to calling the kettle black to me and THAT'S putting it mildly!! Please refer to the CD front and back covers for a visual*

concerning my appearance at that time). He continued on with his verbal assault, “The chances of you actually ever being *discovered* are slim to none, but, Jimmy paid for it so we will make it. I have several other more important sessions coming up soon so we’ll need to get through it as soon as possible.”

At this point, I am already speechless, thoroughly a nervous wreck, and in desperate need of some moral support, a stiff drink, and a smoke. (Not necessarily in that order!) After the day I’ve already had, including the long drive, being passed by my own wheel, dealing with Jimmy’s brother and his feeble attempts at humor, etc. I now find myself, and my musical project, at the mercy of this hypocritical tyrant! After listening to numerous accounts of his self-proclaimed greatness--such as how he’s such a devout Christian, knows oodles of famous stars, was an editor before he switched professions, and blah, blah, blah--we were finally interrupted by his wife. She was a petite and polite little woman who was plainly reluctant to *bother* her husband. (I knew from his previous ranting that they had three small children together, and I wondered why this lady, who was attractive and clearly much younger than he, would confine herself to a life with this egotistical maniac). Apparently, he had an important caller on the line and she felt it was worth the risk of upsetting his equilibrium. After literally shouting profanities and name callings at her, this *devout Christian* finally took his temporary leave from me to take his call.

Now I am visually shaking. Not *just* due to nervousness anymore but also feeling enraged. Who did this man think he *was*? Christian, my a**! Dictator was more like it! I lost no time in heading out to my car, popping the trunk, and taking one big shot of Jack Daniels liquid courage. As the amber fluid burned its way down, it occurred to me that I’d been there for quite some time and still *nothing* had been accomplished. It was too late to change my mind and go to a different studio. Jimmy had already paid him and, no doubt, the louse had already spent it. I was just going to have to make the best of it.

Once back inside, we were interrupted time and time again. Each time was lengthy, and each time was for a different reason.

Consequently, each time he turned his attention elsewhere, I turned mine to my pal in the trunk. By the time we *finally* started the actual singing and recording, it is fair to say that, not only was I mentally and physically exhausted, but fairly inebriated as well! (Based on accordance as to how I *felt* at the time.) No matter. He promptly decided it was now too late to proceed, and I was told to come back the next morning ready to sing, and with the promise of no interruptions. *Sigh.*

Off I go, ready to curl up and end this long, wretched day, when I realize I have stormed off in the wrong direction! Oh well, not a hard mistake to make considering I'm not familiar with the area, right? It's a wide road, and, as I look around and see not a soul in sight, I decide to chance a U turn. After successfully doing so, I drove about 1000 feet before the red lights were seen flashing in my rearview mirror. *Oh my God, are you kidding me?!*

But, sure enough, the young, cocky officer determined that there was cause for arrest, and I was hauled off to the pokey. (Please note that I do not condone illegal drinking and driving. This was a point in time when I was much younger and under a great deal of stress. Let's face it: *most* people who drink alcohol, even on occasion, have been guilty of drinking and driving at some point in time. Whether or not they got caught is another matter. Still, there really is no viable excuse, including sheer ignorance. In this case, the question of whether or not I was *legally* intoxicated was debatable.)

I used my phone call to dial up Jimmy who was, by this time, a good distance away from home. He was very good natured about it and turned to head back and make preparations for my release. Meantime, in my current state, I was escorted to a room they referred to as "the drunk tank." I decided to pass the time by singing, and sing I did! With the encouragement of the jail staff, who claimed to be cordially impressed by my vocal abilities, it was *hours* before I finally sang myself to sleep, with very little time remaining until I was due back at the studio!

Upon being released from the confinement of the small room with the smooth, tan, concrete walls, I was led through a hallway

where a man was shackled to a chair and wearing a square shaped net over his head.

“What on earth happened to him?” I inquired.

“Oh nothing,” was the officers reply. “That’s just Bill. He’s drunk, has hepatitis, and tries to spit on us to infect us.” (Hence, the reason for the net, but what a sight to see!)

Jimmy’s smiling face was never such a welcome sight as it was that morning. Having no time to spare, there was no time for explanation or chitchat. He was off again to make his previously scheduled engagement. I was off again as well, fresh out of “the drunk tank” and still reeking of whiskey (which I had promptly spilled on my clothes), straight to the dreaded studio. (Miraculously enough, all charges were later dropped in a Tennessee court of law).

With badly strained vocal chords due to my “a cappella concert” in that God forsaken jailhouse, very little sleep, and a nagging hangover, I managed to record vocals for the entire CD, (which consists of ten songs), in less than eight hours. When you consider the fact that most artists have the opportunity to take at least that long to record *one song*, and under much better circumstances and conditions, I’m content that the project turned out even as well as it did. My headshot for the front cover was somehow stretched and makes my face look long and distorted, but still, it’s recognizably me with blonde hair and a small flickering candle flame that represents my fire and passion for music. The front cover was also designed to represent the softer side of me.

On the flip side, you will find an image that portrays my more flamboyant style. It more closely resembles what I might have looked like for a live performance. It also lists the song titles and other pertinent information... (Again, please refer to the visuals.) You will notice two red roses to the left side. Those represent the two main females in my life at the time, my mom and my daughter. My mother’s name was Rose, my daughter’s middle name is Rose (after my mom.) Today I have three granddaughters, two of which who also bear the middle name of Rose, again named after my mom.

In all fairness to the producer, I think he did spend an adequate

amount of time on the final mix and provided me with a “music only” disk so I could use that CD for live performances.

In the following years, Jimmy and I remained friends until his death. When next I briefly encountered Dick, approximately one year later, he had lost a LOT of weight using a soup diet and seemed to be happier, healthier and *definitely* a more well-mannered human being. Any other factors that may have contributed to these changes I can only speculate about. I have not seen him since.

