The Great Lake Review is open to submissions throughout the year. Please send your fiction, nonfiction, drama, poetry, and visual artwork as an attachment via electronic mail to the following address:

glr@oswego.edu

Please include your full name as you wish it to be printed and the genre of your piece(s) in the subject line.

*Senior Editor

Special Thanks
Cassie Beal and Scott Robinson
The English Department Faculty
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I once knew a cat
cool, black,
sleek-stricken
with Jazz;
purred
like a Harley.
Free from the platitudes
of master
and pet. Stalked
birds for sport with­
out pretension Just
ran up and laughed
as they flew away.

Dante
Matthew Boudreau

I run my fingers along the colorful tubes of lipstick lined up on top of my aunt’s dresser. I pull the cap from one and wind it up, up, until I am greeted by bold coral. This is not what I’m looking for.

I open a clam-shaped compact and press my nose against the beige powder. I love its smell, clean and fresh like a model sandwiched between ads for expensive perfumes in a fashion magazine.

I look down as I clomp around the soft carpet in a pair of my aunt’s taupe high heels. They are too big and seem to swallow my tiny feet. I turn in front of the mirror that hangs on the back of her closet door. Adorned with bulky costume jewelry, I smile at my reflection. Vibrant burnt-orange lips smile back. I feel beautiful.

Whenever my mother had off from work, she packed my sister, Alicia, and me up, and off we went in our blue station wagon to Aunt Helen’s for the day. Although the ride was only about fifteen minutes, it was full of anticipation. Sometimes instead of taking the usual roads, we would turn here and there.

“Where are we going?” I asked, as I watched trees and lights whiz by.
“We’re taking the back route,” my mom said.
“How do you know how to get there? Don’t you ever get lost?”
“No, I never get lost.”

Although Aunt Helen was really my great-aunt, everyone in my family called her “Aunt Helen.” Sometimes my aunts and uncles would call her “Hun” or “Hunna.”

“Do you need anything from the store, Hun?” my mother often asked.
I never knew where these names came from, but they were catchy. When my sister was a few years old she had this big soft doll with wild, curly hair. She named it Hunna.

In the summer, my sister and I liked to run around the backyard playing kickball or soccer with our cousins. Aunt Helen swayed back and forth, back and forth on her glider as she watched us from the screened-in porch off the back of the garage.

Visiting Hunna
Jessica Maier
There were two swings that hung from the branches of the enormous maple tree in the backyard: a plastic tire swing attached to a hefty limb by a thick yellow rope, and a flat white plastic swing of the traditional sort. My sister and I took turns alternating between the two.

When it was my turn on the white swing, I pumped my legs as hard as I could until I was soaring above the backyard. Sometimes I swung so high I feared I might flip back over the tree branch that the swing hung from. When it was time to switch swings, I allowed myself to slow down before thrusting my body from the swing across the backyard.

I sat upright in the tire swing and twisted myself around and around with my legs until the yellow rope was wound as far as it would go. I held on tight and pushed off the ground with my feet, sending myself spinning and spinning and spinning, faster and faster. When the tire swing finally stopped I climbed out and staggered through the soft grass, dizzy and nauseous. Sometimes I would lay on the ground, flat on my back, looking up at the sky, watching as it spun in azure circles above me.

In the winter, Alicia and I liked to build snowmen families. Aunt Helen always provided us with the scarves and accessories we needed to properly outfit our creations. She stood at the sink, behind the kitchen window, her hands in a bucket of warm soapy dishwater. She smiled out at us as we played. The kitchen smelled of spice from the chicken wings that she shook furiously in red hot and butter. A special treat for when we came inside.

When the weather was bad, we played in the house. Inside the front door, a door used only by paperboys, those delivering pizza, and kids dressed up as spooks on Halloween, there was a small foyer, and behind it, a set of carpeted stairs leading up to the attic. The children in the family, myself included, liked to thump, thump, thump down the stairs on their bottoms, landing in a disheveled heap in the foyer. Our parents didn’t approve of this activity, so Aunt Helen sat in the living room with her crossword puzzle books, watching us through the slats in the railing.

“Those little darlings,” she said, giggling as we tumbled down the stairs. How silly we must have looked.

Before sending us home, she handed each of us a dollar bill. She folded them up so small they seemed to drown in our tiny palms.

“Shhh,” she whispered. “Don’t tell your mother.”
Jessica Maier

popcorn, chocolates, assorted hard candies...

"Dinner's ready," I called to Aunt Helen.
"What, Jeanne?"
"I said, dinner's ready." I stuck my head into the living room to make sure she heard me.
"Oh, okay. I'll be right there."

Dinner wasn't really ready. By now, I had learned to call Aunt Helen into the kitchen about ten minutes before I actually wanted her to be there. This allowed her ample time to shuffle to the bathroom at the end of the hall and back with the help of her trusted walker.

I set a bowl of steaming hot split pea and ham soup on the table just as she was lowering herself into her chair.

"Just the way you like it." I set a soup spoon on the table for her, then walked back to the counter to retrieve the rest of her dinner: a ham sandwich, sliced diagonally, and a small pink bowl of melon cut into chunks.

When my mother had the day off she cooked dinner for the family, but she often worked evenings. My father worked overnight so he usually slept through dinner. Most of the time, my mother prepared Aunt Helen's dinner before leaving for work. She left a napkin or colorful post-it note that read "A.H.'s dinner" resting on top of the plastic wrap or tin foil that covered the dish.

She had meticulous notes written in small, tidy cursive on a napkin or sheet of lined paper left on the kitchen table with instructions for either Alicia or me to heat the dinner she had left. On hot summer days, days when we didn't want to turn the oven on, we prepared sandwiches accompanied by sliced fruit or Jell-o. Aunt Helen loved her Jell-o with a scoop of Cool-Whip on top.

On spring days, when the ground was cold and the breeze was warm, Alicia and I dragged our gymnastics mats up from the basement out into the front yard. We spent the afternoons running around flipping and twisting through the air. Aunt Helen watched us from her favorite chair in front of the living room window.

When Alicia and I weren't playing outside, Aunt Helen liked to keep an eye on the neighbors.

Visiting Hunna

“Something’s going on with those Bernards,” Aunt Helen told my mother as soon as she came in from work. “They go in, then they come out, then they go in, all day long, just like that.”

“Aunt Helen, quit spying on the neighbors,” my mother said. Then she laughed. She understood. Aunt Helen was bored. She was used to having kids running around, entertaining her. Alicia and I had long outgrown our days of kickball and building snowmen.

In the summer, Aunt Helen sat at the kitchen table eating breakfast or painting her nails. Sometimes she walked up to the sliding glass door to watch Alicia and me floating in the pool.

“How is it?” She called out to us.
“It's really nice,” one of us yelled back.
Then she hobbled into the living room and watched CNN at full volume by herself.

“Hello?” I pulled myself up onto the kitchen counter, settling my back against the cupboards as I answered my phone.
“Hey, Jess, how are you?” It was my mom.
“I'm good. What's going on?”
“Do you think you can miss classes tomorrow? I’m at the hospital with Aunt Helen and she’s not doing very well. I think you should come home in the morning and see her.” I could tell she was trying to sound optimistic, but her voice shook.
“I'll meet you at the hospital in the morning.”

Aunt Helen had been in and out of the hospital all summer due to dizzy spells. She finally came home just as the days were beginning to grow shorter and the nights were cooling down.

It was Labor Day weekend. Aunt Helen had only been home for a very short time.

“Does anyone know if Aunt Helen’s been up today?” my mom asked when
she got home from work that afternoon. Aunt Helen slept in later and later every day since she'd been sick.

Knock, knock, knock. My mother gently tapped on Aunt Helen's bedroom door.

“Aunt Helen, are you up?”

She opened the door slowly, peered into the darkened room. Aunt Helen was on the floor next to her bed. She was conscious and tried to explain to my mother what had happened. She slid off her bed onto the floor. She couldn't get up. She tried to call out to anyone who was home, but nobody heard her. She pounded on the floor with her hand, but nobody came. She had been lying on the floor for hours. Her leg was shattered and contorted underneath her body.

“Don't move, I’ll go call an ambulance,” said my mom.

Nobody had heard her call for help. Nobody had heard her pounding on the floor. Was she just imagining this? Did she go into shock and simply imagine she called for help? Somebody should have heard her. Somebody should have helped her.

An ambulance took her back to the hospital where they performed surgery, but her body was too old, too weak to recover. There was nothing more they could do.

I didn’t understand. I still don’t understand. How do you go into the hospital with a broken leg and never come home?

Alicia and I sign into the guest log at the hospital's reception desk then take the elevator up. We quietly enter the room.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Aunt Helen,” we both say.

“Oh, hello,” she says weakly.

Her skin, grey and transparent, hangs loosely over her frame. Her face, once plump and rounded, caves in around her cheek bones. The hair she used to meticulously fuss over lies limp and matted against her head, a shade of dull white like tangled cobwebs.

We chat for a minute, a small broken conversation, then she closes her eyes and dozes off.

Alicia and I take turns writing in the notebook my family keeps in the hospital room as a means to stay in touch with one another. We sit in silence for a little while then decide to leave.

“Aunt Helen, we're going to go,” one of us says.

Aunt Helen opens her eyes.

“Great girls, great girls,” she says in a soft voice as a sweet smile spreads across her face. Then she closes her eyes and drifts back to sleep.
Betsirah
Elizabeth Bishop

It's 11:13, 11:14 according to my alarm clock. yr not back from work yet. hmmn. orange
cat is sleeping, he batted me last time i woke him up. i lay down, c/ my face to the wall
so the lights you turn on won't wake me up. i put the blanket over my head. i wonder
if i want you to come in without waking me up or if i just want to pretend i do. i know
these were the kinds of questions i asked myself for my ex-boyfriend.
i forgot to turn some music on. my tanakh album always, spinning and spinning
under the window. you don't really like that album. i lived my last life in a series of
statements about me and the person i slept
on my shoulders. if i couldn't sleep, i looked out the window at the head of the bed, at
the streetlights and tried to rhyme words. if i was desperate, i would switch languages.
if i was desperate, i'd get up and take one of yr pills. not often. i wasn't sure you'd
even care but i didn't want you to think i was fucked up too. i wanted you to be able
to trust me to be solid, but i got up c/orange cat on my shoulders and swallowed a
pill. we kept the real pills and the drug/pills in separate places. between the two of us
we could get most anything from a psychiatrist, but those were lines we didn't enjoy
crossing. i told you you could make trouble just to have an excuse to use it, that's something you
need to stop saying. i never cause trouble. if i remind you of that, you look down and
say, oh yeah. like if you shut yr eyes, you'd forget you were c/me, not her. but what
if i shut mine?
you laid down next to me. you smelled the bourbon on my breath and said 'i wish you
wouldn't shoot that. this is the moment i decide i'm so tired of you or i turn over, pull you closer and say sorry i just wanted to get to sleep
quicker, i'm sorry. i can't decide which.
seconds pass. i know you are going to turn over soon and that will be my last chance
to say anything sweet to you tonight. but i'm so woozy and confused. and as is all too
common, one of us starts crying. and the other breaks out of his walls and embraces
the other. but this time you can't hear me crying. i'm afraid you're ignoring it. i sit
up, you turn closer and see. you hold yr hands out, yr thinking, 'why are you being so
difficult? why must you?' i lay on yr chest and you ran yr hands over my back and head. i kissed you hesitantly
afraid you still mad. yr not. you tell me to kiss yr mouth so you can taste the bourbon i
wasted. but you say it sweetly, like you don't mind anymore.
as we kissed i pushed yr shirt up so i can rest my hands on yr hips. i think about children
everytime i touch yr hips, and then i think that we can't wake up at 3 after a night full
of coke if i have a baby. and i move my hands lower. i don't know why yr so tall or
white or blue. even yr thighs are soft, cupped in my hands. You sit up, wrapping yr
arms around my back, and pulling off my shirt. i laugh as it gets stuck on my bracelet.
you wish i wouldn't wear jewelry to bed. i/ll choke on it someday/ you say, you hold
my face and look at me, really memorizing every line and lash. i feel perfect c/ you.
like you've been down and back, and you really know it. you press me against yr
chest so my tits rub against you every time i move to kiss a different part of yr face
or neck. i suck on yr clavicles, yr shoulder blades. i curve my tongue around yr bones
and i claim them. no one knows where to go. you have a handful of my hair, you are
keeping me close. it is purple again. the hair falls in yr face as our foreheads press
Elizabeth Bishop
together. you lay me on my back, you remove yr pants, you kiss my hips, my soft nubby
tips, and all my scars. you tickle me c/ you fingers running over my front down my
breasts and over my stomach stopping just short of my vagina. there you kiss softly,
owning, quietly. yr the only man i am attracted to that has absolutely no facial hair. yr
my girl. if anyone else heard that accidentally, they
thought it was the biggest insult. but you knew what i meant. you were my self. on
the other side.

making love.
making love.
i hated the way it sounded, until i actually heard the way it sounded.

Afterwards
Derek Holst

I'm sitting on the couch
thinking about telepathy
when the cat
comes in and licks me
on the face. it can smell
what i've been doing with its owner.
Staring into eyes not human
I realize I'm not either.
And that's the message I send.
Telepathy only has to work
one way. Radio and Television signals
respectively operate on this very principle. They are not biconditional.
There are waves that crash
against the rocks
only to lather rinse repeat.
And there are one way tickets
only waves that crash
on the shoreline of the senses
and nothing else. So why
assume telepathy is a two way highway?
What if like its lean linear 2nd cousin
Time, there was no turning back.
I'm not surprised when
the cat does nothing more than blink
once before turning away
to lick its paws. The shortest
distance between two objects
is a straight line and right now
my line of vision is that line of distance
separating Body A (me)
from Body B (her).

Body A remains stationary
on the couch while Body B gently
showersing approximately 40
feet away at an angle of
45 remains blissfully unaware
of the vast distance/difference
in comprehension of
the events just previous. The popping
of the cork
and the cumming of Champagne
and the cacophony of sex
like flesh made waves
the kind that crash
again and again 'til nothing's left
of the shore, just water.
And that's what it felt like
both bodies spent
turned liquid as well as the mattress
with no way or want to distinguish.
In the end, the dust cleared
from the hole
in the wall the bed made,
but the hole in the condom was bigger
Even now, what's been
growing in and on, and burning
Body A will be in Body B.
Body B gets out of the shower
and smiles
and the cat goes straight for her.
Geometry isn't just for humans.
Neither is telepathy.
Subjugated Independence
Amber Hickman

i don't care about
recycling, but i'm meek and
pretend that i do.

Sunrise In Orlando
Brian Phares

Once upon a time there was a man who lived in a house on a street in a town
that was a suburb of a city that was the capital of a state that was part of a country that
was a piece of a continent that sat in between two oceans on the surface of a planet.
His name was Bill, the house was blue, the street was Oak, the town was Jasper, the
city was Columbus, the state was Ohio, the country was the United States of America,
the continent was North America, the oceans were the Atlantic and Pacific, and the
planet was Earth. Bill was a very ordinary man, with an IQ of 100, an ordinary wife,
a self-involved teenage son, and a double mortgage. Bill worked in a video store. His
wife was a secretary at their son's high school, and she drove him home from soccer
practice after school every Tuesday. On the other days he normally took the bus. Bill's
son's name was Scott, and Scott didn't like soccer. But we were talking about Bill.

One sunny Saturday, Bill decided not to go to work at the video store.
"Shrek 7: Donkey's Revenge" came out last week, and if he heard that ogre scream,
"Put that down, that's my leg!" one more time in the fake Scottish accent, he was
going to hurt someone. So he called his boss and said he was sick and the boss said
"whatever" and Bill had the day off. His wife, who will not be reappearing in this
story so I don't feel the need to name her, took Scott, who will also not be reappear­
ing but I named him any ways, to a friend's house and then went to the city to spend
the weekend shopping with her sisters, all of whom Bill found to be irritating. Since
Bill had the house to himself, he planned on masturbating to Internet pornography.
His wife had long ago become disinterested in sex, afraid that even a blowjob could
result in another sullen teenager who resents them no matter how much or how
little they interject into his life. Bill had tried to sneak some time in at some dirty
websites, but with the computer located in the bedroom, where there is no TV or
bookshelves or anything, it was awkward for him to explain long gaps in time where
he would be alone in the room and reappear exhausted. He had resorted to spending
an extra-long amount of time restocking the adult section of his video store, until he
overheard the 17 year old girl who closes with him on Thursday nights commenting
to her mom that he was the "creepy guy who hangs out in the porn room all night".
Since he could no longer ogle the spread-eagled girls on the covers of the videotapes,
touching each other and promising any viewer that he (or she) could see things beyond their wildest fantasies if they purchased (or, in this case, rented) the tape. And since, because he couldn’t actually masturbate while at work, making the tape-ogling a bit of a tease, Bill was exceptionally grateful for the opportunity to pleasure himself in peace. He read the morning newspaper for an hour or so after his wife left, not wanting to rush right into the pornography, because it seemed a bit perverted to set aside a whole day for masturbation, so if he put it off for just a bit he could pretend to himself that it just happened on its own, and was not pre-planned at all. After exactly one hour of newspaper reading, he headed to the bedroom after folding the paper neatly and putting some tissues back on top, they’re in the third section, so they shouldn’t be in front of your keyboard, so he’d know how long he’d have before his cum got on the keyboard. He logged onto the internet and, after testing his site history eraser on some football sites, he began his pornography search, and soon found a promising site: "hot Catholic schoolgirl lesbian dildo action." He was unzipping his pants, unveiling his erection ready to begin the anticipated ritual, when he heard the doorbell ring. His first instinct was to ignore it; after all, how could he give up the chance to see hot Catholic schoolgirls inserting dildos into one another? But the doorbell doesn’t ring very often, and his curiosity quickly overtook him, and he carefully stuffed his erect penis back into his pants, and even more carefully zipped them back up, then erased the history file, logged off the internet, and went downstairs.

