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OUR OFFICE IS IN ROOM 46 DOWNSTAIRS IN HEWITT UNION

OUR MEETINGS ARE EVERY THURSDAY 5:00 PM

WE ARE NOW ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS FOR SPRING 1999

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

My Love - Andrew McIlwraith ............................................ page 5
The Religion in Red - G. Benedicto ..................................... page 6
Nonfiction Excerpt - Kathryn Lipphart .................................. page 12
The Vinyl Recliner - Christopher Caskey ................................. page 13
Autumn Leaves - Marion E. Green ....................................... page 14
Never Calculate Your Existence - Ed Purchla ............................ page 15
Untitled, an excerpt - Lisa Cervini ...................................... page 20
Go, Jesus, Go - Ed Duell ..................................................... page 27
Empty - Morgan ................................................................. page 28
Rough Love - Morgan ........................................................ page 30
Untitled - Andrew McIlwraith .............................................. page 31
Dinner for One - Christopher Caskey ..................................... page 34
Lonliness - Daniel Schwartzberg ......................................... page 35
Untitled - Anonymous ........................................................ page 36
Untitled - Ed Duell .............................................................. page 38
First Night - Colleen Comerford ......................................... page 41
A Note to Jeremy - Ed Duell ................................................. page 43
Mysterious Ways - Chris Heisler ......................................... page 51
Not Tonight Dear - Marion E. Green ...................................... page 65
Do you see the boy?
   Yes, I see him. His eyes, so bright.
I call him My Love.
   He is yours?
He is for everyone. Still, he is My Love.
   But why?
Certainly you know how one comes to belong to another?
   I regret I do not know.
It is his own doing.
   Go on, please.
It is his choice; he wishes it.
   I do not understand. I am confused.
So you see his bright adoring eyes?
   I told you I did.
Do you think they see you?
   I suppose they do not.
It is my reflection that makes his eyes shine.
   Yes.
Do you see?
   I do. Yet, I am still puzzled.
The boy, do you think he does not have pride?
   I should say I wouldn’t dare.
Or wit? Good sense or manners?
   The answer is the same.
Then where are they? I see nothing but a naked boy with bright hopeful eyes.
   I would be foolish to guess.
He has resigned them to free his heart.
   He gives it to you?
Indeed he does. Ever so truthfully.
   And so he belongs to you?
As I do to My Love.
I.

Their home is dark. The trees enshroud it, eat up the light around it. I think they like that way, but I am not sure. It is a wooden relic of the century before. Rustic, with its unpainted exterior and its sloping walls, the roof carpeted by rotten leaves, and the porch that is swiftly making the transition from pine to dust.

The woman often looks out the kitchen window, her gaze falling on the front yard for a space and then trailing off into the depths of the woods. Sometimes, when she is alone, she hears noises. Sounds like strawberries make when they are stamped under foot - that is what she told the man once.

She tends a garden not far from the porch. It is her hobby, I believe. Though nothing ever grows in the shadow of those old trees, she still toils at it. Many seeds have been dropped into her patch of earth. She watches the man when she is out there - often he is chopping wood or some-such chore near the house.

Like their home, the man's face is darkened, but not by the trees - it is his great brow, shaggy black beard, and that old hat he wears that make shadows of his eyes. His hands are hard and worn like a pair of gnarled clubs. She told me that he used to haul ropes and crates in his youth, when he worked aboard a small merchant vessel. That was a long time before they came to this place.

Today he has gone off into the woods, taking his axe, his knife and a thermos of the woman's beef and barley stew. The woman sits on the couch. She was reading from one of the leather-bound books that sit neatly on the man's bureau, something about the West Indies and Captain James Cook. But now she dreams.

II.

Another dream. Rust, its color and texture, is the stuff from which all things are composed. She is home, near her mother and father. The sweet lilac essence of her mother's perfume permeates the air, and she can taste the aged must of her father's den. There are animal heads mounted on the walls, and they are gigantic - like the heads of malefic gods whose names she cannot remember. She holds her stuffed giraffe close to her to block them from her sight. Then there is a heartbeat, distant and beckoning. She pulls the toy away from her eyes and listens.

The woods are around her, but she is not far from her garden. The heartbeat has become a low pulse, and the trees quake with its rhythm. Parting their branches and heavy boughs, they creak softly as she follows the path they make for her. Light, amber and pure, emanates from the clearing ahead. The single pulse shifts into a deafening medley of beats and breaths, pounding in her teeth. There is a hiss, as of air through dry, dusty lungs. She steps into the clearing.

A dozen bodies lie on their backs, close to the earth. They are dead children. She notices that several skulls have been crushed into a blue-brown pulp, while others watch her with vacant, glazed eyes. Entrails and genitalia have been removed.

In unison, their broken and mangled jaws begin to move in the manner of speech. The woman starts to back away. Why have you forgotten us mother, they murmur, why have you forgotten us?

She is awake. A splinter of daylight caresses her forehead as she busies herself at cleaning last night's dishes. She can hear the man outside, splitting logs into firewood. A pause, as if in thought, and then she rushes up the stairs to their bedroom.

Cautiously, she opens the door to the man's closet. On the floor, in the corner, there is a small oak chest with a brass latch-lock. She pushes away the boots and riff-raff to get to it. Her hands are shaking, unsteady. From the pocket of her apron, she pulls a slim hairpin and tries at the tiny keyhole. A bead of sweat traces the line of her jaw.

The backdoor opens downstairs. A gasp, and then she quickly puts the chest away, shoving it back into its hiding place. Silently, she closes the closet.

The man is sitting in the kitchen, pulling off his boots. She pours him a glass of water from the sink and sets it before him, attempting a smile. Wordlessly, he accepts the offering.
corroded linen and jewelry shuffle past her, muttering nonsense and making esoteric gestures. There is the clamor of many drums being pounded by gnarled fists.

I think she suspects that he is here, among the crimson confusion of buyers and sellers. She is seeking him in the kiosks. There are things being sold there - she can only see their outlines against the rolling backdrop of red. Cold fingers caress her as she walks, and she is suddenly aware of her nakedness. Hands of the metal-garbed begin to grope her, to cut her with their callous touches. Suddenly, it is hard to breathe.

A temple of jagged and flaking iron opens up before her. She cannot fully comprehend its immensity, its filthy grandeur, I realize. Few are ever aware of it.

The man is at the gate, conferring with some squat creature precariously balanced on a pair of stilts. They smile wickedly at each other for a moment, and then there is an exchange. The man places a small coin in the palm of the other, and in return is given something dark, something that she is unable to make out. It bares its teeth once more, and the little bells sewn into the thing's jacket begin to tinkle and clank obnoxiously.

Hand in hand, the two turn and enter the shrine. The woman follows cautiously. Somewhere, a child is singing.

Within there is only confusion. She is overtaken by the sensation of drowning in some bottomless, salty sea. There is blackness about her, but it is not the true kind - rather, it is that black that is a redness too thick and potent to be perceived as color. She breathes in, and its emptiness fills her and redefines her essence. Lurching about in a vain attempt at resistance, she only quickens her corruption. The fists work at her heart now, flexing, releasing.

When she has no spirit left for defiance, the voices come and lead her into a more soothing region of sleep. She has joined them now, I think.

Awake again. She watches the man rise out of bed. Downstairs, he is loading his rifle, sheathing his hunting knife. She hears the screen door screech on its hinges and then clatter back into place.

The weeds are working their way back into her garden. In the space of a single day, they have launched another assault on her carrot patch, twining about the rows, feasting on all available light and moisture. She scowls, and then begins tearing at them in a chaotic attack, careless of whether or not she pulls up their roots.

In the corner of her eye, she sees that a fox has crept into the yard. Something in its mouth, something brown. She looks up slowly, so as not to frighten the animal, and begins to creep toward it. For a moment, the fox pays her no mind and continues to chew at its prize. But she is foiled - a twig snaps under her boot and the thing darts off into the woods. It looked like an arm, she would tell the man later that day. The arm of a child.

III.
The man is slaughtering a young doe. She watches him from the window of the living room. His cuts are calculated, expert.

The empty eyes of the deer seem to regard her, and she is half-reminded of some nebulous dream, I think. I have seen that expression before. She does not turn away until the work is done.

That night, noises pull her from sleep. It is cold in their bedroom. She glances and sees that he is not beside her. Under the door to the stairwell, there is faint light. Quietly, she slips out of bed and makes her way down the steps.

Her stomach hurts. She is staring at the floor, watching the light that is emanating from somewhere beneath flicker between the boards. There is no basement, not even space to crawl around under the house. Yet she can hear sounds - two voices, whispering back and forth, echoing underground.

The woman edges toward the kitchen. The hunting knife is in the sink, and she snatches it up. She goes to their bed, carefully holding it behind her back, and waits.

In a few moments, he is opening the door. She watches him, motionlessly.

The man sees that she is awake. He climbs into the bed next to her, his breath hissing against her ear. She recoils, her face calm, empty.
At first sight I felt complete hatred for this newly found best friend that I’d be wearing for the next three and a half years. I thought that even a robot didn’t deserve to wear such a thing, let alone my thirteen year old body. It looked like some piece of metal technology out of one of those space movies I often caught my older brother watching.

There was one metal bar that went from my neck to my waist and was positioned between my breasts. And believe me, I knew it was there. The slightest turn and I could feel it pinching my newly bloomed femininity. In the back there were two identical metal bars that were positioned evenly, one on each side of my back. At my chin there was a hard plastic chin rest, that denied my neck even the slightest nod or turn. Just below my right armpit was a padded piece of plastic that was L-shaped. Its function was to push at my side. About three inches below my left armpit was a thin metal bar coated with plastic that stretched from the rear left bar to the front bar pushing my back. At the waist level there were plastic pieces that reached three hundred and sixty degrees around me.

The brace opened slightly in the back. There were hinges at the top that often pulled at my long blonde hair. My mother often suggested cutting it so I’d be more comfortable. When she said this, I often envisioned my peers staring at those hinges in class, their eyes burning holes in my back. With such imaginative thoughts, Mom’s suggestion was always turned down. My hair was my shield, leaving me with a slight hope of normality in my appearance. Every night I had hair to clean out of those hinges. Thank God I had extremely thick hair compared to most of my peers. These hinges and one buckle, which fastened at the bottom of the brace, allowed my exit of one hour every day and thoughtlessly stole my freedom the other twenty-three.