As for myself, soon after the completion of the CD, my mom was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. That news changed my course in life swiftly and dramatically. My mom was very proud of my musical talent and accomplishments. She was a special lady who was ahead of her time in many aspects. (But that is another story.)

From that point on, music began to be put on the back burner, allowing me to focus my attentions on other things that were of equal or more importance to me.

The album, “Natural Country (Flame Included)”, sold thousands of copies. Locally, it can still be heard playing in many establishments via the jukebox. I was fortunate enough to have Mike Kennedy, the drummer for George Strait, as well as several other talented musicians included on the project. Another to note is Judy Rodman, who sang some backup vocals and has written songs such as “One Way Ticket”, which was picked up and recorded by Lee Ann Rimes and was a huge #1 hit. (Royalties continue to serve Judy well.) The few unopened, original copies that I have left will be given, as part of my legacy, to my grandchildren.

And such was the birth of “Natural Country (Flame Included)”. If ever you hear a song from this collection, listen closely and you just might feel the warmth from the flicker of the flame or get a faded whiff of Jack Daniels that still lingers there within.

Emily Schmieg

My First and Only Black Friday Experience

For several years now, Black Friday has been an event for those who wish to get all their holiday shopping done early with some mind-blowing sales. I had never been before, nor had I ever been interested in partaking in such madness. Somehow in 2011, I decided to tackle the shopping and save some money with the sales. Thanks to my friends Amanda and Jenna--who have done their fair share of Black Fridays in the past--for updating me on what to expect. Boy, did they sugarcoat it for me.

It was Thanksgiving after dinner, and my shopping partners were both ready to go. Amanda picked me up around 9:30pm wearing her sweats and running shoes. I also saw she was wearing a fuzzy hat to keep warm. A few pieces of her bright blonde hair had strayed outside the hat, but she didn't mind.

"We are going shopping in the middle of the night, no need to look pretty," she said.

Jenna's house was our next stop. She came out with the same sort of attire but had her dark curls pinned up in a ponytail. Jenna is what you would call a planner. She had gone earlier in the day to find out where the sales would be located in the store. Once she knew, she designed a route inside the store based on what we each wanted to purchase. Turns out, we all just wanted the cheap DVD's. One stop in the store seemed like a piece of cake.

Since we all lived in Jerseyville, we chose to stay in our own territory and went to the Wal-Mart Supercenter, which is located in the middle of what used to be a cornfield. It has some life around it with the fast food restaurants in front, and a small shopping center on the side. On our way there, we discussed our game plan. If Amanda wants something, she can push and shove her way through a crowd to get it. That is why she was our leader into the store.

At 10:00pm the parking lot was already completely packed, and

we had to park in the Burger King lot. I had never seen anything like it before. This made me want to turn around and run as far away as I could from this insanity. Amanda and Jenna basically had to drag me out of the vehicle. I kept telling myself, *You can do this, it's only shopping*. It was a chilly evening, and with the long walk ahead, I was glad I wore my comfortable Ugg boots, my warm Northface jacket, and my new purple and gray hat. As we started the long journey toward the front doors, I kept seeing more and more people pulling in the parking lot. Now I'm thinking, *What have I gotten myself into!* We finally approached the automatic sliding doors and went in, not knowing if we would make it out alive.

At first, there were only people in sight. There were no visible pallets, no plastic signs that I thought might scream "SALE! OVER HERE!" We continued to walk further inside and finally started to see all the advertised items placed randomly throughout the store: TV's near the electronics but not in them, computers and printers were in between the food and beauty aisles. Other random sale items were placed nowhere near their original home in the store. Our first stop on the route consisted of going to the dairy section where the DVD's were located. I thought this was odd but went anyway. We politely pushed and shoved our way to the dairy through the herds of people waiting for the paper to be ripped off the pallets at midnight. Amanda was leading the way; I was in the middle, and Jenna was last. It felt safer and easier to have me in the middle for a smoother ride. We rounded the corner and there sat six or seven pallets of DVD's wrapped in brown paper and plastic wrap to keep people guessing what exactly was inside. The crowdedness seemed similar to movies based in New York City where the lines of traffic are never-ending, and everyone is trying to get to the same place all at once. It was a complete mad house.

There were women huddled up in groups, planning their moves and impatiently waiting for midnight. I was surprised to see a few brave men scattered around. They just stood with their hands in their pockets looking like statues.

Jenna whispered, "Those poor schmucks. I bet they have to

carry everything out that their wives bought!”

After noting all of our surroundings, next came the tricky part. We had to maneuver our way up to the pallets. They seemed impossible to get to. Luckily, we were three fun-sized girls filled with determination to be first in line. As we ducked under and around the swarm of people, it kept getting louder and louder. Let’s just say that the “inside voices” rule did not apply for this occasion. I wanted to put my finger over my mouth like kids do in grade school and look at others and say “shhh”, but there was no need to draw attention to us. Not too far from the cooler with the butter, I spotted a pallet overflowing with DVD’s. Target acquired.

Amanda led the way as we bobbed and weaved our way there. We made it! However, standing up against the pallet was a challenge. There was only about two feet of room to move around. Behind us was the butter, and an evil thought came to Amanda’s mind and she just happened to spit it out. “If only there was a way to make use of this butter...Wait, I got this! Let’s take the butter, open it, and put it on the floor so everyone who comes running will slide right past us!”

Jenna and I snickered quietly as we imagined crazed shoppers sliding down the slippery aisles. After the thoughts of sabotaging everyone cleared our minds, it was almost midnight. The store employees started to huddle around with their walkie-talkies and their box knives as the excitement in the crowd grew stronger. Off to our left was a group of women who had whistles and earpieces in to keep in contact with the rest of their mob. We were just seconds away from getting our DVD’s. I’m sure my face was in awe when the clock struck midnight. Instead of waiting for the employees to rip off the paper, everyone just pulled and tugged on it. Literally ripping it to shreds. We had somehow formed a line to where no one could get past us. Various names of television shows and movies were being shouted.