Bill opened the front door, and staring at him through the hole in the screen where Scott had hit a baseball last summer, was a man Bill had never seen before. This irritated Bill, he did not like surprises, and there was nothing more surprising than someone you didn’t know ringing your doorbell as you were trying to jerk off.

"Hello, can I help you?" Bill asked and the man quickly consulted a small, black leather notebook in his right hand, and looked up, asked Bill if he was Bill, and Bill said he was Bill. The man asked if he could come in, and Bill asked what his intentions were, the man said he meant Bill no harm, but Bill was the most important person in the man’s life, and it would mean very much if Bill would indulge the man

for a few moments and listen to what he had to say. Then he promised Bill could go back to whatever it was he had been doing, giving Bill the briefest suspicion that somehow the man knew what Bill was about to do, but he couldn’t possibly, so Bill dismissed the thought, and said he would talk to the man. But before he let him in, the house Bill wanted to know a little more, like what exactly did the man mean that Bill was the most important person in his life? The man said his name was Fillmore Danforth, a name Bill recognized but couldn’t place, and that he was a writer, he wrote a book called Sunrise in Orlando, another name Bill recognized but couldn’t place. All the vague recognitions seemed to put Bill at ease, like Fillmore was someone Bill was supposed to know, so Bill let him in. Fillmore stepped into the living room and looked around, and an expression appeared on his face that Bill interpreted as having expectations met. Bill wondered what expectations Fillmore could’ve had, Bill didn’t think Fillmore knew him, so what could Fillmore know about his living room? Fillmore sat down and asked for some tea. Bill left the room and came back a moment later with a can of Lipton Brisk raspberry flavored iced tea that had been in the refrigerator in the garage for a month because he asked Scott to get lemon and Scott got the wrong kind and didn’t return it despite Bill repeatedly asking him to. He handed it to Fillmore, who looked at the can as though it puzzled him at first, and then he smiled and pulled it open and took a large sip. He put the can down on the coffee table, careful to use a coaster, and looked up at Bill and began to speak.

He told Bill once again that his name was Fillmore Danforth and that he was a writer, and he had written a book called Sunrise in Orlando. Bill sat down in his favorite chair, the one that reclined just the way he liked it and was at the perfect angle so the evening sun didn’t cast a glare all over the TV, and nodded at Fillmore, patiently waiting for more. Fillmore began to give the speech that he had prepared while he sat in his rented car in Bill’s driveway, mentally preparing to meet Bill while Bill was mentally preparing to look at internet porn. Fillmore began to give the speech that he had prepared while he sat in his rented car in Bill’s driveway, mentally preparing to meet Bill while Bill was mentally preparing to look at internet porn. Fillmore told Bill that the book he had written, Sunrise in Orlando, was his life’s work. It was supposed to be a bestseller, the Great American Novel that would put Fillmore on the literary map. He spent six years writing it and another five shopping it to publishers, trying to get it on shelves. When he was finally able to go to Barnes & Nobles and see his work available for sale, it was the best day of his life. However, the book was a bomb. It didn’t sell. No one bought it. Every copy published went back to the publisher, unsold. They tried giving it away at libraries and book shows, and no one wanted it. Fillmore
Brian Phares

couldn’t understand it. He had worked so hard his whole life to be a writer, spent his
whole life studying the art of writing, majored in the writing arts in college, reading what
his professors told him, ostracizing friends and family who told him to find a fall back
career, writing couldn’t be everything, but to Fillmore it was, writing was everything.
How could people tell him he couldn’t write when it was all he ever wanted to do, to
create worlds, worlds where he could manipulate the players in his drama however he
chose? And so, after college he married a cute girl from one of his English classes, a
girl who was an Education major and was only in the class to fill a general requirement,
and really had no interest in literature of the Beat Generation. But Fillmore was cute
and passionate and she felt she could really write the Great American Novel, so she
married him and they moved to Seattle and she got a job teaching kindergarten and
he wrote all day and all night. And after six years he finished Sunrise in Orlando, and
when it wasn’t published, the bills started piling up and she couldn’t keep supporting
them both, and when three more years went by without a publishing deal she had had
enough, so she left. Fillmore hadn’t even noticed she was gone until two years later
when the book finally got published and suddenly he had no one to celebrate with.

It seems that Sunrise in Orlando hadn’t bombed completely. One copy had
been sold at the Borders bookstore in the Twin Pines Mall in North Jasper, Ohio, and
it had been charged to the Visa credit card owned by Bill. When his publisher dropped
Fillmore, telling him he’d only sold one copy of Sunrise in Orlando, Fillmore only
thought, One person bought it. One person understood.

And so Fillmore went through the arduous process of tracking Bill down,
of first finding where the book was bought, how it was purchased, who bought it,
cashing in the little celebrity he had gained by having a book universally panned by
critics, and he eventually found Bill. And here he was. He wanted to know why Bill
bought Sunrise in Orlando. Why Bill was the only one who saw it on the shelf, was
entranced by the cover image Fillmore had personally approved, had read the plot
synopsis on the dust jacket and was intrigued by it, and had spent the $24.99 that the
publisher suggested, the $24.99 that, after taxes and publisher fees and agency fees and
whatever other fees, left Fillmore making 10 dollars for his life’s work.

Bill thought about it, and as he thought, the vague recognitions he had felt when Fillmore first interrupted his unplanned day of masturbation became solid
memories, he did know who Fillmore Danforth was, and he did buy his book. He
pictures the shelf in the den where Sunrise in Orlando sat, unopened and unread, fixed
between Animal Farm and On the Road in the collection of books that Bill keeps in the
den to appear more intelligent than he actually is to people who visit him. Bill pondered
whether or not he should tell Fillmore the truth: that he mistakenly bought Sunrise in
Orlando thinking it was a travel guide, and upon discovering it was actually a heart-
wrenching account of a son looking to reconcile with his estranged father before he died
terminal cancer, put the book away on the shelf where it’s stood for the last two years,
unopened and unread. Or, should he tell him a lie, that Sunrise in Orlando was good,
that it was the best book he ever read, that Fillmore should leave his house right now to
get work on a follow-up novel? So Bill did the only thing he could do: he told Fillmore
that his information was incorrect. He had not purchased Sunrise in Orlando, he had
never heard of it. However, he was the victim of identity theft a while back (not actually
true, but something Bill had heard of on Dateline a couple weeks ago), and perhaps
whoever stole his identity was the one who had bought Sunrise in Orlando. But since
it was an anonymous case of identity theft, Fillmore would probably never know who
it was that owned his book. Fillmore looked at Bill as if he had just told him the Sun
was blue or that God and the Devil were the same person and they owned an IHOP in
Louisville, Kentucky and that IHOP was the place to be. He stood up, dejected, defeated,
unsure of anything in the world, and headed toward the door. He paused for a moment
and turned back to the screen with the one hole over his right eye and the screen over
in Bill’s eyes, he went back to his rental car, a 1998 Dodge Stratus. After sitting in the
car and looking at the front door for a moment, watching Bill watching him watching,
he pulled out and drove down Oak Street to the corner, then made the turns and drove
the distance required of him to leave Jasper, Ohio. Bill watched him get to the corner

Sunrise In Orlando
Brian Phares

and drive out of sight, then headed back upstairs, where he sat at the computer and logged onto the internet and found again the site that promised him hot Catholic schoolgirls engaging in lesbian dildo action, but he found that he couldn't get excited by the young girls in their plaid skirts, no matter how high their skirts were or what they did with the other young girls around them. He tried to tell himself how hard that rubber dildo was and how it must have felt in that girl's pussy, but it didn't matter.

So he gave up on his plans of an afternoon of masturbating alone, and instead went to his den, where he took the dusty copy of *Sunrise in Orlando* off its shelf, sitting in his favorite chair, the one that reclined just the way he liked it, and didn't get that glare on the TV in the evening sun, opened it and read its beginning lines... and soon discovered why no one bought it on purpose. Just as he finished the first chapter, and was ready to put the book back on its dusty shelf, he looked up and saw Fillmore, standing in the doorway, watching him through the hole in the right side of the screen.

Fillmore, who had turned around after leaving the town limits of Jasper, Ohio, with the intention of giving Bill a copy of *Sunrise in Orlando*, one of the many copies Fillmore carried with him at all times just in case, because he felt that Bill was now his friend. Fillmore walked up to the front door that led into the living room and through the hole in the right side of the screen. Fillmore, who had turned around after leaving the town limits of Jasper, Ohio, with the intention of giving Bill a copy of *Sunrise in Orlando*, one of the many copies Fillmore carried with him at all times just in case, because he felt that Bill was now his friend.

Fillmore walked up to the front door that led into the living room and through the hole in the screen saw Bill reading the book he claimed to have not owned and Fillmore entered the house looking more dejected and defeated then he did when he left. He supposed for a moment that he should be happy, Bill really did have the book, he did, and now they could talk about it and why it didn't work, but no, they were past that, Bill had lied, a stranger had lied, a stranger who was supposed to be the only one who understood. Bill stammered and stuttered but did not speak, his mind was somewhere between yelling at Fillmore for entering his home without his permission and explaining the plot of his book was old and tired and maybe that's why it didn't sell.

Fillmore walked past Bill into the kitchen and Bill followed him, confused, until Fillmore plunged a knife into his chest. Bill crumpled to the floor, grabbed at Fillmore's belt, and looked up at him with an expression that said, *why did you just stab me?* Fillmore looked down at him with a sad smile on his face and said, "I know it was you, Fredo. You broke my heart." Fillmore was impressed with himself that he thought up such a cool thing to say so quickly, but Bill was in no state of mind to get the reference, and he slumped down, his last thoughts of who the hell this Fredo guy was. Fillmore looked down at Bill and dropped the knife on the floor next to him. He went into the living room and got the copy of *Sunrise in Orlando* off the cushion of Bill's favorite chair and placed it next to Bill's body, assuring that whoever found him like that would be sure to link the book to his death. Fillmore then helped himself to another raspberry iced tea and left the house, getting into his rented Dodge Stratus and driving down the same roads he did before, only this time without turning around. As he drove, he wondered how long it would take for the police to track him down and question him and link his fingerprints to those on the handle of the knife that killed Bill and how his trial would go and how long his prison sentence would be, and after thinking all this he began writing a new book in his head, a book about a writer who tried his best but was rejected by the world, and how the one man he thought understood betrayed him, how that betrayal drove him to a desperate act. He would write the book in prison, and everyone would buy it because it was such a high-profile case, he would finally have that best seller he wanted. Memoirs sell better than novels anyways, people love to read about celebrities at their worst, just look at the magazines at any grocery store checkout. This would be the book that would make his career, and afterwards he'd write a sequel about his time in prison, then a third once he got out about society rejecting him as a former convict. But first he had to write his true crime drama, and in the opening page, after he thanked his lawyers and God, he planned on thanking Bill.
Three, Two, One, Jump
Michael Morrisey

The thin metal walkway is warm under my wet feet. I shiver slightly from the cool wind blowing across my bare torso, and continue to put one foot directly in front of the other. Although the metal I’m walking on is well supported and about half a foot wide, it makes me nervous to be standing so high up with absolutely no safety equipment.

I hear a shout and look around just in time to see Mickey’s splash as he lands in the river. A grin splits my face and I hurry to get to the jump spot by the time Mickey resurfaces. “Well?” I call as I lean over, feeling a touch of vertigo on looking down through the 30 feet of empty space that was now all that stood between my upper body and the water. “What did I tell you?”

Mickey laughs and starts swimming back to the riverbank. “That was awesome!” he shouts. “Oh, my god! I never thought it would be...I mean, I just thought it was this stupid thing you liked to do, kind of suicidal, actually, whatever. But, oh, man, Mike! We are definitely coming back here tomorrow!”

Bobby nods his head, but I notice that he has his back firmly pressed against the metal column behind him. “That’s what I thought when I first heard about it, that it was a pretty dumb thing to do,” Bobby says. The look on his face says that those same thoughts, more or less, are still in his head.

Behind and above us rise an aging, and slowly rusting, train trestle. The rust flakes off in our hands in places, or in our hair if we happen to be hanging by our fingertips, but we aren’t worried about the solidity of the structure. This bridge has plenty of years left to its life in which it’ll remain strong enough to support the frequent trains it was build for, let alone the minimal strain of holding up an occasional 150-pound kid.

I laugh at the expression on Bobby’s face. “You sure you changed your mind?” I tease, but then leave off. No reason to get Bobby all huffy today when it’s so nice out. Now that my heart’s calmed down off the rush from jumping and my skin and shorts have dried slightly in the strong sun and light breeze, I’m really feeling the effects that such a beautiful day can have on a body. My mind feels bright and my body energetic, the idea of spending all day outside is slowly easing thoughts of work and responsibility out of my head.

“When do we need to leave in order to get to the camping spot on time?” I call to Worth. Worth is another forty feet above the jump spot, spread out on the top of the train trestle, contemplating jumping off.

“I dunno,” Worth calls down to me. “Maybe...well, we’ll want to be there before dark so that we can set up the tent. Plus, the path goes through the woods, along the cliff, and there’s some parts where it comes pretty close to the edge. I think two spots on the path are like a slide, going down towards the cliff. So I don’t really want to walk it with a flashlight. Maybe we should be getting going, then, so that we’ll be sure of...safety.” He edges towards the abyss before him, looks around slowly, and draws back again.

I shrug on my t-shirt and, hand over hand, begin the climb that’ll put me even with Worth’s position. “What’s going on, man?” I call. “You’ve done this plenty of times before.” My right hand slips from the flaking metal bar and I haul myself onward with my left. “You know perfectly well you can do it.”

Worth eyes my ascent. “Yeah, but it’s different every time. Who knows what’s floating in that water right now. I don’t like the idea of hitting a sunken log from this high up.” As I pull myself up the last few feet and steady myself, Worth turns back towards the river. “You gonnajump, too?” he asks. I shrug and grab the pipe running near my feet. I turn my head to look out towards the horizon and cock my head sideways. There’s a long distance to the ground, and it would be pretty horrible to fall the wrong way and land somewhere among the train trestle’s support beams. I glance back to Worth, jerk my head towards the horizon, and he shakes his head.

I start to think he isn’t going to jump. We talk about the river, how it splits the Indian Reservation from the surrounding land. We talk about the trailers on the Reservation side and the people who come out to sit on picnic benches and watch us jump. He points to the harbor at the end of the river where it empties into Lake Erie less than a mile from where we are. I point to the beach bar where I work, and we both laugh nervously about how far we can see from so high up.

We stay standing there for about five minutes. I can’t even blame the guy, I’ve never jumped from this high up, and it would probably take me hours to work up the courage. But the heat starts to get to me and the water starts to look pretty enticing. The only way down from this high up on the trestle, besides jumping, is to
climb down, and that wouldn't look too impressive to the other guys down there. I take my shirt off and say, "I'm still not jumping, but I guess I'm thinking about it."

One second he's standing there looking off at the horizon and the next he must have finally worked up the courage to jump, because he says, "Now?" and then stands up. With nothing left to hold on to, no metal around him, all of seventy feet dropping away below him in a tangle of oxygen and oxidizing metal, Worth seems a bit dangerous and ridiculously confident.

I get up and we stand side by side, knees slightly bent and arms cautiously out at our sides in case a sudden breeze comes along. I breathe out, in, out once more, and turn my head slightly. "Ready?" I ask.

Worth shakes his head. "Hell, no," he replies. "On three?"

I grin. "Three."

"Two," says Worth.

"One," we breathe together, and together we leap ... Holy shit, we fall for hours. And then in a second it's over, and I'm hitting the water, and swimming towards the bank. But I feel every passing moment as I'm falling. The air rushing around my face. Where should I have my hands? From this far up, I've heard of people's skin splitting open when they hit the water. Remember to keep my body straight, point my toes even. The less resistance when I get to the water, the better. Did I empty my pockets? How far is this fall, anyway? One more second, that's all. One more. One more ...