The Vinyl Recliner
by Christopher Caskey

The last time that he was allowed to walk under his own power, he messed the bathroom floor. His room smelled for days, and in his forgetfulness, he complained every ten minutes.

So they planted him in a vinyl recliner with nothing more to do than sit, with skin hanging from his toothless jaw, and remember. A thin black seatbelt digs into his waist, holding him in place until he is sedated for the day.

His vinyl recliner with sticky skin is aimed in the direction of a donated TV set. A lined screen advises responsibly, “Know when to say when.”

The nurse has had enough, and changes the channel with a set of pliers.

“Mother?” he sometimes says, child-like and scared - although his lack of teeth makes him sound retarded. A man walks by him, trying not to touch. As if old age were contagious.

“I’m going to see mother tomorrow,” he says cheerfully. I say, “How nice,” and then move on.
Autumn Leaves
by Marion E. Green

The life cycle
of autumn leaves
passes so quickly.
So lush and green
in September’s
warm sunlight.

Slowing
turning into
rich vibrant colors
during October’s cool draft.

Drifting down
to the ground
on November’s
gentle breeze.

Curling and turning brown on Mother Earth,
until covered by the soft afghan
of December’s
white snow.

Never Calculate Your Existence
by Ed Purchla

He kept touching the mirror - smeared with sweat - the grease of his nervous hands - clenching the item at hand.

“Is it too cliched to run the blade over my soft eyelids? Has it been done?” He thought to himself. His own special penalty must be obvious to the Finders, when they found him. He didn’t want any psychobabble floating around the disciplined community which would take his blindness, and proclaim it as some sort of masochistic event that occurred simply out of something moldy, used up, constantly reiterated ... something they had figured out, something which would add him, or make him a figure in their anthologies of empirical analysis. Something cold and dead ... without a heart ... without a reason ... without ... without. All they would do is, sum up, and generalize. He told himself silently, “I am not a statistic. I am not a phenomenon.”

“It’s been done before,” he told himself. “They’ve studied the others, they don’t need to study me. There is nothing I can think or do that hasn’t been thought or done, that isn’t being done right now ... that isn’t going to be done.”

But he decided he was an artist - from his lowly attempt at financially stabilizing himself through his rambling cryptic prose and subinnovative painting style (iced tea, cotton swabs, Acrylic paint, oatmeal), the Finders would surely say the same - “And it will not kill me,” he thought. “Why can’t I take my own eyes? If I take my life, then they will talk - but my eyes? What can they possibly say to a man who has taken his eyes? All they can ask me is ‘why,’ in that sympathetic tone - sympathetic in regard to the fact that they just cannot understand why in such a beautiful world, one would want to tear his eyes from his head - to eliminate his own ability to see the beauty.”

Pondering his own question a while, he felt that being an artist ... one had an obligation of going out creatively - Hemingway, Cobain ... what lame ways of destroying, of eliminating oneself! A gun - an object that men designed to kill each other, then used to kill themselves (getting out before the real war begins). Then people began to ask him why he was thinking such things. And there was no one in the room. No one in the room. But the people continued to ask, and ask ... pestering ... twitching and buzzing. Twitching and buzzing!

“Was she the blue eyed girl that said ‘hi’ to me last week? How could I possibly have remembered her voice? How can my head say things to me in her voice, if I cannot even remember? Am I hearing conver-
sations to come? Do these conversations even deal with me? Is this phrase which she has told me - 'just think about how, of course, it is . . .' - something that she has just said right now, a few miles away?"

No answers for the people, no conclusions for these disrupting his attempt to find that it was the blue eyed girl of last week that got him here in the first place.

"I cannot continue to view, to see, to try and perceive that which I cannot have! And I can't even try to perceive, for I cannot grasp - I can only see - I can only see her eyes - I cannot stare into them, wondering what she loves...her favorite color...her favorite song...what makes her smile...what she dreams of...I CANNOT KNOW...I CANNOT KNOW...I CANNOT KNOW! I can't kiss her lips - can't taste - can't stand in a field - on an October morning, watching the sunrise. None of that...none. I'm nothing anyway? And haven't I forgotten to kiss? Form my lips on an orange. Lips on an orange. Fuck it! Fuck it! I have forgotten how to taste, haven't I? Oh, will one of you motherfuckers speak up! Stop talking and rambling all around me...contribute to this, it may be my last!

And if I cannot taste...then what good is it anyway? What good is it if I CANNOT TASTE?"

He turned his face away from the mirror, still standing. Face sweating...he pushed his hands through his hair...careful not to cut himself...blade in hand and all. With both hands on top of his head...he breathed in some of the air coming through the window. The only window in the small white bathroom blew air for him to breathe in. Breathing in, he began to cry a bit.

"She is beautiful. Her eyes are...shut man...that's all I can do - make up a metaphor. Reduce her to words...to language...when what she is, in my mind, is so very much more. It is my duty, then, to stop exploiting her. I must stop raping her of the beauty in her eyes, her smile...I must go further, because much came before my present realization. I've got eliminate my very tool of analysis - my tool which allows me to perceive this beauty around me, and then destroy it...letting it cave through the pure bastardization of it all - through words - words - I must 'cancel' all of my words forever...to stop defiling all which I attempt to explain."

Looking down at the blade, then back into the mirror, sweat pellets pass down the parts of his face that the tears hadn't reached yet. Tears and sweat cascading down the rough bumps, small scars, pimples, thin unshaven hair sprigs and blackheads, he awoke from his general theme.

"If I eliminate my sight, surely I won't be able to see the curves of her legs...the light blue beauty in her eyes...surely I won't be able to see her smile...unmatchable to anything, but what if I hear her laugh? Will my hearing act as both my sight and hearing then? Will my hearing be twice as acute then? I know that those who lose a sense get a special acuteness within their other senses. Fuck that. I don't care. My sight is enough. Let's get this thing over with. Can't keep the Finders waiting, now can we?"

So he lifted the blade up to his chin. Staring right into his eyes, he pondered for a moment if she was looking into a mirror right now...maybe brushing her teeth? He knew better, though. It was a Saturday night. Nobody but him was staring into a mirror, looking into his own eyes, dreaming that somebody else was doing the same - nobody but him. The blade was sharp. It cut a small paper-cut type of slash when he ran his thumb over it to make sure it wasn't dull. However, dull or sharp, he knew it'd cut right through his eyelids and into his eyeballs. No problem there. Closing his eyes, he gave last thoughts to the situation. A conversation in his head, with himself, quieted the others who had been talking for a while. He wanted to hear his own opinion.

"I fear that if I don't take my ears, too...I will continue to exploit her through what I feel when she laughs. Her laugh surely conjures just as many images of beauty, when I hear it. I don't need to see her smile, to feel it. And that feeling is all that I need, to destroy her in test. All I need is to hear her cute little giggle, to be able to abuse her by asking her if she ever knew how cute her giggle was? What kinda fucking question is that? I have no right to fuck with her world. I have no right. I must take my hearing...I must take my sight...I must make it through...I must make it right! The truest honor that I can pay her is to find a more 'original' way in which I can do the job."

Placing the blade down on the top of the white sink, he went to the kitchen to find something interesting. He came back into the bathroom a bit later...with a grapefruit spoon. The serrated edge at the tip of the spoon would surely pop out those brown eyeballs. Stupid little brown eyeballs that were nothin' compared to her blue masterpieces. Stupid little brown eyeballs that were nothin' compared to her blue masterpieces.

He was back in his initial position, standing in front of the mirror, and all ready, and psyched to do this. All ready to chop those ears off with that sharp knife...and to pop out them eyeballs with that serrated grapefruit knife...and yet just like in some rehearsed movie part, some fucked up play skit...he was missing something. There was something else to be done...something else to be done. What was it? That question passed through and through his head. He stood there even more numb than he had been when this all began. But he had stopped crying. This was no longer some pathetic sadness that had all begun because of his
cowardice with concern to some girl. This was getting fun ... picking tools ... making it one big artistic experiment. Making it more than death. Nobody was gonna take him now, before he did the job. Nobody was gonna tell him how to finish his final painting. Fuck that! If there was anything that he could do to fuck over the Finders, it would be this ... truly the only piece of art, where the artist began, worked on, and finished the piece - DEAD.

Beady eyed and filled with adrenaline, he looked into the mirror. The sweat has passed. Now all that remained was a clean canvas. Primed with natural oils ... it was ripe for the taking! Down on the sink laid his implements of destruction. His artistic instruments, shall we say.

He figured he'd slash some texture into the actual canvas, before he proceeded with the whole creative effort. Picking up the blade with his already bleeding thumb, he spread a little of the blood on his face ... on his cheeks. After all, who was gonna fucking care? The Finders? They don't give a shit ... once they found him ... their biggest concern would be their own counseling! How would THEY get through his tragedy? He knew how it worked.

Once again, bringing the knife up to his face, he was all ready. A small smile was all he could do. That smile would never make its way to her presence. Wasn't allowed in this world.

"Though, there is that thing. That mouth, that voicing instrument. I mean, isn't that what it all started out with? Isn't that the truth there? I replied to her smile when I heard her look at me with her eyes, and voice her 'hi.' This mouth should have no right to exist either! Out goes the tongue also. The captain always goes down with his ship! The Captain always goes down with his ship!"

And now he was confused, and angry! His arms began to shake. All the energy had no place to go! He didn't know where to begin. If he gouged out his eyes, how would he be able to see himself in the mirror, to do the rest? Could he just rely on his feeling? His sense of touch ... could he just rely on the simple dexterity of his hands to do the job?

"If I have to rely on my hands ... what if I don't succeed ... but wait a minute ... MY HANDS!"

Twitching and sweating ... crying ... tears flowing ... heart pumping ... his whole body felt as if it would tear apart in a few moments.