“What do you need? Sons of Anarchy? Modern Family?”

This continued for the first few minutes. Amanda and Jenna had grabbed handfuls of movies, not even knowing what they were getting. I managed to find what I was looking for in about 30

seconds. After that, I was ready to get out of there! Some of the movies ended up in my hands that the girls grabbed. Our mission was now complete. I looked around as we were exiting the chaos and just about all of the pallets were empty. A few stray movies were scattered on the ground. It looked like a tornado had gone right through the dairy section.

Finally, we made our way up to the checkout counter and had to wait in line for almost an hour. It seemed never ending!

Black Friday will continue to be a tradition for Jenna, Amanda, and the other shopping addicts. After experiencing this event, I realized that I am not cut out for shopping. I will stick to online sales to keep me sane. Hats off to the people who go every year and stay calm and collected in the crazy shopping environment.

Kevin Strange

How NOT to Write a Novel

So, it's National Write a Novel in a month month. I've been seeing this thing posted all over the internet. Basically, a bunch of amateur, non-writers attempt and mostly fail to write a novel in 30 days. There are widgets and social networking plug-ins to allow you to show all your buddies your progress as you race against the clock to write a book.

This is not how you write a book.

I understand the sentiment. Why should anyone nay-say a fun exercise in writing that can only lead to more literacy and awareness of reading and writing?

Because it's a fucking stupid way to promote literacy.

I tend to liken everything to fighting or building. Disciplined skills practiced over time lead to meaningful results. You don't say, "I can't win a kickboxing fight" without first training for kickboxing. You can say you WON'T or don't want to win a kickboxing fight, but not that you can't. You are just as capable as any other healthy human, if you're willing to master the discipline.

Same goes for building a house, which is the more appropriate metaphor for writing a novel. Both writing your own novel, and building your own dream home are American Dreams. Things any self-respecting American plans to do at some point in their lives.

Only most Americans don't have clue one how to do either, and will fail miserably when and if they finally muster up the gumption to give it a go. And here's why:

We're a group of self-entitled, nancy-pants, adult children who believe that things are just supposed to happen for us, without any hint of discipline or craftsmanship on our part.

I used to say, back in my film days, that 80% of indie films die in production. Every horror fan wants to direct a horror movie. And with digital technology, any horror fan can. A lot try, most fail. Why? Because they don't know how to build a movie.

And most of these people who participate in this nonsense novel writing month thing, they don't have clue one how to build a book. If you decided tomorrow that you were going to build a house, just cause Grandpa built the one you grew up in, and whatever grandpa can do, you can too, just because—well, you're gonna fail miserably.

Before you build a whole freakin house, you've got to remodel your basement. Add a few rooms down there. Learn how to build door frames, lay carpet, run wiring, add a bathroom and learn plumbing. Maybe turn your garage into an extended family room. Then build a nice work-shed out back. It wouldn't hurt to hang out with some carpenters and help them build a few houses, too, before you decide to tackle the job yourself.

Sounds like common sense, right? Well, then why don't people use this same basic logic when it comes to writing a novel? I think the answer is two-fold. First, the markets for short stories have all but evaporated, and most adults who now want to write a novel, have rarely, if ever, seen a short story collection or anthology in a bookstore, and therefore don't understand that any novel writer worth his/her weight in words, started off writing butt-loads of short fiction first.

Secondly, much like indie filmmaking, the advent of Kindle/eBook self-publishing allows for any dimwit with a word processor on their laptop to think they're the next Charles Dickens. All of my fellow writers out there understand exactly what I'm saying. In a lot of ways, I'm preaching to the choir, and regurgitating what's been written thousands of times in self-help how-to-write-for-dummies books. But I'm not writing this for you guys. I'm writing it for all the people out there who struggle, and fail, time and time again, to write their first novel.

I've only just now become aware of just how MANY of you there are out there, as posts about national novel month spring up all over the social networking sites. I'm seeing things like, "I don't know what kind of book I'm writing. Suspense maybe? We'll see as I get further along." And, "I've been planning my novel for 6 months, I don't want to just puke it all up in one month!"

What? *What?*

Just like kickboxing, or house building, there are disciplined elements that go into novel writing that must first be recognized, then learned, then mastered. Elements like plot, pacing, character development, subplots, climaxes, conclusions. These elements don't just appear as you write. They must be understood in advance.

I don't outline to the extreme that some people do. I think over-outlining can lead to writer's block, or just a general loss of enthusiasm for a project, if all the fun has already been laid out clinically before you've even put your first paragraph to paper. But some form of outlined structure has to be present before your book can become anything except another 75,000 word rant left to fester and die in an obscure folder on your desktop.

Everyone writes differently. There is no "right" way to write a novel, just as there is no "right" way to build your house. It's art. Take liberties. Think outside the box of tradition. But if you're failing over and over again, year after year while playing Hemingway for National Write a Novel Month, then you need to really think about learning the rules before you decide to break them.

For me, I like to know my title, my first line, and my ending before I'm comfortable digging in to a book. You may write completely differently. But if you don't even understand what kind of conflict your main character is facing--or how they will change as people because of it--before you start your book, you're destined for failure. And for you over-planners who are afraid to write too fast? You can't master a breath-taking spinning back kick by sitting around thinking about doing it for 6 months. You have to kick that bag every single day. Over and over again until you're throwing kicks in your sleep.

A good writer who writes every day will know what I'm talking about when I say that after a really good day of writing maybe 5k or more, I'll dream in prose. I'll narrate my own dreams in paragraph form. You'll never be a good writer, or probably ever finish a book, for that matter, without practicing every single day.

The best way to do that, to learn these elements, to recognize

plot structure and the elements of good fiction is to write short stories. Instead of trying to write a novel in one month, try writing ten short stories in ten months. Make them no longer than 10 thousand words. Then, by the end of the ten months, you'll have 100,000 words. A novel's worth of characters, plots, antagonists, beautiful landscapes and shocking conclusions. Do that for two years. Get yourself 20 shorts stories written and you might find a weird thing happening.