It's probably about seventy feet. I'm still enthralled with jumping from the bottom of the bridge—thirty feet still scares me. And I was done jumping for the day anyway. I had already put my t-shirt back on and dried off. But I climbed up, because there was only one kid up there, and Worth seemed to need some moral support. And now I'm falling seventy feet and hitting the river at a speed I wouldn't even be able to figure out with the help of my physics teacher.

My body hits the water, feet first. Soles start stinging. Now my hands—must have been holding them wrong, stinging palms—now my shout is cut off and transformed into a spurt of bubbles until I gain control of my throat again and shut it—tightly. Gravity gives way, sponge-ily, to the resistance of the moving water beneath me. Internal organs slow down a fraction of a second behind my body, giving me a vertiginous feeling, although I'm no longer looking down from above.

Can I touch the bottom? I kick my feet out, testing, letting out a slow trail of bubbles as I twist in the water, feeling the freedom that the river has given my body. I begin to pull myself with my arms towards the bank, feeling the strength in the tendons of my arms as my hands slice through the waters, fingers slashing, creating currents of my own within the slow and steady flow of the river.

My legs kick out behind me, crazy that this works but it does, and I'm pushing my body through the water, swimming, feeling stronger, more capable, more sleek than I ever will up there. I push down on the water, feel its resistance, feel its give, and miraculously the resistance is greater than the give, enough to propel me upwards. I cut lengthwise through the river, rising slowly toward the surface. In a minute I will break through the barrier, refuel with more oxygen, and when I reach the bank, start the climb back up. Feel the rich black dirt clinging to my wet hands and crumbling beneath my feet, less resistant in my wake than the water. But for now I am free, and my body believes that it will be able to do this forever. I don't have to eat, I don't have to breathe. For these sparse seconds, I am totally self-sufficient.

I head to the surface, suddenly aware of an intense need for oxygen. For the first time, it hits me that jumping from so high up will plunge me a lot deeper into the river. My arms push against the water, but the water moves too easily out of the way. The surface seems just one stroke away. Just one more. I open my eyes to the muddy water, frantically kick my legs in an effort to get to the top before my lungs gave out. One more stroke ... One more ... One more ... Just one ...

I break the surface and gasp fresh air into my lungs, thoughts of a watery grave subsiding into the background of my pride at having jumped off the top of the trestle for the first time. Worth is treading water nearby, and he gives me a watery grin as we start heading back to the bank.
Caffeine Sleep
Alek Krenichyn

I lie a full two inches above my mattress, a quivering mass of hyper-taut tendons woven in a claustrophobic lattice. I am aware of the synapses of nerve-driven electrons shooting the length of my body, only to echo back at a doubled haste. I imagine that if I was a creature of bioluminescence, I might look like a carnival ride gone mad. A glowing automaton on my slab of thin air, I’m shaking in my post-mortem efforts to avoid the brilliantly pale light.

My Body’s Rollercoaster
Shawn Lucas

I sit at my desk along with a handful of other Schenectady High School students in a dark classroom. Mr. Richardson, the health teacher that we all suspect is a drug dealer, sits at his desk in the corner.

All eyes are focused on a TV at the front of the room, which emits a soft glow. I shift in my seat. A disembodied male voice spews out facts about the Human Immunodeficiency Virus as flashes of test tubes, doctors, and people looking through microscopes appear on the screen.

An intense heat comes over me, as if I were standing directly in front of a blazing campfire. Sweat drips down my forehead and I wipe it off. I pull my shirt away from my body, trying to cool off. A quick look around the room tells me no one else is hot. A feeling of nausea sets in. I rest my head on my hand, ignore the heat, and return my attention to the video. The scene switches to a gymnasium. Magic Johnson stands in front of some old wooden bleachers, holding a basketball. He starts talking about his experience with AIDS. My stomach begins to feel like one of those volcano science experiments. It’s as if there’s a cupful of baking soda in there and someone has poured vinegar down my throat. I get up and quickly leave the room.

The bright hall hurts my eyes. I put a hand against the wall and stop to orient myself before continuing down the hall toward the bathroom. I walk in and stop in the middle of the bathroom, which is empty. My body won’t let me go a step further. I suddenly get the idea that I might feel better if I bend over, as if trying to touch my toes.

Everything is black. My head hurts. I hear a long guttural scream. The scream rapidly intensifies and as it does, my head begins to ache more and more. It’s a steady and rapid pounding, as if someone’s repeatedly smashing a brick into my skull. My mind is disconnected from my body. I’m not in control of myself. I can’t move. I’m floating somewhere between conscious and unconscious.

Upon that realization, my mind’s consumed with one thing. Reconnection. I concentrate on coming to. I shake uncontrollably. I slowly begin to feel the sensation of my eyelids trying to open. They don’t quite make it. I will them to open. The hammering in my head intensifies and the scream gets louder. I can feel my body again. My eyes burst open.
The headache quickly ebbs away and I feel little pain. I'm lying face down on the bathroom floor. My chin has a funny feeling, like it has fallen asleep. I quickly pick my head off the ground, sickened at the thought of where my face has just been. I get up, a little shakily, still disoriented but feeling much better than before. My chin itches. I rub it with my left hand. I look around the bathroom, it's still empty.

I stumble out of the bathroom in a haze, intent on going back to the classroom. I'm having trouble keeping my balance so I place my hand against the wall and let it support me as I walk down the hall. I don't get very far before I see my acting and writing teacher, Mr. Dugan, coming from the opposite way.

"Hi, Shawn."

"Mr. Dugan." My words are drawn out and have the tint of confusion. I'm acutely aware that I sound like I'm stoned. He must have that idea too because he laughs. As he gets closer I take my hand off the wall and slump against it. He puts his arm around me and stops me from falling over.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah," I say.

"You're bleeding." He points at the wall.

There's a bloody handprint streaked along the wall.

I stare at it for a moment. "That's my blood?" I ask.

"Yeah."

My eyes go wide and I look at my hand, thinking I'd cut it.

"No, your chin," he says.

I wipe my chin with my hand and look at it. My hand's covered in blood and I don't have any sensation in my chin.

"Do you have class right now?"

"Yeah, health class."

"I'm going to take you to the nurse." Mr. Dugan leads me to the nurse's office on the other side of the high school. We enter the small, two-room office. The nurse comes over and sits me down on a chair. Mr. Dugan relates the story to her and she calls my mom. She takes out a blood pressure cuff and checks my blood pressure.

"Your blood pressure's abnormally high," she says. She places the ends of a stethoscope in her ears. She lifts my shirt and the cold instrument presses against my chest. I shiver. She listens for a moment. "Your heartbeat is fast," she says. "Tell me what happened."

I launch into the story but the nurse doesn't offer much, other than advising me to go to the hospital. My mom shows up shortly after; we only live four blocks from the high school. I'm reluctant, but I let her drive me to the hospital. While in the waiting room I feel another episode coming on. This must be what it feels like to be a marshmallow Peep that gets put in a microwave, its fluffy insides expanding outward as it heats up, until it finally explodes.

"Hey, I'm going to pass out again," I say.

I wake up in a chair, being held up by my mom. A male nurse is wafting smelling salts under my nose. They smell bitter and strong. Smelling salts work because they release ammonia gas, which triggers a reflex that makes a person breathe faster; I must have woken up to get away from that acrid smell. The nearby nurses all make a big fuss but I insist I'm fine now. I go into an examination room and a doctor comes in. Here we go again with the stethoscope and blood pressure cuff. Now my blood pressure and heartbeat are fine. One of the nurses comes in, sticks me with a needle and draws some blood. The doctor runs some tests on my heart. He gives me some Novocain and sutures the gash on my chin. Then he lets me go home. By this point, I can feel my jaw again. I wish I couldn't. This is what it'd feel like to get hit with an uppercut by a boxer.

The doctor calls with the test results a few days later. As far as he can tell, I'm perfectly healthy. He doesn't know why I passed out. I'm not in the habit of getting more than four or five hours of sleep so I assign blame to that and forget about it.

I'm in my sophomore year of college at SUNY Oswego, NY and I have to take a class to become a Resident Assistant; it gives information that someone might need for the job. The class is in a big lecture room in Lanigan Hall. Each row consists of one long desk with lots of attached swivel chairs. I sit in one of the middle rows. My friends, Jeff and Jon, sit beside me.

We have a guest speaker today, a nurse with blonde hair in her late thirties. Her topic is Sexually Transmitted Diseases, specifically how to identify them. As she lectures, she keeps clicking a remote control, which advances a series of slides on the big projection screen at the front of the classroom. She comes to a succession of
Shawn Lucas

slides, pictures of peoples’ diseased penises and vaginas. There are pictures of genitals covered in blue spots, penises with various colored pus seeping out, vaginas covered in little white dots on the inside, vaginas that look as if someone has barfed in them, penises with moldy lesions, vaginas that have been turned inside out and are slowly consuming their owners, like some flesh eating parasite. It’s a bit pointless. If a resident ever comes to me complaining that they might have an STD, I’m sure as hell not going to examine their crotch for symptoms of Gonorrhea or Crabs.

After about a dozen of these pictures, I start to get a little hot. I flash back to that time in high school, during health class. This might be a repeat incident. I should get up and leave for a minute, to clear my head, but I’m too proud. I don’t want to admit that the pictures are getting to me. So I stay. Soon I begin to feel like one of those little roast chickens, spinning on a stick in an oven at some “upscale” fast food chain. As I get hotter, I get dizzier. As I get dizzier, I get sicker. The classroom and the people in it seem to recede into nothingness. I know it’s coming on again. I decide to go get some water, but I don’t even make it out of my seat.

The next thing I know is the murky blackness where I cease to exist. It reminds me of having a big thick blanket over my head that blocks out my sight and hearing, except with the addition of being underwater. I’m incorporeal. I don’t want to be this way. I want my body back. I want to be completely conscious. I want to open my eyes. I want to see. I want to hear. I want to be. I discover something while I’m in that ethereal state. When in this state, you cease to be human. You are one thing and one thing only. You are want.

A professor once told me that want was the Original Sin. He also said a person has two parts, the conscious and the unconscious, and that want is a product of the unconscious. In this room today, I know he’s right.

I want to repair the natural link. I concentrate on that want. I become aware of things. I can feel my body. I can hear noise. I concentrate harder. The noise becomes peoples’ voices but I can’t make out what they are saying. I want to really hear them. I can’t. I can feel my eyelids, closed tight. I want them to open. They won’t. What if I can’t get back? What if I stay like this forever? My unconscious mind flies into a panic at the next question. What if instead of reconnecting, I slip further and further away until I’m not even want, until I’m nothing?

Want infinitely intensifies. I hear a scream. It’s my scream. My body quakes frenziedly. The scream gets louder and that familiar brick pounds into my head and
Shawn Lucas

exhaustion, lack of food, and anxiety. One or more of those triggers leads to a fast heart rate and high blood pressure, quickly followed by a slow heart rate and low blood pressure, which causes insufficient blood circulation. It's the body's version of a rollercoaster ride. After the drop, the blood vessels in the legs dilate, trapping blood there. Not enough blood reaches the brain and all of this ultimately results in fainting. The symptoms of sweating, nausea, dizziness, difficulty breathing, hearing, and seeing are typical. During the period of unconsciousness, it isn't abnormal to have muscle spasms in the limbs, which can cause mild trembling. People usually wake up pretty quickly and of their own accord. A recommended prevention method is to lie down on a flat surface when the symptoms strike. When lying down, the head's at the same level as the heart and since the blood doesn't have to fight gravity, it's easier for it to reach the brain, thus providing a better chance at staying conscious. Vasovagal has a tendency to recur. It becomes a matter of recognizing one's triggers and either avoiding them or training oneself not to be affected by them.

The same year, my friend Amanda and I are at a rock concert in the Orvis Activities Center at SUNY Alfred, NY. The gymnasium's packed. I didn't think there would be as many people as there are. The opening band, Ima Robot, takes the stage and plays a couple songs. People are already jumping up and down, waving their arms in the air, throwing up the "rock horns" (raising the index and pinky fingers, while holding the other two fingers down with the thumb), holding up their illuminated cell phones, and shouting and screaming for the opening band, so I figure this was going to be an awesome show. Amanda and I manage to worm our way pretty close to the stage. It's amazing how close complete strangers are willing to be to one another at a concert. It's one of the few places where it's socially acceptable to have your crotch mashed up against your neighbor and then proceed to scream and jump up and down like a kangaroo on acid.

Someone brushes against me from behind and I feel a sharp prick on my shoulder. My friend Tony told me an urban myth about this club where people would approach someone and stick them with a needle contaminated with the AIDS virus and then say, "Welcome to the club." According to snopes.com, the urban legend and various takes on it have been circulating Philadelphia, New York City, San Diego, Oakland, Seattle, Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Mexico, Australia, Ecuador, and Germany, among other places, since the mid-nineties. It stems from another popular urban legend known as "AIDS Mary," in which a man has a one night stand with a stranger and wakes up the next morning to find her gone and the message "welcome to the world of AIDS" written in lipstick on his bathroom mirror. I'd like to say my mind doesn't immediately go there but it does.

I rub my shoulder. It itches. I scratch it. I try to focus on the concert. My shoulder still itches. I tell myself it's all in my mind. It still itches. I scratch it again. I begin to think about it. I'm acting like an unreasonable fool but it's too late. The seed's been planted. I get hot. I know what's happening. I start to feel dizzy. I don't want to pass out right in the middle of the crowd because it would be embarrassing. I'm not even worried about getting stepped on or anything, my dignity is all that matters. My stomach turns. I turn to Amanda.

"I have to get some air," I say.
"Are you alright?"
"Yeah."

I take a step toward the back of the room and falter. Amanda stops me from falling. She puts my arm around her and helps to support me as we make our way back through the crowd.

"I might pass out," I say. "If I do, don't worry. I'll be fine."

I lean on her because I can't keep my balance anymore. I feel my mind melting away. I begin to stumble. My feet slip out from under me and Amanda helps me shuffle through the back of the crowd. I look over my shoulder and see a short balding kid in the crowd turn and stare at me. I can't tell if he's concerned or only curious. We make it through the crowd to the back of the room. There's a box in front of me and I slump over on it for support. I hold onto it tightly, to keep from falling over. I should lie down on the floor like the doctor told me to but right now I don't remember him saying it. I'm like a man crossing the street that sees a bus coming at him and freezes instead of getting out of the way.

"I'll be right back." Amanda goes to talk to the techie behind the control panel.

I rest my head on the box and close my eyes. I become aware that my body's somehow intangible. I can't see or hear anything. I'm not worried this time. No great panic sets in. I know all I have to do is want to get back. I want. I hear a loud noise in my head, but it's different from the
Shawn Lucas

It's not a scream. It's rock music. My head's thumping, though it doesn't feel as painful as the previous times.

I wrestle my way back into consciousness and feel my eyelids open. I'm lying on the floor. The techie and Amanda are standing over me, as well as a couple concert goers. The techie helps me to my feet. The concert is still going strong. A paramedic comes over and takes me out into the hallway. Amanda follows.

“What happened?” the paramedic asks.

“I got dizzy and I passed out.”

He pulls out his instruments.

“Let me save you some time,” I say. “My blood pressure is going to be too high and my heartbeat’s fast.”

If my blood were circulating better, I'm sure I would be flushed with embarrassment. I wish Amanda hadn't seen me faint.

He looks up at me.

“This has happened a couple times before,” I say.

“Should we call an ambulance?” he asks.

“No.”

“Are you sure? There could be something wrong.”

“Yeah, I'm fine.”

“Can I at least check your blood pressure?” He holds up the blood pressure cuff.

“Knock yourself out.” Why does this paramedic have to make a big deal of what I’d rather ignore?

He wraps the band around my arm and starts to pump. The little needle begins to rise.

“It’s higher than it should be.”

“I told you it would be,” I say.

“You’re sure you don’t want to go to the hospital? You could have a concussion.”

“I don’t. Thanks, though,” I say. “I just want to go back to the concert.”

He shrugs. “Drink some water.” He packs up his gear.

I stand up.

Amanda smiles. “Are you ok?” she asks.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“You scared me.”

My Body’s Rollercoaster

“Sorry,” I say. I hate looking weak in front of others. My pride has always been my ability to not need help from anyone—an ability I admit that is often pure counterfeit and conceit.

“Let’s go back inside.”
Beasts
Nicole Boucher

The cold vomit in cages 3, 19, and 27 is being used as pillows. There is a slimy green cloth in a bucket of cleaning agent expecting me to escort it over all the fecal matter and urine the back room has to offer. There are pools of congealed blood still in the operating room. The doctor expects me to feed and water his patients but he will never notice that I don't. On a better day I'd have at least peeled the blood off the floor.

For a surgery day it really is a tame collection of disasters, no great feat to put back in order, but earlier this afternoon, I just didn't feel like it. From eleven thirty until four, I am alone, the only resident of this sad little island floating in the center of an empty parking lot sea. I hate the sounds and smells of lunch break, animals screaming and wheezing for attention, smells that don't occur in nature. I never notice until after Dr. Gray leaves.