"My hands are the greatest demons ... they are the ones that will articulate it all ... they are the paint brushes ... they abuse her ... they rape her ... they spread her body out in books. The greatest demons are these five fingers ... these five fingers typing. What are my eyes? What are my ears? What is my tongue? These fingers are raping her. These fingers are exploiting her beauty. These typing fingers ..."
His name was Arthur, and his neck and part of his face were covered with terrible burn scars. The scars disappeared under his shirt, and reappeared on his hands, the skin blotchy with dark and light patches. Arthur worked as a janitor at the high school Alex taught at, and while he also had quite a large nose, it was nothing compared to Maggie’s.

He said so at dinner, “My nose is nothing compared to yours.”

Maggie hadn’t even looked up. She was hunched over her plate, busy shoveling corn into her mouth, letting loose kernels scatter on the table. Gravy was dripping down her chin; she had a milk mustache, and she’d already stained her shirt twice.

Sara glared at her. She knew how to eat. Why did she have to be so difficult?

Maggie caught her stares, and slowly sat up straight. She wiped her mouth, picked up the corn she’d dropped, dabbed the stains with water, then looked directly at Arthur, smiled sweetly, and burped.

“My uncle Humphrey has a bigger nose than I do, and yours is even bigger than his,” Arthur responded.

“I get it from my mother.”

It was Alex’s turn to glare. No one in their family knew where that thing had come from, but he said nothing. At least they were talking.

“I get my nose from my father. He says that it’s the Flannery trademark.”

“Did you get those scars from your father?”

Everyone’s mouth dropped, even the two little boys who had been fiercely instructed not to mention the scars. But before Alex’s face could turn purple, or Sarah could reprimand, Arthur answered her, not detecting the sarcasm.

“No, I got these in a car fire.” He smiled brilliantly at all of them, even the two boys. “All the doctors said I’m the luckiest man alive.”

There was a long pause, and Sarah filled it by clearing away the plates, although no one was done. Dessert was a chocolate cake, courtesy of Arthur. The boys were first to finish, and crowed for more.

“I think that’s enough for tonight,” Sarah said.

“Yeah, you don’t want anymore. It’s not chocolate, it’s dog shit,” Maggie told them.

Johnny, the smaller boy, started crying, while Michael’s face turned a pale shade of green. Before anyone could deny it, he ran out of the room and loud sounds of vomiting followed him.

Maggie whooped with laughter, clapping her hands delightedly. Sarah ran after him, Alex groaned, and Arthur stared at Maggie.

“That was mean.”

Her laughter was stopped abruptly, as if someone had clicked it off with a switch. Her mouth twisted into a scowl, making her more witch than woman. “It was funny.”

“Why’d you decide to become a janitor, Arthur?” Alex quickly asked, allowing Arthur to launch into his life story. He did just this, but not before giving Maggie a few more seconds of suspicious looks. By the time Sarah returned to the table, notably crosser than before, he was up to his thirteenth birthday.

“...and my parents gave me a dog, but he got hit by a car the next day. We buried him in the backyard, but he had a blank tombstone because I hadn’t thought of a name yet.”

Maggie pushed back her chair and stood up.

“Where are you going?” Alex asked.

“To my room.”

“We’re having guests. It would be nice if you stayed,” he said, over pronouncing each word in the process.

“The Simpsons’ are on.” She carried her plate to the sink, just like Sarah had nagged her to do for the past ten years.

“I don’t think it’ll kill you to miss an episode.”

“It could.”

“I watch that show every week,” Arthur piped up. “It’s my favorite.”

“Hey, I know,” Alex said, as if he’d been struck with the greatest thought ever to strike man. “Why don’t you two go watch it in the living room?”

Maggie was already half-way out the door. “Whatever you want.” Arthur looked at Alex, who was motioning for him to follow. “Do you think she would mind?”

“No!” Sarah and Alex said together. “It’s down the hall.”

The show was nearly half over when Maggie turned on the television, and she immediately took her place in front of the television. The carpet had worn thin from all the years she had sat there, cross-legged with her mouth gaping open like an idiot. She sat like this now, but Arthur did not notice her mouth because her nose covered it. He took a seat in the recliner that was across from her.

“I like Bart Simpson. I think he’s funny,” was his attempt at
conversation.

Silence.

“Have you ever seen –”

“Will you please be quiet?” she asked through clenched teeth. “I’m
trying to watch –”

“- the one where Homer falls down the cliff on Bart’s skateboard?
And then an ambulance comes, and that crashes into a tree, and he falls
back down the cliff. And then they show him in the hospital and he’s
covered with bandages.”

A pause, then, “That’s an old one.”

“I woulda thought that he’d die from that.”

“It’s a cartoon. They never die.”

“You have the same name as the baby Simpson. Did you know
that?”

“No, I didn’t. I’ve never missed a single episode, yet that fact has
escaped my attention.”

“Do you want to go the movies?”

Her neck swiveled towards him, and she closed one of her small
eyes in suspicion. “Why?”

Arthur shrugged. “I like the movies. Don’t you?”

“How much did Alex give you to ask me?”

There was not a bone in Arthur’s body that could have feigned
such realistic surprise. “What?”

“Let me guess - twenty dollars, right? That’s what he gave the last
sucker he brought home. Well, don’t worry. You still get to keep the
money if I don’t go.” She turned back to the television. “He’s a fair guy.”

“He didn’t give me any money. You seem like a nice person, and I
thought you’d might like to go to the movies.”

Another long pause, longer than the first. The television switched
to a commercial, and when she still didn’t say anything, Arthur thought
she might not have heard him,

“You seem like a nice –”

“I heard you, I heard you. What, did Alex tell you I was deaf?”

“No, he just said you were a little crazy,” he said promptly.

Maggie didn’t say anything, so Arthur went on. “It doesn’t matter,
you know. Everyone’s a little crazy. My mother was really crazy, and she
was the only woman I ever loved.”

“I don’t want to go to the movies.” She said it fast, so she wouldn’t
have to think about it.

“Well, we can go to the park, or miniature golfing, if you want.
They have an ice cream store right next to -”

“I don’t want to go anywhere with you.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Just because.”

“Can I come over and watch The Simpsons’ with you next week?”

“If you want to, I guess it would be okay.”

Arthur stayed for the rest of the program, and when he rose from
the recliner, the same simple smile that he had given at dinner had re­
turned to his face. Maggie noticed that he had a dimple in his left cheek.

“I’ll see you next Sunday.”

He was almost to the door when Maggie called out, “They have
reruns on every weeknight at 7:00. You can come then if you want.”

* * * * *

Arthur came over every night at exactly 7:00 for two weeks
straight. For the first week, they sat in the same exact seats they had
during the first encounter: Maggie on the floor, Arthur in the recliner
behind her. But by the end of the second week, Maggie began sitting on
the couch, and actually started answering some of Arthur’s thousands of
questions. She only permitted him to talk during the commercials, but it
was still plenty of time for him to quiz her on everything and anything.

“What would you eat if you could only have one food for the rest
of your life?”

“Pancakes.”

“I’d pick Cheerios.”

“That’s stupid. You’d get sick of them in a week.”

“Nuh-uh. I once ate them for a solid month. Nothing but Cheerios
for breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

“Really? Nothing else?”

“Nope.”

“Well, I still think you’d get sick of them. And you’d have to eat
them without milk.”

“I like them without milk.”

“You’re crazy, you know that?”

He told her about his cat at home, Jack, and the vegetable garden in
his backyard. She listened to his stories about his parents, which were
either gory details of their deaths in the car accident that had disfigured
him, or the little pieces of useless information that he found facinating.

“My mother used to put all of her money in a jar that she kept
under her bed. She told me that if I ever touched any of it, she’d hit me
so hard that I'd go blind. And then one time my father came home from work, and needed some money to go to the bar, and he took all of it. When my mother looked in the jar the next day to go grocery shopping, she saw that it was empty and went after me with the jar. It cracked open on my head, and there were these little pieces of ceramic everywhere."

"Did you go blind?"

"No, but I saw a lot of stars."

A third week passed and by the end of the month, Arthur was not only staying later, but he began coming earlier as well. He showed up for dinner almost every night, stayed late for coffee, and once was even able to convince Maggie to play a game of Scrabble with him. He was a terrible player - his vocabulary didn't extend past four-letter words - but Maggie liked winning, and never cared how she did it.

Sarah and Alex continued to hold their breath as a second month passed, then a third. Maggie had still not extended so much as a foot past the front door, but just that morning she had actually opened a window during breakfast. She hadn't done that in years, for fear of letting in disease-carrying mosquitoes.

Before he left every night, Arthur would once again ask her if she wanted to go to the movies that Saturday. Maggie always responded with a negative, but she had to admit that the bastard was persistent.

And then one night, after watching a Tuesday night "Simpsons" rerun, Maggie actually paused when he asked her. Arthur had gotten so used to her shooting down the idea, that his hand was already on the doorknob.

"Okay."

Arthur, for perhaps the very first time in his entire life, was speechless. Maggie switched off the television, and walked upstairs. "Pick me up at six."

And for the very first time in her life, she walked out of the room as gracefully as a debutante.

* * * * *

It was November, which meant that everything was either dying or already dead. Arthur drove a blue 1984 Honda with a dented fender and missing hubcap. It was obvious he had just gotten it washed that day (no one kept their car that clean). If Maggie had noticed this, she surely would have ragged him about it, but her eyes were fastened on the sky.

Arthur sang along with the radio when he drove; he knew almost every song that came on. His singing voice wasn't much different than his speaking voice, but he smiled a lot and bobbed his head. Maggie had known one of the Rolling Stones songs that had come on, and she might have even sang along, if she wasn't slumped in the corner with her eyes closed. Arthur cast several anxious glances in her direction, but neither mentioned turning around.

A small cry escaped from Maggie's lips when the car pulled into the parking lot. He thought they would go see the new Bruce Willis movie, but it never got that far. She'd hyperventilated while walking up to the theater, had anxiety attacks on the ticket line, and was crying uncontrollably by the time the trailers began. Arthur was more disappointed than embarrassed, and they left the theater by request of the usher.

"Why don't you like to go outside?" he asked when they got into the car.

"Because."

"Because why?"

She glared at him. "Don't you ever stop asking questions?"

"My boss asked me the same thing one time. We were in the basement, and the air-conditioner had overheated."

"Okay, I was wrong. You stop asking questions to tell some of the stupidest anecdotes I've ever heard. How on earth can you possibly think that people might be interested in such useless information?"