Your stories will start to bust out of that 10 thousand word cage. Now your stories are pushing 15k, then topping 25k. Your plots are becoming more intricate, your characters are practically jumping to life, right off your page, and best yet, you're actually getting good at this! You go back and read some of your most recent shorts and you realize that they're not half bad. Somewhere along the way, you've become a pretty decent fiction writer.

What's that? It's National Novel Writing Month again? You only have to have 50 thousand words? Well your last short was 27k. You can do that. Hell, you've already got an idea in your head for a great story. This time? This time you're going to finish.

Three Poems by Louise Jett

Loving Alone

Rachel carries the sinister wink
of a hurricane in her pocket.
It is her mind's eye. Peering

from the bite of a hooker's
apple, a blackened worm curls
like a candle wick cooling.

Both are debris of a dusty street
that searches for an impossible oasis.
Her feet find rhythm then

land on a dead beat, as a
ragged man coughs his
fish breath into fingerless gloves.

"Can you spare a dime?" he spits
through dry, cracked lips. To Rachel,
he is background noise waiting

to be passed. She has been
walking so long that her knees
are grinding bones. Her feet

are no longer barking and
her smile has slid to her waist.
She finally reaches the sea.

Waves wash her lover's name
on the shore in pebbles and foam.
She feels out her oyster.

Her fingers work at the rigid
mouth. Determined, she pries the
shell open and holds it to the sky.

The pearl gleams in the delight of
being found. “I came for you
after all,” Rachel whispers.

She plucks the pearl from its flesh,
rolls it around with coarse fingers,
and swallows it so it cannot be lost again.

in no particular order

moon pie face you have betrayed me,
 lulled me to sleep by soft accordion
 music that floats its way up to the second
 floor where every yellow wall glows pale.
 the closet spills forth stuffed animals
 each must be kissed, in no particular order,
 or they will come to life and cancel my breath.
 I hold hands with Jesus and pray that
 the devil won't jump out from under my
 bed. the horned fiend has got his eye on me.
 I hallucinate my father in a ghost's
 housecoat leaning like a drunkard in my door way,
 before he disappears,
 I beg him to let me shave my legs.

Sleep walking down steep stairs,
 I find my mother with a head full of snakes
 and scream her awake. there are miles between
 her and my father, but there is no room for me.
 I have grown too large and awkward through
 puberty to fit into the scheme, the blueprint
 of rural life. two hundred twenty people share
 this village and know my every mood. they laughed
 when I drove my moped up the tree and burnt an oval
 into my right leg. but, nobody cried with me when
 Clark Rolland drowned his cats in my pool. post-deed, he held
 one in each hand, away from his chest,
 yellow and white fur gathered in wet lumps, dripping
 they dangled,
 limp innocents born in the wrong town.

then, I tried on the pentecostal congregation. like a pair
of leotards, they were too tight and made me sweat.
Angel had a horse's mouth that spoke in tongues
as spittle hit the faces of those who praised her
as a miracle. but, I couldn't help thinking that
God punished her with that body, hunched and malformed,
those dull washed out blue eyes,
her feeble brain and limited vocabulary of
two syllables. I feared them both: God and Angel.
I was scared by the videos of Armageddon
in which rabbis burned and begged
and the Lord ignored them while
the beautifully suited men and skirted women
all floated up to heaven. I was reminded
time and again that my parents would burn like
Jews lest I collect their hearts for Jesus.
the preacher, bored of wilting the blooming soul of a
clever girl who asked three too many questions,
let his face slip once, it twisted into its true demon form
and I got the hell out with a broken back
and a belly ache.

so was born this rebel of rejection
who skated alone on bumpy blacktops
that tripped her and busted her knees.
instances woven together like snapshots
pinned sidebyside fit nicely wrapped
round my face. Aaron and I could make
leaves float when he stole his mother's
handmade Ouija board and I swear we
could see little boy blue beneath us
when we sat cross-legged on his grave.
we were brave and getting braver
without the fear of God to weigh us down.
but he ran away with a fast sixth grade

girl who escaped daddy's farm to break walls
and burn bridges in southern California.
she escaped, how sexy she must have seemed.

I turned to the moon, elated by her smile, I
worshipped her heavenly blanket of mellow glow
and missed her as she disappeared in fragments
then on her return, I would leave my slumbering
home and dance in the field across the street to
soft accordion music played just for me.

Election 2012

The red Mittens lost.
We put no meat on them bones;
I'm sleeping better

Jake Saunders

The Mongrel

I

Mind-racing-beat in the chest wallowing
 Into the confines of the throat, pulsing and pulsating
 And throbbing – beckoning for a way out.
 Meander about, turning and switching
 Into sweaty drops, dropped into the bowl
 Of the palms and exasperating high
 And heavy: condensation in couplets
 Yearning around, circular and cleansing
 Motions frolicking away from hard Time,
 Tried to ease the mind, an eye beleaguered,
 Baffled into believing mindful Time
 Waits upon a shelf all for the taking...
 Memor-Tempus, raking and saluting
 Upon the ridges of skylines folding
 About black rains and over lighted meads
 Draining into the wide basin of thought underneath,
 Dying and bleeding, meticulously
 Screaming in dreams of elucidated
 And deadened wisps of carnivorous ends –
 Rapsallion cohorts and Scaramouch fiends
 Leading abscesses into the hollow-
 Eyed and high, low-end abysmal abyss.

There is a line and it is consuming
 A boundary to cross and to propagate
 Existing all around, ever-blooming
 In hands for feeling, a meal to sniff out;
 There is a line that will consume the soul,
 There is a line that will eat and will prey,
 An untruthful reserve, lying men know,

Laid down under the archéd-skin-doorways,
Praying for concrete sense and gaining tongues,
To rape and deceive or care and proclaim
Lion-hearted will wildly attaining
To eat and to yield, calmly remaining...