Although there wasn't much debris, today was a bad surgery day. In addition to the kitty abortions and doggy teeth cleanings, there was a bone surgery. The doctor didn't stop barking orders and throwing things the whole time. This is the wrong pack.

Well, aren't you going to answer the phone? Hold this out of my way ... I said hold it! Don't answer the phone now! Pay attention! Don't lean over the incision! Do you know what damage you could have done if you had gotten dust in there? Finally he left and I was glad until I realized he was gone. My hands were still shaking when the phone beeping in my ear, waiting for my blood to start moving again.

I considered getting rid of him, the rott I mean. But there would be no sin to atone for. The cat was old, and a twenty-five dollar cremation fee and an eighteen-dollar urn came to a fraction of the price Dr. Gray would have charged to nurse the old thing back to life.

The next week, a beagle came in with some sort of intestinal problem. I think it swallowed crocheting needles or something. It got sick all over because Dr. Gray couldn't decide what room he wanted to examine the thing in. After the beagle had tracked blood and diarrhea all over the building, the doctor decided to go to The Olive Garden with his wife and do the needle-retrieval surgery after lunch. It took two hours to clean the mess, and when I tried to anesthetize the beast for surgery, the beast leapt up and crunched its teeth into my thigh. I pounded my fist into its thick little skull until it let go. I was briefly concerned that I had injured it, but when I leaned down to examine its skull, it clawed my face. I accidentally kicked it across the room, twice. I'd seen the doctor kick dozens of dogs, but never in the stomach. He never asked about the dog, or my face, or my bloody jeans.

Beasts
dr. to yell, or at least question me when I called him at home with the news, but he just asked if I wouldn't mind telling the owners myself. It's not my job, but he was going out to brunch with his family. I braced myself for sobbing and vicious accusations of murder, accusations that I would have to deny. But when the owners came there was no sobbing, no need for the extra box of tissues I put out, no threats of lawsuits. An older man and woman just came in and calmly picked up the cardboard box containing the bloated body of their former pet.

I cleaned like a madwoman that night, even pulled the wet fur and feces out of the drain in the dog run. But the more penance I did, the more I realized there was no sin to atone for. The owners didn't care. In fact, I had done them a favor. The cat was old, and a twenty-five dollar cremation fee and an eighteen-dollar urn came to a fraction of the price Dr. Gray would have charged to nurse the old thing back to life.

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But this afternoon, I wasn't thinking about the beagle or the waterlogged cat when the phone rang; in fact, I'd almost forgotten them completely. Instead, I was remembering the color of the doctor's face when he shouted at me during the bone surgery. When he said, "What's wrong with you?" his face was the exact same shade as the pink couch in my efficiency apartment. It was Dr. Gray on the phone; he was coming back from lunch early. He said he had been going over some patient files at home and had come across some discrepancies. He said he'd wanted to talk. In person.

I didn't intend to kill the first, that one was chance. An older cat that came in with severe dehydration. Dr. Gray slowly pressed liquid into its leg and had me set up an IV before he left to go sailing. I didn't notice that the drip was too fast until the next morning. It was hard to miss though, since the cat had drowned. I expected the doctor to yell, or at least question me when I called him at home with the news, but he just asked if I wouldn't mind telling the owners myself. It's not my job, but he was going out to brunch with his family. I braced myself for sobbing and vicious accusations of murder, accusations that I would have to deny. But when the owners came there was no sobbing, no need for the extra box of tissues I put out, no threats of lawsuits. An older man and woman just came in and calmly picked up the cardboard box containing the bloated body of their former pet.

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Beasts
in the back and pulled the ‘Deceased’ folder from the cabinet. My hands shook so 
badly every scrap of paper in the file fluttered to the ground. I knelt under his desk and 
collected the patient cards, tried to put them back in chronological order, but I couldn’t 
remember what month came first.

I could remember how to count, though. There were only seven files with 
“deceased” in my handwriting. I counted again and again, all the blood in my body 
seized up into my head and burned my face. I found the drowned cat and the beagle 
that ate knitting needles, and set them aside. There was the card for the orange cat that 
just happened to be wearing a leash in cage 6 when the latch just happened to pop 
open and snag the strap as the cat jumped down. Cause of death: allergic reaction to 
medication. There was the blind cockatiel that escaped its cage and made the mistake 
of flying into a ceiling fan. The biology textbook it collided with midair probably didn’t 
help either. Cause of death: old age. I set aside the file of the disgusting little wheezy 
pug with the front left leg amputation that died when the doctor was in California for 
the week. The dog probably would have made it if someone had come in to administer 
the antibiotics, or food and water. Cause of death: infection.

I found the file for the kitten that clawed the hell out of my arm and then 
died of a vaccine overdose. There was no cause of death on the sheet because the 
doctor didn’t bother to show up for work that Saturday. I’d been there from 7am to 
noon canceling and rescheduling appointments. There was the chocolate lab in for 
boarding that got its head shut in the metal door on the way back from an impromptu 
walk. Cause of death: heart attack.

That was all, only seven. I scrambled around the dirty linoleum floor and felt behind the “Advantage” display for the other cards. Finally, I found two more that 
had slid behind the desk. The fat Persian cat that got out of his cage before surgery 
and not only nearly escaped through the front door, but also managed to urinate on my 
brand new sweater after taking it to a corner of the X-ray room and using it as either 
a mattress or a lover. After a successful bladder stone removal, I gave the hairball an 
extra sedative to help it relax; it never woke up. Cause of death: reaction to anesthesia.

The amount of anesthesia was underlined three times.

I almost didn’t make it to the mop bucket in time. I hated how the smell of 
my vomit was indistinguishable from the vomit I’d been wiping up for the past four 
years. The last file was the same, highlighted, circled, underlined. I knew there had 
been complaints, like owners upset because their dog’s nails had been cut and bled 
on the carpet, but I thought it was ok. I thought my work was undetectable. I thought 
I had hidden it so well that no one would dare accuse me of anything. Except for the 
last one, the file that was missing, the file that was at that moment flying down the 
highway on the passenger seat of a 1986 Firebird to see me. In person.

The cat had been brought to the doctor’s house by some anonymous individual 
who left the animal in a cardboard box on the porch. It had been hit by a car square in 
the face. Dr. Gray said the front of the skull was split right in two and opened the cat’s 
mouth to show me the cracked jaw. He told me to get a warm washcloth and some 
hydrogen peroxide to clean it up. I thought mud was crusted into the fur until I saw 
the peroxide made it fizzle. He insisted I scrub, hard, with a toothbrush. Then he went 
home for the night. The cat didn’t hiss or claw, it just moaned in pain, begging me to 
stop. The face was so swollen, skin had sagged in front of its eyes, its mouth hung open 
crookedly. With the warm cloth I lifted the skin to look in its eyes. I was certain it was 
going to die, not because the odds were too great but because Dr. Gray had wanted to 
get home early that night.

After the injection I went right home. I couldn’t listen to the cat’s voice any 
more. The next morning I realized I had left the syringe next to the cage, but when I 
got to work it wasn’t there, and neither was the cat.

I should have realized before, long before now, that this would have to be 
the way it ended. The doctor should be here any minute. I should get up. I should clean 
some cages, peel the blood of the floor, feed the sickies. But I can’t move. So I’ll stay 
here, crouching in my rainforest smock under the desk, listening to the wheezing of 
sickly beasts, the music of this place, until I hear the crunch of tires in gravel outside 
the back door, or maybe the melody of not so distant sirens slowly weaving their way 
towards me.
Dissected
Kate Engasser

The garden
reverses
Blood on the columbines, corneas
in the mouth of the yellow iris-
slugs
on the stomach, hips
in budding white roses-
breasts in the full begonias, knees
brusied near the dahlia.

Press Play: Prey for Reign
Josh Kirnie

On a day in mid-September there are visions of abstract unions and lukewarm heavies; a tread-heavy beat surges from foreign convertibles over coarse gravel lots. I approached WP from the furthest parking lot. A stern but pleasant female voice issued instructions to residents from a loudspeaker high above.

A clay path led to the brink of scenery- flat, cold, prickly, uncluttered- and a 4x4 brass template that has turned its back on me as I drew closer to it. A woman in black read ⅛ inch raised letters, dragging her fingers over each word as it passes her lips. Her deep-house black bangs fall from the surrounding pines over the left side of her face and stop at a dimple.

A weeping face bordered by brass collars and a leatherneck asks me to step aside and form a line. He finds that I will not budge and allows me to read over her shoulder, as long as I do not make a sound and drop a donation into the baitcan at the foot of a nearby rock.

The head starts from the beginning:

"To truly appreciate the pond, the casual visitor should retrace his missed steps to the last Tuesday in November. This is when one can find the woods and water in their most volatile state, tiring of the summer and recoiling in the face of fresh cold. The boat launch just North of the beach is where I wrote my earliest work, an homage to the flesh-peddler Toby el Toro, and continued until I was forced into retirement. I’ve seen who hides in these trees. They feast on the muse untouched by the landscape and may attack at any time.

"The beach is riddled with knats, horseflies, dead livers, bare feet, sand fleas, unrequited lust from men way too old to hunt. The route to the beach is marked by saplings, found on the right side of the path, and chosen lyrics from The Last Tuesday in November, found on the left. She will not be following you..."
Josh Kirnie

The woman stepped away from the sign and glanced. I couldn't make anything out, but she sucked on a Popsicle stick and sang audibly to the trees. She glanced with little purpose, and her eyes stuck out at me from underneath her bangs. The beach was grieving and silent behind the pines.

The head continued:

"... but may double-back and track you for sport. The pines lay in soft needles centuries deep, and I am buried in them in an unmarked grave on the far west side of the water, on a shoreline impossible to negotiate for man or beast. The place is primitive- the zoning codes, the crapper, the man in the gift shop, the boy that sits on his porch and waits for the woman to your right, the Der Kommissar, the bather, the bikini, the sled, the table of organization, the nights from graphic novels alive with unwashed drifters that piss on my grave, circling my hidden remains until dropped from the rocks by an unseen hand and into the water below that may or may not give under their weight."

"Bradley Nowell, Camus, Pol Pot, Roy Hobbs, Mohammar Quadaffi, Johnny Centore, Glen Miller all stood where you stand now. They insisted that religion is a vice. It is time you turned and walked to the beach and stuck your feet in the water while you hold your shoes in one hand and wipe your brow with the socks in the other. Take a canoe ride, coast out to the fishkill; keep the boat until the last Tuesday in November."

She had a very small dimple in her chin and through it I could see her when she cried and when her plans were doomed. She kicked at a bed of needles with gray sneakers and found a pair of glasses that she tried on. The woman turned to face me; the lenses were greasy and reflected the contours of the sky. The frames were black and lithe and tiny pewter skulls stood guard on her screw posts. Her eyes were large and smirking. When she reached into her black pocket for a cigarette without looking down there was reflection in a rush of amber: a run-down, balding, liver spot in a "Vietnam Vet" cap with gold piping and several multi-colored bars just above the brim. The man was hunchbacked and much shorter than I thought I was. His t-shirt tried to restrain the swollen, spider-veined belly that chewed at his frame. He panhandled out of time.

The woman's face became larger, backing me up into the head and his template, her eyes filling the frames. She tugged at the cigarette. Smoke flowed across her ears and hair and into the pines.

The head spoke on:

"In the mid-thirties, the surrounding area gave way to commerce, fear, and triumph. The wooded hills were deadly amber and thick eyeliner. Random poets, scalpers, farmers, and members of a secret society front would assemble at un-hosted gatherings during the first half of the century. They would whip themselves into a frenzy and lash out at each other while on the shores of this great pond. She was here then, too, only she was the silhouette of an assassin at the foot of a white birch. She neither leads nor follows. She will not be walking barefoot on sun-warmed shale; she is a passing glance turning animalistic urges into child-like verses, cock-strong iamb and menopausal stanzas of four lines...

I found her over my shoulder; she was a girl who walked around the house naked. She stared through the pines toward the beach that had become flooded with Cambodian immigrants shore bound from the deepest point on the pond floor.

"The two of you will not reunite on the last Tuesday in November, meeting here in front of my words, where you had hoped to fall into the bed of needles at my feet and kiss and fuck and fill each other's pockets with stories, excess and unnatural demands while the needles fall around you like shower stall lies."

"You are a delivery van coasting down an empty freeway, tiptoeing the shoulder hundreds of feet above the Pacific. She is through the pines chasing a gatecrasher who catches the last flight out of London."
Josh Kirnie

“To all visitors: Please leave with whatever you came in with. Help keep WW clean! Thank You for your support!”

Sincerely,
MOTOCHRIST parks & rec. staff

Her hips swung like a coda to Achilles Last Stand sung as a lullaby. Her hips had no enemies but peace and death.

I stepped on her discarded butt and walked to the gift shop.

Garden of Eden
David Storch

I know you think it is a dangerous idea, but he will have EVE by his side at all times. If anything goes wrong, we can contact her and control him through her hands.

Alvis

It's seven thirty in the morning and like clockwork the sound of Sophia's shower has awakened me once more. Some people trust alarm clocks to wake them up in the morning, but I don't believe in them, not anymore. When I was in my early twenties, I had the biggest job interview of my life. That night there was a blackout, which reset my alarm clock, and of course resulted in me not waking up in time for my interview. I don't remember much of that morning other than not getting the job, but because of that one incident, I now wake up every morning to the only thing that is perfectly consistent: my sister. She has no need for an alarm clock because of what some people call an internal clock, and let me tell you, hers is the real deal. Sophia, my sister, my best friend, and my twin who happens to be a year and a half younger than me, is like a machine. Every day, no matter the occasion, she is always up and in the shower at seven thirty a.m.

General, I would like assure you that project G.O.E. is under our full surveillance.

Sophia and I have been living together for five years now. We moved in to our little apartment right on the San Francisco Bay after we each finished up college. I think I might have moved in with her because of her phenomenal cooking skills. She makes soufflés while I can't even microwave a Pop Tart without getting that jelly stuff to explode all over the place.

As I get out of my bed, I try desperately to remember my morning routine, which is not even close to routine yet. Today is me and Sophia's first day on our new job. I'm nervous as all hell while I'm sure Sophia is calm, cool and perfectly collected.

"Soph, you gonna be done soon?"
David Storch

“You know my routine, Alvis. I get in at seven thirty and I’m dried and out by seven forty five.”

“Right, right, my mistake.”

While waiting for Sophia, I decide that I will try to be efficient and make myself some food. As I walk the forty steps or so from my room to the kitchen, I suddenly recall all of my previous cooking disasters and decide to wait for her to make me something. Walking back into my room I notice my briefcase and all its contents lying on the couch and coffee table. It seems odd to me at first that I would have left the pieces of my work unpacked, especially before such a big day, but I guess these things happen.

The most qualified members of our staff are looking after ADAM and EVE as we speak.

As we drive over the Golden Gate Bridge in my 1967 Shelby GT 500, traffic suddenly becomes non-existent, allowing me to push my baby easily past ninety-five miles per hour. When traffic becomes visible again and I slow down, Sophia starts throwing me her usual “You shouldn’t drive faster than the speed limit because it’s dangerous” speech, followed without hesitation by her “You know how bad for the environment this car is” speech. She makes great points, but clearly doesn’t understand the thrills of a classic car.

When we arrive at the Marriott on Fifth Street, I manage to get a parking spot right out in front. Sophia has to remind me not to forget my briefcase, which happens every now and again. She drops two quarters in the meter and suddenly it hits.

“Whoa, déjà vu. Weird.”

“Just follow my lead, Alvis. Stay calm, don’t make direct eye contact with anyone and please, don’t say anything until we get to the roof. Oh, and keep your thoughts from this moment onward to yourself.”

“But—”

“—Alvis, Game face.”

“Right, right. I’m like ice today, sis. No worries.”

“Cute. Just stay focused. This is our first job with the agency and I really want it to go smoothly.”

Sophia

Every morning when I’m in the shower I can’t help but feel sorry for my brother. I would like to help him resolve his issues, but he just doesn’t seem to want my help. Instead of interfering all the time with his life and trying to be his personal psychiatrist, I just help him indirectly instead; this way I can be of service without being meddlesome. He enjoys the fact that I cook and clean for him, and he even wakes up to me showering, which is kind of creepy, but he’s my brother, so I guess it’s alright.

As you know, ADAM was the first successful attempt at a genetically enhanced clone. At this time my staff and I deem he will be of no use to us in the future, but we still believe it is important to put him out on the field for research purposes. We need to see how well the implanted memories work.

As I get dressed, I stare at the picture of my family and smile. While it’s a shame that Mom and Dad died in that car accident thirteen months ago today, it makes me glad to know that I’ll always have my memories of them. Most people mourn the death of a family member when they go, but not me. I celebrate. I celebrate by remembering. I’ll never forget when Mom brought Alvis and I to get our tattoos. She couldn’t understand why someone would want to make such a permanent mark on his or her body, but she understood how to keep us happy. I’ll also never forget
when I told her what it was I wanted a tattoo of. I told her I wanted “037” on my right shoulder blade, while Alvis wanted to get “017” on his left shoulder. Either way, she thought it was great that Alvis and I were doing it together, not just as siblings, but as friends, too. Dad though, he was something else.