Arthur shrugged, and twisted the radio dial. "I just say whatever comes into my head."

A mother and her little boy had stood behind them on the ticket line. The little boy kept pulling on his mother's skirt, and asking about Arthur in loud whispers.

"Mom, look at that guy.""Stop staring."

"Yeah, but look. He looks like Frankenstein. And that lady looks like a witch. She's a witch, Mom, isn't she?"

Arthur looked over at Maggie and smiled pleasantly. "The kids at the school call me that, too."

Maggie thought of this now, and she studied him carefully. He did look a lot like Frankenstein, just as much as she resembled a witch, if not more. He was tall like the monster, his shoulders unusually broad for his size. The black hair that was pasted down on his forehead was greasy and always looked wet. Stick a couple of bolts in his neck, paint the sucker's face green and you'd have a bona-fide walking Halloween costume.

"I always say what's on my mind," he'd said.

Well, Maggie thought to herself. That's what I do, too, in a way.
He was looking straight ahead, his eyes focused on no particular thing. She thought he looked sad, but it might have been just wishful thinking. His hand was resting on the fake velvet console, and she turned it over in her hands. His palms were rough and calloused, the lines cutting deep rivers. His fingernails were clean, but broken and ragged, and she looked at her own nails, wondering if he bit his nails as well.

Arthur turned to look at her, and for the first time since they'd met, there was silence. Maggie had stopped gasping, and for once Arthur's nose wasn't making that whistling sound when he breathed. There were no commercials, the radio wasn't on, and no one was forcing them to make conversation.

She brought the hand up to her lips, and kissed it.

"Why'd you do that?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Maggie saw a couple unlocking the car parked next to them. Her heart began to pound furiously, and she dropped Arthur's hand so that she could lock the doors. She slumped in her seat and hid her eyes, her breath catching in her throat.

"Take me home."

She started wheezing, and it was all Arthur needed to turn the key. The car sputtered as it started, and he entertained her the rest of the ride home with bland stories that she didn't listen to, involving his mechanic, dentist, chiropractor, and optometrist.

Maggie didn't feel safe until she had gotten inside, and she almost locked Arthur out in her haste to shut the door. Sarah heard them come in, and when she entered the foyer, Maggie was leaning against the wall, her head in her hands. Arthur's eyes widened when she came in, and he immediately looked guilty, although even he didn't know why.

"What's going on?" Her voice was sharp and heart-stopping, like a fourth grade teacher. "Maggie, what's wrong?"

She said nothing, breaking into tears instead. Her cry was a low howl, the yowling of a cat in pain. She went over to her sister-in-law and put her arm around her, hoping to ease her heaving sobs.

"I think you had better leave, Arthur," Sarah said. "Now."

"Maggie?"

She turned away from him, and hurried up the stairs. They both watched her retreating back, Arthur's face sinking and Sarah's tightening.

"Good-bye, Arthur," Sarah said pointedly.

His mouth opened, but there was nothing left to say. He turned to the door, and stiffly walked out, his huge, lumbering shoulders straightened back, the scars on his neck turning purple, his face growing red.

"Good-bye," he said softly, closing the door behind him.

Sarah took the steps two at a time, and found Maggie in her bed, the blanket pulled over her head. She was still crying, although she tried to muffle them with the pillow.

Sarah sat on the edge of the bed. "Are you all right?"

Maggie didn't answer, but Sarah continued. "Did he -"

"No."

"Did you -"

"No."

"Well, then, what happened?"

The crying had reduced to hitching and sniffling, but Maggie refused to peek her head out. Neither spoke, allowing the dark silence to fog the room. The shades were drawn, and the only light came from the LCD of the alarm clock, illuminating Maggie's hair peeking out from under the blanket. Sarah sat there until she fell asleep, her breathing gasping and irregular.
"Go Jesus, Go"
by Ed Deull

I saw a man on Earl’s Court road in London.
He had the ratty beard and wild hair of the insane.
Big thick glasses, indestructible in their duty of allowing him
to see all.

His T-shirt was what made him alive
in the crowded streets.
On the front, airbrushed in letters as
bold as any graffiti on the Underground
was his official title- “100% Jesus Freak”

He gave me a flyer as I passed by,
I let it fall to the ground.
“Hey,” he called after me.
“You just dropped your salvation.”
I told him it was actually just
piece of paper but thanks for telling me.

“Are you a god fearing man?” He asked me.
His face was scrunched up tight to keep his
glasses from sliding off and cracking the sidewalk.

I thought on his question for a second
and answered no. I told him if god did
did exist then she left this waste of a planet
long ago.

“Well, every good Christian knows that
god is a man.” He put his hands on his
hips and puffed out his bloated torso to
show just how right he was.

I told him that everyone is entitled to
their own opinion and walked away.

“Have a good time in hell.” He called
after me. I gave him a wave to assure
him that I would and thought that at

least hell would be warmer than England.

I saw him later that day in line at a newsstand
he had a stack of this month’s skin magazines
hugged tight against his Jesus Freak T-shirt.

He noticed me noticing the magazines and
gave me a smug look, as if to say, “Jesus
is behind me in my masturbatory excursions.”

I gave him a smile and a big thumbs up.

Party on, Jesus Freak.
Empty
by Morgan

lonely thoughts in a crowded room
laughing faces, smiling in mirth
empty ramblings on a burnt brain
eternal questions, resounding echoes

Rough Love
by Morgan

the days are lonely
the nights are rough
her love is sealed
by a golden band
he wrapped around
her throat
slowly choking
her will
cuts mend
bruises heal
but love
is eternal

Arrows aimed at absurdity.
Believe me
it's not that far away
this pain this fantasy
I know
you know
it can't be that far.

I miss the old days
when nothing was old days
and I could love
and I could be a child
and I could be new.

Cliches are so big now
they block out the sun
(the tiny sun?)
and confuse the moon
who doesn't
know
when to
show.
(So I cling like dust on fan blade;
memory is a machine burning energy
and I'm ninety percent dead skin cells.)

Talk about depression
and political antics.
Talk about good time
and your dead mother.

Or talk to me about rain.
I would think it
dishheartening at least,

knowing
no
matter
how long
you fell
you were
not
flying
and
could
never
fly.

Epiphanies are nothing for
men devoted to
one
cathedral moment.
Like a poem’s coming.

Impossible like birth;
drunken vomiting during orgasm.
Ridiculous like lightening;
euphoric love when nothing.
Belligerent like cold;
being hit again again again.
Meticulous like disease;
slowly suffocating while dreaming.
True like death;
knowing everything all at once
and being electric
and weeping
and pretending to
fly.
Dinner for One
by Christopher Caskey

Before I go to the bank,
I labor to scrape the black
from under my fingernails
for the young, curvy blonde
teller who knows my name.
She completes my deposit slip for me,
when I fake ignorance.
I tease her about something silly
like the purple cast on her wrist, hoping
for a smile or the soft brush of her hand.
But the line decides it's time to go.
Leaving, I can hear her playful little voice,
"Stay out of trouble now."
I make some hopeless nothing of a joke.
Over my shoulder, I can hear a laugh.
I escape
to the aisles of the attached supermarket
with her round face in my mind
I wonder which ingredients I need,
spices, vegetables, hamburger, or love.
Because tonight, my date will be with the cat.

Loneliness
by Daniel Schwartzberg

We have received a letter from the Singles Meeting Organization on
the topic of loneliness, and we are glad to comply.
Surely the organization knows what loneliness is. It is the last
cornflake in a bowl of cereal. It is the last drop of milk in the container. It
is a prisoner in solitary confinement; it is the new kid in school. Loneli­
ness is coming to this country and not speaking the language. It is
missing the field goal to lose the Super Bowl, striking out in the bottom of
the ninth, seeing someone you love, but not expressing your feelings.
Loneliness is watching your mother leave and never come back. Loneli­
ness is the smell of a hospital that a loved one is in. It is listening to a sad
song, being by yourself on New Year's Eve. It's watching your children
leave for school and coming home to an empty house. Loneliness is sitting
in the dark contemplating suicide with your Singles Meeting Organization
calendar sitting on your desk.
F... you
F... you and your cult of false prophets you call friends
To hell with your precious clique
You like to pretend that you're nothing like me at all
When in reality (harsh term, I know)
You say the exact same things that I do
I just have an imaginary world that I've created for myself
Where everything I say is Bible law
And everything everyone else outside of my circle says
Is worthless.
Your hatred is appalling
Your lack of love is horrendous
Why do you have to send me home every night clouded with shame
Questioning my own humanity?
You like to glare at me as I crouch in the corner
Trying to go unnoticed
Fearful of your claws and fangs
And talk freely about my "issues"
About why I'm so weird
You laugh ferociously at the things that spill from my mouth
And then laugh good naturedly when you say the same thing yourself
I cannot scream because of you
I cannot laugh because of you
I cannot cry because of you
You and your pathetic friends exclude me and all others you like to believe
Are nothing like you
I think you're scared
Scared to death that you're not as mighty as you'd like to believe
You're the ones with the "issues"
You're the ones who "can't deal"
You cry and suck your precocious little thumbs when you don't get your way
While doing everything imaginable to ensure that I don't get mine
Who's really got the "issues" here?
I don't say things that make you laugh
I'm not attractive enough to meet your unrealistic standards of beauty
I don't hate enough to revel in your busy little sewing circles
Untitled
by Ed Deull

The poet at the podium.
Soothing voice and o’ the glistening water,
glinting stars, chirping birds and all
the beautiful things that mean a lot
metaphorically;
really they do.

Twenty-somethings in rapture.
“How they do...”
“What about...”
Poetry turns me gray and inside out.
The funny thing is, I was a terrible poet
when I was your age.

She orates,
words flowing out like a back massage.
Everyone relenting to the exotic oils.
Dreaming, thinking, dreaming.

Me? I was off in a land of alcohol and suicide.

Hello, my name is Jim Smith Wesson-Beam,
and I am a chronic thinker.
It started off as an occassional thing,
I’d have a think at a party,
just to socialize.
Then, I started thinking alone.
Soon, I was thinking when I got up in the morning,
and now I can’t stop.

No, Beam is my mother’s maiden name.
I took on my father’s name, Wesson,
after I shot him in the face.