II

And to the Mongrel, suspending, trying at your lofty perch,

O, suspending, occupying your ambivalent perch,

Suspending, keeping the Himalayan high, O for the tide, the rising
waters, the seraphim and the clouds, the ominous and the blinking
womb of Mother Earth ovaries in the ground,

Suspending wake for a monstrous smell, for the taste of lust and
the carnal inquisitions to fuck and loiter and to loathe,

Suspending, O, I am worried for your under-whacking frugality,
your frail life-force dwindling under neon lamp-posts, blue on
dingy street corners waiting to ascertain the feather of night at
bed-post knockings and rocking through sighs and asides, beside
the chain of force and the leather that whips and calmly breaks the
skin on the back in joyous, wanting pain; sweet, sweet satisfactory,
colossally-capital disgruntled disgrace,

Suspending the reed of beastly organs,

Suspending creature-tuning,

Suspending melodious vertebrate,

Suspending harmonic pestilence-working

Suspend suspend suspending suspending suspending the Mongrel
that consumes! bed-table droppings at the hat near the feet, the

plentiful and pleasantly sung tainted meats that we bottle and pack-
age and smuggle and ride and plead for in calm preparation,

Suspending surrounding wild-mannered oaths to be broken and
without fetters, flown and blown into the wind, down throats and
bloomers and faces and homes, sucking-life and suckling at the
milk of the land that has since become dry, rough and hurtful,

Suspending stoop and raping and groaning in the bellies of your
loins, withering and billowing, ugly and methodically-majestic,
fair and insubordinate, iconic-ly ironic and clad in self-depreciation
like fun or like fools wandering and wondering, ever-wondering
and ever-wandering further off into the magnificent void of black
throbbing mechanisms, radiant in all singing-seasons,

Suspending, cold frothed machinery, angry and agitated and burn-
ing to build and to build, endeavoring waves of blissful-insanity
and devouring the wild changeling and to one day erupt, collaps-
ing; calamity flows and ensues amidst foes and friends inside of
this madness and clear-weathered debauchery,

Suspending hasty eyes to the turbulent scenes unfolding, roll-
ing-crescendo and scaffolding above our hides, and hindrances all
sworn upon, never the illusion sworn off;

Can eyes clearly see or do they simply blink out in apologetically
blind coalescence, suspending in agonizingly sound satisfaction,
rhythmical bereft in crying salutations,

Suspending, cadence the envy that breeds through cowardice and
low,

Suspending the timbre jealousy that feeds upon our topmost sacks of
conditioned, positioning belief, reverberating imagination all sacrificial
and trivial, yet goes on determining our successes, a methodical rusted
gate that leads to the exploitable fortress-hole of mounting disbelief,

I do not want a part of the meaningless and serviceable streets and of petty alleyways and of the building bravura in stone, delicately grave and clasped within the infallible Time,

I do not want the ignoble shot of cunning-fire machinery and the ignorant-driven and mass-consuming haul of the intestinal road-metal winding of roaring-clockwork into a gloaming song,

I do not want the burlesque springing duress of the famishing-lighted whirl: starving, hungry and quenched avarice, dismounted avarice; of the romping boson weaving on a fringe of the dark wharf, strewn about and boring down into these ambivalently-familiar lit-crowded corridors; of halls into saturated-oblivion, of a sonly-swooned soul-stew, gurgling soprano over the muddled ignition,

I do not want to wish for the cascading lack and for the longing, nor do I want to be away but on the mindful crafted rooftops and into the musically feathered airways and falling, living vigorously, we are Free! Enamored! simply Free! calling!

I do not want! I do not want...

Though; I do want.

Who among you would console the fruition that has been feeding upon this land since the dawn of every grandfathered age,

Who is it that heeds the council of Celestine seraphim, of angels and of gods in a cyclic count,

Who is it that heeds the inferno of mounting cynicism, the imposition and the superstition, plunging headlong into the plague, never once questioning Time,

Who would cannon and burn every corner of the world's eye, great victorious feat, sanctioned, ravaging bleat of a dying man imposter

a cause in which the means certainly did justify a credulous end...

Why, do not we have a single, solitary and solidified temperament within this cockeyed earthly realm of hallucination – where we do not need thermostats and we do not need minds, and we do not need clothes and we do not need fear and we do not need Time – throw off the casts and the barriers of the all-pragmatic senses, we are the Tempus never-ending! and we are honestly Alive! and we are always Free!

Why then are not we visionaries excepting not a thing short of the static-fibered membranous solution, ideas ecstatically and elastic for the instantaneous magnanimity in giving electricity and not surrounded within the charge of insatiable gluttony for all-perishable fucking and talking and yakking and heat-swallowing-breathing, yearning in a ball of blue-flame that is a life inside of Time,

Why are not we beside ourselves, outside of this backbreaking Time that we persist to exist in, reminiscing, digging, crying with no hands to hold but criticism fingers and condescending hands, driving

Why are we within the full-knowing comprehension that this world is in a round-about failing fulfillment in the eye, of a betrayal in the eye, of a susceptible and successful tremor in the I, and of an above-all deceitful aye, heading its way in paradoxical full swing, the route toward succumbing entirely, unwieldy and unruly ignorance, perpetualized and idolized roots in cool-flowing motions exalted above the crystalline geode and toward the supremacy of the heavens and, in the same Time, the darkness of the abyss, and with everything and nothing done to crucify, but erect the visualized fix and finally turn toward the culturally concentrated wheel of hyperbolic fixation,

Why have we doomed ourselves?

Why then have we doomed our minds and our thoughts and

doomed our feelings, and geared for the tear-traveled terrain of insanity, definition of a madman ever-hunting, ever-dreaming, and becoming increasingly well-accepted, is all akin to relative naivety, fleshly-sweet-talkings, and thus; perpetually prosperous-perspiring for, anticipating, antedating ohms.

III

Who are we?