When I was born, my mother wanted to name me Sophia. My father wanted to name me Evelyn. Dad never wanted to argue with Mom, so he told her, “I’ll tell you what, we can name her Sophia, but I’m going to call her Evelyn for as long as I live.” Surprisingly, my Mother agreed to his terms without hesitation. When Dad died, so did the name Evelyn. Last Monday, Alvis almost called me that, but he stopped himself short, thinking I might get upset hearing that name. I didn’t mention anything to him because he has enough things to worry about in his life. The last thing he needs is for me to tell him that I don’t like being called that name anymore. I’m afraid he might over think it and lose sleep. In fact, I know he would over think it and lose sleep over it, so I just dropped it right there, on the spot.

After I got dressed and made us breakfast, it was time for work. I decided to let Alvis drive today because I knew that I was going to be in control for the rest of the day. If I don’t give him some sort of control over the course of the day, he might go crazy. I know his patterns. I know how he thinks. While I do like to take command and lead our missions, I let him do the stuff that one might deem exciting.

As we cross the Golden Gate Bridge I notice the speedometer kicking past eighty nine and up into the nineties territory. Once traffic picks up again and he slows down, I notice that his focus on the road loosens and I decide that it was time for me to throw in my two cents. I know that while I can convince Alvis to do almost anything, there are a few things he won’t let go of. If that stupid “Gone In 60 Seconds” movie had never come out, he would have never wasted money on that car. I even gave him my “You shouldn’t drive faster than the speed limit because it’s dangerous” speech followed by my “You know how bad for the environment this car is” speech. He’s heard it all a million times, but it makes me feel more responsible if I tell him to treat the environment, and his body, with more respect.

She is perfect, General. We have done tests and she will listen and obey us, no matter what. She thinks and acts however we want her to. If I told her to stop breathing, she would die before defying me.

Garden of Eden

Miraculously, we get a spot out front, which is really nice because the getaway is always the hardest part. I notice that Alvis is a little out of it, so I give him a quick pep talk before we head in and up. I can see it in his eyes, his trust and his respect for me. While he is six feet tall, scrawny with that weird buzz cut of his, there isn’t anyone else I’d rather have with me now.

As we approach the roof, I tell him to remain quiet and follow me to the east end. Once there, Alvis drops his briefcase and opens it up.

“He’s down there, Alvis, just like the dossier said he would be.”

“Is he alone?”

“Indeed he is, and he’s smoking his cigarette, too. Looks like we have no more than two minutes to get this done.”

“Right.”

At the same time that he finishes putting the sniper rifle’s silencer on, I can see the look of uncertainty in his eyes. He rests the rifle on the edge of the rooftop and closes his right eye to properly aim with his left.

“Sophia,” he says, “what we’re doing, is it—”

“Yes,” I tell him before he finishes.

“Thanks. That’s all I needed to hear.”

Alvis

“I can’t believe that went so smooth,” I told her. Sophia insisted that there was never anything to worry about because she was there. She was a little cocky, but she was one hundred and ten percent correct. “You know, if you weren’t with me, I wouldn’t have pulled the trigger. You’re just so confident and positive about everything you do in life. I don’t mean to blow steam up your ass, sis, but thanks. Just one word from you can make something so messed up and complicated seem perfectly simple.”

Right as I finished my sentence, I heard the phone ring.

“I got it,” Sophia said.

“We don’t need him anymore.”

“Who was it?”

“Oh, wrong number.”
David Storch

“Oh. Alright then.”

“Alvis, you’ve had a long day and seem a little wound up. Here, take these pills. They should help you calm down and fix that headache of yours.”

“How did you know I have a headache?”

“Come on, I can read you like a book. You remember the first time someone called you ‘Elvis’ because they heard your name wrong? I knew before you did that you would never introduce yourself as Alvis again. That look in your eyes, it was beyond hatred.”

“You really knew I’d introduce myself to everyone from then on as Adam?”

“No, but I knew you wouldn’t be introducing yourself as Alvis anymore. Here, take these, they’ll fix you up in no time.”

“Thanks sis, you always know how to make everything better.”

Bottom

Brooke Wacha

I play with the puppies that all look like Lady from “Lady and the Tramp.” They all look the same, light brown with darker ears. I watch “Lady and the Tramp” all the time and play with my Barbie’s shoes. I like sliding the blue, spiked plastic onto her curved, rubbery foot. That’s all, though. I know I’m supposed to like to play with dolls, but I don’t. Last year at Jessica from the “Y”’s birthday party, everybody had to bring a Barbie. I didn’t want to. I didn’t like Barbie. Everyone else had fancy Barbies in pink princess dresses and mine wasn’t pretty. My Barbie wore blue shorts and something white on top. No one said they liked my Barbie. Sometimes baby dolls are ok for a little while. I will look at them for a few minutes and tip them back and forth to make their blue glass or plastic eyes open and shut. I’d rather have a puppy. I can play with a puppy. They can play back and are soft and fuzzy, not sewnup or made of plastic.

My uncle lives up the street and his dog, Mandy, had puppies- just like in the movie. They can fit between my hands, but I can’t catch them because they always squirm away on the itchy, light blue carpet. I can’t tell them apart, but Mom says we can only get “That one.” “That one is a girl- the only girl.” She says we will come back later and get one. They need to be bigger- they have to stay with their mom for now.

Some days I go to the “Y.” Some days I go to work with Mom. I am in Nursery School and the kids who come in after us are day-care. I don’t understand the difference. Mrs. Jackson is the Nursery School Lady. She is old and has light puffy hair and likes to wear red dresses. In the summer there are big kids there, too, and they say they are our counselors. I’m not sure what the difference is, but they are there. When we swim in the big pool in the summer, we need to run to our counselors when they blow the whistle. We all climb the metal ladders out of the pool and run to our counselors, so we don’t miss looking into the pool for a drowning kid. I can never find my counselor- I can’t remember what she looks like. I always look at the bottom of the deep end for drowning people. I look under the ledge on the wall of the deep end that even if I stand on my tip toes I have a hard time reaching over. I
Brooke Wacha

It’s been a long time—we still haven’t picked up my puppy yet. I thought we would get it by now. Mommy says I’m going to have a baby brother or a sister, but I still don’t know when I am getting my puppy.

At “The Shop” I sit in front of the TV near the empty desk. I don’t know why no one sits there, but there is an old adding machine that I push the buttons on. They are light green and white like the white-outs on Mom’s desk. If you push down a second one in the same row, the first one pops up again. I try and trick the machine—get two or three to stay down. It’s a game. It’s fun to play with, but I don’t think it works right.

Sometimes I sit in the old wooden chair with the bumpy plastic bottom and sometimes I sit on the floor. Today, I am sitting on the floor. The carpet feels dirty no matter how many times Mom vacuums it. Dirty flat green carpet with brown, but I don’t know if it’s supposed to be brown. I hate playing on that floor. I think it will make my butt and my toys dirty. Not my plastic toys—but the white pants and dress of my two Smurf dolls hugging.

I sit and play and watch TV until my mom is done with work. I watch channel thirteen, but only until Sesame Street is over because I hate Mr. Rogers. He comes in and takes off his uncomfortable clothes and puts more uncomfortable clothes on, and he wears shoes in the house. You shouldn’t wear shoes in the house.

Mom sits at her desk near the windows with her adding machine with the long white paper falling off her desk. I want to play with her phone. I want to stick my fingers in the round holes and spin it around and around.

When I walk over to the tall water cooler with the red and blue handles she gets up from her desk and walks over to me. When she’s not behind her desk I can see her belly. It’s small and round and hard like the basketballs the boys play with at the “Y.” She looks the same as always except for the belly. It’s new. She tells me it’s a baby in there; she tells me it’s a boy. She told me after I made Christmas cookies with Nannie. We made more cookies than I ever knew were possible. Some were gross with weird red gooey jellies that she put on with a spoon and some were fun. I stood on her wooden kitchen table chair and made criss-crosses on peanut butter cookies with forks. Nannie rolled the dough up into greasy balls and she pressed one way and I pressed the other squishing them flat with little boxes all over them. Then when Mom and Dad came and picked me up they had a picture of the baby. “It’s a Boy!” He didn’t look much a baby. The round circle is supposed to be his head.

I guess babies are round, and that is why Mom’s tummy is round. It got bigger as she walked closer to me. As she stood next to me by the water cooler she took a cone cup slowly from the side of the cooler and filled it up with water. She drank the whole cup and tossed it in the garbage.

“You want to know how baby Erik got inside there?”

I look at her belly. He kicks at her sometimes but he doesn’t seem much like a baby.

“Yeah.”

“Well, Daddy planted a seed in Mommy’s tummy.”

Plants like a garden? I imagine Mommy’s tummy being like a big pot of dirt and black shiny watermelon seeds falling into the dark dirt. A watermelon growing and growing inside Mommy’s belly, stretching it out way too far. I see Daddy dropping a watermelon seed down her tipped back throat and watering it with my plastic yellow gardening pail. But I don’t understand; watermelon seeds don’t make babies.

“What did you have to do, swallow it or something?”

She pauses for a moment like the question was too hard.

“Something like that.”

One day I found my real counselor. It was already time to go back in the water, but I wanted to show her I could find her. She was teaching other kids how to swim. They were all sitting on a ledge kicking their toes into the water and wearing big orange and red life-vest-floaties. She told me she was teaching people to swim today, to play in the deep end. I swam away crying. No one was in the deep end. I found her and it didn’t matter.
Brooke Wacha

Today the locker rooms are closed and we have to put our bathing suits on in the classroom. I change in front my cubby quickly because I want to get swimming. The gray squares on the floor are cold and the pool water is warm. Pulling up my pink bathing suit straps, I turn and all the boys are talking in a circle, naked. I'm not sure why the boys are naked. They are just talking in a circle with their hands on their sides and no clothes on. I'm not sure why they decided to do this, but it looks weird and they look weird. They all have their things hanging out and they all look different from each other- all twisted up and funny. I look out of the corner of my eyes so it won't look like I'm really looking-it might be bad, but I can't help it. I wonder if all boy thingies are different from each other. I hope all boys don't do this.

Mom's doctor is not where my doctor is. The building I go to is big and there are two waiting rooms: one for the big kids and one for the little kids, with toys and books and there are metal railings before you walk in. Her doctor is in a little, yellow building that looks like a house and is closer to the Shop. There are no toys, no fun books, no other kids.

Mom goes to the doctor a lot now. I don't usually go with her. Inside the examination room where the doctor looks at people, it's tiny, but there is a big table and a big machine, too. There is no black cat clock on the wall with swishing back and forth eyes and tail like at my doctor's. Her doctor is a man. He's ok; I don't pay too much attention to him. He talks friendly, but I don't know him. His heart listening thing has two ear parts. He puts one on and the other he puts on my mom. He tells me they are listening to the baby's heart beat. Do I want to listen to the baby's heart? I don't want to talk to the doctor. I don't like when people ask me weird things. A two headed heart listening thing is weird. I don't understand how you can listen to a baby's heart if it's under all that tummy. But I want to listen. I stand on a metal chair next to Mom while she lying on the table and the doctor puts the plastic listening parts in my ears. My mom wears the other one. There is a loud thumping, over and over. I don't think it's real. I think it's a joke that the doctor is playing on us. It sounds like from a movie.

"Can you hear it? Can you hear the baby, Brooke? That's your brother."

When I play with my doctor kit, my heart never sounds like that. My plastic black doctor set with the snapping handles. I love all my bags with snaps. Inside there are a lot of toys that are like what doctors have but that don't work, except the heart hearing thing. I put the listening pieces in and if the blue tubes aren't bent I can hear my heart. It's very hard to hear, hearts are quiet. When I pull the red stopper away from my chest and blow into the grey foam square inside, it hurts my ears. Blowing in is a test, my listening things make my blowing sound like the wind. My heart does not sound like the baby's heart.

There is a bump on my triangle! I woke up and I scratched and I felt it. It's like a little blister, but there shouldn't be a blister there. Mommy is getting ready for her and Daddy's "anniversary" and she is up early vacuuming. I show her the bump because I don't know why it's there. She makes me stand in front of her as she sits at Daddy's wooden desk with the mis-matched outside chair. I tuck my chin down and pull up my shirt and she pulls my underwear down just far enough to see it when she talks to Dr. Fin. Now we know that bumps on triangles means chicken pox. I feel bad for Mom. She can't have fun tonight. It's my fault. Chicken pox really means that you have little blisters all over. You can't play or even take baths like normal. When I ride my bike in my neighbor's driveway I have to do it late when it is after dinner and bad for mosquitoes and wear a big black shirt. It's the big black shirt with the Batman symbol on it that Mommy likes to wear a lot. She wears it because it's big enough to cover her belly; I wear it because it covers most of my pox. The sun is bad for chickenpox. I don't understand why. Baths aren't right, either. Mommy pours packets of oatmeal into the tub and the water gets all cloudy white like milk and feels grainy sometimes. It's not so bad though. It's different from when the water is clear and the bubbles burst too soon.

I think that getting a brother means you can't get a puppy anymore.

They know what day Erik will be born. The doctor is going to take him out of Mommy's belly but I think he will use bigger tweezers than in the Operation one. I like that game but I hate the loud pitched noise it makes when the nose bits up. Erik will be born two days after my birthday. I will be five years old and
two days and he will be zero.

Daddy has to take Mommy to the hospital now. I can’t go because it hasn’t been two weeks since the chicken pox started. I want to go! I want to see the baby. Everybody says I will see the baby “soon.” Soon I will see the baby. Everybody else gets to go first. I am always last. Always too young or too little or too full of chicken pox—and it’s always just me. On vacation, all the big kids got to go to the water park, even Robbie, my cousins’ friend, and he is only one year older. Big kids get to watch all the movies they want and stay up late and play where they want and I can’t even see my brother. I’m the only one missing. I promised that my chicken pox won’t hurt the baby, but they don’t listen. Now I have to wait days to see the baby and Mom.

I’m not going back to the Y. After vacation I’m going to Kindergarten. I will get to ride the bus like a big kid. I will go on the big kid bus in the morning and a little bus in the afternoon. Mom says I should be “nice and tan” to start school but I don’t know what tan means. I think it’s good, though. She lies out in the sun when I’m swimming in the pool. At the big pool in South Carolina I swim with my cousin. She dives into the deep end over and over like a mermaid would. But she has blonde hair not red, and skinny legs for a tail. Short quick dives. Over and over. My brother is in a stroller not too far from the deep end by a table with a huge blue umbrella. He’s the only kid in my family not diving. He can’t swim and he’s too small for swimmies.

I like to dive into the pool, too. I dive in after my cousin. I lift my arms over my head and lean downward hard into the cool water. My jump doesn’t take me far enough. I begin to kick and pump my arms, trying to reach the bottom. I swim and I swim kicking against the water that is trying to suck me back up to the top. I want to touch the bottom. The air I am holding in is no good any more and wants to escape. It pushes at my sides trying to get out, but I can almost touch the bottom. The bottom of the pool is hard, rough white concrete like by the side of the pool. I touch it with the tips of my fingers and turn around fast, pushing my feet as hard as I can against the bottom. The water pushes me up, faster than anything. I pop up to the top just in time to get more air before I explode and my cousin’s face is there. A big, brown face looking down at me, making sure I wasn’t stuck.

Old Maid

Stephanie Tuff

"My mother was right. I am going to become an Old Maid just like Aunt Jo. Twenty-seven is old; too old to get married or have babies. I’ll probably die alone in my apartment..." Sara ignores me because she’s heard this a thousand times just this week. She places the plate of eggs and bacon on the counter in front of the man with the funny eyebrows. He’s been coming here for weeks but I can’t remember his name. Whenever he tries to talk to me all I can do is stare at those furry caterpillars over his eyes. They’re so bushy and brown and they wiggle when he laughs, like they’re alive and trying to climb down.

"You’re overreacting, as usual," Sara says and snaps me out of my trance. "Unless you get hit by a bus tomorrow, you’ll have tons of time to settle down. Why can’t you just enjoy life and go with the flow?" Sara is only 22 and a little stupid if you ask me. Sure, she has lots of time, but not me. My biological clock is like a time-bomb ticking in my head every time I pass a woman with a stroller. A much younger woman with a stroller.

"You know that the only reason you’re flipping out is because of your birthday tomorrow." I shoot Sara this glare that says, "Shut your mouth or you die," but she doesn’t notice. Kyle slaps her order onto the kitchen window and rings the bell. She trots over still blabbing on about tomorrow. When Kyle catches wind that it’s my birthday, he’ll tell everyone and they’ll buy me a cake or something and then they’ll all ask how old I’m going to be. I pinch her ass so she’ll look back at me and give her my best “death stare.” She stops talking and picks up the plate of pancakes from the window.

