

PEPPERMINT

MIXTURE / CURE ALL  
FOR WHAT AILS YOU!

INTRODUCING THE  
WORLD FAMOUS

CONCOCTED BY  
DR & PROF. SILAS J.

ROOSTER

GREAT MEDICAL  
MIRACLE MAN!

REVIEW

IS PROUD TO PRESENT  
HIS SPECTACULAR

TALENT & VARIETY  
SHOW EXTRAORDINAIRE!





# Peppermint Rooster Review

Volume 4  
Spring 2016

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Helen Jarden

## **Layout and Design**

Korin Fisher  
Louise Jett

## **Cover Art**

David McCausland

Dear Reader,

This is the fourth 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.

For the third year, we held a campus-wide contest for a student to design the cover. A panel of judges decided on the winning cover art, which was submitted by David McCausland.

When we were looking for a name for this magazine, we considered many different suggestions. The name “Peppermint Rooster” was suggested by a former Lewis and Clark student, and the idea resonated with us because of the odd juxtaposition between the two words. (Also, it sounded more interesting than “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 an L&C student, please feel free to submit your work to [litmaglc@lc.edu](mailto:litmaglc@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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# Peppermint Rooster Grand Prize Winner

Laurin Buettner

## *The Bean Cabinet*

One thousand cans of beans. Stacked tall and filed in neat rows, the beans were organized by season and secondly by brand. The primary collection consisted of a wide variety of refried beans and black beans; scattered on lower shelves, one could find the occasional can of Lima or pinto, and, of course, the green beans had their own shelving system at the left for means of color coordination. Lentils were spared, though kidney beans found their way into the stockpile whenever a clearance sale offered them for a considerably reasonable price. Never eaten, only stored. One can even dated back to 1947, labeled ‘Van Camp’s improved Beans in Tomato Sauce’ with a bland red wrapping and a picture of the cooked beans round the top.

Grandpa and I piled the cans into boxes of all shapes and sizes. We took them from the shelves in random order and filled the boxes with no prior planning. Pinto beans in boxes with the greens; older cans mixed in with the new. Some were thrown out in case of being expired. Eating something from the forties was probably an unwise health decision, anyway. Then we filled fourteen boxes, some bulging out at the sides as though we had stuffed them with a nice meal. Once a shelf was emptied of its contents, it seemed barren and sad, so we would wipe it down with lemon-scented cleaning products and casually leave small objects scattered across their surfaces. The destruction of the Bean Cabinet was a silent endeavor, one last act of solidarity for grandma.

The Bean Cabinet started long before I was born, long before I was even a glimmer in my grandfather’s eye. I suppose I should say it quite obviously started small. Everyone keeps a few canned goods around the house. They are a typical staple in the cooking of most meals. Grandma was no different. She must have gotten a taste for saving them after purchasing the first few cans. See, my grandmother grew up in the time of the Great Depression. I don’t think she ever recovered from those experiences. I don’t know if anyone can ever recover from the fear and the hunger that comes from living every day in horrible poverty.

She sometimes told stories about the Depression, stories about the hunger. There's one story in particular about her childhood that sticks to my bones. Grandma was once so hungry that she stood outside the window of a restaurant, watching people eat. The people, who weren't as affected by the difficulty of the times as her family, were inside munching on loaves of warm bread while she stood outside and spit up stomach acid from the sight of it all. It's a wonder no one saw her outside the window; no one offered her a bite to eat from their plates. Perhaps they did see her, but they didn't feel like sharing. As it was, her family would have to dig out holes in the dirt to make small cooking fires with which to bake cans of beans for their minimalistic meals. That, I gather, is where the idea for the Bean Cabinet was planted.

When grandma and grandpa were married, money was no longer an issue. My grandpa is a war veteran and worked hard his entire life to amass a small fortune. An outsider would never know his wealth by his frugal nature, but he has never failed to care for his family's needs or to spoil us with gifts. Still, grandma began her collection. I don't know if she began as a way of securing food for her future family, but I know she was in constant fear that the Great Depression would strike her once again. You could call it an end-of-days stash, or a disaster survival kit, though I think she felt it was a poverty safety net. I'm not sure she was ever comfortable with my grandfather's stock market investments.

Despite the Bean Cabinet, my grandma was a small eater. As she cleaned or ran errands she wore weights around her ankles and arms. She kept slim, slimmer than necessary, but she was beautiful. Inside and out. I will never meet a person as gentle or equally as strong as her. She loved with every fiber of her being, filled you up with her warmth and made you feel like you were the most amazing human being to ever prance across the planet. Strict and religious, she made sure that you followed a path of principals that she felt would guide your way into Heaven. Even when you strayed from her beliefs she showed love and understanding. Despite my lack of faith today, I know that she would still care for me so much that it would become stifling. She and my grandpa made a great pair. True love is hard to identify in this day and age but those two had it more than anyone else. I think the Bean Cabinet was a clear showing of how much she loved us all, don't you?

In the end, pancreatic cancer took her from us. No cancer is easy, but

I must say that my fear of cancer has a definite rooting in her experience. Near her death, my grandma wrote a letter. She wrote it as though she was God, and in the letter she spoke of how much she loved the reader and how opening their eyes to religion could be the guiding light in any hard times. Even as an atheist, the letter brought me to tears as I read it on my eighteenth birthday. Through her cancer my grandmother sent that letter to every single address in her phone book. Every person listed in those pages received her letter in the mail. Perhaps they were agitated by the unsolicited religious advice, or maybe her letter saved a life. There's no way to know. All I know is that she finished out the phone book before she passed, and I consider it a valiant last effort.

Now, in the wake of her passing, we are surrounded by boxes upon boxes of beans. They were loaded into the backs of two separate cars and each box was labeled 'bean' in crude permanent handwriting across strips of multicolored duct tapes. We drove the two loads of cans through the city like an unknown parade. Down into a bad part of town we went, looping through alleyways and backroads lined with shack-like homes. Shingles fell from roofs and poor excuses for white picket fences rose from spotty brown lawns. A single German Shepherd barked at our procession from a leash tied to a tree. Then it was there, yellowed walls and a halfway lit neon sign that read 'St. Mary's Crisis Center.' We were one of two cars in the lot, so we parked at the opposite end of someone's beat up gray Chevy.

Instantly we began to unload boxes of beans. Five for this place, five for another, and four for the last stop. The boxes were too heavy to carry alone, so we scooted them along on the ground to the front door. Five boxes of beans all in a row on their front step. My grandpa went inside and must have said something about the delivery to the owner, because a flustered looking man in his mid-forties came shuffling outside wiping hands on a dirty apron and looking hesitantly from me to the boxes on the ground.

"Five boxes?" he questioned, leaning down and making a futile attempt to lift the first box in the row. He stood back up and smiled, running his thumb across his chin and repeated, "Five boxes?"

"Five boxes," Grandpa replied, patting the red-faced chef on the shoulder. "We'll help you get them inside. Then we have other deliveries to make."

A tearful hug was exchanged, a few nods of approval from Grandpa, and then we got to work. Three more workers came out to help. One was an older woman who did a lot of crying and hugging. I helped carry in the last box of beans, and I eyed the dimly lit interior as we carefully wobbled our way to the back room. An old television set played a news station clouded with static and the tables were covered with thick red and white plastic picnic cloth. There were a few people spread out around the tables, though no more than six in total. One was a boy around the age of four who stood and watched us carrying back the beans. He said nothing to me, but I noted that his clothes were dirty and his shirt appeared to have been patched with a few different kinds of plaid fabric.

I stood in the doorway of the kitchen with Grandpa, and we watched as the workers started to set up their own small section of grandma's Bean Cabinet. They scattered beans around on shelves with corn. Beans went under the sink and above the stove. I even watched one go next to the can opener, primed for dinner rush. These people could help end a small portion of local hunger from the life collection of a woman who lived in fear of going hungry. Cans of beans collected to save the future of one family could guarantee the tomorrow of a hundred families. As we turned to leave I grinned at the little boy who watched our visit from the front room.

My grandma was afraid of the Depression returning, but I don't know if the Depression ever really left us.

Lee Crosby

## *Knock, Knock, Knocking on Heaven's Door*

If you've never smelled a fresh driver's license, it's my duty to inform you that it smells like freedom. And warm plastic. To a sixteen year old it's an aroma that screams, "I AM AN ADULT. LOOK AT ME ADULTING ALL OVER THE PLACE." Why was I such an eager beaver to grow up? Ah, I don't miss that young kind of stupid. The older woman who took my photo for the ID seemed amused and entertained by my inability to contain my excitement. "Stop bouncing around so I can take a clear photo," she chuckled. "Bless your little heart." No sooner did the flimsy white card hit the sweaty palm of my outstretched hand had I bolted out of the DMV, whooping and fist pumping in the air.

Dad had been patiently waiting in his car for my driver's test to conclude. A complete stranger would initially describe my father as an emotionless or expressionless type of man. He wasn't one to lose his composure, but I knew his eyes just like my favorite mood rings. I could always decipher his stony gaze by locking in on those mahogany orbs. When he heard my commotion, I saw him look over at me with dread and disappointment as the realization set in. Someone was dumb enough to grant me legal driving privileges. I was deliriously happy. As I slid into the passenger side, his custom leather seats seared my bare legs. I winced. My family constantly implored Dad to switch to cloth seats, but to no avail. He was all about style over comfort. If I didn't know any better, I'd assume he was gay. My dad always dressed for success and expected no less from his family. "You never know who you may run into," he cautioned any time I tried to leave the house in my baggy, stained cargo shorts and combat boots. Dad and I were dead ringers for each other but couldn't be more different. His milk chocolate skin was always moisturized, and thick locks of espresso hair were always tamed to perfect waves. Thanks to his fifteen years in the Navy, Dad was incapable of wearing an outfit without starching and pressing it each morning, and trimming his neat goatee whether it needed it or not. With my lack of style, I might as well have been adopted. My cliché teenage fashion sense could be summed up with three words: Nineties Punk Skater. The sixteen-year-old Lee didn't even understand

how to turn on an iron, let alone use one, and my idea of moisturizing was simple. I didn't.

On the drive home, my benevolent dictator laid down the law. He refused to buy me a car. Partially because I had the maturity of a three year old who's blankie was in the washer, and partially because all I wanted at the time was a purple 350 Z. He did, thankfully, agree to let me drive his precious 2006 Toyota Tacoma. "It was TRUCK of the YEAR," he would boast to anyone who would listen. The austere rules for driving his "baby" were to be followed as if God himself chiseled them into stone and passed it to Moses—no driving unless I had my own money to replace the gas. Before and after reaching my destination, I must call him. Only I was allowed in the vehicle. If it was dark enough to require headlights, don't even ask to look at "her" like I wanted to drive "her." And last but certainly not least, NO BOYS. Did I mention no boys? No boys. Dad could sniff out a young man's pheromones like a bloodhound could a coon. I didn't mind the rules. Maybe it's because it was the first vehicle I ever drove. Or perhaps all his "Truck of the YEAR" bragging had brainwashed me. Whatever the reason, I truly believed that Tacoma was a sexy beast. Its slick black exterior glistened in the sunlight, much like those disgusting fictional vampires my female classmates fawned over. It had more curves than my lanky, barely pubescent frame. And to be honest, his truck probably smelled better, too. With Yankee candle air fresheners clipped to the vents and a "new car smell" scented tree hanging from the rearview mirror, the Tacoma smelled like a Bath and Bodyworks on wheels.

Driving to school the next morning was, hands down, the most glorious day of my junior year. I remember the windows being down, blaring Green Day's best album *Dookie* (FACT, not opinion) loud enough to vibrate the side view mirrors, with my right hand on the steering wheel while the left hung aloof out the window, like I'd seen my dad do for years. I don't think any girl ever tried so hard to give off the aura "Yeah, I've been driving for years. And yes, I'm way cooler than you are." Of course, no one besides my friends gave a lick that I had my driver's license, but I didn't care. I could DRIVE. No more debating whether to sit towards the front of the bus with the weird kids and that elderly bus driver who faintly smelled of cheese or daring to travel to the back and endure the rowdy kids who cursed like sailors

and picked fights with anyone that took their “spot”. Never again would I have to endure the harsh elements while waiting day after day for a rarely punctual bus. Those yellow, soul-crushing, seatbelt-lacking, reputation-killing death machines were ancient history.

A few weeks later, I decided to stay late after school and read outside. The leaves on all the majestic maple trees had started to change colors. Fall was my favorite time of year to admire nature in all its glory. The sun’s gentle warmth was a blanket, balanced out by a crisp wind that carried hints of freshly mowed grass and gently shook marigold, crimson, and tangerine leaves off their branches. They glided around me like confetti as I sat mesmerized.

Before I could settle into the novel, my Razor flip phone vibrated. It was a text from my father reminding me that I was to pick up my little brother from band practice by 6. I glanced at the time stamp on the message. 5:48.

Expletives raced through my brain as I scrambled to gather my belongings and raced to the parking lot. Dad was very strict about being on time and he was sure to call by 6:01 to ensure that I wasn’t late. Out of breath, I rammed the keys in the ignition and pealed out onto the road. *Shortcut, shortcut*, I panicked. *There’s gotta be a damn shortcut.* Lightbulb. *The backroads.*

The backroads in my town did not have any street signs as long as I could remember. It was dubbed the backroads after a pathetic attempt of a shopping center was dumped in front of it and the asphalt snake became less frequently traveled on. Even though the sad, run down street was neglected, it was still used occasionally to avoid traffic or to sneak away with friends to smoke pot. It twisted like a child’s swirly straw and had only one lonely, bent 35 MPH speed limit sign that was completely covered in graffiti I would forever deny having any involvement in. Trees stooped over the roads, and with the late fall sun disappearing, it gave the half bare branches a menacing claw like appearance. 5:56. AHHHH. I pressed down on my gas pedal, pushing 50 miles an hour. *I’m gonna make it*, I told myself. The middle school football field was only two turns away. One turn away. Reaching over, I flipped on the radio to an oldies station.

“.....*Getting daaaark, too dark for me to see/ Feels like I’m knockin’ on heaven’s doooooor.*”

“Hells yeah, Guns ‘n Roses,” I exclaimed and leaned again to turn

up the volume. When I looked back up at the road, my heart seized in my chest. A deer. Right smack dab in the middle of the final curve. I didn't even have time to register what it looked like before reflexes kicked in. Jerking my steering wheel hard to the right, I side swiped the deer and screamed. Two seconds or so passed before I realized my foot had slammed on the gas instead of the brakes. By then, it was too late.

*"That cold black cloud is coming dooown/Feels like I'm knockin' on heaven's doooooor...."*

My truck veered sharply off the dark asphalt and plunged into the ditch that lined the road. Even though I had stomped on the brake pedal, it didn't matter as the two left wheels lifted off the ground. "NO!" I shrieked. The world began to turn upside down. I could hear glass shattering around my face and feel my body being pulled away from the seat. In the rush to leave school, I never buckled my seat belt. As a result, my body was hurled to the ceiling then slammed into the backseat mercilessly. When the world began to flip again, I saw a glimpse of what I was about to collide with. Please, I pleaded to a higher power, *I don't want to die...* The large trunk of a maple tree was the last thing I saw before I flung my arms over my face.

*"Knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's doooooor....."*

Air bags exploded. It felt like Mike Tyson punched the left side of my face. Putrid blue-gray smoke began to fill the vehicle, wafting up my nostrils, searing my eyes that already stung from tears. No, wait, that was blood. Body frozen in fear, all I could do was scream. Panic and adrenaline surged through my body. I flung my head from left to right, trying to make sense of where I was. It finally clicked that everything was upside down.

*"...And it wouldn't be luck if you could get out of life aliiiiive...."*

Now the smoke was thickening and a deep hissing sound could be heard. Every over dramatic car explosion I'd ever seen in a movie forced its way into my imagination. Hyperventilating, I started feeling around me to find a door handle, but it was hopeless. Up was down, left seemed right, and the right was demolished. My shoulder pressed against something cold, something hard. A WINDOW. I positioned my body, took a deep breath, and began kicking frantically.

*"Knock, Knock, knocking on heaven's doooooor/ Hey. Hey, Hey, HEY."*

Kick. Kick. Kick. Pain ripped up my calves. Car fumes polluted my throat, burning the lining of my lungs. However, I was unrelenting. *KICK, KICK HARDER, DAMMIT.* As I pulled my knees to my chest in preparation for another thrust, hands wrapped under my armpits and I was yanked out of the car. I was saved.

There aren't too many details I can give you about what happened directly after that. The police said it was because I was in shock. I remember the flashing sirens, the neighbor who happened to be a nurse cradling me in her arms as I unabashedly sobbed into her chest. Everyone's voices seemed muffled and like the adults from those old Charlie Brown cartoons.

The memory that stands out the most is the moment I saw my father. I still have no idea who called him. It never occurred to me to ask. When I heard him yell my name, it rattled me. My dad never sounded like that before. Looking up, I saw him briskly walking towards me and I quickly turned away. Fear and intense shame washed over my body as I prepared for his rage. But the rage never came. Instead, he grabbed my chin and lifted it to meet his gaze. Dad's eyes brimmed with tears, jaw clenched tight.

"I'm so glad you're okay," he choked. "You're okay." I fell into his arms and we sank to the gravel where we stayed, not letting each other go until the remains of that "Truck of the YEAR" was towed away.

Years passed before I sat behind the wheel of a car again. At first, Dad refused to let me drive, but, when he finally caved a few months later, I discovered what it meant to have PTSD. Anytime I saw a deer, a road with ditches on the sides, or a sharp curve, I'd scream and slam on the brakes. My body shook so badly, I couldn't see straight. So we both decided it would be in my best interest to call shotgun for the remainder of high school. But Dad never punished me for crashing his "baby". He was able to replace it with the next year's model. Besides, my fear of driving and Guns N' Roses was punishment enough....

## Brennen Larson

### *The Corpse on the Cliff*

Harold Solomon, reporter for the River City Panoptic, walks through Blufftop Cemetery on a Sunday evening with the aid of a flashlight, his only source of illumination besides the small sliver of moon sitting high in the midnight sky, sending meager rays of light down to the graveyard, his thoughts straying on the fact that he is there for a solid, definite reason:

His horoscope told him to.

From an early age, Harold was fascinated with astrology. He saw it as a message from some abstract creator, a clarifying expression of what his part would be in their grand scheme. So he subscribed to a newsletter, which was hand-delivered every morning, just in time for breakfast. It was an expense made worthwhile by the sense of satisfaction it gave him. The reading he received on this particular day went as follows:

*Reaching out to others may prove difficult today.*

*The actions of a stranger will put a damper on your usually sunny disposition, but looking at things from a new angle will allow you to shed some light on the situation.*

*Tonight: Pay respect to those who have passed.*

Harold wasn't a man who said no to the stars, so at about quarter til the witching hour he tossed his camera and flashlight into his lemon-yellow Buick and drove up to Blufftop. It's a gorgeous little spot with an excellent view of the river, one somewhat marred by the presence of a shipyard whose dim lights shimmer on the water in shades of red and yellow. At the very least, it's good for a photo. A few paces from one of the more gnarled trees in the area, Harold currently wanders, waiting for something to come up.

As he rounds a corner, the circle of visibility from his flashlight passes over something on the ground. The circle snaps back to it as he realizes what it is.

It's a heavy brown coat, soaked with blood, clearly covering up a human body; a slender hand reaches out from under it, limply clutching

the grass. Harold keeps the light trained on it as he reaches into his pocket, pulls out his camera and switches it on, recognizing that he has a story on his hands. Body in a Boneyard, pictures on page three. As he readies his camera, he notices something beyond the coat and freezes, his eyes widening. Someone is standing over the body; something is in their hand. Something compact and metal, shining in the barely-adequate moonlight, and, despite the fact that the flashlight in Harold's hand illuminates only the figure's legs, he can tell that it's pointed directly at him.