People, Eidolóns, Celestine prophets

And spatial, spectral life

– Of things; of objects

Objectifying widespread
satisfaction and gratification

A thick shroud of smoke

Is what we perceive

In our dreams of reality,

To defy all morality in themes

Through schemes by a way of life

To die and become not what we have loved,

But what we have come to love!

O, better dreams to come

Through tattered, traveling streams,

Our consciousness to wake,

Though full of disdain, we take

What is ours and rightfully so,

To show our true colors by all that we know.

In life we have but one to live

So sound with grace

Through this heart that we have hid,

To a time and a place,

That is ours to take,

That is ours to win!

Be not distraught

By the malevolence wrought

By the shaking sinners and most ignoble winners

Of the season –

It is ought to be ours;
 These thought up magnificent towers
 Of whom we want to be,
 But may actually might see
 Not the ominous being
 Of virtue and valor,
 Overcome and devoured
 By the treacheries that stalk by the night
 And inoculate a love
 And lead to us
 Perchance for blood;
 We are thus, we;
 Me, you, they –
 To be love in time and place,
 Henceforth we may straightforward become
 The essence of our quintessence;
 From dust to fame to dirt again,
 We are the corollary of what we are,
 From what our choices deem;
 We are already who we are supposed to be.

And we sit there,
 In our most sound of lairs
 In our complacently, suited chairs,
 These apathetically damnéd chairs!
 O and they are everywhere.
 Be not fooled,
 Reeléd in to sin –
 Discharge, intake, dividends;
 Smoking cigarettes filled in
 With Nicot's herb and putrefaction
 Carcinogens, piss, and compounding teratogens
 Of monetary systems
 With nothing to win,
 (Lest carcinogenesis) unless
 It all be within.

All ill-suited hints
Take hold in our midst.
Our dialect to peel,
Archaic to extort,
Deprive and strip off
With more to contort
In palpable cunning masses
Repugnantly unpalatable,
Though acceptably swallowéd whole,
And we endure to bear
A witness to these, are we,
Dissenting, disagreeable woes.
Alack an anguish
Of such high tribulation
To formidable foes
All the while encapsulating
The blackballéd undertow.
An unsatisfactory saint:
Horns on our heads
With food in our mouths and
Blood on our hands; all!
Lead not thy paths astray into time,
Pride, lust, place and greed
But by what zounds we show
In a multitudinous meed.
Reverberating in fathom,
Heralding our fashion.

Abhor! Abhor!
Abominable this world
And all that is gold.
Abstain; refrain!
From bewildering doubt,
Contemptuous misgivings,
And wallowing qualms withering
Assist; persist

In all that we know,
You barbarous knaves
In heavenly glow,
You peak and you breathe
Untimely to bloom
In paramount plateau.

Through mountains of clouds
We circumnavigate in sail
To gravitate past circumscribed
Circumstances like thin air
Between our arms and
Under our legs,
Lifting us on wings
Past alarum clangs,
A semblance of things
With a resemblance of appearance,
Not unlike the knell,
With a toll to call
And a tale to tell;
To a boundless significance
More valiant than Hell.

Now be here

Yet for one
– Who will not sway with words,
Obsequies at desire,
A covetousness itch
Yearning to fire,
Dastardly and reprehensible words
Holding in breathes too long for
Each other to stay in the balk.

Gather and recollect, usurp the cognitive
Take back your head;

The morning breathes anew;
Rhythmic pounding to better beats,
O complacency
Once you had the best of me
But no longer shall I thrive
By this path that divides,
Beget to die,
Fighting continuous fight
In this Hellish plight;
Or to remain alive
Beneath the gods and the willow way
Enamored free,
Heavenly beings
Vicarious and vivaciously stringing
Their own noble kites
Toward the sky!

Who *are* we?
For the blood of Christ!
A global, disgustingly enthralled;
Dissenting, dissecting, depleting beings!
O pornography?
Blasphemy to our minds
– Ignorant swine –
That we should harbor these fallacies
To conjure such
A bawdy and lewd attitude
Of demeaning demoralizing tastes.
No, it is not just our need for lust –
Our initial and innate supremacy;
It is in us all;
And *in* all of us,
We know,
But to some of us...
Shall not show
The tremendously, truly crude,

And vicious and vicarious, nature
We all have come to consume –
We are creatures that do what we ought.
Animals beasts mongrels
Are we so easily ruled
By such an appealing touch?
We have been breeding
Fools within of us all,
And dare I say,
Damnéd swine to lie
In such a muck.
Abide;
If not to die,
To live;
But if to live to fuck,
Then pro-create we must.
Or else this sandstorm of brutes
Spewing their guts into our roots
Until diminished is our respect
For one another, ourselves
And all others to serve our ego
Like children who never grew
To learn they are equal
To their God and all surrounding;
So instead an enduring echo of cozen
Featherheaded loons resounding.

Donald Reynolds III

An Ode to Joe's :

Foul beast which roared with fury—
a coiled creature hidden beneath.
The roiling monstrosity tore
its way from deep inside.
Painful sensations bellowed out
from the serpentine horror,
a caustic secretion to strip the flesh,
Angrily it spewed its deadly creation.
No amount of preparation can ready him
to stand against this fiend.
Its crimson seepage effortlessly eradicates
any sense of elation.
An unknowable odor saturated the air—
a septic catastrophe.

Michael Martinez

E.T. FunGuy

I begin in a room
that no one can be
taking a nap
or drinking tea.
Only enough room
for me.
Slowly I fall
out of my home
carried away
by wind blown
Affected by circumstance,
turn of the tide,
impervious to
my diamond hide.
Wafting through trees
gently swaying
by the breeze.
I don't feel hot or cold
I don't feel pain or pleasure
Wetter the better
Is my only measure
If by chance,
If fate will permit
I will be glad
wherever I sit
where I begin anew
building a house
without rooms.
But to my dismay
blown to far
by a cosmic force.