I want to smack her, but she’s right. Ever since I tore off the April calendar and saw that it was Monday, May 1st I’ve been in panic-mode. Usually my birthday is great because I have an excuse to get way too drunk, but not this year. This year I’m too old. This year I’m an Old Maid.

David slams the door behind him and drops his keys onto the marble countertop of his lavish kitchen. I stay here because he can afford to buy food but it’s not really my kind of place. He owns way too many kitchen gadgets, like blenders
Stephanie Tuff

and these little tiny forks (which are apparently for seafood. I don’t see why you wouldn’t just use your hands).

“Hun, I got that gig for the new Jockey ad. They loved my stare.” David is a pseudo-professional model, mainly underwear gigs. He thinks that he’s big-time. He says that he used to play football in high school and that’s where he got his big break. A modeling scout was watching David play against his son’s team and introduced himself after the game. The rest is history, or at least that’s what I’m told. Now David is a full-time model (which really translates into barely 20 hours of actual “work”) for the Schwarz Modeling Agency and I’m a waitress at a shitty little diner outside of New York City.

“Oh, good for you, sweetie. What do you want to do for dinner?” I ask in my best June Cleaver voice. He keeps talking about the gig but I can’t stay focused on what he’s saying. I smile and nod but I’m really thinking about tomorrow and how I’m going to shrivel up and become an old spinster at midnight.

“Chris! Did you hear what I just said?” I haven’t heard anything he’s said for the last few minutes, but nod as if I have. “They want me to fly to LA tonight to prep for the shoot tomorrow. Isn’t that great?!” I regain consciousness at about the time he says “fly to LA tonight.” I smile a big toothy smile and realize that this could be just what I need. Nothing could take my mind off of my impending doom better than a quick getaway to someplace exotic like Los Angeles. I simultaneously remember that I haven’t waxed my bikini line in months and that I’ll need to pack for such an adventure.

“So, when do we leave?” I ask, while feverishly tossing the box of macaroni back into the cupboard and running into the bedroom to dig out my black sandals. In the midst of my packing, David gives me the “bad news.”

“You know that Schwarz is a small company and they can’t afford to fly both of us. If you went we’d have to fly coach …” I’ve stopped listening by this point and go back to contemplating my fate when it hits me that David is loaded and should definitely be able to afford to buy me a one-way ticket to L.A. Well, maybe he’s not loaded, but he has the money for a ticket and a swanky hotel room and maybe even a little bubbly to top the evening off.

“Sweetie, I would really like to go with you. Doesn’t a romantic little rendezvous in LA sound like a great time? You could always just buy me a ticket,” I say in a sweet way, but he’s already trotted off to the bathroom still blabbing on to himself about what a stud he is or something like that. I hear the shower come on and then the singing starts. He always sings in the shower. It’s cliché but he sings show tunes, oldies, and sometimes even a little blues. I think it makes him feel like a star, or maybe he just likes to listen to himself. That could be it. Anyway, I finish packing up my things while drowning out his voice. He can be so annoying sometimes, especially when he sings. I wonder if he’ll plop down the cash for my ticket. He’d better, if he knows what’s good for him. Funny, he never mentioned anything about my birthday tomorrow.

The smell of ham and baked potatoes drifts out to my spot on the sticky leather sofa. I wish it were done already. I’m starving. David is cooking me a nice dinner, he says it’s because of his trip but it’s gotta be for my big day tomorrow. He can be pretty sweet sometimes, I’ll give him that. A loud crash comes from the kitchen behind me and I can hear the muffled sounds of David swearing at whatever made the noise. He’s definitely not perfect but he’s pretty damn good for now, especially for an Old Maid like me.

Five years ago, I was a fresh-faced, energetic 22-year-old with an eye for a good photo. I’d dreamed of being a professional photographer ever since I was in grade school. I loved to take pictures of everything and everyone. Because of this, my brother and sister learned to lock the door behind them when using the bathroom. My brother, Jack, learned that one the hard way. Pictures in the bathroom were okay but my greatest feat was snapping a picture of my older sister, Amy, and her boyfriend making out on the couch one day after school. Amy was my slave for weeks and her boyfriend brought me candy every time he came over after that. From then on I was hooked.

As I got older, I set my sights on bigger things, like beautiful landscapes, stunning sunsets and hot guys. When I came to the City, I found that landscapes and...
Stephanie Tuff

All through dinner, David smiles, seemingly uncontrollably. I was caught a little off guard when he comes out of the kitchen with a plateful of ham and a mouthful of teeth for me. I’m so used to his “smoldering stare,” as he calls it, that I’m a bit afraid. But he’s so polite and attentive that I soon fall under his spell. The food is delicious and the champagne is so bubbly. I think he’s really outdone himself this year when David gets up from his chair, clasps my hand and kneels down on the floor next to me.

My eyes shoot wide open and my heart starts to race. That’s what this is all about. He knows that my birthday is tomorrow and I’ve been bitching for weeks about becoming an Old Maid...he’s going to propose!

David looks down at the floor and then up at me but his smile has disappeared. I am relieved but a bit frightened also. Shouldn’t he be smiling when he asks me to marry him? Maybe he’s trying to play it cool. He doesn’t want me to know. He wants me to be surprised.

I gaze back at him with a hint of a smile on my face. Pictures of our children running through the front yard on Easter come into mind. They would be beautiful too, just like their father. I never really thought about marrying David, until now. He always seemed like too much of a bachelor to settle down, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe he’s been planning this since we met. Maybe this was his plan all along. We can afford to have a big wedding and jet off to the Bahamas for our honeymoon. It will be perfect. I can’t believe that he kept this secret for so long. What a birthday this will be! One that I’ll never forget. I guess I won’t become an Old Maid after all. So there, Mom.

“Hun, I have something to ask you,” David says. He looks a little scared. How sweet- he has cold feet. I think he would be a good father. “I think we should see other people.”

Suddenly the pictures of our perfect life pop inside my mind and I see David staring at me, waiting for me to respond. My mouth is hanging wide open and I feel very dizzy. Too much champagne. What did he just say? He says it again. I cannot believe this is happening.

“I’ve met this woman that I’m really attracted to and I, I was thinking, that maybe you could meet her.” What the hell is he talking about? Meet her? Why would I want to meet her? I must look really pissed and confused at the same time because David tries to back away from me, and trips over himself. I stand up. I wanted to punch him square in his “smoldering eyes” when he starts stuttering again.

Old Maid

sunsets were hard to come by with so many buildings around but there were hot guys at every turn.

Sitting at the bus stop one afternoon about two years ago, I overheard an attractive older man talking about a modeling agency that was looking for a photographer. Schwarz Modeling Agency was actually just down a few blocks so I decided to take a little detour. It was very glamorous. There were beautiful people and beautiful pictures everywhere and then there was me. I wouldn’t necessarily have described myself as “plain” but the receptionist disagreed. I hadn’t been there for thirty seconds before she turned her nose up at me. I convinced her to let me speak to the manager, Mr. Schwarz, and after an hour of waiting, he called me in. I won’t go into the horrifying details but, in a nutshell, Mr. Schwarz told me to come back once I’d had some professional photography training and a boob job. Apparently you have to look like a model in order to shoot one. Devastated, I slumped out of his office and into the hallway where I proceeded to step on the shoe of a very tall, handsome man. David introduced himself and apologized for my disappointment. He offered to buy me a drink and the next thing I remember is waking up next to him in a naked heap.

We went on a few dates after that, never anything really serious, until he invited me to come to one of his premiers. He picked me up at my front stoop in a black stretch limo. (I later found out that it, and his tux, had been rented for the night.) But after schmoozing with such glamorous, beautiful, rich people, I decided that I couldn’t just throw this one back. It would be fun while it lasted. Life since then has been much like that first night: swanky parties, liquor, and sex. For the first year it was fun, but then it became monotonous and I got sick of looking at nothing but beautiful people. I had begun to think that dating a model wasn’t exactly all it’s cracked up to be. Then, out of the blue, David asked me to move in with him and suddenly life with him didn’t seem so horrible. At least it was rent-free.

All through dinner, David smiles, seemingly uncontrollably. I am caught a little off guard when he comes out of the kitchen with a plateful of ham and a mouthful of teeth for me. I’m so used to his “smoldering stare,” as he calls it, that I’m a bit
Artwork: “Untitled 1,” Michael Selli

In the Green Age we roll
over buttercups,
staining hips with yellow blush.
staining hips with yellow blush.

August
Kate Engasser

Tuesdays are generally pretty slow at the diner. Thank God, because I don’t think I could take any more excitement. The hours drag on until the lunch crowd comes in. Plenty of time to wallow in yesterday’s “unfortunate events,” as my mother called it. The clanging of dishes makes Sara stop and glance back through the kitchen window. She looks back at me slumped over the counter as she wipes the crumbs from her hand onto her apron.

“Don’t be mad, baby. I thought that you might like her too. She’s really hot and I thought the three of us could go out sometime. That’s all.”

“A threesome!” I scream back at him. I hear a loud clap and see myself backhanding him across his smug little face. Damn, that felt good. “I thought you were going to ask me to marry you, and what you really want is to have a threesome with some ‘really hot’ girl that you think I would like?” David’s face morphs from scared to confused.

“Marry you? I can’t marry you! It would ruin my image!” His words pricked me like thorns: ‘my image.’

“You didn’t even want to marry him. What’s the big deal? Twenty-seven is not that old. You’ll find a good guy someday.” She’s been saying that same line for years now: ‘You’ll find a good guy someday.’ I don’t know if she’s right or if she’s just too young and stupid. But this time, I want to believe that she’s right.
Matthew 7:1

Amber Hickman

I work at Borders in the southern most end of the Bible belt. Jacksonville is definitely not the most booming place in the United States, unless you are religious. There are even religious tattoo shops that refuse to tattoo anything that they consider dark or evil. I remember when I first came down here I went to one of these shops. I had "Lev. 19:28" tattooed below my belt line, but just above where the hairline is supposed to be. This verse states that a person is not supposed to mark their body in the name of the dead. I laughed while receiving this tattoo because I watched another artist tattoo a crucifix on a different customer. I learned quickly what this town was about.

As a cashier, I see what books are most popular. I believe I have sold more pink Bibles than any other book in the store. Yeah, pink Bibles. Bibles come in just about every color. My personal favorite is fluorescent brown. So many people buy the same Bible, five times. They have to have different colors, one to match each Sunday suit. This is the "in" thing down here. It's disgusting. Just another thing for the rich to waste their money on. Bibles aren't cheap.

The way I see it, books and minds are a lot alike. There are lots of them out there and many people don't know how to use them properly. Take the Bible for example. I get harassed all of the time by the people buying these Bibles. I've been to church. I know that somewhere in that Bible it says not to judge. This is what inspired me to read it. I wanted to understand these people. I mean, I had to share a community with them. So I picked one up and started reading it, and that judging thing was definitely in there. Matthew 7:1, to be exact.

The day before yesterday I was reading the Bible. I had finally gotten to Revelations, the last and most controversial book. There was a part that made me laugh out loud. Well, there was more than one but this one I find most memorable. Revelations 13:16-18. It says the mark of the beast (666) will be placed on the right hand of those who buy or sell anything. When I laughed, I heard a man clear his throat to get my attention. I put down the good book and saw a priest. He was buying, of course, a Bible. Why the hell does a priest need another Bible? I wondered if an exorcism painted the last one green, pasting the pages with viscous vomit.

After reading the Bible, I learned that the only thing that scared me about it was the fact that people take it so literally. Seriously people, we're in the 21st century. The Constitution isn't even holding up, and that was written pretty clear. Yesterday I had to open. Every morning at Borders the managers give the employees a pep talk before they open the store. I was walking through the cd department to get to the café for the morning pep talk when I noticed a new display. It was a five-foot tall rectangular cube. On the top was a sign that read “Music That Moves You.” I was intrigued. What kind of music moves me? Each side of the cube had a different genre of Christian music such as gospel and Christian rock. I was a little offended. This kind of music doesn't move me, but I know what does. I quickly went to the "S" in the pop/rock section and found an album that had recently been released and didn't receive all of the publicity that it deserved, especially as a new release. This is partly because it was released on September 11, 2001. Damn those terrorists for taking the spotlight. I took it upon myself to pull Slayer's God Hates Us All (why it was in the pop/rock section, I couldn't say) and move it to the display. I placed it right next to Creed.

After our ten-minute pep talk, I went to my place behind the cash register and picked up the Bible to finally finish it. When I closed the back cover I heard a SMACK! I looked up and saw a middle-aged woman who had purposely dropped her
books on the counter. To my disbelief, it was a pink Bible and its trusty sidekick, A Guide to Reading and Understanding the Bible. This lady stared at me with a look that started to burn another hole in my face. I swear she had counted every piece of jewelry in my face and read my tattoos as if they were the devil's ten commandments.

"Hi. Did you find everything all right?"

No answer. It was like my lips were moving and all she could hear was the deep growl of an evil beast that had come to swallow her faith and feed off of her soul for the rest of eternity. I just smiled. "Okay then." I rang up her precious princess pink Bible but her guide to being brainwashed would not ring. I typed the barcode into the register, but apparently this book did not want to go home with this woman. I felt no compassion. I just wanted this book out of my sight and out of this store before some poor child got her hands on it. I think this lady was getting nervous, too.

"You know what, never mind that b..." Before she could finish her sentence I managed to ring up that device, "$69.87." The lady handed me one of the many credit cards in her wallet. The name on the credit card read Mary Virgil. She must have come from a very religious family. For a moment, I felt sympathy. That quickly fled. I swiped Mary Virgil's card. There was a lingering pause that was so quiet and long it made Mary Virgil even more uncomfortable. I just smiled as I watched her watch the register, praying to her God that this hurry up. It was approved. I handed Mary Virgil a pen and the receipt. As she was signing Mary Virgil, she said without even a glance at me, "You need to find God."

"Oh, I did. I found God. But when it was my turn to hide, it was getting dark and God’s mom called her home for dinner."

Mary Virgil stopped everything and stared at her signature like she needed to grasp something that was concrete in her mind. Disgusted, she slightly shoved the pen and receipt in my direction. I checked her signature to make sure that it read "Mary Virgil." I gave her the yellow slip, her credit card, and her bag.

"Have a wonderful day, Mary Virgil."

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"Have a wonderful day, Mary Virgil."

Matthew 7:1

didn't sell it. Therefore someone had removed it from the display. Damn the man who wasn't moved. I went back to the "S" in the pop/rock section. I pulled Slayer's God Hates Us All and placed it back on the display, right next to Creed.

Lunchtime is usually very busy for us. Yesterday was no different. I was the only cashier and there was a line thirteen people long. I counted. "Have a good day," I said, waiting for the next customer. The next customer hesitated. She was a tiny old lady, shorter than me and I am 5'3. She was definitely pushing 85. Everything she wore was a pale pink. She even wore a pink, sheer, plastic rain hat that ties under the chin, one of those hats that old ladies wear for a week after getting their hair done so the rain doesn't mess it up (mind you, it hasn't rained in two weeks). She was holding a pink Bible, a lavender Bible, a baby blue Bible, and a pastel green Bible. They looked fairly heavy but she refused to let me touch them, maybe for fear of me placing a curse on them. We just sort of stared at each other. I noticed the other eleven customers in line were getting impatient.

"Ma'am, if you’d like, you can wait for the next cashier to ring you out."

"Yes, I would like that very much."

"But it's going to be another three hours before she gets here."

She huffed. A few of the customers in the line chuckled. Straight-faced, I looked her in the eyes and said, "Matthew 7:1." That was all I needed to say. The expression on her face and her personality underwent a drastic change. She became very bubbly and animated, smiling as she gently placed her Bibles on the counter in front of me.

"Lovely day, isn't it?"

I responded with a smile. From somewhere in the long line, I heard "I want her job."

A couple hours later, my relief came for my 15-minute break. I needed another cup of coffee. I walked through the music department again to get to the café. I knew I didn’t sell it, but it had been moved, again. I went to the "S" in the pop/rock section and pulled Slayer's God Hates Us All and placed it next to Creed, again.

Who the Hell keeps moving this?

My shift was finally almost over. I had a half hour before I could leave.

I started to clean up the register area when a man came to the counter with a black
Amber Hickman

Bible, a leather journal, the soundtrack to *Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou*, and Creed. He was a well-dressed man in his late 40s. He had freshly cut hair and a smooth face, just shaved, probably by a barber using a straight razor. Before I could greet him, he said, “Why do you do that?” I started ringing up his purchase.

“Well, sir, if I don’t and you walk out of here with these, then you will probably get arrested and I will lose my job. I kinda like it here, so I don’t want that to happen.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, sir. *Please*, enlighten me.” I swiped his credit card.

“Why do you deface your body?”

“I don’t deface my body. This is my temple, and I practice an assortment of ancient body modification rites, which I believe, are essential to my spirituality.” Smiling, I started to bag his purchase.