The figure standing in the dark barks out a command, each syllable carrying the force of a punch in the otherwise dead silence: "Drop it!"

Harold lets the camera drop. It lands wetly in the grass.

From the sound of the voice, the figure is a young man. His silhouette, barely defined in the dim light, indicates that he is shorter than average.

The young man speaks again, this time with a softer tone: "This *really* isn't what it looks like, you know. There's actually one hell of a story behind it!"

Harold is dubious. *Literally no human being on earth*, Harold thinks, *has ever been honest when saying that. The gun in his hand doesn't help matters in the slightest, either.*

A light bulb switches on in his head.

*Unless, of course, I'm looking at something that needs new light shed upon it! That's it! Reaching out to others, indeed.*

"I—I have a solution, actually!" Harold squeaks, "It just so happens that I'm a reporter for the Panoptic! Tell me the whole spiel, start to finish. I'll write it down, get an expo-zay, or whatever, in the paper, and you get your story out to the public!"

"Really?" the figure asks, "strange man in a graveyard found standing over a body, holding a gun, and you want to ask him his side of the story?"

"Er, absolutely!" Harold replies. "I do this all the time. Well, not really. Mostly it's just alien sightings and ghosts knocking over expensive vases while the owners are away. If you hadn't come along, I'd be writing about a chilly spot in a basement somewhere, so please, by all means, tell me what happened."

Harold holds his breath as the man thinks this over.

The man in the shadows lowers his gun, then steps into the light.

He is, indeed, young. Early twenties, Harold guesses, and vaguely handsome. He is short but visibly fit, with an air of heartiness about him. His face is round, curly yellow hair pokes out from under the brown ball cap on his head. He stares at Harold for a moment, sizing him up before speaking.

“Okay, pal-”

“Harold. Harold Solomon.”

“Okay, Harry, but only so long as you tell the whole thing. Get this right, I might not go to prison. That would be nice.”

The young man closed his eyes and began to speak:

I should probably introduce myself first. Name’s Sherman. I deliver mail, not that that matters. It’s more of a courier service, really. Little packages here and there, the occasional circular, yadda yadda. Two days ago there was a show in a place down the river called Mellichio’s. Nice place, owned by my boss, Zeke Juniper. You’ve probably heard of him, right? No? The name’s not one you can really pass over, you know? Big man in River City, big man in general. Older gentleman, booming voice, dark grey hair with streaks of white like lightning in a storm cloud? Hell of a guy. Doesn’t really matter, the musician’s who matters. Penny Prospero. Not her stage name, mind you, she always said her parents just thought it would be cute. She was tall and tan, with eyes that glowed amber and short black hair always tucked under a beanie. Showed up Friday night with a beaten-up guitar and the best cover of “Sweet Home Alabama” I’d ever heard. It was her first real gig, actually, Zeke set the whole thing up. Great guy.

Anyway, the place was pretty packed. They weren’t there for the music, really, just boatmen in for the weekend. Man called Charlie was there for the whole show, just staring at Penny the whole time. Lots of people stared at Penny. She was the kind of person who attracted attention wherever she went. Wouldn’t have paid it any attention, just another creepy dude from the barges, coming in smelling of dead fish, cigarettes, and regret for his life choices, except after the show, he went up and talked to her.

I was pretty sweet on Penny, saw her play at the fountain downtown all the time. It was right next to the office, so I passed by her every day. Eventually we got to talking, went to dinner a few times. I introduced her to Zeke, actually.

So when Steamboat Charlie, who was old enough to be her father, went up and spoke to her, I was concerned. I went over to make sure he wasn't being weird.

Turned out, fortune was in Penny's favor.

"It's the shipyard's fiftieth anniversary, you know." Charlie was saying, "and we've got the cake all settled, but I reckon I could convince the head honcho over there we're in need of a performer. You've got talent, kid. A voice like a... spring morning, or somethin'."

Penny seemed pretty jazzed about that. She thanked him, he left, and we both talked about how weird bargemen were for the rest of the night.

Saturday morning, a small black envelope sealed with wax showed up in the mailroom, addressed to Penny. I delivered it personally.

"It's a job offer for a Sunday soiree!" she exclaimed when she opened it, "and it pays well, too!"

She showed me the offer. Two grand for one night's work. She was good, but this was suspicious. I told her so.

"I'm not worried," she replied. "It's signed by the owner of the shipyard and everything. Official paper, embossed. Thaddeus Avidea the Third. Name's fancy as hell. Sounds like a king or something."

I was still concerned—I mean what kind of shipyard has paper that lush? But Penny was set on the idea. When I brought up my concerns with my boss, he put on an expression like she'd gotten cancer in the mail, instead.

"I'd not trust that man with anything, were I you," he warned, pacing around his smoke-filled office. "He's a renowned chicken chaser. Probably heard that sailor talk about her and decided to try and bring her in for wooing. Two grand, indeed!"

So, naturally, I told Penny about that. She remained unfazed.

"Two. Grand," she said, simply. "Two thousand dollars. For a few songs! Do you not even—that's not bad money. Not bad at all. And you want me to throw it away because the guy there is going to try and, what was the word, 'woo' me? Do you not think I have that precious virtue known as willpower? Granted, with a name like Thaddeus Avidea the Third, he's probably richer than God..."

"But?" I said.

"Nope, that's the end of my thoughts about that. He's probably richer

than God. As for the man himself? We'll just see, now won't we?"

That was the end of that, as it was. She spent the rest of the day on the giddiest corner of cloud nine, playing music by the fountain until well after the streetlights switched on.

This morning, I tried to put the whole thing out of my mind. To settle my nerves, she'd promised to leave after the whole thing ended, around ten thirty.

Sunday was a busy day for Juniper Deliveries. Mail isn't delivered on weekends, but packages still need to be organized, paperwork done, et cetera. Business goes on. At eleven sharp, I finally escaped. I stood outside, waiting for Penny to arrive so we could go for noodles. The place was dead. There were two cars in the parking lot. One was mine; the other belonged to Zeke, who lived in the sizable loft space above the office.

I remembered what he'd said about Thaddeus. Panic set in. She should have been back by now, I figured. So where was she? I called her. No response. I waited around for a few minutes. No call back, no sign of Penny.

I jumped into my car and sped off into the night to get her. A policeman stopped me five minutes later. So, after my ticket was written, I drove carefully into the night to get her.

I arrived around eleven thirty, and the place was quiet. People were still there, of course. The place never quite shuts down. It just keeps bringing things in and shipping them out, moving things up and down the river in an unending chain.

A banner still hung over the main building, partially-deflated balloons tied to the handrails around the stairs leading up to darkened offices, a single light shining on the second floor. I ran upstairs to find the room empty, save for a slice of vanilla cake sitting on the desk, a fork dug into it.

Back outside, I asked around for anyone who'd been there at the end of the party, and who should I run into but old Charlie, who was directing some men loading empty cargo containers onto his boat, the *Something Fishy This Way Comes*.

"Yep. Saw the gal not half an hour ago. Left with the boss, said they were going to his favorite place on the river."

"Where?"

“Place with a great view. Over yonder. Can’t miss it.”

The man pointed right over—well, right over here, actually. Blufftop Cemetery. I sped over there as quick as I could. Who wouldn’t? Strange man driving off with your gal to the top of a cliff. I’ve seen enough teen movies from the fifties to know what happens after that.

I arrived about ten minutes later, saw Thaddeus’ car in the parking lot. You must have seen it when you got here. No? Figures. I wouldn’t stick around, neither. Not after—

Anyway, I run in, shouting my little head off, when I hear a noise like a peal of thunder. For a moment, that struck me as odd, considering that lightning always comes before the sound, then I connected the dots. My heart raced as a million thoughts rushed through my head at once, adrenaline coursing through me as I ran to where I thought I heard the noise, right at the edge of the bluff. I stumbled around the headstones for what felt like ages before remembering I had my phone on me. I switched its light on just in time to spot that limp form there, lying in the grass, staining the ground with blood.

“That’s some heavy stuff, man,” Harold says, “I’m guessing that’s your coat?”

He points at the red-stained jacket draped over the corpse.

“Yeah,” Sherman replies, “I felt so bad, him just lying there, I had to do something.”

“Him?” Harold remarks.

Sherman says nothing. He stoops down and pulls the coat back by the collar, revealing the crumpled shape of Thaddeus Avidea the Third, lying face down, clutching his chest with one hand, the other reaching out in the direction of the parking lot, where an empty space once occupied by an extremely pricey car is now inhabited by air.

The new driver of said car, now two thousand dollars richer (not counting the contents of the wallet and watch lifted off the corpse of the shipyard owner), is currently putting space between herself and the scene of the crime, knowing that if she’d stayed and argued self-defense, the question of the ownership of the gun would ultimately arise, along with how she came to River City in the first place, clutching a guitar formerly owned by a Tennessee Elvis impersonator who was found in his apartment with the contents of his wallet missing, three broken ribs, and the lyrics to “Sweet Home Alabama” stuck inextricably in his head.

Helen Jarden

*The House on Hazel Avenue*

I turned into the gravel driveway, my car bumping from the juts on the path. In front of me was a large Victorian style mansion, the best house on the street from what I could see. The warm cream paint was fresh. The front porch looked brand new. If I had to guess, I would say that it had been recently renovated. “This might be the nicest job I’ve gotten yet,” I smirked at my new temporary living situation. Yet, despite looking like it came out of a home decor magazine, there was one blemish that was impossible to ignore. On the top floor was a shattered window, now boarded up, that looked like a black eye on an otherwise impeccable face.

Exactly one week ago I received an email from a Mr. Arnold Cragstead. This guy apparently knew someone I used to work for, Miriam Gray, and was impressed by the job I did. This perplexed me, since Mrs. Gray died in my care after only a week, from causes out of my control. In the short time I did assist her, she boasted about my work to everyone, and I guess this was enough to get this man to contact me.

Just reading the financial details of the job was enough to make me automatically accept the offer. He was offering me seven hundred dollars a month on the condition that I live with him until he died. When I read that in the email, my curiosity was triggered. However, it was the promise of a bonus ten grand, rewarded after death, that gained my attention. Yet, there were a few details about the job that surprised me. For one thing, the client contacted me on his own, an unusual move in this business. Normally, I get emails from family members—“concerned” children who didn’t want to deal with the old anymore. At this age, as stereotypical as it sounds, clients are stubborn as hell. They don’t want to seek assistance. It hurts their pride.

This slight weirdness didn’t deter me in the slightest. In fact I tried to look at it as a positive. Sometimes, it was a real pain to get the elderly to cooperate when they didn’t want to admit they needed your help. At least this way, the old man knew he needed me, and wasn’t going to put up as much of a fight.

As I parked, I began to play the guessing game. Who exactly was this man, how big was his family, and what did he do for a living? It

was clear he was pretty well off financially. However, I suspected he was also pretty lonely, considering he was the one that contacted me, rather than a family member. I was almost banking on the idea that he didn't have anyone related to him left alive. If he did have family, I'm sure they would not have allowed him to give me ten grand just to see his death through to the end.

I turned the car off and opened the door, a process that took a moment thanks to the handle being jammed. "After this job, I'll be able to get rid of this shitty car," I said to myself. As I did this, out the corner of my eye I saw something move. I turned to see a curtain, which had been lifted up, drop in front of the window. "Old guy must be coming to greet me," I chuckled.

"I may be old, but I'm not deaf," a firm voice said to the left of me. I jumped, turning toward the person. There, standing by a small flower garden, stood a fairly tall, old man. He had a white bushy beard, which he was currently scratching, and a nicely polished red and black cane in his right hand. As he leaned against it, I could see that on top of it, his hand was resting on what looked like a giant black orb.

"Oh, sorry," I stuttered, at a total loss for words. "Are you Mr. Cragstead?"

"Who the bloody hell else would I be, boy?" he grumbled at me, a quick scowl forming on his bushy gray eyebrows.

"The gardener?" I offered up, blurting the first thing on my mind. I quickly realized that could be considered insulting, but it was too late to take it back. The old man's scowl retreated and a small smirk formed on his mouth. He started to laugh, a deep chuckle erupting from his lips, like I had said something incredibly funny.

"The gardener," he laughed, slapping his hand down on his good knee. The laugh stopped instantly, and he looked at me once more very seriously. "You are my caretaker I hired, correct?"

"Yes sir," I said, returning to my original composure.

"Jacob Mcquade?" He confirmed my name.

"Yes sir," I said again, shaking his free hand. This man obviously demanded respect, as is normal for elderly men. He nodded, waving his left hand at me, motioning for me to walk with him. I noticed as we walked toward the porch that he didn't seem to use the cane at all, swinging it carelessly by his side.

“Follow me, I’ll show you the house.”

As I got the grand tour, I learned that some of my guesses were incorrect. Cragstead hired me because his late wife’s brother insisted upon it. Apparently two months ago, while the brother was staying at Cragstead’s house, the window of the guestroom suddenly shattered. His brother-in-law claimed he saw three shadows, dressed in black, jump out the shattered window. The police were called but the “hoodlums”, as Cragstead described them, were never caught. The brother was worried that Cragstead wouldn’t be able to deal with a break-in on his own, so he insisted that someone like me be hired.

While it sounded to me that it was just a few kids wreaking havoc and having fun, it still made me feel a little less safe than before. Of course I wasn’t going to tell Cragstead that I was afraid of some stupid kids; my pride was too strong for that. Still, it made me wonder how the kids got inside the house in the first place, and I decided to make a mental note to check all the windows and doors at night before bed.

“I have to admit this is a bit different from my normal jobs. Usually I’m hired because people of your age can’t take care of themselves,” I said as he showed me up to my room. The house was newly furnished, freshly painted, and decorated with the best taste—all thanks to his late wife, I was told. He had already made it seem like he was fine living on his own, that he didn’t need anyone.

“Well, I have a pretty bad liver and my heart isn’t what it used to be. Honestly, my doctors said I should have keeled over by now. You won’t have to wait long until I’m dead,” he said gruffly. “When you get to be my age, as I’m sure your other clients have told you, dying doesn’t seem all that bad.” It was, indeed, a speech I heard many times from many, now dead, clients. That didn’t stop it from being any less grim.

My room was on the second floor, but thankfully it was not the one with a shattered window. As we walked in, I instantly wondered if this was some mistake. It was a huge bedroom, decorated with silk bedding and bright yellow, paisley curtains. There was an obvious feminine touch to the decor, more so here than the rest of the house. Before I could ask, he already answered. “This is the master bedroom. I moved out of the room when my wife died. Grieving, you know.” That would explain the bottles of perfume still on the vanity, the bits of jewelry displayed in cases. It was like she never died.

“Are you sure you want me to stay here?” I asked.

He nodded once. “I’ve long since let go of the pain this place gives me. Her memory is the only sentimental thing I hold onto anymore. Really, the only reason I haven’t moved back up here is because of those damn stairs. No, it’s a good thing you’re staying here. It feels good knowing that the place is being used.”

His words seemed true enough, and so I let the topic go. The place was a bit dusty and I knew I would need to thoroughly clean it. Just him mentioning his trouble using stairs made me realize the whole upper house probably hadn’t been cleaned in years. I dropped my one case of luggage on the floor, then decided to open the curtains and let in some natural light, all the while making light conversation with Cragstead.

Of course, the conversation became a little less light when I realized the window had bars on it. “Why?” I asked, my hands stroking the cold metal bars. They were obviously new, so shiny I could see my warped reflection in them.

“Oh that... another paranoid whim of my brother-in-law. He thought maybe that would keep those damn kids from breaking in again. I let him do whatever he wants with the house. After all, I’m never up here so it never bothers me.” He pointed out towards the downstairs. “My room, the kitchen, and a bathroom are all down there anyway. What else could a man need?” I chuckled in response.

That first night was the hardest to sleep through. The wind pounded against the house, making the place creak endlessly. Many times I found myself woken up by the noises. My heart pounded in my chest; my skin broke out in a cold sweat. I swore I heard a human groan in the very room I was sleeping in. Yet, when I turned the lamp on and searched the place, I found nothing.

Much like all my clients, once he got used to me he talked a lot. It seemed the guy was a bit lonely. However, I soon learned he had some social quirks. He liked to talk, but never be questioned. Anything about his wife, how he got his house, or family members was ignored. He held a tight grip on his personal life that, at first, I was sure he’d never release. Yet, he seemed to let those details go on his own volition. Any information about himself had to be given away on his own terms.

Through various conversations I had figured out that Jezebel was his late wife, and apparently his pride and joy. They were married ten

years ago, and while she died after eight years of marriage, he insisted it was the best eight years of his life.

“Were you married before that?” I asked one day, while we were eating dinner. I assumed he would change the subject, avoid the question without tact. Of course it was when I was sure I had him pegged that he decided to surprise me.

He nodded, taking a sip of his drink. “Yes, but I really didn’t know her well. It was a short marriage.” There was a slight edge to his voice, a guarded tone that seemed out of place when talking about a dead loved one. “I married Clara when I was twenty-one. I was head over heels in love with her, otherwise I wouldn’t have married a woman I only knew for three months. I have to admit I was quite a ladies’ man back then,” he chuckled, “but there was something about her that was different from all the rest. Unfortunately, she died in childbirth after four years of marriage.”

I shook my head, “I’m sorry to hear that. I’m guessing that was your only child?”

“Er,” he paused, looking off to the side. The grandfather clock chimed, distracting him for a moment. “Yes. The poor... thing died during delivery as well. Of course by the time I met her, Jezebel was far too old to have children, if we had ever wanted them. I’m just an old man with no heir.” I thought he would have been sad about that, but instead there was a gleeful tone in his voice, a wide grin accompanying it. It was the first time I had seen him happy about anything.

As time wore on, I began to get a bit closer to Cragstead. He had his schedule, which he kept vehemently. It was far more ritualistic than any other’s I had seen, but I chalked it up to the man just being quirky. Every morning he would, before doing anything else, knock three times on the basement door. Then he would take his shower, make breakfast, and set the table for two. Oddly, he would turn all but two of the chairs towards the corner of the room, as if he didn’t want anyone else to sit down. I offered to take care of breakfast, but he refused. “A man’s morning ritual can never change,” he scoffed.

We would eat and talk about the news, as I strived to follow the unspoken rule to not to ask about these quirks. Sometimes I felt like it annoyed him if I even looked at the other chairs. After eating he then would go about his business, sometimes muttering things under his

breath. One other odd thing I noticed was that his cane, which became clear to me was only a fashion accessory for him, was also involved in his quirks. Whenever he passed by a vent cover in his house, he would tap it with his cane. It was usually a light tap, but the sound would travel throughout the house, echoing through the vents. Sometimes as early as three in the morning I would hear the sound.

About two and a half months after I had first moved in, an eerie event occurred. We had just finished breakfast. Cragstead was heading toward his bedroom to watch some TV, when suddenly, he began to shout, "Get away from me you pest!"

I jumped, wondering what I had done to infuriate him so. Then I realized he wasn't talking to me. In fact he wasn't even facing me. The light in the hallway by the stairs began to flicker, an orange glow shining on his white hair. With a swift movement, he lifted his cane and hit a vent as hard as he could. A loud crack sounded, his cane snapping in half. His trembling knees gave way and he began fall backwards, a horrible roar erupting from his lips. Instinct took over and I ran to him, my hands sliding behind his back as I attempted to break his fall.

His head almost smashed into the hard wood floors, but somehow I managed to cushion the blow. With almost a surprising amount of force, my hand was pinned between his head and the floor. A shooting pain came from my fingers, and while I tried to lift his head up I found myself unable to.

There was a strange look in his eyes, one of fear and anger. His hand clutched onto my shoulder tightly, his fingers digging into my skin. "I... I hate... these damn..." His eyes fluttered and suddenly the pressure on my hand was gone.

"Mr. Cragstead," I shouted, taking my free hand and checking his pulse. Too faint. Too weak. Without hesitation, I called emergency services, praying that the old man would pull through this one. No matter how much money I was offered, I never wanted my clients to die. Especially when their death was as questionable as this would have been.