A lone cowboy
On a wayward horse.
Nothing but space
To float freely
The tortoise of the race-
Ill get there,
When I can.-
Out of the air
Soon to land
On a bright
Blue ball
I will not burn or freeze

I will not hurt or please
My only need
My only measure
Yes indeed
The wetter the better

Five Poems by Benjamin Gold

To Beatrice in the Clinic

We wake in the woods, we realize
we are the spawn of a fallow season.

We are the re-render kender, kids of those try-tie-dying delirious
and/or dolorous dames 'n dudes of the nineteen seventies digit
generation,

the lot of us damned dilettantes and delinquents.

Like orphans on a power trip; we're the wonder kids of America,
mis-begot in reality, little miss and mister's too-hot-to-trot the
upright shot.

Forsaking bended knees we can see the boulder juxtaposed six
o'clock to shoulder,

roll over them who thought not to toe the party line. The only
thing we're betraying is

Our thoughts and words and compound run on rhymes are instincts
for imitation beauty, gilded
depth. Our painted shadow.

Our works are green rot gains grown from graying landscapes,
costs of a time trying to

remember what it was to be human,

and a populace who couldn't care less. We're caught in wicked
threads wishing you were here,

wishing on a smoggy night,

wonder what we're wishing wads a web between our empathy and
Dish signals. A just what in

Hell were we wishing when we said we can't live without eks or
why?

In amusement we wretched raised in silver nestled spooning arms
of prosperity struggle

with a conscience Crying I remember I remember, I know; I shall reconsider.

But the day is short. Boredom devours all.

We talked in gossip. Filling the room, we're flies frequenting stagnant pools, halls of fraudulent smiles, the in'n'out styles some would name a so called social life.

so it falls to those like us to show the casualty count, the cast off-remnants of who couldn't generate the clout.

Still waiting on a worthy cause the yet to be judged anticipate voices from hollowed cored mass

cry new found

Havoc

for an unoccupied people, exhaling only in the call from the rooftops

shriek for a

Second Renaissance!

I saw her in the wood but she bolted away as I came near. I asked for the matter as gently as my tone could muster.

At talk she shrieked such words that make summer sails sigh at apathy's wind. Her empty she called pain, the guilt that she called fear.

On a clear mask she traced trauma, striped down to only her special kind of shame, an atypical sin.

In the fallow season she had forgot her name.

Vinegar

Some knock-around guy's
gun lies on the shore bank
Meanwhile he drowns mocking birds

Police ignore Spring
Not just hot thawing,
they intone it's
car crash season
in hushed documentation, the paper
scratch is an orison ceremony to loss by the day
Tch. they're just cynics

The horde perfect words
possessing you, like Legion
pigs running off cliffs

The Aegean
Laps them up.

We take each the others hand facing forward
No matter how it changes us.

Chest

I will come for you
after barbarians
after water-gatherers
after confessions
beaten out of you, like morale
like the rice in the fields where
the bodies still burn like torches.

I will gut this
after I mistake this loaded thing as harmless
after admittance on admittance
after wave dancing
fingers splayed to catch the sunray
like solar-panel powered mustard gas
the grass choking, the air choking.

I will crawl
after you litter our hallway with bones and diamond
dust.
after we burn the wind
after the world has forgotten
smooth ink covering it all
like amnesia
the need to remember replaced
by anything
in reach

Neon (x2)

I am sure when I'm silent
liked you when you're quiet
loved you when you're hardly there.

I remember merlot; cheap and boorish
Old as dust, rich as sin, made
You blush, but Gwen you hate to talk, the
Red wine making you nervous.
So you do more,
Kneading pudding, confessing blessings
Index finger gyrating in mock hallelujah.
Bored witless spraying stains on the ceiling. That
Summer in our meat-packer city our neighbor
Could name by songs.
You, me, Hootie holding hands. Jewel
Coercing everyone eventually, to jump through
Hoops in hope to save our souls. The
Knock-your-wind out city was
Putting on airs, a museum so redolent of wondrous
ages or mold, an apartment honeysuckle-sticky, even
Corinthian molding guilty-sweet tasting.
Navy Pier pried secrets by small whirls
Whisper tapering through straw thin fountains
Plush air more crushed and coddled than
Cigarette filters, your hair so dark midnight hours
Hung about it. Or greasy me, destitute, gathered
Round a burning barrel, getting a break
From neon.

The Weather

Here's what you
need to know
about heaven. We're trying
to get back out.

It's snow,
damned white stuff covers, it
blankets and smothers it's
the lace and feather pillows
we used to strangle
starlets and supermodels.
His mandate, our work.

Even up here
It's not all lapis lazuli.
Imagine the airship
shuttles you above eagle eye ascent
until Hindenburg implodes. Eight hour
saint songs searingly-deafen,
a peerless-yearless
ivory purity.

And.
The time-lost corpse
The second coming bride
became. Translucent like a spider spun shawl.
Bewitching but undead,
Twitching with rigor-mortis.

It's diesel smoked streets of gold,
sold-out pearl gleam-gates
Seraphim Gang-war graffiti
peeking behind beatifically
famished eyes of the Cherubs,

the Reborn. Crowding the gates. And
their chicken
thin claws.

Orchids bent,
rattling in a pristine receptacle.
Bones, child teeth, China dolls
and in between the silver towers?
the heavenly wind chilled wasteland.

What He left
out was how
much we'd miss Earth.

Or how those cumulus
cloud columns drifted up
from some obscene depth
regurgitated
temple pillars wispy formed of
ashes that
are the Damned.

Contributors

MARK AX was born in 1983 and grew up on the mean streets of Godfrey, Illinois, battling gangs and German Shepherds. He evolved into an adult male and enjoys sleeping in until noon, unhealthy eating habits, and watching Judge Judy for inspiration. This short story is dedicated to his family, friends, and Jackie Tarrant, all of whom recognized his talent long before he did. Thank you.