“You are going to a bad place.”

“Leviticus 19:28. But Leviticus 19:27 states that you are not supposed to cut your hair or shave your beard,” I handed him his bag. “So I’ll see you there!” I had a smile of complete satisfaction as I watched him stroll out the door.

“That was great!” a deep voice said. I turned around and saw a guy with really long hair and a goatee that was the same length as his hair.

“Hey. How you doin’ today?” I proudly asked him.

“Better now that I just witnessed that. I had no idea that you sold this here.”

I looked down and he had Slayer’s *God Hates Us All* in his hand.

“If it wasn’t for that display, I wouldn’t have even known. But it definitely isn’t Christian rock.”

“No, but it is ‘Music That Moves’ and there is no way I was going to let it go.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. But don’t you ever get in trouble for doing or saying these things?”

“No way. I’m entitled to my own beliefs and opinions, just like everyone else. And I don’t preach until theirs are forced on me.”

I took the cd from his hand. When I looked at the cd, I saw my reflection on the cover, but it wasn’t me. When I looked harder, I saw Mary Virgil wearing a pastel pink rain hat that was covering a clean haircut and a smooth face. I was disgusted. What is this place doing to me?

I mean, I was looking forward to these encounters. I started to look at the customers in such a way that I could tell exactly which ones I was going to have words with.

I believe the only part of the Bible that should be taken literally is Matthew 7:1. I decided I needed to look after my own well-being and rid myself of this community.

But before I left for the day, and ultimately forever, I walked back over to the “S” in the pop/rock section and pulled another copy of Slayer’s *God Hates Us All* and put it on the “Music That Moves You” display. I still have my dignity.

Matthew 7:1

*1* I smugly rang up his over-priced cd.

“$19.24 is the damage.”

“Ouch,” he said as he gave me a 20-dollar bill.

“76 cents is your change. Have a great day.”

“You too. I’ll see you around.”

Yeah, not if I can help it. This place has turned me into everything I hate.
Bang
Alek Krenichyn

Tiny green shoots Jack-Hammer through the tightly packed concrete's pitiful attempts to block out Nature's mad march - like Sherman's Seaward Rush -- only slow Her- and (though it's not fully proven) piss Her off.

Smallest sprouts erupt from man-made rocks-- slow motion explosions-- moving mountains with miniature chlorophyll dynamite, vegetal TNT.

Celebration
Colin Kennedy

As a child, when a holiday rolled around, and decorations started to be taped up to every available window, there was a sense of great anticipation that is now dead to me. It didn't even matter which holiday, even though some were obviously better than others. The mere fact that for the allotted amount of holiday time, everyone I knew would put on a different mask and act according to that holiday's rubric, gave me a shiver of excitement that could only be paralleled by coffee ice cream with rainbow sprinkles, or the right look from the right girl, depending on my age.

In this tale, my age was eight years, and the mask that we all wore was the plentiful cornucopia of giving and thanks that is Thanksgiving.

Granted, my detection of character in individuals was still in its infancy, but as November crept to an end I certainly felt a change in the way people were treating each other. Everyone was nice; particularly the teachers.

Mrs. Byker was an attractive lady with short, curly blond hair, a glowing smile and of course, a name that all children couldn't help but love. However, she was a Nazi when it came to teaching. Her voice seemed 50 years older than her face and when she spoke, her eyebrows formed in such a way that it masked her beauty. In her daily grammar and cursive lessons, it seemed as if she preyed on the weak. She hunted out the confused, and embarrassed them when they couldn't choose the correct preposition. She was most definitely a bitch. At least that's what Alex and Sebastian, the really bad kids, thought of her. I silently agreed.

However on this, the last Monday before the extended Thanksgiving weekend, Mrs. Byker opted to forgo the three R's in exchange for a more festive activity. She ordered us, in her nicest tone, to create a Thanksgiving word poem, wherein we were to take each letter of the holiday and name something we were thankful for that started with that letter. Here's what I came up with:
She misled us. There was indeed writing involved, and some coloring too. However, not enough writing to be a lesson and not enough coloring to be considered art. It was one of those unique occasions that only happen during a holiday.

Although this was my father's year for Thanksgiving, according to the mixed up, staggered system that the court had set up for these types of situations, my word poem present was going to my mother. Mostly because she expected these types of gifts, and partly because I knew she would stash it away with all of my other school work in a time capsule to be opened the summer of 2005, and frankly because it was too much of a hassle to hide it from her in order to get it to my father's house.

Her reaction to the gift lacked the appreciation that I was so used to receiving from her. Perhaps the holidays had the opposite effect on her. Or at least the holidays that landed on even numbered years. Either way, her emotions seemed stifled and bitter, even to this gumshoe.

And then she said, "That bitch acts like you're her son." And, "I hope that evil son of a bitch goes to hell."

The bitch and evil son of a bitch in question, of course, were my step-mother Brenda and my father. The timelines of these comments was so inappropriate. This was a holiday. And even though I loved my father and Brenda very much, I loved my mother more. I loved my mom so much that I sometimes hated them if I felt that was what she wanted. She never said it, but I felt it. So I went to my room and tried as hard as I could to block out what was said, and what continued to be said out in the dining room to no one but her glass of wine.

When the intercom buzzed, indicating my father had come to pick me up, my stomach jumped. This would not be a smooth ordeal, something told me. Normally I said goodbye to my mother at the door, leaving me a solid 20-flight elevator ride to transition from mom-Colin to dad-Colin. This time my mother rode the elevator with me, word poem in hand. We said nothing. I was not sure why she took the laminated gift with her.

We were in uncharted waters as we left the building and walked towards my father's car. I couldn't remember the last time my parents were in sight of each other.

And then it got worse. Brenda emerged from the car and walked over to pick me up. "Oh, no," my mother said. "He's not your child. You are not taking him away."

Her stubbornness angered Brenda and angered me as well.

"It's our turn to take him, so let's not make a big deal out of this," Brenda said in a tone harsher than I was accustomed to.

"It's Donald's turn. He's Donald's son. You have no right."

Without a response, Brenda took me by the wrist and we started off to the car. Then I felt my other wrist was being clutched. I was the human rope in a custody tug-of-war. Awful things were shouted, arms were flung about and maybe even some punches were thrown. Residents of the building gathered in the lobby with the doorman and watched the altercation. I was confused and embarrassed. I wanted to get in that car and drive off, so I ran toward it, picking up the word poem off the street that had been tossed in disregard. My mother was crying and shouting, "I want my baby!"

I was mortified by the display. My father and Brenda got in the car, while my mother banged on the window. "Just let me kiss him goodbye," she yelled. "Just let me say goodbye." The window lowered an inch and my mother's face poked through. I didn't want to be fought over like this. I stood still until the window went back up and we drove away.
Colin Kennedy

I watched the figure of my mother grow smaller and smaller as we took off. With each inch of distance I felt more awful. I love you, Mom, I thought. I love you more than ice cream. I love you more than anything else.

My father and Brenda quickly forgot about what had happened, and we did our best to carry out as normal of a Thanksgiving as possible. I gave them the word poem and said that I made it just for them. I'm sorry, mom I kept thinking. I'm so sorry.

When Sunday arrived and most of the leftovers were already eaten, I paced around the apartment, nervous about seeing my mother again. I went into the kitchen and saw the word poem. It was wedged in between the microwave and the wall. It had been crumpled during the exchange, and the laminated creases shone like open sores in the bright kitchen light. I grabbed it, folded it up and put it in my bag.

In the Face of a Straight-Faced Lie
David Daghita

The three bedroom house with the two car garage cried of emptiness. The curtains, carpets, and canned foods left their marks on walls, floors, and cabinet shelves. The front porch light blew yesterday. You sat next to the gas fireplace that never once maintained a spark. This white envelope you held in your hand still smells of her. You ran your hands over the blue pen writing. “Thomas.”

Fucking bitch. Left me miserable, but how I miss her.

Your wallet has become lighter since she maxed out your credit cards and drained your bank account. The foreign rugs, expensive paintings, and high end suits all gone as well.

At least we didn’t have children, that would have made it more difficult.

You pulled on the buttons of your black corduroy blazer, hoping those wouldn’t come off because she would have taken them if she had the chance. You crammed the envelope into your right pocket. You sipped from the bottle that had dust on it.

No better time than now. The wine won’t let me down and run out of town on me in five years.

You wiped your mouth with the blazer sleeve. Your wedding band felt easier to slide off as you methodically moved it in circles around your finger. You put your hands to your mouth and blew warm air into them as if the temperature had suddenly dropped, causing your hands to become numb. You shivered at the thought. You pulled the envelope out again as if this has an effect of changing the contents of the letter. Rapidly, you advanced to your feet with a slight stumble and one minute delay. You turned the old steel gargoyle faced handle fully open.
David Daghita

She loved that gothic architecture. It was Euro rubbish to me.

You slammed the fireplace fencing against the wall across the room. Your hands moved along the mantle, searching intensely. You stopped, gripping the object that saved humanity in Prometheus's eyes. You struck the red tipped match against the wall. You watched the flame dance in the darkness of the room. You moved the match back and forth in front of your face trying to uncover some detail all the poets never discovered. You dropped the glowing stick into the fireplace.

Shit. My heart and hands aren't so cold anymore.

You sipped from the bottle again, feeling a moment of accomplishment. Leaning hunched over the mantle, staring into the flames like a crystal ball of the future. You tossed the envelope as if it were a lucky penny into the hell well. You spit some of the remaining wine into the fire expecting a fireball of sorts. It was more of a reduction as the flame decreased in size for a moment. You spun 180 around on your heels. The rush from the victory dance made you unbalanced as you staggered in front of the fire. You felt the warmth of the flames. You shed your blazer off which fell into the fire. You walked over to the window to look out into the front yard. The green lawn looked spectacular from the Mexican landscapers.

She probably had a threesome with the two Hispanic workers while I was at work then made them sandwiches for a great team effort.

You felt as if the room had gotten to a hundred degrees. You pulled at the neck of your dark green button up shirt. You blew down into your shirt to relieve some of the heat. You noticed a bright orange line reflecting in the window glass. You turned around to a blur once the room settled you. You saw the fire had escaped from its designated spot. The wall engulfed in flames along with the ceiling became a sheet of the sun. You stumbled to the front door. You opened the door to the sweet summer evening breeze as it blew through you. You walked out into the street. Your neighbors ran over to you as they watched your house burn in a blaze of fire and smoke.

The man from across the street asked, “Why did the house catch on fire?”
You mumbled, “She won’t get the house now.”
The fire trucks can be heard coming in the distance. You stood admiring the fortunate event. You threw the empty bottle at the burning house. You fell backward onto the green lawn that felt like a Sealy mattress. You closed your eyes and formed the biggest smile you could possibly manage.
Our Golden Fall
Elizabeth Bishop

cigarettes taste so good
thank the paroxetine for that
thank the white coats
and the white pills for that
wine in the icebox
i'm trying to find a home
for this inflated head
meeting tomorrow night
itchy tongue
and crying girls
tell me about summer sometime
and our golden fall
you lost yr job and
went to court
there's a warrant out for yr arrest
its ridiculous
for us to even be here anymore
but i know you-so
i know you so, why stop.
our golden fall
rotten apples and a chimney sweep
car driving through streets
i was as thin as yr bedsheets
falling all over your
sleeping body
love made me weak
and keeps me quiet
i'm sorry its true
i'm the one you never knew
in our golden fall

the trip was beautiful
but false
beautiful but false
sit thoughtfully
through wine and
records
it was a good show
and makes a good story
for later girls
for later girls

Hand Me Down Red Socks
Allison Greer

My grandpa was sitting in his chair, his small glass in hand and his bottle of Tawny Port close by. I was sitting next to him, my little legs swinging away as we watched the Red Sox game on a television where the players seemed no larger than ants. It was late afternoon on a hot summer day. I had been looking forward to the week long summer visit to my grandparent's for months. My grandma was dishing out a bowl of rainbow sherbet and I was tracing my finger over my grandpa's hand. He had a strange bump on his palm, right under his ring finger. He told me he got it during the war and every year, the bump got bigger and his ring finger was pulled closer to the middle of his hand.

The Red Sox were losing, it was something we had all become used to. As the game crept on so did the hours and my eyes began to close. My grandpa picked up my tiny frame, my arms and legs hanging as though there was no life left in me and moved me to the couch in the next room.

I curled up there and tried to fall asleep. Half asleep and half awake I heard him murmuring. I could see the bright glow of the green grass on the television screen, and I heard him say, "That goddamn curse!"

The "Curse of the Great Bambino" is like the curse of no other athletic figure in history. With Babe Ruth as their pitcher, the Boston Red Sox would win five World Series Championships, the last coming in September of 1918. In 1920, Babe Ruth was sold to the New York Yankees, starting a rivalry that lasts to this day. It is because of this sale to the Yankees that many believe the "Great Bambino," as Ruth was often called, placed a curse on his former team. "The Curse" is loaded with ironies to the fullest and plagued by bad calls and foolish errors. The Red Sox's own former players would be bought by other teams and would end up being the game winning heroes for those new teams in games against the Red Sox. This was the case in one of the most difficult losses for my family.

My family has an addiction to baseball and the fate of the Boston Red Sox. Each Fall, when the World Series rolls around, we sit and watch as history repeats itself. In the Fall of 1995, the Boston Red Sox entered the post season facing the Cleveland Indians. While my parents, my brother and I huddled around the television at our house, my grandfather was sitting in the dining room at his house with the
smell of stale Tawny Port creeping about. On October 3rd, my family, along with thousands of other Red Sox fans wearily awaited the end of a game that was the longest game in post season history. This would remain the case until recently when the Red Sox would be demolished by the New York Yankees 19 to 8 in a game that lasted four hours and twenty minutes. As the innings passed in the Cleveland game, two of Boston’s greatest hitters, Mo Vaughn and Jose Canseco, remained hitless. We pried our eyelids open to realize that “The Curse” was just as strong as ever. In the bottom of the 13th inning, a former Boston Red Sox player, Tony Pena, hit a game-winning home run, shattering the dreams of thousands.

It was my grandfather’s last World Series with the Boston Red Sox. My grandpa had just gotten out of the hospital. He had been there for several weeks and the doctors told him he was finally well enough to return home. My parents didn’t want me seeing him since I was still young and he was very weak, not looking like himself anymore. They told me that we could call him so my brother and I could talk to him. My mom dialed the number and before long I was talking away with my best friend, just like always.

“How do you feel Grandpa?”
“I’m doin ok punkin.”
“Are you happy you don’t have to eat that yucky food anymore?”
“Yea, but don’t tell grandma that her cooking isn’t much better.”
My face squished up and I let out a giggle. I twirled my hair around my finger, antsy to get off the phone.

“Okay I wont. Grandpa you get to sleep in your bed tonight.”
“Yes I sure do.”
“I will see you soon right Grandpa?”
“I’ll see you around kiddo.”
“Ok, you want to talk to Chris now?
“If he’s not busy.”
“He’s right here. Bye grandpa.”
“Bye.”
It was the last I would hear from him. Just days later when I got home from school, my mom was there to tell me that he had passed away and that we had to go to Utica as soon as possible. His passing was hard on all of us. It was especially hard on my dad. He and my grandpa were always arguing about politics, or something of that nature. They could never get along, just like my father and I could never get along.

We buried my grandfather with his Red Sox hat, hoping that in some way he could change the fate of his team and of our family.

I was sure that my grandfather’s passing was going to lead to a change in my relationship with my father. I knew he had taken his passing hard because he had never really gotten to know him. I was sure that he wouldn’t want unresolved issues with his own children. I was so sure.

After that winter, our arguments increased in number and decreased in educated language. At least once a week my father yelled at my mom; and like a helpless child too weak to stand up, she would, as she had the past twenty years, internalize everything he was saying. I wouldn’t allow it. It seems strange that in all the years we lived in that house together I was the only one to say how I felt, I mean how I really felt. I was getting to the point where biting my tongue was no longer an option. Most of our fights started over the time I spent with my friends, or on the phone. But for some reason they never ended like that.

I was five minutes late for my curfew. This was never a problem because my dad always went to bed before I was due home, leaving my mom to fall asleep on the couch which would leave her barely conscious enough to notice if I walked through the door late. But this night it was different. My boyfriend was driving me home. It was 12:02. I was happy to think that I was only two minutes late. I was sure that my mom would be awake enough that I would get to talk to her when I got home. My cell phone rang.

“Hello?”
“Allison, where are you? Your father is going to kill you, do you know what time it is?”
“Mom, it’s only two minutes after curfew. What does he care anyway?
“Mom, it’s only two minutes after curfew. What does he care anyway?
“He never cares about me or where I’m at.”
“Allison, just hurry up and get home.”
“I knew it wasn’t going to be good. When my mom said “Allison, just
hurry up,” it meant that my dad was standing right over her shoulder forcing her to make the phone call and giving her the third degree about how it was she raised a child like me. He was always calling me “her daughter” like he had no part in making me, like I was some kid she had with the milkman that he was forced to adopt. I walked through the door, my guard already up with words; no they weren’t even words. I knew what was coming and I had to prepare my ammunition for the battle that was about to ensue.