The words just came back,
I’m torn out of my world of
backalley fiction
and into the babbling brooks of someone

standing where I want to be.

What the fuck is a kid doing in class?
(The non-trad mother’s boy.)
Look at him, he pays the poet no heed,
he is off in a world of imagination
that writers yearn for.

He makes us look like fools;
he knows more than our coffee shop intellectualism
will ever teach us.

A cherub in a Power Rangers shirt.
His feet don’t even touch the ground,
yet he stands taller than any
misty mountain of summer that the
poet can conjure up.

The boy sneezes mid-stanza
the poet looks over and I see the fear in her face.
Ske knows it too.

The boy wipes his nose on his arm and pulls a toy from his pocket.

The poet starts back into springtime in Paris.

Me? I’m back in my world of alcohol and suicide.
The boys congregate in the green corridor seeking specific details as I break for her room where I am assaulted by tidal waves of screams.

This is not poetic, this is not really happening, not again, not to another. Thinking aloud while turning the knob.

I see her body is shaking, convulsing, her head hung low tucked in her chest, mascara smeared down her cheeks affirming her tears. Scanning the room, my eyes focus on six helpless faces looking for answers, answers I am still searching for. Her scream breaks the silence.

Her eyes slowly reach mine and her mouth opens words fall slowly
   I deserved it
a victim’s first reply.

Then something gave, something broke broke inside of her. Inside her mind, she was able to hear all of us for the first time, the first time that evening.

*****

Saturday night in the ER. The heat is nauseating, lights too bright for this hour - it’s already after 3am. Three of us sit in a closet called a room where Sesame Street characters
stare out from four walls. I wish
Cookie Monster would wipe that stupid grin
off his face,
but it's better than the bleak waiting room and
at least the poster of Tigger can cough up a little laugh from her.

6 in the morning, it's her
first visit to the ER, first Pap smear, the
first rape kit, the first
sign of daylight, the first dried tears
and the first silence since we arrived here
this first night. This very
first night for many things.

A Note to Jeremy
an excerpt
by Ed Deull

Through the fog, he walked with purpose. Shoulders back, he
watched each measured step as rain caused the dirt on his brow to roll
down, leaving clean streaks on his face as though he wore a mask that was
gradually melting, dripping from his chin.
The streets rushed to face him in stride. He hadn't been up this
early since his school days, and the city seemed strange to him. Gone
were the whores and punks he dealt with on his nightly missions for
vodka and cigarettes. In their place he found children going to school and
people on their way to work. He couldn't remember the last time he had
seen a child up close. They looked like tiny demons to him, their eyes
questioned him, made him turn red and confused. He had purposely
chosen the early morning for this walk; night was routine and he did not
want familiarity now. He fingered the roll of duct tape in his pocket and
felt better. He was going to kill himself today. Soon, soon, there would be
no more thoughts.

He had gone over it a million times in his head; the bridge was
chosen. He would tape over his mouth and nose and let the water do the
rest. A suicide note had been written this morning and stashed in a ziploc
bag inside his coat pocket. He liked the note; it sounded confident.
Drowning will be good, he thought, no blood. This had ultimately been
the final factor in deciding the method. He couldn't afford a gun and
couldn't stand the sight of his own blood, which is why he had never done
heroin.

Jeremy could find no relief. He had been wallowing in his own
pain, real and imagined, since he hit puberty. He started drinking about
five years ago to kill his brain. He hated his brain, hated thinking and
consciousness; it made him aware of himself and his world. Reality, he
had decided long ago, was a terrible thing.

He had no family since he had left his foster parents at the age of
sixteen, and he alienated himself from people before they had a chance to
get close to him. He would never admit this to himself because without
self-pity he could not find an excuse to drink. He had never been with a
woman, save prostitutes, though he always thought that a good woman
would bring him the relief that frightened him so. A year ago he had
convinced himself that he was gay, thinking maybe he would find comfort
among his own gender. What he found was a brutally large man who
made walking painful for a week.

He had tapped every option he had never tried, and he couldn't
afford alcohol consistently enough for his liking. Suicide was the only thing he could think to try next. He felt good, he thought, like he had a backbone. He was going through with something for the first time in a while.

Rain pockmarked the street as the bridge loomed close ahead - thick fog doused the sidewalk and rolled to reveal a figure on the bridge. Jeremy cursed quietly when he noticed the silhouette; he hadn't wanted anyone around to witness his triumph. The wind flailed violently as he approached, flapping hair revealing the figure as a woman. He decided to ignore her and quietly removed the tape from his pocket, tearing a long strip off for his mouth.

"What's the tape for?" She asked, approaching him with a smooth gait.

Fuck, he thought. He remained silent and brought the tape to his mouth, doubt already blooming in his mind.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Her dress was blown tight against her body. Jeremy looked her over from the feet up when he encountered the purple bruise encompassing her left eye. He had to speak to her now; his confidence running away with the wind, he stood there, helpless.

"Ach." His words came out as a croak and he dropped his head in shame. Hands clenched in frustration, he turned back to the tape.

"Don't do it." She slipped her hand into his.

"What?" He said, face wrinkled in utter confusion.

"You're going to kill yourself, aren't you?"

He was stunned, almost angry with this woman. He had come here with a purpose, and he didn't want a stranger questioning it. How did she know he was going to kill himself? Why did she care?

"Aren't you?" She repeated. Her eyes met his; she was beautiful. Jeremy hated beautiful women, they made him feel like nothing.

"Yes." He replied, his voice a whisper on the verge of tears.

"I'm Rosalita - what's your name?" Her hand extended with the question.

"What the fuck is this? Why do you care what my name is?" Jeremy was exasperated; he couldn't believe what was going on.

"I just want to know your name." Her dark brown eyes held him, the bruise made her seem fragile and pure, like a saint. He felt bad for cursing at her.

"My name is Jeremy." He could feel his shoulders slump as he did. Weak again, his resolve drizzled away like the rain that stabbed them both.

"Hi," she said. Her hand fell from his, caressing his fingers as it did. He felt a slight shudder, as the warmth that her hand lent him crept away.

"Why are you killing yourself, Jeremy?"

He paused, speechless. He found himself trying to remember why he decided to kill himself. In reply he could do nothing but shrug.

"It's cold and wet out here; why don't you come with me?" She took his hand again, her look questioning him.

"Where?" He asked. He was so confused that he wanted to cry. A few short minutes ago his life was set out before him - now this woman had taken it away from him before he had a chance to do so himself.

"We can go back to my apartment - I'll make you some breakfast." She spoke as if it were completely natural for her to take home a suicidal stranger and make him eggs.

"Whatever," Jeremy said. He gave up; it was just easier to go with her.

She wordlessly took his hand and led him away from the bridge. He was shaking, more from sobriety than the cold. She held his hand like a lover.

"You're shaking," she said, her eyes deep with a worry that only confused him further.

"I need a drink," he replied, the word made him want it more.

"D.T.'s - are you an alcoholic?" The question was not accusing.

"Yeah, I guess that's what they call people like me." He was suddenly nervous; this was the most he had spoken to a woman in months.

"My boyfriend is an alcoholic," she said, her face growing sad as she spoke.

"He give you those bruises?" Jeremy asked, shocked at the concern in his voice.

Her reply was silent; her face spoke of nights locked in the bathroom, hysterical with fear. The bruise spoke for itself.

"Why do you stay with him?" Jeremy forgot about himself for a moment.

"I don't. I ran away from him yesterday; now I'm somewhere he can't find me." She suddenly looked proud, untouched by the subway gray that hung over them both in a shapeless cloud.

That's where we're going now - come." She took his hand and led him two blocks before stooping at a tenement door. Jeremy walked slowly and silently next to her, wondering why he was following this woman.

Rosalita smiled at him as she unlocked the door; the place stank of
urine and made him shake worse. Neither of them spoke as they strode
the graffiti-stricken hallway, stopping at apartment four. Jeremy worried
for the lack of conversation, but her look was friendly regardless of his.

The urine smell dissipated inside her apartment. Rosalita banged
around it like an old friend, straightening the small room that served as
bedroom, kitchen, and den; only the bathroom was allotted separate space.

"Whose place is this?" Jeremy asked, acquainting himself with the
bare walls and small, ratty bed that occupied the corner floor space.

"It was my sister's, but she got picked up for prostitution one too
many times and is over in county. She had already paid the month's rent
and I have an extra key. Bill can't find me here; he doesn't know about
this place." She approached with a smile that set

him at ease; her dress flut­
tered lightly around her as she walked.

"What do you want to eat?" She asked in an enthusiastic tone, as if
she were a newlywed
wife, eager to please.

"Do you have anything to drink?" He asked, holding out his
shaking hands.

She searched the small freestanding cabinet that doubled as a
counter. Jeremy scanned the well-muscled calf and thigh exposed by her
efforts and felt his cock jump slightly. He raised his head quickly when
she turned around. Embarrassed at his thoughts, he was uncomfortable
again.

"I have half a bottle of vodka and some grape cough syrup." She
held the vodka out to him.

"Can I have the cough syrup too?" He asked hesitantly.

"Cough syrup and vodka?" Her face contorted at the thought.

"It's nothing I haven't done before." He was embarrassed, but he
wanted the vodka. Rosalita handed him the bottles and a glass. He gave
the glass back and poured the cough syrup into the vodka bottle, taking a
long pull.

She stood a moment, let him take a second drink. His hands
weren't shaking as badly now. He looked up, his lips purple from the
cough syrup. Their eyes met; her look was serious, fragile with want.

"Do you think I'm pretty, Jeremy?" She seemed unsure of herself.

Jeremy looked up from the bottle, caught off guard by the question.
Her face told him his reply meant everything. An odd feeling engulfed his
chest. He felt confident, as if she were his and he could shield her from
the world.

"I think you are beautiful, Rosalita." It felt good to say, and he was
overwhelmed by the desire to hold her.

Rosalita stepped close to him, took his hand and placed it on her

hip. The other hand needed no guidance. As he cupped the back of her
head, the bottle crashed violently to the floor.