Paramedics quickly arrived and wheeled him off in an ambulance. A police officer asked me several questions, and looked skeptical when I told him the full story. "Why would he hit the vent?"

"I don't know, maybe he saw a mouse? Old people do weird things

all the time.” This wasn’t the first time the police suspected me of something. They never could accept that I was simply the caretaker. They also could never prove I did any harm.

There was an offer for me to go to the hospital, but I thought it wouldn’t be wise to leave the house unprotected after all the talk of breaking in. They promised that I would be called about his condition, but I knew from years of experience that seldom were those promises kept.

Alone in the house, I started to clean up the mess. The shattered cane made me shudder; the loud clang of the metal and the snap of wood came back in my mind. As I swept up the bits of splintered wood, I noticed that the black orb, once on the head of the cane, was now missing. I started to look around for it—god knows I didn’t want to trip on the damn thing—when something else caught my attention. The vent had a large dent in it, but instead of bending inwards as it should, it instead bulged outwards, the little metal bars twisted and warped as if something on the inside had tried as hard as it could to get out.

“What on earth?” I muttered, leaning down toward the vent. The muted sound of something scampering broke the dead silence of the house. I reared back, repulsed by the noise. “Rats, he must have rats in this place.” I shuddered to think of my own things being tainted by the foul creatures. Of course this job seemed too good to be true. I made a note to look around the house for rat poison, feeling sure that Cragstead wouldn’t mind this at all.

An hour later, I called the hospital for news on his condition. A young woman’s voice, sweet and pleasant, had me smiling. “Mercy Hospital, this is Roseanne, how may I help you?”

“Hello Roseanne, my name is Jacob Mcquade. About an hour ago a man I was taking care of got brought into the Emergency Room. Arnold Cragstead.” I paused to take a breath but found it unnecessary.

“Hold for a moment,” she said before I could continue. The click of classical music began, droning in my ear for what seemed to be forever.

Then the voice came back, strangely muffled, like she was talking from the other side of the room. “Isn’t it wonderful, Darling? Claw footed gold, just like the magazine! ...The water is too warm, Darling.”

I frowned for a moment. “Hello?” There was a pause, the

phone totally quiet. Then the sickly sweet voice was talking right into the receiver.

“Sir Mcquade? Oh he was hung on a meat hook, then hacked into little pieces like the pig he is.” There was a click, then classical music played faintly in my ear. I stood with the phone pressed to my ear, my mouth hanging open slightly. There wasn’t a sound throughout the house, not even a creak. The silence only made my heart beat faster as my brain slowly churned with what I heard. What I thought I heard.

“Hello, Mr. Mcquade?” The nurse’s voice came back.

“Yes,” my voice sounded hoarse.

“Mr. Cragstead would like to talk to you. Would you like me to transfer the call?”

I had barely gotten a hold of myself. “Yes, but while I was on hold did you say something to me? I heard voices and-”

“No, you’ve been put on hold this whole time,” she said blandly. “I’ll transfer the call now.”

The classical music continued before I had a chance to say something else, not that it would have done any good. I held my breath, waiting to see if her voice would come back on. When the raspy voice of the old man came on, I was more than pleased.

He wasn’t happy to be there, but he thankfully didn’t direct his anger at me. I listened patiently to him rant and rave about how the hospital staff was treating him. “The doctor wants me to stay the night, supposedly to make sure nothing happens. Can you believe this crap?”

“Maybe-” he stopped me right there.

“It’s a goddamn ploy to get me out of my money! They’re keeping me here so they can jack up my hospital bill, the stingy fuc-”

“Mr. Cragstead!” I interrupted him quickly. No way I was going to listen to this tangent any longer than necessary. “Listen, I have to go. Someone is at the door. Please, just listen to the staff and you’ll be out of there before you know it!”

He started to grumble but I hung up before he could ask any questions. I’m sure if he was thinking clearly he would wonder who would be at the door, since no one visited him. I looked around the house, trying to catch my breath. The memory of the voice was slowly becoming a distant nightmare, and each second I traveled away from that moment in time made it seem more and more unreal.

I looked at the vent in the hallway, and the odd shadows it cast with its mangled appearance. “Rat poison,” I reminded myself, a new task forming in my head. Thank god Mr. Cragstead didn’t have any pets. Last time I put out rat poison, it was in Mrs. Jones house. Her idiotic cat ate the poison and when I discovered its fluffy white corpse lying in the middle of the kitchen floor, I had to quickly bury the damn creature before the old lady found it.

Finding the rat poison, if there was any, was going to be an issue. There were three possible places I could think of: the attic, the cellar, and the shed in the backyard. My first thought was to go in the shed, but one look at the pouring rain made me second-guess that thought. The grass in the backyard was overgrown, the landscapers having not had the chance to mow his yard due to the unending rain the season brought.

Through the window, I could see the rusty white shed off in the corner of the yard, it’s windows cracked and broken from age. It seemed silly, but something about it creeped me out. The way the shadows through the window swayed, probably from the trees, which were being moved by the ever-growing harsh wind, made me feel like something was lurking inside, watching me as I watched it. Distant thunder sealed the deal for me—no way in hell I was going out there unless I had to.

I headed towards the basement, passing by the dining room on my way there. The table was still set from breakfast time, dirty dishes waiting to be cleaned. That would be my next chore after the rat poison. I swung the old wooden door open, revealing rickety stairs and darkness below. I flipped the light switch on, a dingy yellow light casting a warm hue throughout the basement. Each step down the stairs creaked. Each noise made me sure they would break under my weight. I heard many horror stories of people falling down the stairs, a fear my clients often shared with me. Somehow these stories had worked their way into my heart. A vision of me tumbling down into the blackness of this basement was enough to make me cringe.

As soon as I got to the bottom, I covered my nose with a grimace. It smelled rotten; the moldy walls were a good sign that this place had not been entered for a long time. I stopped, staring at the blue rusty metal shelves, and wondered if it was even worth looking for the poison at that point. Clutter filled each unit, boxes bloated with paper spilled over onto the floor. Little glass baubles were carelessly placed everywhere,

some broken from their abuse.

There had to be at least sixteen shelving units, placed in rows along the room, like library shelves. I walked between each, trying my best not to step on anything too valuable. Toward the back of the room, I began to see a swift change. The debris began to become antique. There were porcelain dolls with green, velvet dresses stained with age. Dull glass eyes stared in random directions. Heads twisted too far to the left or right.

I saw in the corner of my eye the box of rat poison, placed on the bottom shelf. As I picked it up, a few pellets dropped out of the open bottom. I would have been dismayed by my rotten luck, if I hadn't watched the green pebbles fall. They landed on a tiny pile of vintage photographs.

The colorless features were still recognizable. A young Mr. Cragstead was standing in front of a tree, staring blankly at the camera, no smile on his face. What struck me as odd, though, was that there were three small children standing beside him, the same blank stare at the camera. A little girl on the end was crying while a slightly older boy, probably her brother, was holding her hand. A girl no older than two clung to Cragstead's arm. All were dressed in black.

A skeletal arm, with skin so pale it looked bloodless, reached out from between the shelf towards the photo I was holding. It's shriveled fingers clutched onto the paper, grazing against my hand. I yelped, pulling back from its icy touch. Just like that, the arm shot back, taking the photo with it. No time to breathe. No way to catch my thoughts. Slowly the head of an old woman poked out from where the arm had retreated, an inhumanly wide grin stretched across her haggard face.

Behind me, something sputtered, wet liquid splattering against my neck as they coughed on me. The sound of light thuds, much like footsteps, padded up the basement stairs. I turned toward the noise, an almost instinctual move to see who was behind me.

There was nothing. No sign of anyone being down there for years. The basement door started to swing shut. "Hey-" I began to call out.

The metal creaking of the shelves caught my attention. I turned just in time to see them tilting towards me. I jumped back with a yelp as they suddenly flew across the room, sliding several feet on the floor, making an awful, teeth clenching screech.

My body was shaking uncontrollably, my hands sweaty from the wracked nerves. Like a bullet from a gun, I shot across the room, tripping up the stairs on my way up, slamming the door behind me as I braced my back against it. Below, I could hear the sound something crashing through the destruction.

My instinct was telling me to run out of the house, to flee from whatever was down there. I wanted to run to my car, drive away, and never come back. But another side of me, a more egotistical side, took control. I couldn't leave the house because I was paid to take care of it. What kind of caretaker would up and leave? Especially if the only thing down there was some old, albeit strangely strong, woman. No, I knew I needed to call the police.

My body was still pressed against the door as I tried to devise a plan. In the hallway there was a little table, where the phone and answering machine was supposed to be kept. Yet, in its place was nothing, just a missing slot and a small red light indicating it was not in use. So the house phone was gone, whatever. Plan B, my personal cell phone, was just around the corner on the dining room table. There was one problem: in order to get my phone, I'd have to leave the door and risk letting whoever was down there loose.

I listened for a moment, checking to see if I could hear the old woman. Perhaps she was still causing chaos amongst the fallen shelves. Maybe she was creaking her way up the stairs. Then again, she could very easily be standing on the other side of the door, listening to my heavy breathing while I tried to hear hers.

There was no noise now, not even a breath. She might have hurt herself after pushing the shelves over, or got trapped under one somehow. I had to take the risk and get the phone. I rushed to the kitchen, then stumbled forward as my legs stopped moving. I stared in exasperated terror, my whole body feeling like frozen ice.

The room smelled like eggs, toast, and chemicals. The chairs were now turned toward the table, Cragstead's strange quirk undone. On the breakfast plates, now cold from the time that passed, was rat poison piled high. It spilled down onto the table, the chairs, even the floor, some of it still rolling as if it had just been poured. I lunged for my phone and pushed my back against the wall, staring at the strange sight. No sound. No movement. No perpetrator that could have done it.

I dialed the number and put the cell phone shakily up to my ear. A soft voice started to talk, but I ignored her greeting completely. "I'm at 1910 Hazel Avenue," I said gruffly, trying to be quiet but whisper loud enough so that she could hear me. "I think there might be two people in my house. One of them attacked me." I gave her the full story then, not giving her a chance to interrupt me. She carefully instructed me to lock myself in a room until police arrived, and remain on the phone with her.

I rushed up to my room, remembering that I had a lock on my own bedroom door. The stairs creaked loudly, and I swore I heard steps echoing after me, as if some unseen force was following me to my safe haven. During all this, the woman kept talking at me, trying to keep me calm. My nerves were already fried though; her help was useless now. I ran into my bedroom and slammed the door shut behind me. For one brief, terrifying moment I watched the doorknob rattle loudly. Then I realized it was only vibrating from the extreme force I used when I slammed the door. "I think I'm losing my mind," I whispered into the receiver.

"It's okay, Jacob. You're in a very stressful situation. Try to take deep breaths. Help will be there soon!" She was trying, in vain, to keep me level headed. Every inch of me felt vulnerable, goosebumps forming up my skin.

I could still hear the metal clanking, first soft but growing louder. The doorknob was still shaking. "I uh, think they are trying to get in!" I practically yelled.

What ended that line of thinking was when I saw thin long scratches forming along the door's varnished surface. Desperately clawing to get out of the room, away from... me? I backed up, reaching for something to grab. The only thing on the ground was a small wooden plank, a wooden plank that was not in my room before. In fact, this room was very different from my bedroom. The walls were pale blue, decorated with the stencils of childlike animals. There was a thick beige curtain over one of the two windows. The other didn't need a curtain. It was boarded up.

I had run into the wrong room in my panic. "The water is awfully warm, Darling. Will you help me in? Protect me please sweet Darling, keep me away from them." The phone operator's voice grew sickly sweet in my ear. I yelled and threw the phone across the room, watching

it shatter. Just as it cracked in half, a shrill shriek, a girl's shriek, pierced my ears. The room became frigid. Waves of agony washed over me. Her agony. "Jonny" the girl's voice cried shrilly, "help me!" She had to be young, only six or seven at the oldest. The door continued to shake as I listened and watched in horror. The boards on the window shattered like they were paper, splintering outwards into the yard below. There was one final scream, which climbed the evening wind and blew back into the room.

*Thud.*

My heart raced as I listened to the silence. The door was no longer shaking, the girl was no longer screaming. A false peace was in the air. Then sirens in the distance caused me to snap from my trance, and I glanced out the window cautiously. There was no child's body on the overgrown grass. A black and white police cruiser was outside, its blaring siren and flashing lights creating a growing crowd of neighbors in the street.

They searched the house and found nothing. There was obviously a disturbance, of course. The shelves were toppled over downstairs and the rat poison was still spilled everywhere in the dining room. I told them everything up until the point of the child's voice. They would think I was a crazy: an invisible assailant screaming through the room as it was thrown out the window. They asked me if I'd like to stay the night at someone else's house, a tempting suggestion I almost took. But my pride was still intact: I couldn't leave, what kind of coward would I look like? A little ghost, if that's what it was, wasn't going to scare me away. If Cragstead had lived with it, I could too. The officers told me they would keep a police cruiser on patrol in the neighborhood and, after searching the scene sufficiently, left.

As I went to sleep—the door was kept locked and the small lamp in my corner left turned on—I thought of the picture I had discovered. The children dressed in black, their sad little faces looked dull on the faded paper. The little girl holding her brother's hand, could that be Jonny? I shook my head, as if that would disperse the thought. It was ridiculous to consider, ghosts and whatnot. I shut my eyes and tried not to think about why that girl was screaming, or how she fell out that window.

Two AM. Deep breathing in my ear. Heavy breathing, occasionally choking and sputtering like every breath was a battle to get air. Slowly,

the breath drifted from one ear to another, circling around my bed. No footsteps. No creaking of the floorboards. Just the breathing and the now faint smell of smoke. My eyes remained shut, my body frozen, though I wanted to scream. The door to my locked bedroom opened with a creak. Through my eyelids I saw a bright light. After a few minutes of heavy silence, I opened one eye up. The bedside lamp I had kept on was now off. The light in the hallway was on, and I could see a dark shadow creeping down the stairs, fluidly moving yet not making a sound at all.

I waited until the shadow was all the way downstairs, then reached across the bedside table to retrieve the newly found house phone. It took me several nerve wracking minutes to locate it, my mind not wanting to remove my eyes from the doorway out of fear that whoever was down there would suddenly be standing in the doorway. I took two deep breaths, then dialed the numbers as fast as I could.

Static. The white noise on a television was ringing through the telephone speaker. I quickly pressed the end call button and tried again. 9-1-

The other side of my bed shifted slightly. I turned, eyes wide, as I looked at the thing lying next to me. Her old wrinkly skin was stretched again in that wide grin, but this time she started to open her mouth. Wet drool seeped out from under her lips, pooling onto the sheets beneath us. I pulled away from her, rolling out of my bed and, half crawling, half trying to stand up again, flew out of the room. I slammed the door shut behind me, gasping at the air around me. The old woman again was tormenting me, but why? Who was she? An Alzheimer's patient with an uncanny ability to appear without a sound?

Or a ghost. I didn't want to consider anything in that vein. I began down the stairs, running to the front door to get help. A neighbor's phone probably worked—hopefully worked. Anything was better than being stranded in a house with no way to get help. Yet, when I got to the front, a flash of red snagged my attention.

In the hallway, red was smeared against the walls, streaked along the hardwood floors. Something had been dragged through. I stared with morbid curiosity, following the trail with my eyes. The back door, leading to the backyard, was now open. A warm orange and yellow glow was shining through the dark night.

I couldn't ignore that. A stupid idea formed in my head, one that

I should have ignored. If someone were out there, locking them out would be the best decision. I stealthily walked down the hall, carefully avoiding the mess. As I approached the end, I saw a shredded leather belt with red droplets on its slick leathery surface.

Outside, the shed was now bursting with flames. Dark smoke fluttered around the building. The light casted strange shadows through the ashy clouds, and I swore I saw a shape of someone frantically struggling. Through the roar of the fire I heard it clearly, a noise echoing through my mind rather than my ears. A scream, a boyish one. I shuddered, clutching my head as I did so. Suddenly the smoke and flame vanished, leaving instead just a burned concrete foundation. There was no shed, not anymore.

I stumbled backwards into the house, slipping on the wet floors. A stream of curses poured from my mouth as I immediately tried to remove the blood—if that’s what it was—from my hands. I stopped. The blood was gone, now replaced with burning hot water. I rushed to the stairs, water cascading down them like a waterfall. I followed the source, slipping several times, hitting my knees on the hard stairs only to pull myself back up again. Reaching the top, I soon found the water pouring from underneath the bathroom door. My instinct was telling me to run but, as if I was being controlled, my hand shakily reached for the doorknob. The door swung open with a reluctant creak.

Two frail arms were flailing from out of the claw-footed bathtub, grasping at the air. Water flowed over the edge of the white porcelain. Muffled screams bubbled from the bath. A boy, probably no older than fourteen, was standing by the edge of the tub, both of his arms stuck in the water as he struggled to hold the person under. His long black jacket was soaked through as water splashed against him. The facet creaked, turned to the bright red word “Hot” as far as it would go. Long after the gurgling ceased, he was still pushing. Finally, he released his hands. In an instant, so quick I didn’t even see it happen, he turned to face me. Fleishy scorch marks were all along his face and neck, too fresh to have healed. His dull orange eyes stared right through me. I was a bug under a microscope; prey looking into the soul of its predator.

I immediately ran out the door, feeling as if being near him was enough to kill me. I heard him behind me, his footsteps sounded like the hooves of the devil. Even while I sprinted down the stairs I could

hear something moving, the sound of glass plates clinking together. As I passed the dining room archway I saw a young girl sitting at the table, choking and vomiting. I didn't care at this point. Let the damn thing die. I was leaving that godforsaken house and nothing could stop me, not even my pride.

I pulled open the front door and slammed into something incredibly sturdy. There I was, face to face with the young boy who had drowned the old lady upstairs. "Finally," he said, his voice raspy. I could hear his lungs from where I stood, the sound of their feeble attempts to breathe making me cringe. The boy sounded like he smoked for a hundred years.

"What?" I gasped, backing away. Briefly, I was terrified I was going to slip. Then I realized the water was all gone, like it had never been there.

"Do you know how long we were trying to get him? And then you had to come along and ruin everything!" He shouted, his fists clenching up into tight balls. "You're going to pay for what you've done," he growled, moving forward.

Somewhere in the house I heard the sickly sweet voice of insanity gurgling her song. "It's claw-footed, Darling! The meat hook, Darling! Hang like the pig you are!" The water came back, flooded so high it reached my knees. He slowly inched toward me, not wasting any time. I needed a distraction.

"Who... what are you?" I asked, my voice shaky. Slowly we were inching our way towards the back door. A leather belt floated past us.

The boy smirked. "A ghost, of course. What the hell else would I be?" There was a sadistic glare flaring up in his eyes.

"Who is she?" I tilted my head upwards, towards the noise.

"Jezebel."

"His late wife?" If this was a haunting, it didn't make any sense. "They loved each other, why would—"

"We all haunt him for our own reasons. He's killed each of us in his own way, and for that we must seek revenge. For her, it's anger. They had a deal, together. Your employer was well aware of the ghost problem, as well as Jezebel. The two of them cooked up a plan to make sure neither of them would be killed by us. Unfortunately he dropped the ball and fell asleep while she was bathing. It gave me the perfect opportunity to eliminate her."

“Okay...” I felt myself back against the door. There was nowhere left to go. “Then who are you?”

The boy was silent for a moment. “My name was Jonathan.”

“Well that doesn’t tell me anything. Why are you haunting Cragstead?”

“He killed my sisters right in front of me. Poisoned Charlotte and threw Dawn out of a window.” There was an intense fervor in his voice.

Suddenly everything clicked together. The girl I saw in the kitchen, vomiting—I knew I had seen her before. The photograph I discovered in the basement. As dated as it was, I swore that it was the same girl. The boy too, now that I thought about it, looked the same, though much younger. “You’re... his children? He killed you? He killed his own kids?”