JOE EVANS is a veteran of the Iraq war. He currently resides in East Alton and attends Lewis and Clark Community College.

Born in 1987, **BENJAMIN GOLD** is a native of Alton who graduated Lewis and Clark with an Associate in Arts on December of 2009. Currently, he resides in Springfield, Illinois with his wife Sara. His work has appeared in the Lewis and Clark's *The Bridge*.

ANDREA HECKLER is a writer, reader, and musician from Godfrey. After graduating from Lewis and Clark in May 2010, she went on to complete a BA in English with minors in Creative Writing and Music at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She is currently working internships with publishing companies Arch Enemy Entertainment and Peanut Books, in addition to freelance writing and, of course, pursuing many creative projects, including revision of a recently-completed novel and regular video blogs about books and related subjects through YouTube (username booksandbrew). She also has an unnatural fondness for coffee.

KAYLA HOWLAND, a student at Lewis and Clark Community College, is pursuing a general education in the hopes of moving on to getting a Bachelor's degree in English. She has published a poem in the American Library of Poetry, 2007 Edition: With Honors. She doesn't really make much of a living, but works freelance creating art for local businesses. Kayla writes novels and short stories regularly for fun in her spare time and hopes to get several

published... eventually. She also enjoys photography, photoediting, and animation. Currently, she is writing several novels: *For Nara*, *Psychologistics*, and *Valdan*.

LOUISE JETT has been writing poetry and fiction since she was a child. She also loves to read. She especially enjoys the poetry of Anne Sexton, Marge Piercy and Sylvia Plath. Her favorite author is Kurt Vonnegut Jr., and she has read his book *Breakfast of Champions* too many times to count. She also recommends Lois Lowry's books *The Giver*, *Gather Blue*, and *Messenger*.

Louise has worked as a journalist, newspaper editor and marketing director. Currently, Louise is a media specialist and adjunct faculty member at Lewis and Clark Community College. She is working on a book, which tells the pictorial history of her hometown, Carlinville. She also enjoys photography, fine art, music and spending time with her husband, Luke, and their ten-year-old son, Keenan.

The Macoupin Economic Development Partnership named Louise one of the Top 25 Leaders in Macoupin County under the age of 45 in 2011. As a journalist and editor, she also won several awards during the Illinois Press Association's 2011 Convention, including a first place prize for government beat reporting and a second place award in the Public's Right to Know category.

DEREK KERR would be a professional writer if you gave him five dollars. As things currently are, he works at a job and goes to school at a place. Someday he hopes to have a large pile of money. Sometimes he writes things and puts them on the internet at amazingsubmarine.blogspot.com. More frequently he does not.

DEBORAH J. KNIGHT was born in Grafton, Illinois. She is a Lewis and Clark student and staff writer for *The Bridge* student newspaper. She is also a Singer/Songwriter/DJ Knight Publishing-BMI, Certified Hypnotherapist through Mottin & Johnson, aspiring novel writer, though she is interested in working on other writer projects as well. Deborah is a mother of two, grandmother

of five. She has ten recorded songs, 9 of which were self and/or co-written. MANY songs still needed to be recorded by upcoming or established singers.

MADLINE KOHLBERG is in her second year and Lewis and Clark. She is currently working on her Associates in Arts and is planning to transfer to St. Catherine's University in Minnesota to study English. Her pieces have been previously published in her high school newspaper, and she is a two-time winner of National Novel Writing Month. In her spare time, she enjoys writing poetry, watching British television, and swing dancing.

CAROLINE LEATHERS is the creator of "The Library Creatures," which are two-dimensional characters that were designed to help children learn basic etiquette and rules of life. She has completed two coloring books and had these little creatures published as a comic in three different newspapers. She is in completion of a picture book featuring the Library Creatures. She lives in a small town in Illinois where she is also at work on a novel featuring her favorite characters, Carlene Brada and her trouble bound family. Caroline says, "Having control of a story's happenings is an exquisite treat in a world where most things seem beyond control."

DONALD REYNOLDS, Born Donald Reynolds, is both a gentleman and a scholar. Many would describe him as breathtaking, others simply as sweet delicious candy for the eyes. Donald, a native of earth, has lived in the small village of South Roxana since 1990. From then he has grown to become a man of much legend. Now he slumbers, waiting for the day in which he will reveal himself to the world. Then he will promptly be charged for indecent exposure. They say that he stands 30 feet tall and has a stark blue bison... Or that might have been somebody else. The important thing is, he is Donald R. Reynolds III, and he will one day rule this world and many others. Dlanod Pihrow.

JACOB FREDRIC SAUNDERS is currently a Brighton,

Illinois-based creative writer, specializing in both prose and poetry, which has been published most recently by *The Bridge*, most notably with, *Trees of My Flesh*. He is also presently a musician, often performing melody as well as spoken-word at Jacoby Art Center in Alton on East Broadway.

He may be contacted at fred.saunders@rocketmail.com.

EMILY SCHMIEG is a returning full time student at Lewis and Clark Community College. She is a graduate of Hickey College with an Administrative Assistant Diploma. After being in the work world for about four years, she decided to return to school to further her education. Emily is now majoring in English with a Pre-Law minor and has plans to transfer to Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville in Fall 2014 to finish her studies. Being an English major did not even faze her until her sophomore year of college. She began getting great feedback from the instructors and had finally found writing was a good fit for her. Along with being busy with school, her main hobby is photography. She is in the process of starting her own photography business. Emily hopes to juggle both school and photography together. This is the first piece of work she has had published and hopes that there are many more to come.

MICHAEL SMITH is a student at Lewis and Clark Community College.

KEVIN STRANGE is a prolific underground filmmaker with six feature films to his credit and more than a dozen shorts. He currently grinds out a meager existence in a small Midwestern river town, trying his best to make a living selling his art in a community where the closest thing to an art district is a museum dedicated to the town bullet factory. He is failing miserably. His first novel *Robamapocalypse* was released through StrangeHouse in November 2012.