He felt her breath soft on his lips just before they met, a tender
brush at first, then mouths open to taste the exotic sweetness of a foreign
mouth. Jeremy concentrated on the tongue probing his mouth; it was
shorter than his and their rhythms were off. Hers eager to explore while
he lay back lazily, content to slowly roll through the warmth of her mouth.
He kept his eyes open, falling in love because he didn't know what else to
do. It occurred to him that he had never kissed a woman before, not like
this. He had done nearly everything else, but prostitutes wouldn't kiss
him; that was their rule. Business could get messy if emotions joined the
fray.

They moved as one; her dress fell to the floor as she stripped away
his wet clothes. They strode to the bed as through water, never coming up
for air. He explored her body first with his hands, then with his mouth,
careful to avoid the blazing spots where she had been used as an ashtray.
She kissed his neck and straddled him; he was alive with sensation, with
unfamiliarity. She took his cock in hand and slid onto him slowly. He felt
every inch disappear, engulfing him in a slick warmth like no other.

Sensation caused his breath to come short; he was afraid anything more
would break the moment. She rode him gently, mouth open, eyes closed.
Jeremy looked at her face, gorgeous in desire. Her long hair traced webs;
she moaned slightly and he felt himself explode. His eyes sprung open as
if he had been shot, and gasping slightly, he laid back, drowning in the
beautiful aftertaste.

She sighed contentedly and laid on his chest, his cock withering
inside of her. "You make me happy, Jeremy."

He made someone happy. The words made him feel good, and he
held her tight.

"You make me happy, too, Rosalita."

They laid there a long while and slept, finding comfort in each
other's arms. Jeremy dreamed of a white fence and a manicured lawn.

Rosalita woke before Jeremy and dressed, waking him as she did.

"Where are you going?" He asked almost frantically, as if he
would never see her again.

"To get us some food. You go back to bed." She kissed him and
stroked his hair. He smiled like a child who has been woken from a bad
dream.

"Do you want me to go with you?" He asked.
"No, that's okay, you stay here and rest. I'll be right back."

A thought occurred to him as she creaked the door open.

"Rosalita?"

"Call me Rose, Jeremy."

"Okay, Rose. I was just wondering what you were doing at the bridge this morning?"

She looked at him somberly. "I was going to kill myself." She blew him a kiss as the door shut.

Jeremy repeated her words as he dressed. She was going to kill herself, he thought. We had nothing, now we can have each other. He felt the note in his pocket and resolved to stay alive.

He had set about cleaning up the broken vodka bottle when a loud banging startled him to his feet.

"Rose," the banging grew louder. "I know you're in there, Rose. Let me in, baby. I love you and I need to be with you."

Jeremy didn't answer. He was stricken with fear and confusion. She said he couldn't find her.

"God damnit, Rose. Let me in, girl. Don't make me break the door down." The voice was losing its forced calm. Still Jeremy did not answer. He lurched for the window in panic.

"I'm coming in Rose. We can do this the hard way or the easy way. I'm going to count to three. If you don't let me in, then I'm letting myself in. One." Jeremy struggled for the window. It had to be painted shut.

"Two." He nearly tore his fingernails off in the attempt, but still the window did not budge. He turned to the door, unsure of what to do next.

"Three." The door caved in with a monstrous crushing noise to reveal a looming white figure. Bill and Jeremy stood face to face.

"Who the fuck are you?" Bill roared, confusion feeding his anger. Jeremy could only stand slumped, speechless.

"Jer, Jer." he stuttered. He couldn't even say his name. Bill shot across the room and grabbed him by the throat.

"Is this your place? She been staying with you?" Spittle flew from his lips as he spoke, his tone a barely contained growl. Again Jeremy could not answer, and he began to cry from fear and shame.

"Are you fucking her? Are you fucking my woman?" His grip tightened. Jeremy's breath was coming in wisps now.

"Let's go outside and talk about this. How about that? We'll talk like adults." His eyes told Jeremy that talking was the last thing he had on his mind. He dragged Jeremy out by his coat, threw him through the door onto the sidewalk, and pushed him into the alley next to the tenement.

Jeremy fell against the brick wall and toppled over a large garbage bag; he thought he wanted to crawl inside it and wait for everything to go away - he wanted a drink.

"So you're fucking Rose - that makes two of us, you know." His voice reduced to a violent whisper as he spoke. Jeremy quivered, tears contouring his face.

"So did she suck you dick, huh, buddy?" Jeremy clenched his arms around his chest and shook his head.

"No, really?" Bill said, his eyes dead calm, dangerous.

"I bet you'd like to suck my dick, wouldn't you, champ? You look like you'd make a real good fag." Bill stepped closer, his fly inches away from Jeremy's face. Jeremy closed his eyes and let out a sob, unsure of what to expect next.

"Okay, boy, open wide." Bill was yelling again.

Jeremy opened his eyes to see the shaft capped by a single eye staring him down; he became fascinated by it - it was beautiful and terrible at once. It was a gun.

"Suck it boy, suck it now." Bill pulled his head forward until the shaft penetrated his mouth. Jeremy tasted the cold steel in his mouth, choking him.

"That's good - faster, bitch, faster." Jeremy went faster and grabbed the bottom like he had seen in porn movies. Despite the fear and panic, he thought that maybe he should have given the gay thing a second chance; the sucking part wasn't half bad.

"Oh, yeah, that's good; I think I'm going to cum. That's it, I'm cumming." The gun went off. Jeremy's blood mingled with the garbage that cradled his body.

* * *

"We can't chalk it now - the pavement is wet." The alley was filled with cops; one held Jeremy's note, his opus. He read aloud, "There are no feelings, no pain, no sorrow, no anger, and there are no good-byes; so fuck off. What an asshole; I think we can book this one as a suicide."
Mysterious Ways
by Chris Heisler

Three days later I was sitting in the morgue, an hour and a half into a twelve hour shift, happily lost in the newest Steven King novel. That’s what I love about my job - nobody around to annoy me, very little actual work to do, and a chance to catch up on my reading. I’m a Stephen King junkie. Read them all, most of them two or three times. Besides, what could be more appropriate reading for the morgue?

I hadn’t thought about Paulie once since that night at the club. Keara’d gone out of town to visit her mom in Florida, so I’d had nothing to do the last few nights. Didn’t bother me much: I picked up a couple extra shifts at work. I needed the cash. My bank account had been pretty much wiped out paying for the parts of my treatments that my insurance hadn’t covered, and the credit card bills my ex had run up. Nothing like a little monthly reminder from American Express that you reached the end of your usefulness for the woman you loved when you reached your credit limit. Now I needed every penny I made just to get by every month. A few extra hours at work might mean the difference between making rent this month and having to move in with Keara. That old saying about money being the root of all evil? It’s really the lack of it. A few more bucks in the bank and maybe I wouldn’t be sitting here with Mr. Seeman. But I bet someone else would be. That’s the problem with money - always someone who needs more of it, that’s willing to do whatever they have to, to get it. Someone like me.

It was silent in here that day; the bodies hadn’t started moving and talking yet. I heard Paulie coming all the way down the hall. I put the book down and watched the door. Don’t get a whole hell of a lot of visitors down here. When I saw Paulie’s face grinning at me through the little window on the door I had the unmistakable urge to climb into one of the freezer drawers and pull it shut behind me. But by the time he got into the room, the smile was gone. I couldn’t decide if that made me glad or just nervous.

He looked around for a minute; everybody does. You can always tell the first time somebody’s in the morgue. They’re always glancing around, checking over their shoulder, half expecting something to jump out at them. When he seemed satisfied that nothing was going to leap out at him, Paulie turned back to me. “Don,” he said with a nod. My interest was peaked now. No “Donnie” or arms out looking for a hug. He wanted something. “I’ve got a proposition for you. An offer you can’t refuse.” Quoting from The Godfather is to Paulie like quoting from the scripture is to
expression was as blank as my social calendar. I have to admit, I was kind of impressed. It was a ballsy move, far more than I would have ever expected from Paulie. Not necessarily the brightest move, but still pretty damn ballsy. There was only one thing left to ask. “Why?”

“He’s doing my wife.” That did it; I was in. He knew it, I knew it, anyone with half a clue would have known it. Looking back, he’d known from the minute he thought of this whole absurd plan just how to get me. I’m still not sure which bothers me more - the fact that a small timer like Paulie could play me so well, or that even now I kind of admire him for it. Doesn’t really matter - the point is, he had me. For a while at least, I was in. My own personal experience with cheating women, and even more, my need for cash won out over my better judgment.

“I’m in. But its going to cost you.” He smiled. Nothing like a little murder to liven things up in the morgue.

Paulie’s plan was, not surprisingly, simple. It also hit every emotional button I had. Paulie played it perfectly, waiting for me to walk right into it. And walk into it I did. My first mistake was my curiosity. Paulie was outlining the basics of the plan. Zeeman was being admitted to St. Elizabeth’s later that week for treatment. Could have just kept my mouth shut, but... “What kind of treatment?”

“Chemotherapy.” A simple word, that made everything else a whole hell of a lot less simple.

I had a sudden urge to get the hell out of this, no matter what it took. I also had the sudden urge for a cigarette and enough beer to make me forget everything this was reminding me of. “He has cancer.” This time even Paulie recognized that it wasn’t a question.

“Why not just wait it out, let the cancer kill him?” I really hoped Paulie would go for it. Right then, I would have gladly sacrificed the money just to get out. I couldn’t explain it, maybe it just hit too close to home, maybe my conscience was just finally rearing its ugly head. Whatever it was, I wanted out. Paulie had other ideas.

“Because it won’t kill him.” Of course it wouldn’t kill him. Why would anything be that easy? “It’s not that far along yet. The doctors think he’ll be just fine with treatment.”

“And you know this how?”

“I hear things.” I should have known. I also should have known that now that I had walked into it, Paulie wasn’t above pushing the issue. “Doesn’t seem fair, does it?” I didn’t ask him what “it” was. I didn’t want to know, and I knew he was going to tell me anyway. “A bastard like Zeeman, a wife stealing bastard who doesn’t care for anyone but himself, and he’s gonna be fine. Good guy like you, guy that would give you the shirt off his back, that’s willing to go on a limb for a friend - like you’re doing for me - and you damn near died. Just doesn’t make any sense.” I knew the whole shirt off my back bit was just a little bit of last minute butt kissing from Paulie, but the sentiment behind it came through loud and
Almost perfect. A perfect plan would probably have involved Paulie using some sort of untraceable or undetectable poison. I would have suggested that, but then he wouldn’t have needed my help, and I wouldn’t have been paid. Besides, at this point my involvement was limited to after the fact help. I may be a bit on the morally flexible side, but actually helping to commit the murder was a bit much even for me. Of course, since even after the fact help has turned out to be too much for me, I don’t even want to think about what I’d feel like if I’d helped any more.