The boy stopped moving towards me. He was so close I could smell the smoke that clung to his body. “You’re smarter than I thought. Yes, he killed us, right after Mother died. She passed away during delivering, taking the baby along with her. My father was upset, not because she was dead but because he was left with us. So slowly my sibling began to die, one by one until I was left. They were too young to really fight back, though Dawn tried her best. When it came to me, the oldest, I tried to fight him,” there was a sadness in his eyes. This was the first time I had seen anything in him other than fury. “I was easily bested. He burned me alive, in the shed that used to be out there. I watched for sixty years as he reveled in his life as a bachelor. I listened to the confused and tortured souls of my siblings, and now Jezebel, crying to be free.” He shook his head, staring off towards the kitchen where his sister was reliving her death. “They don’t even know they are dead. In fact, I don’t think they know me anymore. The only thing I feel is their fear and confusion...”

He waved his hands, changing topic. “I suspect that until we kill him, we will never be free of this house. Of course, I don’t know why I told you any of this. I’ve already decided to kill you for screwing up the plan.”

An aching pain shot through my stomach. He was suddenly there in front of me, his ghost arm wedged deep inside my lower abdomen. There was a churning feeling in my gut, like something was pulling at me from the inside. “No wait, please,” I croaked, trying to pull him

away from me. It was no use; his ethereal body was not as physical as it looked. “I-I can help you!”

He laughed humorlessly, the noise dripping with sadistic pleasure. “How would you be able to help us?” His grip clenched onto something in me, crushing organs that should not be crushed. I grimaced, gritting my teeth as I tried not to scream.

There was no time to question morals here. All I knew is that I didn’t want to die, and I didn’t want to be cursed to haunt this place with that demon of a kid. If this was the death I’d have to relive, I’d rather burn in hell. “I’ll kill him for you. When he gets back from the hospital, I’ll lead him through here and push him down the stairs. If he doesn’t die by that, you can finish the rest,” I gasped.

He stared blankly at me, no expression on his face. The pain grew to the point that I thought I was going to pass out. Then suddenly, I was released from his grip. I fell to the ground, coughing up blood and bile. When I looked up, Jonathan was gone, but the promise was not forgotten.

The front door swung open as I helped Mr. Cragstead inside. It had been hell, picking him up from the hospital, listening to him rave like a lunatic about how horrible the staff was. “Damn hospitals,” he was fuming again, his breath reeking of old age and that morning’s breakfast. “My toast wasn’t properly made. How in the hell do you screw up toast?”

The house was spotless. Even the vent bent back in the correct shape. After Jonathan left me, I found all evidence of what had happened erased. Cragstead glared at the vent intensely; a scowl rested on his bushy eyebrows.

While on the outside I was being cheery, helping the old man in any way I could, on the inside I was still reeling from what I had to do. The vent no longer interested him. He stood in the hallway for a moment, looking all around with a curious expression on his face. “You know, I don’t think I’ve felt a sense of peace in this house until today,” he said with a serious tone.

“Oh, really?” I shrugged, wondering what to make of that. I only felt a mountain of pressure, a thousand eyes staring right at me.

“You got the vent fixed, I see,” Cragstead said, pointing at it.

“Was it broken in the first place?” I asked with too much innocence.

He stared at me for a moment. “Hmm, I guess maybe it wasn’t.”

When I first met him, he had no reason for the cane, but now he seemed to be incredibly weak. His legs were shaky and while he refused my help, I still kept my hand on his shoulder. There was something about the way his body shivered as he tried to walk that made me feel horrible on the inside.

That was when I noticed it. By the frame of the basement door, which was already open, rested a silver marble cane with an obsidian orb on the top.

“Where is my other cane?” He asked, pointing to the new one.

“The last one was broken when you shattered it on the vent. I found this one upstairs thankfully.” Truthfully I didn’t know where the hell that came from. It was definitely not there before I left to pick him up. Cragstead huffed, but showed no concern.

His hand reached out for the cane as he spoke, moving towards it with total innocence. “I’ll be going to the living room. Put a pot of coffee on will you? I desperately need coffee after this hellish weekend.”

“Here, let me get this for you,” I said, keeping one arm on his while I reached for the cane. As soon as my fingers touched the orb, my vision blurred. I could hear the repeated thud of the cane hitting something fleshy. Jonathan’s voice screamed for the pain to stop. Above him stood a young Cragstead, raising the cane in the air.

I recoiled back for a second, my breath getting jagged. “Son?” Cragstead asked. I wanted to tell him to shut up, to never dare call me his son. Instead, I simply shook my head.

“Sorry, I don’t know what happened there. Maybe I need some coffee too,” I chuckled half-heartedly.

There we were, my arm around him if his frail body needed support. He was now standing in the middle of the basement doorway, still reaching for that cane. My mind urged me to push him, but my body was stuck. He turned his head, looking down into the darkness. The voices of my previous clients echoed in my mind—the horror stories of falling down the stairs, fearing

they would die before they hit the ground. I couldn't do it. I couldn't push him. The plan was going perfectly, but some awful part of me was telling me not to kill him. He was old, he lived his life. I had so many years in mine and yet for some stupid reason my morals were telling me to sacrifice all of that for an old goon.

All the air in my lungs was sucked out as I felt a horrific pain in my knees. I fell to the floor, grasping at my legs as another blow hit me. Cragstead struck me with his cane several times, knocking me to the floor, then elbowed me in the face. "What are you doing?" I screamed, as blood streamed out of my nose. With energy I never thought he'd have, he wrapped his hand around my neck and lifted me up in the air. No more was he the frail old man struggling to walk—the act was over.

As I choked for air, he spoke, his nostrils flaring with each word. "Damn you. Damn you straight to hell for working with those little brats." There was no chance to stall or plead for my life. This was not Jonathan.

With that final thought, he flung me down the stairs. With some final, desperate attempt to save myself, my hand grasped for the railing that did not exist. My legs twisted in ways they shouldn't. My arms snapped behind my back in angles my bones couldn't handle. Each thud against the stairs seemed to birth a wave of pain inside me. My body suddenly jerked, my head smacking into the concrete floor. I slumped back, my dull eyes staring up at Cragstead. The smell of smoke overwhelmed me. The last thing I saw was his dark figure glaring down at me before two scarred hands grabbed my head. With one quick motion, my neck snapped.

Robert Wilson

*Reader vs. Yorker*

Dear Editor,

I have been an avid reader of the *New York Times* for many years. Every week I wait in eager anticipation for the latest issue to hit my doorstep so I can read the fantastically written editorials, but last week was different. In an editorial titled *Wedding Preparations: The Food*, the “author” of the article made an offhand comment stating, “... cake, as you may know, is the most iconographic piece of any wedding. Although that seems to be changing, as of late, with soon to be newlyweds substituting cake for other desserts, such as [...] pies... I must say, to a traditionalist like me a ‘wedding pie’ sounds a little absurd, but that’s not my [...]” I must say I am quite disgusted by this statement. In all the years reading the *New York Times*, I have never read such slander. This statement alone shows that the editorial was written by a cake elitist, or caklitist, with an anti-pie agenda. Well, I am not going to sit here and watch as pie’s good name is sullied. Pie is leaps and bounds better than cake, and I am going to explain why it is the ideal dish.

Let me start by talking about the most ludicrous claim mentioned in the editorial. There is no doubt that there is a larger variety of pies than there is for cakes. I searched allrecipes.com for all the varieties of pies and cakes. There is pretty much only one type of cake: a sponge. Sure one can get different flavors of cake such as lemon, chocolate, yellow, and so on, but at the end of the day it is nothing more than a flavored sponge. With pie, the choices are endless. There are juicy, sweet fruit pies and light, airy cream pies. Not in the mood for sweets? That’s fine because one can also get an assortment of savory pies that consists of various meats and vegetables. Just hearing all the varieties makes my mouth water; luckily I have a slice of cake to soak-up my mess.

I recently held a poll for friends, family, and fellow neighbors on what dessert they thought is more memorable to them. The results may shock the cake-elitist. Pie is related to such memorable and emotionally heartwarming Moments in life. Severing an apple pie on a nice sunny summer day at a picnic, eating pumpkin pie with family while

conversing on great memories of old, and a warm pecan pie served ala mode during the festive Christmas nights are just a few. The editorial claims that cake has more emotional appeal because it's related to great emotional and memorable Moments like marriage and birthdays. Ha! Way to shove that bull down readers mind. Congratulations on getting married readers; I hope they enjoy spending the rest of their lives getting nagged by their "significant" others, who are only going to eventually have an affair on them and have them work three jobs just to pay that alimony check. Hey, at least there is that big cake, right? Oh, another birthday has come. Happy birthday, here's a cake that reminds readers that they are one year closer to death.

Who am I to make such provocative claims? I am a connoisseur of pies. Throughout my life I have eaten bountiful amounts of pies and cakes, and I have yet to taste a cake that is on par with any pie. When I was a child my mother would bake all sorts of bake goods; pies, cookies, and even cakes. Whenever my mother would bake a cake, our family would sigh in disappointment knowing that a mediocre, sponge with slime slathered on top awaited us after dinner. Our reaction to pie, however, was different. When Mom said she was going to make her famous sweet potato pie, everyone's face lit up with glee knowing that there was something to look forward to after dinner. I would quickly shovel my dinner down my throat so I could have a slice of that luscious pie. I still enjoy pie even now. There is something about the flaky crust, that intoxicating aroma, and gooey filling that keeps me coming back.

I hope that this letter shows that editor of the *New York Times* just how misguided his editorial is. It is a shame when journalists try to portray their opinions as facts, unlike myself. Pie is the epitome of all baked goods, and it deserves to be treated as such. So, that is why I am demanding that this "editor" of the *New York Times* retract his original editorial and apologizes to all pie lovers. While I am waiting, I am going to have my pie and eat it too.

An ex-*New York Times* reader,  
Ron Remington.

Dear "editor" of the *New York Times*,

Earlier this week I made my way to my local grocery store to

purchase provisions needed to prepare a blackberry pie. Ah yes, my famous blackberry pie. The warm, gooey filling made from the fresh blackberries I grew in my organic garden, encased inside a flaky and buttery-rich crust. And if you are wondering, yes, I churned my own butter for there is no other way to achieve said buttery-ness.

Anyway, while I was at the checkout lane I saw the new article of the *Times* so I figured I'd just take a quick glance to see if you rescinded your slanderous article and apologized as I demanded. However, to my surprise, you did no such thing. You actually doubled down on your "opinion," and even more maddening you wrote an entire piece—*Wedding Preparations: Dealing with the Naysayers*—targeting me! Don't even try to play dumb with me. "You will no doubt run into people who want to take over your wedding as if it was their own [...] if you want a more traditional wedding, with your traditional white cake, then you put your foot down and say enough is enough. Do not give these people an inch or else." Did you really think I would not realize whom you were talking about? Don't think of me as a fool, sir.

Is this how you treat your readers? You mock and threaten them? Well then, I too shall double down and become even more of an ex-reader of the *New York Times* than I was before.

Your mortal enemy,  
Ron Remington.

Dear "editor" formerly of the *New York Times*,

It appears that the powers that be at the *New York Times* finally came to the realization that having you under their employment was a huge liability. Your crusade to defame the good name of pie has finally come to an end. Perhaps now you have seen the errors of your ways. Sure, the media is claiming your termination is over some scandal with the state governor, but we all know the truth. You can no longer use your clout to brainwash the masses into choosing the inferior product known as cake. Hopefully, the editor-in-chief will choose a real editor that will work diligently to repair the damage you have done and tell the truth of what it means to eat a slice of pie. Maybe that person will be me; I submitted my resume the minute I learned that they fired you.

Wish me luck,  
Ron Remington.

Dear ex-*New York Times* “editor” Daniel,

I had my interview at the *New York Times* the last week. Sadly, the interviewer did not see my glorious talent or the importance of speaking about the wonderful world of pies. She claimed that I did not meet the criteria needed to fill your old position. I tried to win her over with some of the amazing titles I had been working on: *Pie: A Slice of Life*, *Why Pie Charts are the only Charts Needed*, *The Top Five Movie Title Pie Puns*. Nothing. It seems you were not alone in your tirade against pies. As I waited for the elevator door thinking about what I was going to write to that interviewer when I got home, I overheard her talking to someone in the break room just a few doors down.

“Wait, you’re telling me you just interviewed him, the Pie Man? I heard that he wrote Daniel twenty-three letters a week!”

“There isn’t a doubt in my mind it was him. The guy would not stop talking about pies no matter how many times I tried to change the subject. And when he finally realized that I was not going to hire him he offered to become our ‘Pie Editor at Large.’

“Man, Daniel was right, he is a nut job.”

A nut job? They called *me* a nut job?! Sure I was referred to as the “Pie Man” but I could tell it was not a term of endearment. Why, Daniel? Why, even from the pit of despair, must you continue hurt me. Thanks to you the world thinks I’m sort of Looney Toon. You have ruined me, and pies by proxy. The weeks after you lost your job I thought that you were getting your just desserts. Seeing you eat that slice of wedding cake alone, soaked in your tears seemed like the punishment fitting for a piece of filth like you deserved. You lost your job, your wife left you, taking the kids with her (may she soon find a true man that understands the true value of pies and instill this into the kids). Yet despite all of this, I now see that your punishment was not severe enough. Don’t worry, though; I have a big helping of humble pie, with its hearty and savory taste of justice I made just for you.

Ron Remington.

Daniel,

Six years. Six years has passed since I last wrote to you. My time is short so I'll make it brief. There is nothing I love more than the taste of victory; it's not unlike the slice of coconut cream pie I had earlier today. The soft and cooling sensation of its sweet creamy center, its airy whipped topping feels as if I bit down on a cloud from the heavens, and the graham cracker crust, oh the graham cracker crust as it crumbles in my mouth... indescribable.

Although, there is one thing I didn't enjoy about that masterpiece: the toasted coconut shavings. As with any masterpiece, it was not without its flaws. Even as rewarding as it was to dine on that near perfect delight, it was somewhat marred by the frequency in which I had pieces of crunchy daggers impaled into gums and between my teeth. I guess it was symbolic of how, sometimes, obtaining the great things in life can come with great consequence. Not that you would ever know anything about that. It seems that they are ready for me. I shall see you in hell, you sponge loving bastard.

Yours truly,  
Ron Remington.

Sarah J Dhue

## *The Sight*

Luke was not a bad man. He had been born with the sight; it was not as if he had had a choice in the matter. Many had called him a charlatan, a faker. Others had also called him an abomination, unholy. There were few that felt he had been truly blessed, that God had given him this gift for a reason.

Poor Luke had recently been the victim of some teenagers that lived in the apartment complex near his own small house. Everyone in town knew he had the sight, and would either treat him like a holy man, a liar, or the Devil. Luke was certainly not the Devil, but he was also no angel. After the hoodlums took a baseball bat to his car, he decided to do something he had never done before. To tell them their future, only it would be a lie. He saw it as a mean prank, but he was justified; it wasn't as bad as him taking a bat to their heads like they had done to his poor old Ford.

Luke had shook his fist at them as they ran off, shouting, "Listen here, you little shits! You'll get what's coming to you, and not from me! I see only blood and death in your futures!" They had actually looked amongst themselves in a terrified manner, picking up the pace and running even faster; Luke thought this was funny shit.

The sight was very unpredictable. He actually saw nothing of the boys' futures, but he could tell you that the woman getting out her car was about to get a promotion. When she would enter her home to tell her husband the news, she would find him making love to the young lady that worked at the Quik Trip. Life's a bitch like that. But Luke could not be held responsible for what happened next. He really had seen nothing of the boys' futures; he had told a flat-out lie to scare them.

A mere two days later, the boys went to the amusement park a few towns over for some fun, and to carry out a little bit of minor vandalism. The amusement park was known for its fantastic roller coaster. So everyone was shocked when it derailed in mid-

loop, traveling about 80 miles per hour, crashing to the ground and killing its only three passengers for that session: the three boys who had beat up Luke's car.

The woman with the promotion and cheating husband told authorities what she had heard Luke yelling after the boys and he was of course brought in for questioning. Luke explained that it had been an empty threat, to scare the boys. Many thought this was downright cruel. Some thought he had made the roller coaster derail, but the sight didn't work like; he was not telekinetic. After that day, Luke stopped telling anyone what he saw. Because he had not seen the tragic future ahead for the boys...

Luke had never thought his powers were either evil or divine. He had always known they were unpredictable, but before that day he had never known just how unpredictable. It was then that he decided that maybe the Devil had played some hand in this charade he called 'the sight.'

Eli Schroeder

## *A Field Guide to Classifying Douchebags*

Most experts will agree that, objectively speaking, there are as many types of douchebags on Earth as there are people. That being said, these some 7 billion types display certain traits that allow them to be classified into four general categories. However, before this guide can begin, it is important to understand just what distinguishes a douche from any other human being. This necessary definition presents a problem, as determining whether or not a person is a douchebag is an incredibly subjective practice. As a rule, determining the douchebag status of an individual can most simply be explained as a “gut feeling.” This guide will leave it up to the reader’s discretion as to whether or not a given subject is a douche or not.

As a quick side note, there is some debate among the leading douchebag authorities over the proper usage of the term “douchebag.” Many state that it is only applicable to males and is therefore not the best terminology when discussing the human race over all. There is certainly some truth to this claim, as there is a higher likelihood that a male will be identified as a douche or douchebag than another person. For the sake of this guide, however, all people who display these certain characteristics will be referred to as “douchebags,” regardless of gender identity.

The first and most easily identifiable douchebag is the “Classic Tool.” Classic Tools are generally the first images that come to mind, for most people, when discussing douchebags. They tend to have popped collars on their polo or button down shirts, sunglasses (placed possibly on the collars of their shirts or the back of their heads), some form of styling gel in their hair is not uncommon, and, in an unfortunate blow to the heritage of the Hawaiian people, puka shell necklaces have become an incredibly common accessory for the Classic Tool. Many Tools will be into sports, and some observers may describe them as “jocks.” Most Classic Tools are very close-minded; they can be stubborn and often quick to anger and violence. It is not at all uncommon for a Tool to be insecure, and, if they feel their sexuality is being called into question, violence is almost guaranteed to follow. Tread carefully around the

Classic Tool if one is encountered in the field.

On college campuses, the next most likely type of douchebag to find is the “Bohemian Hipster.” There is a very broad range of looks a Bohemian could adopt: that of a hippie (lack of personal hygiene and grooming, vintage clothing), that of a hipster (itself a broad definition, being anything counter-intuitive to the culture the subject was raised in), or that of a “normal” person. Bohemian Hipsters are not generally identified by their appearance, although it is sometimes a helpful indicator. The easiest way to determine whether or not an individual can be considered to be a Bohemian Hipster is to probe their musical identity. Ask about their favorite genres: if they can only give *incredibly* specific examples, that might be an indication of their douchebag phenotype. Dig further in. Question them about their favorite bands, take note of how they react if the band names they provide are known or unknown. If they find that the band or artist is known, many will attempt to produce more band names until they give an example that is unknown. When they have provided a name that is obscure enough, they may act smug or in some way attempt to display the fact that they think this makes them superior as a person. Studies have shown that in such a situation, about 97.93% of those displaying such behavior can be categorized as a Bohemian Hipster douchebag. As such, it can be concluded that this is really the only behavior that is required to indicate the Hipster status of an individual.

In the world as a whole, the most likely type of douchebag to see roaming is the “Biz Bro.” Depending on the setting, there are many looks the Biz Bro may adopt. They are generally dressed in full suits and, even when “dressing down,” khaki shorts and a polo are the most casual outfit you will likely find them wearing. No matter the setting, it would be a very surprising scenario indeed to find a Bro without some type of Bluetooth headset on. A typical Bro will converse relatively loudly with whoever is on the other end with no regard to the people around them. Many Biz Bros have found their way to success by one way or another and if this is the case, they have a tendency to flaunt this fact in a similar fashion to how a Bohemian Hipster may act when they have mentioned a musical artist that was previously unknown to their conversation partner. Some experts theorize that Classic Tools may grow into Biz Bros. This theory would explain why many Bros are

quick to anger, much like the Tools previously mentioned.

The final type of douchebag a researcher may encounter in the field is the “Congenital Douche.” A Congenital Douche will likely be the most difficult to identify as they will not easily fit into any of the previous three categories. The least cumbersome way to determine a Congenital Douche from any other kind is to test the subject for all other known types of douchebag. If the individual does not fit any known classification but the researcher still finds something inherently douche-y about the specimen, they are more than likely a Congenital Douche. C.D.’s do not have defining physical traits or behaviors. They do not display any of the previously mentioned attributes and yet they are still *clearly* douchebags. Congenital Douche-ism is an incredibly fascinating phenomenon as the subject does not necessarily need to do anything to be a douchebag; they were simply born that way.

Classifying douchebags is not as black and white as this guide may make it seem. In most cases the types given here will overlap somewhat with each other in a given subject. This guide is not meant to brand anyone who participates in any activity mentioned as a douche. Being a douchebag is more about an individual’s attitude than their looks or core values. That is the reason this guide has left it up to the reader to determine whether or not a given individual is a douchebag or not.

Good luck and happy classifying. Be careful out there.

## Leslie Patterson

### *The Truth About Cell Phones*

Over the years, cell phones have evolved into little computers you can carry in your pocket. People use cell phones for a number of different reasons: talking, texting, social networking, work, emails, and etc. Although I understand the appeal of having the latest and greatest device, I do not understand why people would rather be playing on their phones and looking down for extended periods of time rather than having an actual conversation with a real person and taking in their surroundings. My question is how can something that you have to look down at be so much more interesting than the world around us? The fact of the matter is cell phones have caused people to not realize what is going on around them, forget how to communicate with others, and phones can cause serious accidents.

Failing to realize what is going on around us has greatly increased due to cell phones. How many times have you been walking down the street, in a grocery store, or at school and all you see are people with their heads down looking at their phones? Every Tuesday and Thursday while walking to classes I see students at my school walking with their heads down looking at their phones. It makes me wonder how they know where they are walking to and if they are even paying any attention. What if they run into something or someone? While cell phones often come in handy when you want to make a phone call or something important is going on in your life, they also have become quite a nuisance. With all the games, social media, and texting you can do from your phone, many individuals do not want to miss what could possibly happen on their cell phones. It could be that one of your friends on Facebook just got married, or Eva Longoria just started to follow you on twitter. My question is: are these things really that important?

Just a couple of months ago at my local grocery store I witnessed a little boy, about seven years old, knock down a display of candy bars while his mother was on her phone. She had absolutely no idea he had just knocked over 50 candy bars. It boggles my mind to think that, if there were a predator around, the child could be taken and the mother would never know where her child went. How does something so

small consume all of our time and energy where we cannot even pay attention to the world around us? I have seen students in my classes having a thirty-minute texting conversation with whom I assume to be their boyfriend or girlfriend while the professor is teaching. To me those conversations can wait—an education cannot. It fills my mind with questions about raising a child in this day and age because if they don't have the latest and greatest devices and all the social media sites they will not be “cool”; however, if I would subject them to the world we live in and allow them to have all of these savvy devices and social networking sites then they too will not understand what it is like to see what is going on in the world around them.

Another big issue I have with cell phones is that people have forgotten how to communicate with others. I have been in mid conversation with people, and when their phone goes off they immediately check to see what is happening on their phone. Just this weekend I went to the Lake of the Ozarks with a group of my girlfriends and without fail every time their phones would go off no matter where we were or with whom they were talking to they immediately turned to their phones. I was unaware that communicating on the phone, through social media or text message, was more important than having a good raw conversation with an actual person. Most people who communicate on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram do not even communicate with the individuals outside of these social networking sites. My girlfriend is a prime example of someone who talks to people on social networking sites but never actually sees them in person. She doesn't even care to hangout with the people she communicates with; my question to her is: why even talk to them in the first place? We all can like our friends' photos or write a silly comment on our social networking friends' pages, but when do we see or speak to these people outside of social media? We don't. Most of us will probably never see these people ever again in our lives, so why is it important to keep in such close contact with them and not the people who are a constant in our lives? In my opinion, I would rather tell my stories and share my life with the important people in my life: my family, friends, and significant other.

My biggest issue with communication nowadays is that my friends and my family members constantly have their phones right by their sides because they do not want to miss anything. To me, they set an

expectation that they will always have their phone on them and they will always check their phones. So why is it when I call or text I am unable to get a return phone call or text message? For instance my girlfriend will be texting our friends in a group text and as soon as I text her outside of the group I have to wait for 30 minutes before she texts me back. I just saw that thirty seconds ago you commented on Joe Shmoe's picture! If we cared half as much about communicating with the constants in our lives and less about people we never speak to I think that families and friends would go back to being closer. We live by our phones. This is an issue that has to change. I think about years and years ago when none of this technology was around and we actually had to play outside, communicate face to face, and eat dinner without having our phones by our sides. I remember my sister and I would go outside and make the most awesome mud pies for our parents. Granted they never took a real bite out of one, but they would always pretend with us. Now parents give their children iPads and call it entertainment. What happened to imaginary friends? I know when I was younger I had three imaginary friends. I felt like I had to keep my options open incase I got mad at one of them. I understand times have changed and things evolve. But, why does communication have to demolish for us to live in a more technically sound world?

Finally, being on our cell phones while driving is a huge problem that we all face. This is the biggest issue I have with cell phones. 31% of drivers in the U.S. ages 18-64 reported they have read or sent text messages or email messages while driving. It does not matter if you are only glancing down for seconds at a time—it is dangerous. I have heard that being on your cell phone is the same as looking at your GPS or radio. If this were the case, they would ban radios and GPS systems from being in your vehicle. In 2012 cell phone distraction caused 3,328 deaths and 421,00 injuries in the United States. I have never heard of a case where someone died while looking at their GPS or radio. I have heard of many incidences when people have gotten into fatal car accidents killing themselves, someone else, or sometimes both. They would not put laws against being on your phone and driving if there was not a problem with it. What makes someone think that texting, emailing, or being on social media while driving is a good idea? I have seen teenagers, grown men and women, and elderly individuals looking

at their phones for extended periods of time while driving. Driving on the highway and witnessing people almost getting into wrecks because they're on their phones is very unsettling. When you make the conscious decision to pick up your phone and text, email, or play on social media while driving, what you are saying to me is you have no regard or respect for not only yourself but also the others around you.

On April 22nd, 2015 the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* published an article about a man in Granite City hit and killed a pedestrian walking on the sidewalk because the driver of the car was texting and driving. What gives you the right to decide how important someone else's life is? If we all thought about our loved ones and how we would feel if they were involved in a fatality due to texting and driving I think we all would put our phones down. The issue is people not thinking it is a big deal to play on their phones while driving. If it weren't a big deal it would not be plastered all over the news and newspapers. Everyday when I drive down I-270 and I-70 I see the same billboards that read, "it can wait" with a cell phone in the hands of a driver. We as a society have to make a stand and stop killing others because of cell phones. This madness needs to end.

All in all, while it is good to have cell phones in an emergency and to make plans with friends and family, we as a society should get back to cherishing our environment and the people around us. Stay off the phone while driving and be considerate to others. Yes, they are awesome devices that can do things we probably never thought they could, but, at the end of the day, do they provide you with the support and physical attention you need? Do cell phones provide you with the interaction you need to remain a well-rounded upstanding citizen? No! They deprive us of having good communication skills and compassion and thoughtfulness for others. The excessive cell phone usage needs to stop. Bring back the basic flip phone and that will force people to actually communicate properly and be aware of what is going on around them.

## Sarah J Dhue

### *The Tree*

I remember the first time I saw the tree. I felt as if I'd walked into a dream. As I grew older, I told myself that it *must* have been a dream. I had been playing hide and seek with my friends in the woods. We were seven years old at the time. I ran deep into the trees, deeper than we were supposed to.

The clearing just appeared, one moment I was in dense trees and the next a small overgrown clearing. A single tree towered over the rest of the foliage, strangely shaped. It bore no real branches, no leaves. As a matter of fact, it was shaped almost like a flower in bloom: the trunk was the stem. The two cupped 'branches' made up the petals, and the trunk continued upward, narrowing to form the pistil.

I stopped dead, thinking of running back the way I came, but the tree had grabbed my attention; fascinated me with its odd shape. Even the bark was strange, perfectly smooth, nearly void of any texture. I had circled the tree and come across a large slab of rock lying behind it. Part of it was chipping away. As I continued around the tree, I found several more stones, placed in a seemingly random but organized formation.

Then I'm not sure what happened. I heard a noise coming from behind me and ran. But all that was fuzzy, and that was why it had been so easy to convince myself it had all been a dream. I told myself this lie all through school.

But in a few days I would be leaving for college. And I wanted to see the tree with fresh adult eyes one more time, to see if it had all been a dream, or if the tree really did exist.

Same as all those years ago, I wandered through the trees and suddenly found myself in the clearing. There stood the tree, barely weathered with aged, still leafless, no new branches growing from its trunk. The shrubs and foliage were even more overgrown than before, making it clear that no one ever ventured through here.

I circled around the side where I remembered the rock formation being. There they still stood, now covered in moss and lichen. What purpose could they serve?

I continued around the tree to the large slab of stone, to see a collection of chipped off rocks at its base; time had really taken its toll on it. I knelt and touched where most of the rock had fallen away and I heard something move inside. I fell back on my behind and watched in horror as the rocks fell away to reveal that the stone was hollow inside. A skeletal hand reached from inside, mummified flesh still clinging to its bones.

I yelped and ran around the tree, away from the rock formation and suddenly tripped on something, falling face first to the ground. I pushed myself up and before me lay a tombstone buried under the leaves and vines. It read 'Dieter Schultz.'

"No!" I cried, shuffling to my feet.

A dry voice came from behind me, "Come back here, little boy. You have to pick your stone."

## Rebekah Bonniwell

### *Look Before You Laugh*

Like most ten-year-old boys, my brother Jesse loved to play-act. He and I would spend hours in our backyard, pretending to be pirates. We would sword-fight with long mimosa branches from our woods, and take turns “walking the plank” (which dramatic maneuver entailed jumping from the lower platform of our slide onto the soft turf beneath). When we were fencing, Jesse would sometimes feel the need to use fancy footwork; but I could never provide adequate competition to satisfy him in these moods (I was, after all, six years his junior). On such occasions he would be forced to battle myriads of imaginary foes, while I looked on mesmerized by his skill and prowess. He would vanquish entire armies until, becoming exhausted, he would be forced into the corner by some villain and stabbed through the heart with a rapier or broadsword. He would then stiffen, gripping his wound and gasping, and then fall to the ground lifeless. He would die in such a comical fashion that I would always be thoroughly amused, but after his tragic end he would wait so long to revive that I would often become very irritated. Jesse loved to tease me in this, but only when he knew that I was on to him; he made sure to never really frighten me.

At this period in my life, my family and I spent much of our time at the home of an elderly widow named Flossie. She attended our church, and as my father was between jobs she had offered him work repairing various things in her home. Flossie loved us all (and we her), so we would tag along whenever my father would go to work for her. Her house was on a little hill that descended into a shallow valley. The hill and valley were covered in a lush layer of soft, vibrantly colored grass; the only thing that broke the harmony of this sea of grass was a solitary tree, situated at the foot of the hill. The beauty of this spot was dreamlike, and Jesse and I loved to play there.

One fine summer day, Jesse and I accompanied my mother to Flossie’s home. As the weather was clear, we were permitted to play outside. We sat on the hill, trying to think of a game when, inspired by its abundance, I threw a clump of grass at Jesse. This meant war; in a matter of seconds we were both tearing up great fistfuls of the abundant

grass and chasing each other in exuberant glee. He was much faster at gathering the handfuls than I, so he got most of the best shots in, but he began to grow lazy due to his numerous victories. His laxity was his bane. I had just scooped up two marvelous bunches when I looked up to find Jesse armed only with one rather meager fistful. “I have you now,” I chuckled to myself. He had no choice but to run for his life. He tore down the hill at full speed with me hot on his heels, but rather than watching where he was going, Jesse looked back at me laughing—that was when I saw it.

I tried to yell and warn him, but it was too late. With a sickening thud Jesse hit the tree, then fell to the ground. Slowly he lifted himself onto his hands and knees, his body swaying slightly. I began laughing uproariously as I thought, “It’s only the old game, he must have hit the tree with his hands for effect.” But my skin crawled, and my laughter stuck in my throat as I saw large globs of something dark and red begin to ooze from Jesse’s face onto the grass beneath him. Fearing the worst, I let loose a blood-curdling scream that brought my mother and Flossie at a run.

As it turned out, Jesse was not dying as my childish mind had assumed. His poor face was sadly mangled; but his nose, though smashed, was not broken. It took several weeks for his cuts and bruises to heal, but though they were very painful, I believe Jesse rather enjoyed the distinction of his wounds when among his peers. This experience taught me to never assume that someone is play-acting when the cause of injury is tangible, and Jesse learned to watch where he was running. In closing, dear reader, you might be interested to know that this encounter left Jesse with no lasting scars, and to this day he still asserts that the tree ran into him.

Rachel Zimmerman

*Mental Illness in Summer 2015*

At the bottom of the well  
Nothing  
Seems to flow freely  
Clenched, choked  
Aware.  
Thoughts shoot, shift, slam  
Ricochet into stone walls  
For ages.  
Forever.  
Looking up,  
You smile down  
“Come up!”  
But my weight will snap your rope.  
Palms, mangled.  
Angry at me for trying to  
Escape.

I wake up  
You are here but,  
You are far away.  
Everyone  
Is far away  
And I know I’m not  
The person I advertised  
You must wonder how I got away with  
Selling something so broken as  
Something that worked  
Beautifully,  
Effortlessly.

Sickness, climbing  
Spreading  
Body, mind

Permeating  
Everything.  
My thoughts are not my own, my body  
Is not my own.  
Is this still my mind?

And I wonder why  
You're still around.

Try to breathe  
Pretend to be water  
But I don't understand water  
Anymore.  
I only seem to understand  
The panicked look  
In a cornered animal's eye.

Sarah J Dhue

*The World Underground*

Twas in another world  
does seem  
Deep in a cave  
an underground  
Charmers, roses  
Fire of desire  
Thoughts buzzing away  
in those lovely craniums  
Where those fluent  
in the long miles  
Would rest their feet  
at those raves indistinct  
A gentle caress  
A flower among foliage  
Banter  
Deviant, cross, and beautiful

I implore you,  
Imagine!  
This world underground  
A world both bitter and sweet  
Idyllic and tragic

But it is beauty  
that lures the dogs  
Those prominent, grand,  
Sour  
Not sweet

“Terrible the charmers!”  
They cry  
saliva flying from their mouths  
“Too thorny the roses!”

They cry  
tears welling in their eyes  
“Too outside the box  
their thoughts!”

They cry  
shutting out the song  
A royale, a rose  
a flower  
Hidden away  
Crammed into that box  
A cave, an underground  
now a crypt,  
a tomb

Say your grisly condolences  
Find love in the loss  
Caress that elusive sound,  
Silence  
Reprise your role  
Sir Loss!  
Build again  
Raise the dead  
Overturn the grand sours  
A flower blooming in darkness  
A voice in the silence  
A beacon  
A caress, desire  
to be free

Sarah J Dhue

*Afraid of the Dark*

Wouldn't it be silly  
if horror writers were afraid of the dark?

We write about mysteries  
Of boogeymen and banshees  
And other things that go bump in the night

We write about Hessians and curses  
Of werewolves howling at the full moon  
And axe murderers lurking in the woods

We write about insanity and other worlds  
Of aliens out for world domination  
And dinosaur resurrection

We write about suicides, murders, and the like  
Of ghouls feasting on decaying corpses  
And zombies pounding against boarded windows

We write about the twisted human psyche  
Of ancient evils buried for centuries  
And shape shifters prowling the city streets

We write about dragons terrifying a village  
Of 'I believe in Bloody Mary'  
And the hook on the car door handle

We write about kidnapers  
Of haunted houses and ghostly cemeteries  
And ponder who Jack the Ripper was

We write about witches' brew and magic  
Of black cats crossing one's path  
And sea monsters on a stormy sea

We write about pacts with the Devil  
Of vampires come to suck your blood  
And the secrets of Area 51

No, I take back what I said  
Horror writers have the most reason to be afraid of the dark

## Michael Washburn

### *Resurrection*

Some things you never get over. Mine was three years ago. There was so much death that day that I feel like I will bleed forever. I will never forget how their bodies looked after it was over. Their bodies were unmoving, bloody, dead. I would rather die myself than to ever have to witness that again. I wonder if my heart will ever heal. I still hope every day, that it was all a dream, that my friends could still be playing football with me on the beach. In my heart they will live forever, but the hurt will never end.

I grew up in Los Angeles, California for the first fifteen years of my life. When I was seven, I started doing mixed martial arts and playing flag-football. When I turned ten, I started smoking weed. Smoking weed, to me, was like a whole new happiness. I joined a gang when I was thirteen. We would rob people, beat up people, and damage anything we could. The gang was my new family in a lot of ways.

When I turned fifteen, my gang and I were playing football on the beach when all of the sudden two cars full of enemy gang members pulled up and started shooting. We were shooting back but it didn't matter. There were too many of them for us to handle. Seven of my best friends died that day. I got away with a bullet in my knee.

After this tragic event, I moved to Illinois to live with my mom and siblings. They had moved to Illinois the year before. After about a year of living in Illinois, I met a lot of new friends. I went to high school to start my freshman year at sixteen. I played football that year and ended up going all-state on offense and defense. I was ranked third in state for offense and second in state for defense. By my sophomore year playing football, I had college scouts from four different states looking at me. I was on top of the world! Unfortunately, I couldn't get over my loss. I started doing drugs and getting into trouble again. I got caught robbing houses and went to jail for my first time. After two weeks in jail, I went to court. The judge sent me to rehab.

When I completed rehab at one hundred and fifteen days, I was no longer an immature kid. I became a man. I grew up, and chose to turn my life around. However, I had lost all the trust and respect my

family had for me. But I was determined to earn every bit of it back. And I did! Even though I ruined my chance for a football scholarship, I started working on getting my G.E.D. While working on getting that, I started going to high schools around the country and talking to kids my age. I told them my life story and how it affected my whole future, how my dream has always been to be a Marine, how because of my choices and charges, I'm not sure if I will be able to get into the military. My life story scared a lot the kids! I have gotten letters from thousands of kids that I spoke to. All of the kids' letters I received were positive. My story hit deep.

Now I think about how my past will affect my future. I used to think about nothing else but money and the gang. I thought I was better than everybody else. Nowadays, I think about how anything negative I do puts my family in pain. I think about other people and do whatever I can to help the change their lives in positive ways. I like talking to kids from high schools and trying to help them be the best they can be. I also think about myself and how my whole lifestyle has changed and how much good I can do for the world. I am creating a legacy that will never be forgotten.

## Kaitlin Bremer

### *Rodeo Life*

Everyone has a turning point in their life, whether it's good or bad. Anyone who has horses or competes in rodeos has experienced that time in their life. If you're wondering what a rodeo is, it's an event where cowboys and cowgirls get together and entertain a crowd of people. They have many events like bull riding, steer wrestling, barrel racing, bronc riding and cow roping. It is one of the most rewarding sports you can be in.