With the not quite perfect plan in place, it was just a matter of waiting. Zeeman had been in the hospital for about twenty-four hours. Paulie was waiting for the night I was scheduled to work the night shift - waiting for tonight. I’d switched with one of the other attendants; Tino had decided it would be easier to get the body out at night. While I was waiting patiently for the night, Paulie was running around town calling in every marker he had trying to collect my two fifty asking price. I wasn’t selling the last bit of my soul cheap. He had tried everything to get me to drop my price, even giving me a free tune up for my car over the weekend. Should have known the second Paulie mentioned the word free that something was up, but I just chalked it up to him needing me bad enough to go to any lengths. Seems to be a recurring theme with me - “should have known.” Just like I should have known something would go wrong. Namely Keara.

She’d come back from Florida over the weekend. I met her Sunday night at Private Pleasures to give her a ride home in my newly tuned car. I was amusing myself by engaging in one of my favorite pastimes - making crass comments about the strippers. After one particularly nasty comment, Keara sulked off behind the bar. “You are, without a doubt, the biggest pig I have ever met. I don’t know why the hell I hang out with you.”

“Because neither one of us can make any new friends,” I replied. “That’s not true. I still have some social skills left.” A couple of the regulars at the bar laughed and high fived her. “Besides, you were getting pretty chummy with the Stick the other night.”

“I had no idea what she was talking about. “The Stick?”

“Yeah, that guy you were sitting with that night last week. The one with the huge Roadrunner tattoo.” Paulie. Something in my stomach turned over.

“You know him?”

“Of course I know him. He’s in here all the time. They call him the Stick cause he kicks everybody’s ass at pool. He’s dating one of the dancers. Ginger, I think.” Dating? I pushed her for details. “He’s been

clear. And I had to agree with him. It didn’t seem fair.

At that point I was angry enough that Paulie probably could have talked me into killing Zeeman myself. Fortunately, that was one honor he reserved for himself. The plan was for Paulie to slip into Mr. Z’s room and drug his chemo. Mix a little cyanide with his chemo medication, platinoil. The sudden nature of the death might be a bit suspicious, but most likely it would be chalked up to the cancer. At least it would be until an autopsy was done. But, without an overly suspicious death, it could be up to two days before the post mortem, giving me plenty of time to get rid of the body.

That part of the plan was all me. Me and Tino, actually. Tino is the biggest fringe benefit of working in the morgue. Nobody’s quite sure where he comes from, what his real job is, or if he even has one, but anybody in this hospital that’s into anything even remotely less than ethical has dealt with him. And if you work in the morgue, dealing with Tino is almost a prerequisite for the job. He has a special affection for those of us who work down here. I think he sees us as kindred spirits, or maybe just guys desperate for cash. Either way, he’s probably right.

Tino has his hands in every illegal cookie jar in this place. He has a thriving “pharmaceutical exchange” business with several of the doctors. It’s amazing to watch him work. He’ll buy drugs off one doctor greedy enough to betray his Hippocratic oath for a few extra bucks. Half an hour later, Tino’ll turn around and sell those same drugs to another doctor who’s a bigger junkie than most of the OD’ed corpses down here. Rumor has it Tino’s been involved in everything from helping the hospital commit insurance fraud to selling off organs for transplants on the black market. No one knows for sure how many of the stories are true, and Tino’s not telling. A little legend is good for business.

Tino does most of his business outside of the actual hospital. But when he does work here, it’s always out of the morgue. He loves having people come down here to meet him, loves the fact that they don’t know whether to be more creeped out by him or the corpses. Whichever attendant is on, usually me, gets paid quite well to act like a look out. And to forget everything they saw as soon as Tino leaves. Several times I’ve made my rent payment with money from Tino. Naturally, as anyone who’s dabbled on the immoral side of life in this place can tell you, if you want something done - call Tino. So, he was the obvious choice to help me remove Mr. Z’s body. Of course, rumor has it he’s done this sort of thing before. Whatever sort of thing it is you need done, odds are Tino’s done it before. As far as murder plans go, this one was good. Simple. Effective. Almost perfect.
slow rage starting to well up inside of me. Paulie was trying to frame me, trying to make sure his own ass was covered. "He's trying to frame me."

I don't need to be a master of overkill. "That little ..." I barely even registered anything, but a was enough cyanide in that bag to kill a small elephant. Paulie was the that it was tainted. I'd bet every penny Paulie was paying me that there bag to the other. I was no expert either, but I didn't need to be, to know that there was enough Platinol. I took it from her, watching the liquid slide from one end of the bag to the other. I was swearing at the tire when Keara reached out the spare and the jack. I was sitting in the Private Pleasures parking lot, waiting for Keara to come out. Two nights in a row I was giving her a ride home. People would start to think we were a couple. And she certainly wasn't the only one cheating. And she certainly wasn't the only one lying.

Keara's little revelation had me thinking. A very bad habit for anyone about to participate in anything illegal. It didn't bother me much that Paulie was sleeping around, too. He was divorcing his wife for another woman, one he was apparently in love with. Then why kill his wife's lover; why not just let them be? It was just vengeance, plain and simple. Paulie was being a hypocrite - killing his wife's lover while sleeping with his own. Even that didn't bug me. What did get to me was the fact that he'd played me. He'd known exactly how to get to me to go along with him. If a half wit like Paulie could play me that well, what did that say about me? Whatever it said, I didn't like it, but it wasn't enough to make me walk away from a quarter of a million dollar payday. That one little thing wasn't enough. Of course, there's never just one little thing. There's always more. I should have known.

The proverbial other shoe might never have dropped if that broken glass hadn't been in the parking lot. One less blown tire, and I might not be sitting here listening to the bodies move. I'd had twenty-four hours to think about my new discovery about Paulie, and had come to the conclusion that it really didn't matter. I was sitting in the Private Pleasures parking lot, waiting for Keara to come out. Two nights in a row I was giving her a ride home. People would start to think we were a couple. She finally strolled out, and we were on our way. Hadn't gotten more than five feet out of my parking spot when we heard the front tire blow. I'd managed to drive through broken glass, and popped the tire. We got out, checked the damage, and headed for the trunk. I unlocked it and pulled out the spare and the jack. I was swearing at the tire when Keara reached into the trunk and pulled out a small, clear bag of liquid. "I'm no expert, but I'd be willing to bet this doesn't belong in you trunk."

I knew what it was from the second I saw it in her hand. Nobody that goes through chemo will ever forget the sight of those little bags. Platinol. I took it from her, watching the liquid slide from one end of the bag to the other. I was no expert either, but I didn't need to be, to know that it was tainted. I'd bet every penny Paulie was paying me that there was enough cyanide in that bag to kill a small elephant. Paulie was the master of overkill. "That little..." I barely even registered anything, but a slow rage starting to well up inside of me. Paulie was trying to frame me, trying to make sure his own ass was covered. "He's trying to frame me."

"Ahem." Keara waved her hand in front of my face, snapping me back to reality. "Feel like explaining this?" I could have lied to her, but she wouldn't have believed me. And she wouldn't let it go till I told her something she would believe. So I told her the whole story. By the time I was done, I was officially good and pissed. That ungrateful little bastard was trying to frame me in case something went wrong, and it hit the fan. A body of a cancer patient disappears from the morgue on my shift, an anonymous tip to the cops leads them to the tainted cancer drugs in my car - placed there during my so called free tune up - and you've got yourself a homemade murder suspect. Sure, it wasn't a world class frame up, the evidence was all circumstantial, but it didn't have to be world class. Just good enough to deflect attention from Paulie. Even if I rolled over on him to the cops, it would be my word against his, and the evidence. The odds weren't in my favor.

When I finished, Keara just stood there, drumming her fingers on the lid of the trunk. She was staring at me. "Just so I'm clear ... you're pissed off cause the Stick double crossed you, but the fact that you're involved in a murder doesn't bother you?" I didn't like the look in her eyes. It was the look the old me would have given someone in my position. Somewhere between disappointment and disgust.

"I didn't kill him." It was a weak excuse, a technicality. I knew it. Problem was, I truthfully didn't care. Trying to save Mr. Z. had never crossed my mind. It wasn't my job to save him. Sure, his death was probably senseless and unnecessary, but most of them are. At least some good might come of this one. $250 grand worth of good.

Keara wasn't drumming anymore. She wasn't looking at me either. "How the hell could you go along with this? What the hell were you thinking?"

I leaned back against the car and lit a cigarette. I was trying to ignore the disapproval in her voice. I was trying even harder to ignore the fact that it actually bothered me. I could let a man die without flinching, but let Keara be disappointed in me, and I suddenly develop a conscience. I knew what she wanted me to say. She wanted me to tell her that I'd known all along how wrong it was, and had been lying awake every night wracked with guilt. I could have told her that. She'd still have known I was lying. I did know it was wrong, or at least that it was supposed to be. And the money was too much to walk away from. But there was no guilt. There was supposed to be, but there wasn't.

"Remember when I was in the hospital having chemo?" I dropped the cigarette to the ground and stomped it out. It suddenly didn't taste as good. Keara nodded; I could tell she hated remembering it as much as I
did. “While I was there, my father came to see me.” I saw the shock on her face. Nobody knew better than Keara how bad my relationship with my parents was. “He looked like he’d been crying. He told me that he and mom had been praying for me.” My parents are what you might call overzealous in their religious beliefs. Praying for them is much like breathing for the rest of us. “But he didn’t know how to pray this time. So they asked their Reverend. I was kind of touched, you know? Meant a lot to me that they actually cared that much.” She smiled a little. I didn’t. I knew how the story ended. “So he tells me that they’ve been praying to God that he not let me die. So far, so good. But, and there’s always a but, they were also saying to God that if it was his will that I die that they accepted that.” Her smile died. “I was drugged up higher than a kite, and I could barely remember my own name, but I heard him. Every word. I wanted to scream and shout, and ask him how he could just accept that his only son was going to die. All I could get out was that one word. ‘Accept?’ I craved another cigarette, but held back. “And you know what he told me? He said, ‘Yes, accept. It’s all we can do. It’s not our place to understand why God does what he does. We just have to accept that it’s his will and that it’s for the best. He works in mysterious ways.’” I was glad my father couldn’t see me right then. Keara’s disappointment in me was enough.