On the night of May 24, 2013 I experienced a huge turning point in my life. I woke up that morning and was so excited for what the night would bring. I texted all my friends and family and told them I had big news to tell them. Many of them were expecting me to tell them bad news but it was far from bad. I was going to be competing in the Troy rodeo, my very first rodeo with my horse, and I was ecstatic. It felt as if it took forever for the time to come that I had to start getting ready but hours later it eventually arrived. The rodeo theme was "tough enough to wear pink" for all the cancer patients. All the contestants had to wear pink for the cause. It was time for me to get ready so I put on my cutest pair of buckle jeans, my pink button up collar shirt, my boots, my hat and of course my cowgirl belt. My belt was so blingy that when the light hit it, my parents said it was blinding. I was all ready to go and headed to the rodeo.

When I arrived, all I could smell was horses and dirt, but to any horse person that is one of the best smells there is. I had to go to the back (where all the horse trailers were) to find my friend who brought my horse for me. By this time, it was almost eight o'clock and the rodeo was about to start. I went to find my horse and saddle him up quickly so I could head over to the arena.

Once I got over there, the announcer was starting and told all the guests and contestants to stand and remove their hats because it was time for them to play "I'm proud to be an American." When they started the song, a girl riding her horse came out holding the American flag and it was one of most beautiful things I have seen. It gave me goose bumps listening to the audience sing the song and watching the horse gallop

around the arena. After they were done with the song, they let all of the contestants ride their horses in a circle around the arena and wave to the guests watching. I had a absolute blast but it was time—they had to start the events.

The first event they started out with was roping the cows. The objective is to see how fast you can rope the cow, jump off your horse and tie the cow's legs. The cow's legs must stay tied for at least six seconds for your time to count. The next event was bronc riding, the crowd's second favorite event. Bronc riding is the second most dangerous event in rodeos because the horses are wild and trained not to like people. The rider must stay on the wild bucking bronc for eight seconds for him to get qualified for his ride.

By the time bronc riding was over it was getting later in the night, and you could see the bulls' breath coming out of their noses, and I could feel the cool breeze through my shirt. It was time for intermission so the guests could get food and use the bathroom and it was time for me to ride my horse to get him ready for the event I was in, barrel racing. This was the only event I was competing in. My horse Buddy has long legs and a long body, and he's a beautiful red color and his mane and tail are flowing with many different colors. Barrel racing is when you run your horse in a cloverleaf pattern seeing who can run it in the fastest time.

The ten minutes of intermission went by, and it was time for my event. I was so nervous when the announcer was naming the girls who were running. I could feel my heart beating so fast it felt like it was going to pop out of my chest. I had every reason to be nervous; I was in control of a 1,000 pound animal. My horse could feel my nerves so he started to also become nervous and anxious. The first girl went out there and ran her set, which meant I had six girls ahead of me still. All the girls went and got their run in and kicked butt but now it was my time to go.

The announcer called my name and told the crowd a little about me and I was walking up the arena and my horse knew it was time to go out there and run his hardest. As we were walking up to the gate Buddy started to get antsy and couldn't keep all four of his hoofs on the ground. As soon as we got up the gate I let the reins loose and kicked him as much as I could and we rounded the first barrel and we were on to the second barrel, buddy was leaning low to the ground, all four feet dug

into the dirt trying to get around it as fast as he could, next we were onto our third barrel whipping it around that barrel with the crowd cheering for us as we were making it back home as fast as we could. I was kicking him and whipping him with everything I had and once we passed the gate the announcer said, “Would you look at that cowgirl folks! She is the new time to beat, so give her a round of applause.” It was one of the best feelings I have ever had and the adrenaline I got made me being nervous so worth it. The rest of the girls ran and then they moved onto steer wrestling. And last: bull riding, the crowd’s favorite event but the most dangerous event. The cowboys must stay on the bull for eight seconds to get a qualified ride, which is not easy to do considering they get the best bulls they can find. After the bull riding was over the stands started to clear out and horse trailers were starting leave. But I sat on my horse and thought about everything I was thankful for and that I made it around all three of those barrels safely.

My first rodeo was such a huge turning point in my life because of the values it gives you. They pray at the beginning of all rodeos and it makes you realize how lucky we are to be able to live in America where we are free. When I saw the girl carrying the American flag, it was one of the most beautiful things I have seen. She had long blonde hair with red, white and blue chaps on a flag in her hand that glided through the wind as she galloped circles around the arena. And that’s when it made me realize how amazing it is to be a part of the rodeo family.

## Jennifer Lane

### *Teezers*

Teezers was the bar that introduced Jennifer to the world of different types of drunks. Jennifer was a young, tall, blonde twenty-one year old, who was a little naïve to the world. She had never worked in the bar industry and her first night job was a little run down bar in the middle of Collinsville. This job became a huge eye opener for her. When you first walk into this dark, ancient bar, you get a gloomy feeling. There was not much lighting and not much room either. It's a small, run down, hole in the wall kind of bar that doesn't feel like excitement but desperation. Normally, when people go out, the kind of entertainment they're looking for is a band or a DJ; people went to Teezers for this amusement instead because you never knew what you would see at any given moment with these patrons. This establishment is the reason Jennifer has come to believe that there are four types of drunks that bartenders deal with on a daily basis. You have the blissful drunk, the flirty drunk, the infuriated drunk, and probably the scariest drunk would be the falling-over-you-needed-to-quit-drinking-hours-ago drunk.

The blissful drunk is the type of person who comes into Teezers looking for a pleasurable time. These people are happy and delightful, looking for enjoyment in their evening. These drunks bring more showbiz to the bar than what's already there. Happiness to them is a glorious thing to share, and they love to share it whether you want them to or not. Often, these types of drunks are the ones handing out hugs and sharing loud stories. You can't help but smile because they are just so happy with life that it's often contagious. Will was definitely one of these customers. He was a tall, well-groomed man with dark hair that made the ladies smile whenever he was around. His demeanor was graceful and full of confidence. He would come into Teezers, belly up to the bar and start to drink. You usually didn't hear much from him until he was on his fourth or fifth vodka and tonic then there was no stopping his happiness. He would share stories of his children, whom seemed to bring him all kinds of delight, but, everyone would wonder, *If they brought him so much joy, why would he be here drinking when*

*he could be spending time with them?* Anytime he was in the bar, Will would say, “My children mean the world to me” and “All my free time is spent doing anything my boys would like to do.” One night, when he came in he ordered his vodka tonic and told Jennifer to hurry up, that he only had time for a couple because he’s didn’t want to be late to his son’s play. That left her puzzled, believing that maybe his relationship with his children was not what he made it out to be; otherwise, he would be with them instead of enjoying cocktails with Jennifer.

The blissful drunk and the flirty drunk are often close in relation due to the fact that they are both happy; yet, the flirty drunk adds body language to it. This is a man or woman in the bar who usually doesn’t say anything to anyone until they have a few cocktails and they start to get relaxed enough to socialize with everyone and start to get their flirt on. Julie was definitely one of these women. She would come into Teezers by herself, but, by the end of the night, she was always leaving with company. Julie was an attractive young college girl who seemed like she didn’t need help getting a date. You watched Julie transform into totally different woman once she got some drinks into her. She went home with probably ten different men in the eleven months Jennifer worked at Teezers. You couldn’t help but notice! It wasn’t like she tried to be discreet about it. There would be times that two or three of these men would be in the bar at the same time and she would just ignore them and be on to her next victim.

The flirty drunk is not limited to women, though; you also have men who do the very same thing. Jim, a tall very good looking middle aged man, would come into Teezers all the time looking for his next flirty fling. He was different, though; he tried to be more nonchalant about whom he was leaving with for the evening. Jim was a real Casanova. With Jim’s flirty smile to go along with his attractive face, you could just sit back and watch the women fall for him. It was almost comical to watch. Mr. Casanova was the kind of guy who would flirt without drinking, so his flintiness only increased with alcohol. You would hear him say things like, “Did it hurt when you fell from heaven?” or “Those pants are made just like a mirror cause I can totally see myself in them.” Some of the cheesiest pick-up lines would have women melting in palm of his hand. One night, he was hanging all over this younger girl putting his arm around her, rubbing her back. The young lady turned around

and said, "Excuse me, old man but I came here to drink with friends not the old man at the bar." Boy, that shut Jim up real quick. It was nice to see him squirm. Needless to say, Jim was asked to leave several times because of his behavior. This would sometimes cause him to turn into the infuriated drunk.

The infuriated drunk is the type who is on a mission to madness; these people come in pissed off and leave even more pissed off. They like to disrupt people and their environment. Arguing with anyone about anything makes their day complete. The infuriated drunk looks for certain situations or conversations to prey on. They are looking for a fight of any kind whether it is verbal or physical. These types of drunks will argue, fuss and fight just so they feel better. You know the old saying "misery loves company," well, that totally applies to these people. Steven was definitely one of those drunks. He was about 5'8" and weighed probably 150 pounds soaking wet. Needless to say, he wasn't one of the biggest guys around, but when he drank he was 10 feet tall and bullet proof. Jennifer was nervous on several occasions when he would come in just because she knew the night was about to go south. She would have her attention focused on him and his behavior making sure no one was affected by his ignorance. Bill, an older guy that came into the bar on a regular basis, fell victim to him one evening. Bill was minding his own business and just looked in Steven's direction, and it was on. Steven said, "What the hell are you looking at old man?"

Bill replied, "Just looking, youngster, no harm."

Well, that answer was all it took for Steven to be rubbed the wrong way, and he was over the bar stool and in Bills' face. That was Jennifer's queue to grab ahold of Steven, be the referee, and get him out of there before Bill kicked his ass. Of course, in Steven's eyes, he was innocent and didn't do anything. He was provoked due to Bill's "youngster comment." The problem was: it was NEVER his fault (when in actuality every time was his fault.)

Even though Jennifer had to play referee at times, probably the scariest thing she had to deal with were the falling-over-you-needed-to-quit-drinking-hours-ago drunk. These people never knew when enough was enough. Normally, you can see this building up in people and stop serving them. There were your regulars, though, who would make Teezers their last stop on their way home to get that last drink

that they didn't need. Julie was definitely one of these people. It would never fail, right at 1:45 on a Saturday night, here she would come, stumbling through the door. First thing out of her mouth: "You're still serving right?"

"I think you've had enough already Julie, it's time to go home."

Julie would bellow out in a demon voice, "I'm not drunk, give me a beer!"

"I'm not giving you a beer," Jennifer would tell her.

"Ok, give me a long island tea!"

"Julie, I'm going to give you something alright. It's advice. GO HOME!" Jennifer said. That would usually get Julie to head for the door, but whomever she was with would always end up assisting her due to the fact that she could barely walk.

The scariest situation is when one of the patrons would pull into the parking lot and not even make it inside. Bill was one of those types of customers. At least two times a week, the employees at Teezers would have to deal with Bill being passed out in the parking lot in his car. One time, Jennifer caught him sneaking outside drinking out of a bottle of Jack in his car. She never could understand how he got so drunk from just four or five beers. So, she started watching him when he supposedly went outside to smoke. Needless to say, he was doing way more than smoking. The mystery was solved.

Jennifer learned many lessons from her job at Teezers, not only how to deal with the different types of drunks but how to handle all the different personalities that came with them. It's always been the saying that when you're a bartender, you're really a therapist in disguise. She came to believe that there was a lot of truth to that statement. Due to all the drama and excessive babysitting of the patrons she had to do while working at Teezers, she decided to throw in the towel and pick a different means of employment. Whenever she and her friends went out, she was always conscious not to be in any of the categories of drunks she served while as a bartender.

## Christopher Wense

### *White Swan Down*

Nothing says good morning at 1:45 A.M. like the ear piercing sound of an alarm clock radio not tuned to a station. As my feet reach the floor for the first time of the day, I'm fully aware of the last location of the dog's bone. Thanks to the room-darkening shades, the bedroom is black as coal. I feel a wet sensation between my toes; I'm fairly certain at this point that I have a bone-induced laceration between my big and second toe. It's quite obvious at this point that a career as a cat burglar isn't in my future. I fumble around the bedroom closet for my clothes, and make most of the hangers fall to the floor. This portion of the morning could have been made easier if I had gathered my clothes the night before.

With my clothes on, band-aid on my toe, and the DNA trail from the bedroom to the bathroom cleaned up, I finally have coffee coursing through my veins. All my hunting gear is packed and sitting by the garage door waiting to get on the road. My excitement level begins grow with every slow moving minute that passes. Snow goose season had eluded me all these years due to scheduling conflicts that seemed never ending. This time I've scheduled my year around the geese, and I'm not missing another season. Now if Bill (my hunting buddy for 15 years) could possibly pull off a small miracle and actually show up on time for something, life would be grand. It's hard to put a lot of faith in a blond hair, blue eyed Joe Dirt twin. God bless his little hillbilly soul. He is a camo-wearing, mullet-sporting, horrible scruffy beard growing good ole boy. We met our freshman year of high school at baseball tryouts, and have been best friends ever since. My first thought when he walked into the tryout was, holy crap we have a real hillbilly on our hands here. From that day until now, Bill has served as a good example on not judging a book by its cover.

I can't believe my ears; the sweet serenity of my sleeping subdivision is being invaded by the unmistakable roaring sound of glass pack dual exhaust mixed with the faint undertone of country music erupting from the stereo of a 1999 Chevy Silverado accompanied by the gentle hum of oversized mud tires. With all of this noise overloading my senses, the

only thought in my brain is “It’s finally time to go kill some geese.” Ole Billy boy is no more in the driveway when my first arm full of hunting gear lands in the bed of his truck. Needless to say, my anxiousness has taken control of my body and mind.

Bill has a grin on his face as he exits his truck and asks, “Could you at least let me put it in park before you start loading your gear?”

“I’m not used to you ever being on time so I guess I was in a state of shock,” I replied sarcastically.

Now that the gear’s loaded and my state of shock has dwindled, there is only one crucial question needing to be asked: Are we going to stick with tradition, or change things up?

With my stomach practically speaking for me, I ask, “Are we going to IHOP?”

“What the hell do you think? How many hunting/fishing trips have we ever made without pancakes?” Bill response has a little stank on it.

“I figured as much, but with you being on time and all, I thought maybe you were turning over a whole new leaf,” I mutter through my laughter.

After that comment the radio is cranked up, and, with a simple hand gesture, Bill is either trying to offend me or reassure me that I’m number one. I’m fairly certain it’s not the latter of the two. Luckily there’s no time to be offended anyway. As luck would have it, IHOP is only a few minutes down the road. The two of us have been ordering the same thing for fifteen years. I get a full stack of pancakes with Boysenberry syrup, and he gets nasty runny over easy eggs with bacon and toast. Watching him eat those disgusting slimy eggs not only grosses me out, but apparently makes me oblivious to the fact that syrup is flowing down my clothes, and forming Lake Boysenberry on my chair. Bill finishes his plate of bacon, toast, and snot as I take my last bite of pancake heaven. He is quick to point out my brand new syrup stained and scented camo bibs.

“Surprised there was enough syrup for your pancakes after the trail down your clothes,” he proudly announces.

“Hey at least mine didn’t look like a sinus infection on a plate,” I happily bark back.

As we pull out of the parking lot heading to Carlyle Lake something happens on KSHE 95 that could have caused hearing damage to dogs.

This particular radio station is playing 45 minutes worth of music, and—to the misfortune of anyone who can hear us—we know every damn song. This is a gift from above for me, though. I could be a closet rock star for 45 minutes and not think about it taking that long to get to the lake. Bill's truck has just turned into a mobile karaoke lounge, two obviously tone deaf adult males singing rock songs at the top of our lungs.

At long last, the singing ends as we see the parking lot #2 sign for the Carlyle Lake walk in area. It's almost game time, as the rush of anticipation takes control of me again. I roll my window down to listen to the sounds of the morning. You can hear ducks and geese quacking and honking all around. The parking lot is packed with trucks carrying fellow hunters. As we park, I notice the age of our competition on this crisp morning is quite a bit younger than us.

We finally get the truck squeezed into a makeshift parking spot, and I fly out the door like it's on fire. I start packing all the gear on our homemade hauling cart and getting the mountain bike out as well. Bill hooks the cart onto the bike while I put on my hoodie and gloves in preparation for the Tour De Carlyle. He is coaching me up the whole time about pushing past the burn.

With a fierce look in his eyes Bill tells me, "Don't let these youngsters pass your ass on the levee trail. Run their little asses off into the water if you have to."

"Yeah that sounds like a brilliant idea, moron! Maybe if I'm lucky I can wreck myself and end up in that freezing ass water as well. Your elevator really doesn't go to the top floor does it?" I snap back at his ridiculous advice.

He simply replies with the same hand gesture as earlier and a smug half grin.

I'm lined up on what looks like a starting line just waiting for that 3:30 A.M. launch whistle to sound off. The whistle blows, and my feet and legs start driving those pedals faster than I think I've ever pedaled. After about a half mile of doing my best Lance Armstrong impersonation—minus the doping—my legs are on fire. It's at this moment the harsh reality hits me that I still have roughly a mile left to ride. Bill, on the other hand, is taking a leisurely stroll down the levee behind me carrying absolutely nothing more than a thermos of coffee. As all of this

passes through my mind, I start to realize in all my excitement I may have chosen the wrong job in this teamwork mission.

My legs are like rubber bands, and I'm out of breath and sweating like it's a warm summer day, but I made it to the honey hole. Bill won't catch up for probably another 30 minutes. Once again my excitement overrides my fatigue as I begin unloading the cart and get my chest waders on and start dragging our decoy bags into the water. As I look out in front of me, the water is smooth as glass. The moon is bright and glaring off the water and creating reflections of the trees and cut bean stalks in this flooded impoundment. This moment is as calm and serene as it is ever going to be for the rest of the day. I finally wade out to our spot and check the wind direction. The wind is perfect today; it's slightly more than a breeze, and is blowing in the direction of choice for our hunt. I start setting out our decoy spread, making certain to leave a "U" shaped opening for incoming ducks or geese to have an easy access point as they descend to their almost certain demise. The spread looks great so I wade back to the small island like patch of land that we will be hiding in during the hunt. Getting a fresh dose of coffee into my system is my next task at hand. As I relish every swallow of my French roasted caffeine delivery system, I start getting our separate hunting spots set up. Finally, Bill shows up from his walk down the almost 2 mile levee.

"Are we all good, and ready to pound some fowl?" he asks between heavy breaths.

"We are ready to rock and roll!"

The last few minutes before legal shooting time takes an eternity. It doesn't help that we can hear ducks and geese quacking and honking all around us. Some of the ducks are flying overhead so low you can hear their wing joints creaking as they flap. I shine my flashlight out across our decoy spread one last time to ensure they're all floating upright.

I turn towards Bill's direction and declare, "Lock and load man, it's time to bust some ducks!"

"Already locked, cocked, and ready to rock."

Off in the distance I hear that magic sound of the first shot of the day. My heart is pounding and I'm on high alert for anything moving in the sky. As I scan out in front of me I see a mallard drake coming towards our spread. I get myself in position and within 10 seconds he is right over our decoys. This poor duck never had a prayer. The second he

locks up and cups his wings for decent I smoke the little fella.

“That’s one in the bag Billy Boy,” I announce with pride.

“Day is still young partner,” Bill grumbles.

Before I have a chance to talk any more trash I notice some movement off to my right. This is what we came for. A huge flock of geese are headed our direction. There are Canadian and Snow geese all mixed together in this flock. I want my first Snow goose, but I’m not about to pass on a Canadian honker either.

When they get about 150 yards away, I notice one of the Snows flying out of formation and kind of hanging out by himself. I decide that’s my boy. I start blowing my goose call somewhat softly, not to scare off the usually shy Snow goose. I cannot believe my eyes; this stupid goose is actually leaving the flock and heading right for us. The whole time this is taking place, Bill has no idea what is going on. From his position on the opposite side of our little island, he can’t see a thing.