“How could I go along with this? I decided long ago that if God didn’t give a damn who lived or died, if he just worked in these mysterious ways - letting people die for no good reason - then why should we care either? What was I thinking? That my only job is to take care of myself and get through the day, not to save Mr. Zeemans of the world. If God doesn’t want to do it, neither do I.”

She didn’t look at me. I think she was crying, but I don’t know. Finally, she spoke. “Take me home.” It was a whisper, and a whisper from Keara is more rare than a perfect diamond. I finished fixing the tire, and drove her home. We sat there in the driveway, both of us staring straight ahead. She broke the silence again, but this time her voice was stronger. “What are you going to do?”

The answer she wanted was that I was going to turn Paulie over to the cops. I couldn’t tell her that. “I can’t back out. It’s too late.”

She thought for a minute. “And I can’t stay here anymore, not like this. This is wrong, Don, and you know it.” This time I could tell she was crying. “I’m leaving.” She looked right at me. She was desperate enough to leave town to try and stop me. I felt worse. “Friday morning.” The day after I was supposed to lose the body. “Do the right thing, Don. And then go with me. Or help Paulie. And stay the hell away from me.” She got out of the car and ran for the house. Right then and there, I honestly
didn't know if I'd ever see her again.

* * * * *

And that's how I got to here. Sitting in the morgue with my new buddy, Mr. Zeeman. He came down a few hours ago. The corpses started talking right after that. Don't know what they're saying, can't understand it. In some cheap horror novel they'd all be muttering, "Do the right thing" or some other conscience bothering pithy little comment. Not here, though. They just sound restless. Except for Mr. Z. He's quiet. He's more at peace than I am.

At first, I just stared at him. Been trying to convince myself to do what Keara wants - do the "right" thing. Thought if I stared at Mr. Zeeman long enough, he might start to mean something to me. Maybe I'd start to feel guilty. No such luck. The only thing I'm feeling guilty for is not feeling guilty. After a while I started talking to him. Just idle chit chat, at first. Beating around the bush 'til I finally ran out of anything else to say.

"Ever read any Stephen King, Mr. Z.?' I asked him. He didn't answer; I took that as a no. "I have. Read 'em all. There's a line in one of them ...Desperation, I think. Line's about why God is cruel. It's because, 'Sometimes he makes us live.'" Not sure Mr. Z. got the irony that line has, given our present situation. "Always thought it was a great line, but I never really understood it. Until I survived." The voices in the room got quieter then. I'd like to think they all were listening to my story, but I'm just not that good a storyteller. "Until I survived for this. I survived so I could be sitting down here, talking to a dead man that I let die. Survived so I could get myself into deals with low-lifes like Paulie. Survived so people like Paulie could look at me and see someone just like them. Someone with so little soul left that they'd jump right on a deal like this. Someone even they could double cross and outsmart. That's what I survived for, what I survived to become." I looked at him then, lying there dead. "I survived and you died. And I'm wondering which of us really belongs down here."

That's when the bodies started moving. Just a flash of movement here, or a little flicker there. Always saw it just out of the corner of my eye. By the time I actually looked, there'd be nothing there. I ended up staring at the wall of freezer drawers. I ran my fingers along the handles, resisting the urge to yank one of them open and make sure the body was still inside. So many drawers. It occurred to me that I spent more time among the dead than I did the living. How many of these people had ended up here for no good reason? How many had come here because of people like Paulie? Or because of people like me, the ones who let all the Paulie's of the world get away with it? I couldn't have done anything for them. Mr. Z., maybe, but the rest had always been out of my hands.

I found myself staring back down at Mr. Zeeman. He was a young man, would have been fairly good looking when he was alive. Under normal circumstances, he'd end up in one of those drawers, waiting for the ME to cut him open. Poke around, play around inside him like a kid rummaging through his toy box. And then that would be it. Off to the funeral home, then the cemetery, spend the rest of eternity six feet under on his back in a box. Just like all the others. For what? So Paulie could boost his ego? So I could make a few bucks? I looked down at him. I'd lived. He'd died. I'd looked at hundreds of bodies in my time down here, but this time, for the first time, I actually thought it would be better if it was me on the slab instead of him. Maybe he could have make more sense of this than I could.

"'I'm sorry." It seemed woefully inadequate. I was sorry - not for my part in all this, but that it happened at all. "It shouldn't be like this. For either of us." I knew then I couldn't do it. I couldn't take the money and walk away. It wasn't guilt, or my conscience, or the sound of those damn bodies murmuring in the dark. It was because somewhere, some day, somebody was going to be staring down at me like this. And when that happened, I damned well wanted it to make more sense than this. Wanted it to be for a better reason than somebody's $250 thousand payday.

I still didn't know what to do. I knew I wasn't taking the payoff, but after that I was clueless. I could do what Keara wanted - call the cops. There was enough evidence; along with my testimony, Paulie would be doing time. It would be the right thing. But Mr. Z. would still be dead, and I'd still be here. Sure, I could go for the Hollywood happy ending, the one where I find my soul again and make something of myself. I could find the old me again, do the right thing, believe in doing the right thing, believe good things come to those who wait, and believe the golden rule. And after about of week of that I'd shoot myself in the damn head. Funny thing about losing all that - once it's gone, it doesn't come back.

Nobody, not even Keara, could convince me to just accept that was the point. That all this had happened just so I could find my conscience again. God may work in mysterious ways, but not even I could accept he'd put me through all this and let Mr. Z. die just so I could end up right back where I started. I could do the right thing - make Keara happy, punish Paulie, maybe even put things right in some small way for Mr. Z. But what about me? I couldn't go back, couldn't just believe in the right
thing again. I'd done that and all it had gotten me was a hospital bed and chemo medication running through my veins. It wasn't me anymore. But neither was this. Couldn't just let things go back to the way they'd been. There had to be a way to do the right thing and find some sense in it for me.

The voices stopped. So did the moving corpses. The sudden silence startled me, almost as much as Tino walking through the door. He grinned at me. He loved this kind of thing. "So, where's the body? I got a nice big trunk waiting for him outside."

That's when it hit me. My new plan. Simple. Effective. And while it might not be perfect, it makes sense. At least - perfect sense. "Tino. I've got a favor to ask you." He just kept grinning at me. I grinned right back.

* * * * *

It's been two weeks now. I don't exactly feel like a new man yet, but I'm getting there. Keara hasn't quite stopped looking at me with that disappointment in her eyes yet either, but that's OK. By the end of the drive to St. Louis she was smiling again, and that's a start.

The new car handles like a dream. Of course, compared to the old one anything would be better. Bought a Saturn. Figured it was about right - not too flashy, but a step up from that junker I used to drive. And there's nothing in the trunk. I checked.

Funny thing about trunks - you never know what's in them. Take that Thursday night a couple of weeks ago. The cops showed up at Private Pleasures after someone called in an anonymous tip that there was a large quantity of drugs in the trunk of a car there. But, as luck would have it, when they got there and searched the trunk, there were no drugs. But by then they were more interested in the body that had been staring up at them when they popped the trunk. Further investigation revealed it to be one Dennis Zeeman, who, it was discovered, was having an affair with the wife of the car's owner. The bag of poisoned Platinol they found with the body probably didn't help Paulie's case any. Poor guy. I wonder how that body got in his trunk like that? Maybe he should have asked me how I took care of it when he paid me. Oh, well. He should have known better.

Karen and I left that Friday morning. Just picked a spot on the map, a spot that turned out to be St. Louis, and headed out. She didn't like that I had taken the money, but she warmed up a bit when she saw the car. Think the idea of a new start is beginning to outweigh her anger at me. I hope.

As for Mr. Zeeman, by now he's resting comfortably in a quiet, shady plot in Johnston cemetery. He's even got a headstone, a beautiful hunk of red marble. I paid for the whole thing. Seemed the least I could do. Tino told me Paulie's wife lays flowers on the grave every day. She's getting everything in the divorce. I try not to think about the fact that she'd trade it all to have Mr. Z. back. Most of the time I can almost convince myself there was nothing else I could have done. Most of the time.

And as for me... I don't know. I've got over two hundred thousand dollars, a brand new car, and my best friend. Heading out, starting over. Don't know where I'll end up or what I'm going to do. And I don't know if I'm always going to do the right thing, or if I'm even going to always know that that right thing is. But the way I've got it figured, if God can keep working in his mysterious ways, then so can I. Makes perfect sense.
(Scene: HUSBAND and WIFE at breakfast.)

HUSBAND
We're visiting my Mother tonight and that's final.

WIFE
I'll be busy tonight.

(HUSBAND takes a vitamin pill with his orange juice.)

HUSBAND
Doing what?

WIFE
Planning your funeral. I poisoned your orange juice.

(HUSBAND drops dead.)

I told you that I would do anything so I wouldn't have to visit your Mother.
THE GREAT LAKE REVIEW

Oswego State University's foremost literary publication

We are a Student Association-funded organization which has for over 25 years showcased the artistic and literary works of the Oswego State University community. Every semester we publish and distribute a new magazine.

We are democratic in our editing procedure. As a staff composed of students only, we seek work with an original, uncompromising voice represented in a wide array of writing disciplines - playwriting, poetry, fiction, essays, commentary. The harder it shakes us by our proverbial lapels, the more likely we are to accept it.

We take any kind of artwork, but usually gravitate toward black and white photos, computer graphics and ink drawings, due to monetary restrictions. Full color everything is out of our league.

As a staff member, one has the choice to help with editing, advertising and layout, but we stray from the bureaucracy most organizations use to survive. Therefore, no egomaniacs need apply. Everyone else is welcome.

If you love to write, or feel you want to become familiar with working on a magazine staff, join us. The more the merrier. But if you just want to submit stuff, that's fine, too.