All of my senses are on high alert, and my whole reason for being here today is about to be justified with the assassination of this goose. The goose takes an odd wide swing around the right side of the island and disappears out of sight for a moment. Before my pouting can really get started, he comes back around and has narrowed the gap between himself and our decoys. He is about 80 yards out when I make the executive decision to dust his ass. I raise my trusty Winchester Super X2 12 gauge with 3 ½ inch magnum BBB (triple B) shells and lock in on this goose. Without hesitation I pull the trigger and make one of the best shots of my life. I can’t believe it—the wait is over. I’ve finally gotten my first Snow goose.

“What did you shoot?” Bill asks.

“I got one man. I finally killed a damn Snow!” I reply with my now shaking voice.

In all the excitement I haven’t noticed that my goose hasn’t hit the water yet. This seems odd, and I start to question how well I actually hit him. As I look out over the water I notice my dream goose is falling at an incredibly slow rate. The further he falls, the bigger he gets in my eyes. It is at this moment I start realizing that we may have a large problem. My goose finally splashes down like a 747 landing in a swimming pool. That’s when it hits me and my

stomach flips upside down. My dream goose is a federally protected “White Swan”, and the killing of one of these majestic birds is punishable by a \$5000.00 dollar fine, jail time, and loss of hunting rights for life.

With a mixture of laughter and fear mixed in his voice, Bill asks, “UM, why is there a swan floating dead on the edge of our decoy spread?”

“I’m going to guess because I shot the damn thing, dick!”

“You know they are protected right? They probably taste fabulous since they have a \$5000 price tag,” he says through his full-blown laughter.

“What the hell are we gonna do?”

“Well you’re going to jail. I’m going to inherit your gun and hunting gear, because you won’t ever need it again,” my so-called buddy explains.

“You are aware we are shooting the same shells and there is no way to prove which one of us shot the swan right?”

“Point taken!”

We wade out to this massive bird with decoy weights in our wader pockets. I begin to tie weights to the swan until I get enough to sink this poor innocent bird to the bottom of the water. I hate every part of this and vow to never go Snow goose hunting again. If it’s white, it stays in flight. That is my new rule of hunting ducks and geese. When the whole unfortunate incident is over, I feel a horrible mixture of guilt, embarrassment, and relief. Although we’re thankful for not getting caught, that feeling isn’t strong enough to cancel out my sense of shame. I have always prided myself on being a legal hunter. I feel like I had let both of us down on this day. When I look back on this unfortunate experience I have mixed emotions. The one positive that came from this experience was my overall awareness of the wild game I pull the trigger on. I escaped this escapade without legal ramifications, but the whole ordeal made a lasting impression on me that will last a lifetime.

## Eli Schroeder

### *What Are You In For?*

They told me seeing a turtle on your wedding day would bring good luck. That's why I married Tiny Terry, my "pet" box turtle. For those of you who have been living under a rock for the past decade, back in 2047 the United States Supreme Court declared animals to be people (like how they did with corporations back in the day!). Which meant, among other things, that the U.S. government is now "totally cool" with bestiality. Also, that I can marry a turtle. So, Tiny Terry, the love of my life, my best friend and soul mate was getting ready for our big day. We've never been a traditional couple (obviously) so that whole "seeing each other before the ceremony is bad luck" thing? It didn't matter to us. None of the standard wedding platitudes did. Except the good luck turtle thing. And probably others. Don't judge. We made our own rules!

So I go visit Tiny Terry in his...glass, house, thing...it was in his bedroom. We've never been much for privacy (I mean, he's a turtle), so I just walked right in. What did I find? Exactly what you'd expect. Tiny Terry was...*with* Sheila, his ex-rabbit-girlfriend. I was stunned. Tiny Terry tried to tell me that it wasn't what it looked like. Probably. I don't know. He's a turtle. He can't talk. I did what any reasonable person would do. I picked up Sheila, took her outside and punted her as hard as I could. She died instantly. Well, she definitely died. So, now I'm doing 10-20 in federal. Stupid rabbit.

## Leslie Patterson

### *The First Day*

Ever since I can remember, I have always loved fixing other people's hair, mainly my group of high school girlfriends. Fancy up-do styles were my go-to when playing in their luscious locks. We would always get together hours before the dances, both formal and informal, so I could do everyone's hair; we are talking about six girls' hair not including myself. I loved trying out new styles on all of them, finding what would best fit their face shape and what would go well with their dresses. It was pure bliss to know I had such a talent that I was the one that had the privilege of creating masterpieces on top of their heads. Little did I know that, in the future, I would be doing what I loved and getting paid for it.

It was a cold January morning, the kind of cold where you can see your breath fog up the windows in the car even after you have had the heat on full blast. I had awakened three hours before I was supposed to be there. Where, you might ask? To The Salon Professional Academy in Saint Charles, Missouri. There was no doubt in my mind I was going to make the best first impression anyone could make walking through those glass double doors. I had showered, blow-dried my hair, put on my makeup, and had the most outstanding outfit picked out just for this day; it was an all black because our dress code was black. My mom helped me choose a black lacy top with a black camisole underneath, we paired it with a pair of black skinny jeans, and the best black boots you have ever seen: they zipped up in the back, had red accents along the sides of the zipper, and made my feet look like a million bucks. Never had I been so ready to go to school. This was it, the first day of the rest of my life.

I arrived to the school thirty minutes early, eager to learn and possibly teach my peers what I had been doing for years before entering this world of decadence. I parked in the best parking spot on the lot, the front row right in front of the double doors. The school was not yet ready for what I, Leslie Patterson, had in store for it. I walked in and there stood my instructor. Susan Reeds was her name, although we just called her Reeds. One of the most beautiful women I had ever

seen, with a smile that was better than Miss. America's, she was tall and very slim. She had short almost black hair styled similar to Victoria Beckham's. "Stunning," I thought to myself, hoping one day I would be that woman who made others heads turn. She greeted me with a firm handshake and very professional eye contact. It was then that I knew this was a great decision that I had made.

We waited at the front of the school for the rest of my classmates. While taking in my surroundings, I realized I couldn't wait to get my hands on a head of hair. The whole front of the building was made of sparkling windows from top to bottom that read on the lower part of the windows: Cuts, Color, Highlights, Perms, Waxing, Facials, and Peels. To the right was the front desk, a silver-topped, black, modern style, nine-foot long desk with two computers on top. Behind the desk were large silver letters that read 'The Salon Professional Academy'. To the left of us were three six-foot shelves full of products: shampoo, conditioner, pomades, waxes, putties, shine serums, mouse, gels, all the specially colors coated in reds, greens, purples, and blues—you name it, they had it!

I walked over and started to smell some of the products; the 'Align' was the first one I picked up. It is a smoothing and protecting milky substance that helps your hair from frizzing. Never had I smelled something so delightful. Better than the smell of watermelon on a hot summer's day. If this didn't put my eagerness to learn into overdrive, then I just don't know what would.

Watching out the window, I saw a blonde haired, short, very petite, attractive young lady walking up to the school; she reminded me of a blonde Deborah Messing. Radiant in her own way, she had green eyes and bright blonde hair, a combination I had never seen before. She walked in and lit up like a little schoolgirl. Assuming this is what I looked like when I first arrived, it made me chuckle to myself. She entered the school and introduced herself to Reeds and myself. Jyoti was her name, an 18-year-old girl who seemed like she had everything figured out.

Moments later, a lady in her early 40s walked into the salon. She was bold. Very enthusiastically she shook our hands and introduced herself as L.J. She had a coppery blonde hair, something I had never really been fond of until I saw it on her. With her skin tone it was the

most perfect color for her. She was tall, over six feet, had a raspy voice, kind of like Melissa Ethridge, and a very large smile. The kind of smile that makes you smile because that person has such a smiley smile—that kind of smile. This was my entire class? Three girls? I love small groups so I was pretty content with our class of three.

For the next couple of hours, Reeds took us on a tour of the school, walking us behind the front desk and product shelves towards the rows upon rows of black styling chairs paired with a black framed floor length mirrors and black cabinets with silver tops. On the side of the cabinets were four holes of different sizes: one to place your blow dryer in, one for your flat iron, and two for your curling irons. This was absolute bliss; I was ready. “Put me on the floor now!” my heart cried out.

On the right side of the styling stations was the dispensary area. This would be my favorite area, a place where I would formulate wonderful colors of: chocolate browns, icy blondes, and rich vibrant reds. I wanted to know everything NOW! There was no time to wait.

Behind the dispensary area were the shampoo bowls, two rows of ten, black shampoo bowls all paired with a black shampoo chair. The bowls kind of reminded me of the feather dusters on Beauty and the Beast, very feminine pedestal shaped bowls. I was in love. Another fantastic thing about the shampoo bowls was you stood behind the bowl, not on the side so there were no back problems from bending and turning in all different directions. “Show me more!” I thought to myself.

We walked to the back of the building where the Esthetician room was. It was a small room with only four gray massage beds covered with a white sheet and a white pillow. The beds looked plush, like something I would want to take a nap in. We next headed to the nail area across the building. Ten black pedicure chairs lined the wall, all sparkling clean and just waiting for me to perform a pedicure. To the left of the pedicure chairs were the manicure stations, six manicure tables, all black with silver tops. Beside the manicure tables was a five foot tall nail polish stand with about 200 different nail polishes: reds, greens, blues, black, pinks, browns, purples, oranges, yellows, you name it they had it! Trying to take it all in, I was in awe. For once in my life, I had no words to express the excitement I felt.

Finally, we went to our classroom, which was located in the very back of the building on the right hand side next to about fifty small

lockers. The classroom was about as big as a modern living room; we didn't need very much room since we only had three students in the first place.

We arrived in the classroom and took our seats. The walls were gray and three black cabinets stood in the back of the room that were about seven feet tall. There were three rectangular tables placed together into a shape of a U. We all sat at our own tables, L.J. sitting at the middle table, Jyoti at L.J.'s right and me at her left. Reeds stood at the front of the room behind a black podium with a large white discussion board to her right.

"Hello everyone," Reeds exclaimed "are you ladies ready to learn about hair?!"

Inside I was screaming, "I WANT TO KNOW NOW, I CANNOT WAIT ANY LONGER!"

"Yes!" we all said in unison.

"Today we will be receiving all of our tools: blow dryers, flat irons, curling irons, combs, clips, and best of all your shears." Ms. Reeds went on to say, "Today may not be the most exciting day of school but it will be the most beneficial. You can't cut or style anyone's hair without your tools."

We were ready. The other girls had to be feeling as excited as I was. I'm positive I wasn't the only one who couldn't wait to start this journey. We went around the room and told a little about ourselves just so we had an icebreaker so maybe the three of us would actually talk. Naturally I started—I was never the type to hold back, and I have a lot to say.

"Hi, my name is Leslie. I grew up in Saint Charles and attended Saint Charles High School. I live with my mom and dad and I AM SO EXCITED to start cosmetology school. I use to do up-do styles for my friends in high school. I knew once I walked in here this morning that this is what I was called to do."

"Thank you, Leslie!" Ms. Reeds said.

L.J. was next to talk, telling us she was in her early forties and had one daughter in high school. All of her friends were Cosmetologists and, because she used to help them put color on their hair, she decided to come to TSPA to get her license so she could do what she loved for a living.

Jyoti was last to talk. She was always the last to talk. It seemed like she was waiting to hear what we had to say before she figured out what she was going to say. She went on to say she came to cosmetology school not just because she liked hair but also because her friend actually talked her into coming. She had a friend that went to TSPA as well. The most interesting reason Jyoti had for coming to cosmetology school was that she eventually wanted to go into mortuary science—kind of creepy if you ask me, but everyone has different dreams.

As we three sat there conversing and getting to know one another, we quickly decided we would be the best class that ever graduated from TSPA. We were the three musketeers and we would stick together no matter what. We were ready for anything that this school had in store for us.

We were so busy socializing amongst ourselves we didn't notice that Reeds had left the room. Reeds came back carrying a large four-foot by three foot cardboard box with orange duct tape keeping the top and bottom closed. She handed the box to Jyoti and left the room again. We all looked at each other and exclaimed in unison, "OUR TOOLS!" Waiting for our boxes, L.J. and I told Jyoti to wait to open hers until we got ours, then we could all open them together. Bringing in the other two boxes, Reeds told us to dig in! I am sure we all looked like children on the morning of Christmas. Not paying attention to the other girls, I tore off the orange tape and removed the contents of the box, a beautiful silver with red trim blow dryer was the first thing I pulled out, followed by a black flat iron and a black and purple curling iron. There were 20 or more combs: tan combs, black combs, wide tooth combs, fine tooth combs, teasing combs, rat tail combs, foiling combs, grooming combs—every kind of comb you could imagine! It was heaven. I pulled out my smock that read 'The Salon Professional Academy.' I was officially official! I felt like I had just won the apprentice! Next I pulled out my case that would hold all of my combs and shears, a black leather case that smelled like a leather factory. Following my case were my clips, all 40 of them. Finally at the bottom of my box, there they were, my pride and joy: my shears! They were silver with orange accents. They were magnificent. They were so sparkly and new, and mine!

After we were finished going through all of our tools, Reeds had us take them to our cars. The day flew by; we wondered where the time

had gone. After putting our tools into our cars, we went back to our classroom and sat back down at our now designated seats. We patiently waited for Reeds to come back in and tell us what we were going to do next. Reentering the room, Reeds had three large five-inch thick-spiraled type books, three small one-inch thick bound books, and three spiraled type half-inch thick tiny books. After handing us one of each, she said that these would be the books we would be learning out of for the next six weeks before we get on the floor and start doing hair. Only six weeks and I would be the master of the hair world!

“Bring it on!” I bellowed.

Everyone laughed a little and we all agreed we were ready to start learning now!

The end of the day came and we all expressed how wonderful it was to meet everyone. We all had a good feeling about the eleven months we would all be spending together! Ms. Reeds said she was pleased with how mature we all seemed and knew we were going to be a great bunch of students. With smiles on all of our faces we left the school, going our separate ways knowing that tomorrow we would all be together again, learning and getting to know more and more about each other and sharing our love of hair with one another.

After that day, we went to school every weekday, Monday through Friday, for 11 months. We learned about how to apply color properly without getting color all over someone’s face. We learned how to formulate our colors so we got exactly what we wanted every time. It was definitely an experience none of us will forget. We were able to make life long friends while starting a career in something we love. To this day, we all three talk on a regular basis and meet up for drinks and dinner every now and then. Going to Cosmetology school was not only something that helped me start a career in my life—it helped me find lifelong friends.

Sarah J Dhue

*Peaceful Unrest*

Popping pills had seemed the easiest way to go. I was already on a prescription, so I had easy access to pills. It would avoid a bloody mess; I did not want anyone cleaning up after me or for my son to see all the gore. I just wanted it to seem like I had fallen asleep peacefully, and that was that.

In this life, I was anything but peaceful. I had been suffering from depression for two years now. Some chemical imbalance in my brain; I really had no reason to be unhappy. I had a great husband and a beautiful little boy. We were not poor. We had a nice house and a working car. But I just could not take it anymore, the feeling of hopelessness that had been eating away at my insides for two years now.

I swallowed the whole bottle of pills, as well as a few Tylenol PM to help me get to sleep faster. I was already feeling drowsy. I lay down on the bed, curling up in the fetal position. My eyelids grew heavy and I felt my soul leaving my body. And then, I saw something that changed everything.

It was my funeral. My husband looked haggard and unshaven, my little boy dressed in a suit. He looked so handsome; someday he would make a woman—or man—very happy, like his father had me. I really hoped that Dan, my husband, did not blame himself. It had nothing to do with him. And little Michael, our son. I hoped he would grow up to be successful and happy, not chemically imbalanced like his mom. Dan was a good father; he had a good chance.

But as I looked at his little tear-streaked cheeks, my husband's worn-down appearance, all the others who had shown up to bid me one final farewell, I did not feel the peace I had wanted. I felt unrest; while for me, the pain was over, for all these other beautiful people it was just beginning. I realized that I had been the cause for all that pain, and while Dan was a good father, Michael also needed his mother. He loved her—me. I wanted to wake up from this nightmare; I wished I had not taken the

Tylenol PMs. I fought with all my might to wake up...

Vomit flew from my mouth, staining my white bed sheets and blonde hair. My eyes fluttered open. By some miracle, I was back in my bedroom. I heard the front door open, the patter of tiny feet.

“Mommy, guess what we learned at school today!” Michael’s voice rang from down the hallway.

## John Horstman

### *The Summer Job*

All during senior year I had been looking for a job, but nothing was ever available. My mom was really mad that I still didn't have a job by the end of the school year. I was turning eighteen soon; I thought it was time to work. So once school was over, I called my Uncle Paul, who does home repairs for other people, to see if I could help him over the summer. Most of the work we would do was building decks, ramps, and occasionally renovated trailer homes. Most the homes we would renovate were either non-livable or the person had just moved out.

On this one day in particular, I had arrived at my Uncle Paul's house at 7:00 A.M. just like he asked. Right as I pulled into the driveway, out comes a big, tall man, with a not yet full gray beard wearing a gray shirt that had paint stains and a few tiny holes in it. My Uncle Paul's stature was comparable to a lumberjack.

He came up to my car and asked, "Are you ready?"

I replied with a tired look on my face, "I guess so."

I hopped into his truck, like I always had to. Looking at his truck from the outside you might think it looks like a normal work truck, with some scratches, bumps, and tools in the bed. But once inside the truck, it was like a tornado went off. No passenger seat belt; bolts, nuts, empty bottles, and dirt all over the floor. The only clean spots on the dashboard were the clock and the odometer; the rest was covered in dust. I guess it was okay that the speedometer wasn't clean because he never drove over fifty miles per hour.

Our car ride to work in the morning was very quiet. Not much was said since we were both still tired. But my uncle looked over at me and started to laugh.

He asked, "Have you ever pulled up carpet before?"

Not being experienced in home renovations I answered, "No, but I'm sure it won't be hard to learn how to."

The rest of the thirty-minute car ride was silent. Only the radio in the truck was playing; we listened to Bruce Springsteen, Sammy Hagar, and the rest of the artists on K-SHE95 radio station. I was only left with my thoughts because I was too afraid to ask where we were going.

I thought to myself, *I hope this is a decent looking house with not much we have to do with it.*

Then suddenly, we pulled up to this old beat up trailer. The sun went away, and it became cloudy, with a few sprinkles of rain. I couldn't believe that we were going to be working in this thing.

My uncle opened the front door and then it hit me: the mixture of mold, rotten food, animal urine, and cigarette smoke. At this point, it started to pour, so there was no way of getting fresh air without getting wet. Every time I would take a step there would be a loud cracking noise like the floor was going to break.

The first thing I was told to do was pull up all the carpet in the whole house. Just before I started to tear it up, my uncle stopped me and said, "Put these on before you do anything," referring to a pair of gloves. The carpet was very old and gross. It must've been thirty years old. Typically, you would find this style in a house from the 70's; shaggy, multi-color in certain rooms, brown in one room, and an aqua color in another.

I was trying to keep all the torn up pieces of carpet away from my body, since there was so much urine it went all the way through to the other side of the carpet. Every time I would take a piece out, I would become drenched from the rain. My shirt was wet and mixed with urine from the carpet.

It practically took me all day to tear all the carpet up and do all the little jobs I was told to do. I hadn't eaten lunch so I was becoming very hungry, irritated, and just wanted to go home.

I heard this car pull up to the house and heard a woman come in. At first, I wasn't sure who it was until she came into the room I was working in, the one with the aqua color carpet.

She asked, "Are you having fun yet?"

I turned around to see a tall, heavy woman, with short dark red hair, standing behind me. It was Kristy, my Uncle Paul's girlfriend and the superintendent of all the trailers in the park.

I looked at her with a blank face. "HA, yeah," I said sarcastically.

Finally, it was time to leave. I raced as fast as I could through the rain into the truck. I had to just sit there and wait all the way back to my car in a wet, sweaty, and urine stained shirt and pants. I couldn't wait until I got home so I could take a shower for as long as I could. Once

I got home, I immediately went up stairs ripped my clothes off and hopped into the shower. I made sure that I washed every spot on my body twice. I debated whether or not to just put the t-shirt in the trash.

When I got out of the shower, I heard my mom downstairs making dinner. I put on my clothes and went down to see what she was making. The first thing she asked me was “How was work today?” The only thing I was worried about was dinner since I hadn’t eaten all day. We sat down at the table and I began to tell her all the things that happened to me. She just laughed through the whole story.

I continued to work with my uncle for the rest of the summer and part of the school year. We found ourselves working in more and more trailers with all the same issues as the first house. Now, every time I smell the scents of urine, cigarette smoke, and rotten food, I think of the houses I had been working in all summer. Needless to say, I will plan on trying to find another summer job far away from anything he had me do.

## Krystie Morrison

### *Life Changing Condition*

One cold and dreary morning in June, my grandfather and I traveled to Chicago to retrieve my sister from the Great Lakes Naval Base. I awoke that morning with such happiness as we began our long journey to see my sister. My grandfather, who usually sleeps until about noon, awoke at dawn, ready to face the day. His attire consisted of a button up shirt, jeans, and a pair of black, shiny cowboy boots that matched his slicked-back, shiny grey hair. I awoke shortly after my grandfather to the sound of his southern accented voice.

“Woman, make me some eggs!” my grandfather shouted towards my grandmother.

My grandmother was in their tiny beige kitchen that would only fit the basic essentials like a table with two chairs and a small white refrigerator that was probably as old as I was at the time. She was a very short lady with a mean looking scowl on her face all day long. Her rebuttal to my grandfather was short and sweet. “It’s too early to listen to you gripe,” she hatefully replied.

After breakfast, my grandfather and I left for our destination up north. We traveled in what felt like a miniature RV. My grandfather’s van resembled a giant green monster, but the inside looked very nice. The details along the windows were a shimmering gold strip with lights on the ceiling accompanied by a small beige curtain to pull down and block out the sun. Inside the big green monster also sat a small TV centered in the middle of the roof for everyone’s viewing pleasure. It felt like riding on a cloud down the very rough interstate.

Approximately four hours later we arrived at the Great Lakes Naval Base. It reminded me of a scene in a movie. The entrance to the base had chain-linked gates surrounding the entire area and sailors running around as far as the eye could see. As we pulled in to the small and almost empty parking lot, a man wearing a dark blue shirt along with pants that matched perfectly directed us to the pick-up area. We sat in the parking lot for what felt like a lifetime before I saw my sister hobbling towards the van. My sister, Stephanie, had knee surgery the previous day and she received a week worth of leave to recover. Despite the crutches that

adorned both sides of her, my sister still wore her “dress blues” and had her dark brown hair pulled back into a very neat and proper bun. As soon as she managed to get in the van she looked absolutely relieved.

“Man, it is so great to see you guys and be able to be out of here for a week. My bunk buddy is driving me nuts!” my sister said almost immediately.

“That’s the only reason why we are here. . .to help you escape your roommate,” I replied, sarcastically.

She glared back at me.

“Let’s blow this popsicle stand and get some lunch,” my grandfather suggested.

We made a quick stop at a nearby McDonald’s and we were on the road once again heading home and that’s when I blacked out. I regained consciousness for about a minute before I realized that someone was trying to pull me out of the van. Out of instinct, I immediately grabbed a hold of the side of the door to keep from being pulled out. I heard voices all around me, but I had no idea what was happening.

“Krystie, it’s okay. We need you to let go sweetie. Nothing bad is going to happen to you,” one voice told me calmly.

“We are just here to help you, dear. You need to let go so we can get you in the ambulance,” another voice added.

Both of these voices confused me because I couldn’t tell if I was dreaming or if this was actually happening to me at that moment. In the short time I had to think, I wondered, “Why did I need help? What was happening that I needed to be put into an ambulance?” Then I blacked out another time.

This time when I regained focus, I could see my grandfather’s vehicle weaving in and out of traffic. I then looked around my surroundings to see if I could piece together a few things. The realization hit me that I was now in the back of an ambulance and being interrogated by an EMT. The EMT that sat next to me was an older lady with silky looking grey hair. Her voice sounded very sweet as she spoke to me.

“Do you know your name?” the EMT asked.

“Krystie Morrison,” I replied sluggishly.

“That’s good. Do you know how old you are and what year it is?”

I had to think about these questions and then replied with two answers that I believed to be true. I told the EMT that I am thirteen

years old and the year is 2034. The look on her face worried me a little and told me that those answers were definitely not right.

“What’s going on? Why am I being transported to a hospital?” I finally inquired.

“You experienced a seizure in your vehicle while you were traveling down the interstate. It looks like you bit your tongue and banged your head up pretty bad, dear. We should be arriving at the hospital soon and then you will find out more.”

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. I have never witnessed or experienced a seizure and I was beyond scared at this point. As soon as we arrived at the hospital, a nurse dressed in very colorful scrubs and clean, white shoes directed the EMTs to the nearest exam room. At this point, I had regained full consciousness, and I was very aware of my surroundings. My sister walked into my room and sat down next to my bed in silence, while our grandfather filled out paperwork at the nurse’s station.

After fifteen minutes had passed, the doctor knocked on my door. When he walked in the room, I thought of a shorter version of George Lopez. His accent was very strong and it made it difficult to understand what he was telling me. “Hello Miss Morrison. I am the doctor on call this afternoon and there are a few things I would like to ask you,” he said confidently. “Are you aware of the circumstances you are in?”

My reply was a little slow and not very informative. “All I know is that one minute I’m riding in the van and the next I’m hanging on for dear life as someone tried to pull me out.”

He then turned to my grandfather and sister, “Could you explain what happened during the seizure?”

“Well Doc,” my grandfather started to say, “We just pulled away from McDonald’s and hopped on the interstate. We made it about two miles and then Kryz just slumped over in the backseat and started shaking profusely.”

“I would like to keep you overnight for observation,” the doctor directed.

“I would much rather go home. I don’t live anywhere near here and it would make it a lot easier on my family and me if I could get checked out at a closer hospital,” I told them.

The doctor understood my reasoning and after signing a stack of

paperwork that was as tall as a mountain, I was released. My entire body was sore and it was very hard to walk. Now there were two disabled people coming back to Bunker Hill instead of just one. My sister wheeled me out of the hospital and into the sunshine that seemed to be even brighter than before. When we made it back to the van, I crawled into the very back and passed out for the rest of the long ride home.

At the age of sixteen, just a few months after I received my license, I was diagnosed with epilepsy. My life has been different ever since that cold and dreary morning in June when I experienced my first seizure. I was no longer a carefree teenager only worrying about school, boys, and what I was doing with my friends. Instead, I constantly lived in fear of when my next seizure would strike and who would be around to witness it. I've experienced two more seizures since that life-changing day four years ago. I'm happy to announce that I'm three years seizure free. It's been a long road and there have been quite a few bumps along the way, but I'm confident that I will come out stronger and wiser after dealing with the hand I've been dealt.

Rachel A. Federle

## *The Significance of Balance*

There are two significant people in my life. I would rather keep names anonymous; therefore, these two people will be called Casey and Lucy. Casey and Lucy are both relevant in my life because they are both positive figures that I look up to. They are people I admire and respect. Lucy and Casey may differ in many ways, but they share the common trait of caring and empathy. Casey and Lucy are two people who have the ability to successfully help me surface and breathe when I've become submerged in chaos. They've both created a much-needed balance in my life.

Casey is like the mother that I never had (but needed) growing up. I admit that I kind of adopted her as a mother, despite her being unaware of this. Like what I imagine an ideal, supermom to be, Casey may seem a little protective; yet, she will let me make my own mistakes. Casey will express her concern, in a more brutally honest, yet motherly way. In the end, she will leave the final decision up to me. I remember her telling me, in regards to a decision I was making at the time, that she thought I was "kidding myself," and it was a bad choice to make. Her tone expressed concern and extreme disapproval. Moments like that may be what I like to call, "ouch" moments, but I truly appreciate the straightforward reality check. Casey gives me the balance that I've needed in regards to bringing me back to Earth, when my I go astray. She is empathetic, yet she does not hold back in terms of speaking up with pure, harsh, yet beautiful, honesty.

Lucy is one of the best mentors I could have ever asked for. Unlike a mother, Lucy is more on "my level," in an alluring, parallel, way. Although, I personally view her as this vibrant goddess, Lucy sees me as a human being, just as she sees herself. There is more of an equality between us, a mutual understanding, rather than a "mother-daughter" hierarchy. There is a unique human connection that I have with Lucy, something unlike anything I have ever experienced with another being. She is like a guiding hand in the darkness. Lucy has aided in pulling me out of the murky waters, from under the internal ocean, of my unspoken turmoil. One thing that Lucy does that always drives me crazy is—when

I attempt to hide from her, either out of embarrassment or shame, I will hold my head low and hide behind my hair—she will tell me to look at her. It is the hardest thing for me to do. It is the most excruciating act for me to look her in the eyes when I feel so low. Once I finally peer into her eyes, because there is never any way out of it, I seem to find a bizarre relief or comfort. There could be two reasons behind these strangely satisfying, yet paradoxical, feelings. One reason could simply be the fact that I made the eye contact, exposed my humanity, and got it over with. The second, more likely reason, could just be the fact that Lucy cared enough to want to connect on a deeper level, exposing her own altruism and empathy towards me; thus, reminding me that it's okay to be human. This second reason does not mean I want her to keep peering into my soul, but, to be honest, I have to admit that it justifies the experience. And I do find it beautiful. Lucy has a way of encouraging me unlike anyone else. When life becomes overwhelming, and I start to feel the world crumble on my shoulders, Lucy inspires me to keep reaching for the stars.

Casey and Lucy create a healthy balance in my life. Casey keeps me grounded and gives the comfort of a mother. Lucy keeps me grounded as well, and inspires me to keep moving forward, to keep hope and my dreams alive. Lucy is the friend and mentor that keeps me aware internally; thus, aiding in a better balance within myself that, in turn, creates an awareness necessary for survival, as well as reminding me to stay true to myself. Casey keeps my eyes open and awareness focused on the more external realm of existence; this helps by creating a better balance in relation to the more outward actions, of myself and others, as well as opening my eyes to the collective realism of life. Both Casey and Lucy are two of my biggest supporters. They keep me stable and rooted but also allow me to grow. They keep me from floating off too far into the confusing, bittersweet, ether of life; yet, they also do not hold me down when I need to practice the art of spreading my wings in an attempt to fly.

Sarah Dhue

## *How Selling Your Soul to the Devil Will Ensure a Better Economy for Future Generations*

The economy is something we talk about every day. We discuss how we would propose fixing it, or we ask others how they would fix it, or (my personal favorite) we complain about how the president is not fixing it. I think all the ways we have tried so far are failing because we are not thinking outside the box. I believe I may have the solution.

In several folktales, stories, and plays, people sell their souls for what they want. I think the best solution we have has been staring us in the face, and we just have not noticed it yet because we are so wrapped up in what we are reading or watching. We must sell our souls to the Devil for enough money to pay off our debts and live comfortable lives.

Now, I know how most of those stories end; the soul-seller ends up going to Hell when they die. Yes, this would seem like a major setback. But just think about this for a moment: if we sell our souls for ‘blank’ amount of cash, we can leave large sums of money to our children when we pass on, ensuring them an easy life and stable economy for years to come. Just what any parent or grandparent wants—to leave their children sufficient funds to survive and begin a family. And all we have to do is give our soul to the red guy with horns. Not like we are giving up anything we will miss: we still have our cars, homes, and jobs.

When our time comes, we must accept our end of the deal in the investment, by going to Hell with the Devil. But we will not fret on this day, for we know we have made a wise decision for the people of tomorrow. No good deed goes unpunished and we must remember this as we descend into those fiery depths. I really think everyone should take this idea into account, seeing all the benefits and the fact that it is a flawless ‘get rich quick plan’. If for no other reason, think of our children’s futures, and their children’s futures. We would not want them to live in an even worse state than we do, seeing as the economy is continuing to spiral down. We should all sell our souls to the Devil to fix the economy. Like I said, we will not miss them anyway.

Sarah J Dhue

*Lexar the Fantastical Lion Tamer*

The lion roared. Lexar cracked his whip. Yes, the famous fantastical Lexar the Lion Tamer. Lexar who could put his head in a lion's mouth and remove it without a scratch. Lexar who could yank a lion's tail without facing any consequences. And oh yes, Lexar who could crack his whip and bring the whole tent's populace to attention: crowd, clowns, and lion.

I hated Lexar. I hated his ridiculous red jacket, his perfectly waxed mustache, and most of all his smug grin. Lexar gestured toward the lion, showing the crowd how the lion sat at attention in response to only one crack of the whip. He turned to the lion, and, with a fluid motion of his hand, the lion opened its mouth. I readied myself as he stuck his head into its gaping maw. I had paid extra for a front row seat, just for this moment.

As Lexar's head disappeared into the darkness, I threw some firecrackers at the lion's feet. As they went off, the lion's jaws clamped shut as it panicked. The crowd screamed. I smiled. Now Lexar's fucking smile would never be seen again, save for in the lion's shit, where it belonged.

## Helen Jarden

### *The Valley*

Past the town of Riverside and the forest of Canary, there is a secret valley. There are no roads that lead here, no trails worn down by passage of people. Few can find their way through the thicket of trees and bushes that guard the valley. When one does manage to break their way through the barrier, it warps behind them, making their path forever gone. Of course, none of that matters. Those few who enter the valley are hypnotized by the beauty.

For this is the place that children think of when their elders speak of heaven. The lush green grass is decorated with dancing clover flowers. Rose and lavender bushes cover the hills, drawing in a huge array of bejeweled butterflies. Each set of wings has two jewels encrusted in them, depending on their species. Diamond, ruby, emerald—to a casual onlooker, it would appear as if jewels were raining from the sky.

In the center of the valley, where the hills dip down into a perfectly flat ground, there is the most beautiful sight of them all. A small, deep pond with unnaturally blue water, so clear you can see every detail of the green and purple pebbles on the bottom of it. Just like the butterflies, six bejeweled fish swim around, sun glittering off their pure topaz bodies.

A small child, a lost child, lays by the water and watches the fish with his tear-filled eyes. He's scared, of course. He was supposed to be at home six hours ago for lunch. Now it's well past dinnertime and all he can think about is how his mother will be angry at him for being gone for so long. He remembers when his brother went missing and how, for the first day he was gone, his mother was furious. After a week, his mother cried all day until she passed out. Now, three months later, his family acts as if his brother never existed.

He begins to wail at that thought. "I don't want to be forgotten. I don't want them to hate me so much..." He blubbers more nonsense, words that don't matter. This child is so young, so naïve. He doesn't understand the inner workings of grief. His mother didn't hate her missing son—probably not anyway. She most likely just didn't want to remember the pain. For some people, forgetting is easier than facing problems head on.

But back to the child. He looks around at the border of trees surrounding the valley. Their dark and jagged shadows looked menacing compared to the safety of the valley. He doesn't want to leave, and he won't.

Instead, he looks at the water again, dazzled by the fish. His mind lets go of the fear and instead concentrates on the glitter of the fish scales. Something about them tempts him. He wants to catch one. Maybe it's the hunger, as he hasn't eaten in hours. Of course, it would be worthless attempt—you can't eat solid topaz no matter how hungry you are. Then again, it could be for entertainment. Children can make a game out of anything, including catching fish. Either way, he gives into the temptation and sticks his hand into the crystal blue water. Yet, as clear as the water appeared, his hand disappears from sight.

He reaches for the fish, not yet realizing the illusion, and instead he grabs my own hand. His emerald green eyes widen as he feels my claws clench tightly around his wrist. I think, in the moment that pure terror flashes across his deliciously plump face, he realizes what is happening.

Maybe that's why he doesn't immediately scream as I jerk his body into the water. His lungs fill with ice as he emits a gurgled yelp. Before he can drown, I pull him into the inky black depths of the water and devour his skin.

The next visitor will come and see seven fish swimming in my home. This one will be a man, a thief in fact. He will stand by the edge of my pond and judge each fish carefully, choosing which one he wants to grab first. Eventually, he will decide on the one with the emerald eyes. As he reaches into the water, I will be gleefully waiting to take his hand.

The Valley is mine, and mine alone.



## Contributors

**REBEKAH BONNIWELL** has lived in Alton all of her life. She was homeschooled from pre-k through high school, so L&C has been her first ever classroom experience. Currently, she is in the process of acquiring her Associates in Science, and her dream is to one day attend medical school in order to become a medical missionary.

**KAITLIN BREMER** is a student at L&C.

**LAURIN BUETTNER** is a hospital volunteer, student, television addict, and cat owner. She writes in her spare time and hopes to one day write a full-length memoir. With plans of pursuing a future career in psychiatry, she is often found studying or buried in a book. Most of all, though, she loves her family and enjoys writing about them and bring their personalities to life.

**LEE CROSBY** is a student at L&C.

**SARAH J DHUE** is an author born and raised in the Alton/ Godfrey area. Some of her writing has been featured in the Alton High School Calliope and Peppermint Rooster Review. She has also self-published four books to date. Although her first love is writing, Sarah J Dhue is also a photographer and graphic designer, and hopes to someday travel the world taking photos. She is a true animal lover and believes in supporting all types of artists from all over the world. She graduated with her Associates in Computer Graphics in the Spring of 2015.

**RACHEL FEDERLE** is a 26-year-old student at Lewis and Clark Community College. She grew up and still resides in the Riverbend area. Rachel has enjoyed writing since she was a child. She hopes to publish a variety of books in the future.

**JOHN HORSTMAN** is a student at L&C.

**HELEN JARDEN** is an aspiring writer attending Lewis and Clark to get a degree in English. Currently, she's a freelance editor as well as a Copy Editor at the school's newspaper The Bridge. Her favorite genre to read and write is horror, but she does enjoy toying around with other genres as well. Besides writing, her other hobbies include knitting, databending, playing video games, and taking care of cats.

**JENNIFER LANE** is a student at Lewis and Clark; her major is Nursing. She absolutely loves school and has enjoyed all of her classes to the fullest. She has four children and eight grandchildren. Jennifer stated, "I can't wait to be a nurse and help people. Have a great day!"

**BRENNAN LARSON** is a student at L&C.

**KRYSTIE MORRISON** was born and raised in Bunker Hill, Illinois. At the age of sixteen, she was diagnosed with grand mal seizures, a form of epilepsy. She started college at Lewis and Clark in August of 2015, and she was recently hired on as a freelance photographer for The Bridge. She has decided to major in photography.

**LESLIE PATTERSON** is 25 years old and attends L&C for Nursing. She works as a Cosmetologist in St. Charles and as an editor for a Private Investigations company. Some of her favorite things to do are go camping, hangout with friends, sing karaoke, and cook. She has one dog and two cats, and she lives in Alton.

**ELI WINTER SCHROEDER** is a student at L&C, a dope human being, and all-around cool guy.

**MICHAEL WASHBURN** is a very optimistic person who likes to read, write, train mixed martial arts, and play football. He intends on making a career in the Marines and eventually moving back to California.

**CHRIS WENSE** is 42 years old and is married. He's a father of one girl and two boys. Having been laid off from his job as a steelworker at U.S. Steel, Chris is at L&C and in his first English class since 1992.

When asked for a brief bio to include in the magazine, **ROBERT WILSON** had this to say: "Hi, my name is Robert Wilson. What? You want to know more? Jesus Christ, I gave you my first and last name. What else do you want to know? My social security number!?! Alright, let me ask you something, Peppermint Rooster reader: What's your name? And don't give me that puzzled 'how am supposed to respond back' look. See how uncomfortable you are right now? That's how you made me feel. Your presumed apology is accepted."

**RACHEL ZIMMERMAN** is a 24-year-old radio producer and news announcer currently living and working in St. Louis, Missouri. She enjoys cooking, thrift shopping, going to concerts, and getting emotionally attached to fictional characters.