"Why are you late?"

"Dad, chill out. I’m like five minutes late."

"I don’t care if you’re thirty seconds late, you have a curfew and in this house you have to obey it."

No other time in history had he cared if I had shown up late and the one night he decided to wake up and I wasn’t there yet, he was going to make a fuss like it was really bothering him that I wasn’t home. He hadn’t had a hard time falling asleep or anything. He seemed to have done that with no worries about where his only daughter was. If this was his strange way of showing me he cared, I wasn’t having any part in it. I couldn’t forget all of the times he had told me I was lazy and worthless. I couldn’t forget all of the times he wasn’t there. And I especially couldn’t forget that he was the one who taught me that it was all right to swear and slam doors.

"You’re grounded. End of story."

"No, not end of story. You’re not gonna tell me when I’m grounded and when I’m not. You don’t give two shits about where I was or what I was doing, and now you’re gonna try and restrict what I do. Yeah, ok Dad."

"Dawn, tell your daughter not to talk to me like that."

"Where do you think she learned it from?" my mom shouted.

"That’s such bullshit. He never cares about me or Chris and then he’s gonna try and act like he does by grounding me for being five minutes late?"

I had to get out of this room, away from the yelling, screaming, madness. I knew my blood was getting hotter and hotter, and I knew if I didn’t choose to leave the room soon, I was going to use the cell phone in my hand as my weapon of choice. I was bound to throw it at him, send a curve ball right in his direction.

"Dad, I fucking hate you so much. You’ve never done anything for me. You never go to my soccer games and Mom always takes me to the doctors when I’m sick. You probably don’t even know my birthday. How old I am? What grade I’m in? What school I go to? You’re the worst father ever."

Without giving him the option to respond I ran down the hall and with all the strength I had in me I slammed my bedroom door, causing the picture on my dresser to fall over, jumped in bed and buried my head in my pillow.

I couldn’t believe I was stuck riding in the car with him for an hour. I didn’t realize when he asked me if I wanted to ride with him to visit my grandparents’ grave in Utica that I was the only one going. I knew that he had ulterior motives behind it. We hadn’t spoken more than two words in about three years. I’m sure that somewhere in the back of his mind he thought this would be a breakthrough for us. We pulled up to lot 19, parked the car, and got out. I hated it here. I loved it here. It was the only opportunity I got to tell my grandpa how much I missed him and think about all the things we had done together. But it was a constant reminder that he was lying under my feet, in the cold earth that had wrapped itself around him.

My dad’s hands were in his pockets, as he stood there not saying a word. I knew what I was thinking, and I wondered what he was thinking. Was he thinking about what he hadn’t gotten to say or do? Was he thinking about what he had said or done? Or maybe he wasn’t thinking at all, just letting the moment take over his mind, letting himself become numb. He slowly pulled his hand out of his coat pocket and in it he held a small glass; a shot glass. He slowly bent down and placed the glass where the grass rose to meet the cold granite headstone. He ran his hands over the words, Father, David M. Greer, Sr., and below it, the dates, 1921-1996. His hands were so much like my grandfather’s hands. Strong hands, the kind you can tell have spent their fair share of time doing manual labor. On the edge of his thumb the skin was more pink than the rest; he always chewed on it when he was nervous, just like grandpa. A tear came down his cheek, so big it seemed that it would have filled the shot glass to the brim.

He stood up and I kneeled where he had just been. Reaching my hand out to feel the smooth polished granite just as he had, I realized the shot glass was no ordinary glass. There it sat, a symbol of hope, with the Red Sox logo prominent on its side.

He’s merely three inches tall with long red hair and little beady eyes. He wears a Red Sox jersey and his hair is held back with a note of good luck. My
grandpa gave me this troll shortly before he passed away and ever since, during big games I read the note slow, doing what it tells me, hoping that things are going to be different this time.

I hold him on this night, tight in my sweaty palm, stroking his hair. It's game seven versus the New York Yankees, my team on the path to breaking a record never conceivable in any professional sport, a comeback from being down three games to none in a series. I know that my grandpa is watching the game closely from above and my father watching in his house. All of us are hoping the guys on the field will carry nearly one-hundred year-old dreams of thousands of families, including ours. Shortly into the game, it became clear that no one was going to stop Boston from realizing its dream of winning a pennant. The greatest comeback in the history of baseball had taken an organization one step closer to breaking a curse.

October 27th, 2004, just over nine years since my grandpa's last World Series with the Red Sox, it seemed as though a dream was about to come true. Not only were the Red Sox out to rewrite history, they were out to break a curse and unknowingly, relight a flame in a deflated family. Not only were they going to win the World Series, it was apparent that it was going to be a sweep. I watched the game alone in my dorm room. I knew the Red Sox were going to win. By the ninth inning, the Sox were on top 3-0. I was standing in the middle of my room, too many emotions flying through me to even sit down. Oh my God, what would grandpa be thinking, I should call Dad and see if he’s watching the game; wait, of course he’s watching the game, and what about my brother and my mom, were they watching the game too, were they seeing history write itself, were they feeling tears burn their face like mine?

The glowing green grass on the television screen appeared. While celebration lasted late into the night, I sat in my room, crying to myself, over the thought that dreams do come true. My grandfather had spent his whole life with the Red Sox his symbol of hope, and when he couldn't hold on any longer, I took over his spot. The Red Sox became my team, and my team had just answered the prayers I had uttered so many nights, just let my grandpa feel the glory. Just once.

I hadn't seen my dad in two months. I called him from my mom's apartment where she now lived to let him know I was going to be stopping by. My mom had moved out almost a year before when she finally got the courage to stand alone. I was mostly going to see what my dad had to say about the broken curse and to see my dog. The whole way over I was thinking about the conversation we had had when my mom first moved out. He sat me down and told me he loved me. The words had spilled out of his mouth, so foreign yet so sincere. He cried, like the day at grandpa's grave. I fought so hard to press the same words through my teeth, but as hard as I tried they clung to my tongue, not wanting to be let go. It wasn't because I didn't love him, but because I realized that I did.

I pulled into the driveway and got out of the car. I walked up the front steps and there on the door hung a sign, "2004 World Series Champions," next to it, the Red Sox logo. I walked into the house, which felt so much different since my mom had moved out. It no longer had the smell of chocolate chip cookies mixed with the faint odor of Windex. It didn't even feel like home.

"Hey Dad."
"Hey. Gimme a hug."
I reached my arms out and placed them around him. I didn't know when to pull away or when to keep holding on tight. Hugging him was a new thing for me.
"What are you up to?" I asked.
"Nothing, just using the Swiffer."
"You know what that is?"
I was shocked. He was becoming the regular old family man.
I walked into the living room and there on top of the television sat a picture of Ted Williams. It was in a wood frame, black and white. He stood with his bat up like he was ready to swing at anything that came his way, from a fast ball, to a knuckle ball, to the unexpected. Under the picture in blue ink it read, "To David, Best of Luck in all you do. Ted Williams." My dad's good luck charm had been watching the game with him.

"So Dad, World Series Champs, sounds kinda nice, huh?"
The Crime Scene
Brian Phares

The detective pushed his way through the gathering crowd, stopping as he approached an officer attempting to hold the onlookers back. He grunted his name and precinct, and the cop stepped aside, letting him through. He ducked under the suspended yellow tape and slowed his pace, taking in the scene before him. He pulled a crumpled pack of Camels out of his trench coat pocket, slid one out, and lit it. After a long drag and a longer sigh, he stepped up to the policeman who was crouched near the ground.

"O'Malley," the detective said.
"Murphy, thank God you're here," replied the street cop as he stood up. "This is a mess."
"You the first on the scene?"
"Me and Johnson."
"Where is he?"
"He's puking in the alley...he's just a rookie, Murphy. Takes a lot to be able to look at something like this without losing it."
"Wish I still had that innocence, O'Malley. What do we got?"
"The victim was found tied to the tree like this. Could've been here for hours."
"Witnesses?"
"No one coming forward, Murphy. But I don't believe for a second that no one saw anything."
"Bunch of savages in this town. As long as it isn't happening to them, they don't give a shit."
"I swore on my mother's emerald eyes I'd transfer if I ever saw something like this again."
"O'Malley, you can't go anywhere. This city'd fall apart without cops like you."
"Nice of you to say, Murphy."
"Alright, let's take a look at it." Murphy crouched low to the ground and pulled aside the sheet covering the victim. He winced and dropped the sheet back to the dirt before standing up again. He blew smoke into the air above them and watched the gray cloud filter through the tree branches.

"You and Johnson found it tied up like this?"
"Yes sir, we didn't touch a thing."
"Who reported it?"
"Anonymous caller said they saw it at 1:45 and didn't think anything of it, but then it was still there at four and got concerned. Call came through to my car at 4:56."
"Why the delay?"
"Don't know. I got the call when I got the call."
"See if dispatch can do a back trace on the caller, find out the area it originated in. There's something fishy about this." O'Malley walked back towards his car, leaving Murphy alone with the covered victim. His keen eyes scanned his surroundings: a small, grassy area, a tree, twenty or so feet away sidewalk and public buildings. A darkened alley entered his line of sight, no doubt the same alley where Johnson was throwing up his youth, having seen a horror that no man can block out of his mind. Murphy pondered the things he had seen in his thirty years on the force, the brutality that man inflicts on his fellow man that haunts Murphy's sleepless nights, the stress that ruined two marriages and gave him a two pack a day nicotine habit. He snapped out of his daydream as O'Malley walked up to him.

"Anything on the caller?"
"No, Murphy, but we may have something better. Eyewitness came forward, says he knows what happened here."
"Where is he?" O'Malley pointed toward the parked patrol cars nearby. The two men walked over to the vehicles, and Murphy got his first look at the witness. A kid, maybe twenty years old, jeans, black hooded sweatshirt. He was sweating despite the mild chill in the air, a sign Murphy took as nervousness. Guilt. Murphy smiled.

"How are you, son?"
"Fine, I guess. What's going on here?"
"Why don't you tell me?"
"I just tried to get over there and these cops stopped me."
Brian Phares

"Where were you trying to go?"
"That tree right there."
"Why did you want to go to the tree?"
"It's where I left my bike."
"You left your bike there? Chained to the tree?"
"Yeah...did something happen to it?" Murphy's eyes gleamed with rage. He grabbed the kid and pushed him hard against the patrol car, spit flying from his mouth as his frustrations poured out of him.
"You son of a bitch, what were you thinking? How could you do something like that to an innocent bicycle?"
"Someone get this guy off of me!" O'Malley tried to grab Murphy's arm, but the detective shoved him aside and drew his gun, pressing the barrel into the kid's forehead.
"What's your name, scumbag?"
"Ron," the kid managed to say through panicked sobs.
"Ron, how would you like it if I shot you in the head and tied you to a tree?"
"Oh God, help me."
"God can't help you now, Ron, only I can."
"Murphy, don't lose it on me."
"Shut up, O'Malley. Why did you do it, Ron? Why did you leave it locked up like that?"
"I stopped for lunch, I didn't want anyone to steal it."
"Oh, so you locked it up? Like it's your property, you sick bastard?"
"It is my property! I bought it at the mall last year!"
"You disgust me. O'Malley, get him out of here." The officer took Ron and handcuffed him. Murphy holstered his weapon and headed back toward the crime scene. He lifted the sheet and looked at the bike one last time, its chain twisted around rusting gears, balding tires covered in thick mud, a water bottle holder missing its bottle.

"Bunch of savages in this town."

Artwork: "Untitled 2," Michael Sellitti

An Intimate Pantomine
Sarah Johndrew

your puppeteer hands
move so flawlessly over
yourself, everyday.
Immersed Insanity:
Tina Piazza

For Friar Dan, who has left a lasting legacy up the minds of many students.

When one tends to look back over their schooling, one remembers the exceptionally good teachers, who seem to be rare, and the exceptionally bad teachers, who always seemed to be in abundance. But in all classifications to remember teachers by, certifiably crazy is rarely mentioned. Now, this is not crazy like, “I can’t believe how much homework this teacher gives; it’s insane.” This is crazy like come from another world insane, and no one teacher can best fill the category like Friar Dan.

My first experience with Fr. Dan began in the sixth grade. My class was taking a tour of Bishop Ludden, and every tour guide stopped by Fr. Dan’s class. After that first introduction to Fr. Dan, I should have ran and never entered Bishop Ludden again. The sixth graders all huddled together in the back of the room, terrified at the priest in front of the room who was losing his mind before our eyes, playing with stuffed animals, and having serious conversations with them. His students were smiling while the sixth graders were trying to hide behind one another, praying that he wouldn’t call on one of us. Fr. Dan was the most memorable part of the tour. We thought he was crazy, but deep down, we knew it was an act. It had to be. The diocese wouldn’t let him teach if he was really crazy. Would they?

Seventh grade started and the rumors of Fr. Dan flew around us and terrified us, but it didn’t seem possible that he could be like that. Giant pink bunnies in the wall, fiery archangels in the back of the classrooms. It seemed more like wild stories that the seniors were making up to scare the skippers. A person couldn’t really act like this. He didn’t seem all that crazy, or at least not during mass when he was serious and calm.

It wasn’t until eighth grade that I got my first real interaction with Fr. Dan. French class was right next door to Fr. Dan’s room. That was the problem. He loved foreign languages and could speak five or six languages fluently including Latin, Ancient Greek, and of course, French. The first time he burst into our classroom was my very first experience with “Sanctuary!” He was hunched over and carried a cane. Cries of “Sanctuary! Sanctuary!” rang throughout the classroom. Quasimodo became alive before our eyes, and we became dead quiet, our mouths gaping open in shock, staring at the priest of our school doing a perfect impression of the Hunchback of Notre Dame. We didn’t know how to react to it, so we were stiff and silent trying to hold back our terror and laughter. Fr. Dan burst into laughter and shook his head at us; “Oh come on,” he said to us, “the Hunchback of Notre Dame,” and he left the room laughing. We were more terrified than ever as we slowly went back to French.

From French class, we learned what Fr. Dan was, how he acted towards us, and how we should react towards him. Always humor the mentally insane. His one true and grand appearance in French class came when Mrs. P. left the room. Fr. Dan burst into the room singing the Canadian National Anthem in French. We became dead quiet as usual, and then he started questioning us. He had found out from Mrs. P. that one of us had admitted to being terrified of him. Mrs. P. had betrayed us to the insane priest. Justin Fugo timidly raised his hand, which was a dumb thing to do. He should have never identified himself. Fr. Dan went straight to him and began interrogating him. He wanted to know why Justin was scared of him, and why Justin didn’t believe he was from another planet. This was the first time I had actually heard Fr. Dan in conversation with another person, and this was the first time that I had ever heard of his home planet, Planet Mongo.

Ninth grade I was in the unfortunate section that had Fr. Dan as a Religion teacher. Everyone else had the nice and normal teacher. This meant that I would have Fr. Dan for two years as my Religion teacher. He always taught 11th grade Religion. During this time, I became more familiar with the Planet Mongo. He had a map of stars in his classroom, and he would point out where his planet was located, but he could have pointing to anywhere. We wouldn’t have known. Planet Mongo was located in the furthest reaches of the galaxy. This certainly explained a lot. He certainly did seem alien. Alien was probably the one word that could perfectly describe him. The giant pink bunnies in the walls, the fiery archangels in the back of
the classroom, Planet Mongo, and his "normal" behavior certainly did seem alien to us, who had never encountered behavior quite like Fr. Dan's.

Fr. Dan really did believe he was from another planet, or at least he made us believe that he believed that he was from another world. We would look at him skeptically as he told us he had just made time stand still and just walked through a wall, or turned into his natural form - particles of light. We would question on him on why he thought he didn't touch the ground when he walked; it looked like he touched the ground, but he claimed that it was so slight a difference that Earthlings would never notice. After all, he didn't want to attract attention to himself. What was wrong with Earth ground anyway? He never really explained that one very well. It would be brushed off as being too hard or too damp.

I never did understand the giant pink bunnies in the wall. They were from a different planet too, but not Planet Mongo. They were the troublemakers in the classroom. The tricksters that would disrupt class, bang on the walls, and steal things from the classroom. If anything was missing, it would be because of the giant pink bunnies in the wall. And of course they would to each other, or at least Fr. Dan claimed that they talked. All I ever heard was silence. We would ask him how they fit into the walls if they were so large. He would just go into how dimensions were not really what they appeared to be, and how did we know really what we knew? This would be the first of many of Fr. Dan's philosophy lectures.

Philosophy in Fr. Dan's class was always a bit unsettling. It always had to do with something about how you know if something really exists if you don't know if your senses are correct because they could just be a part of your imagination, and in fact, our whole world was made up of imaginary beings that could never be proved. No one ever did very well with Fr. Dan's philosophy. In fact, every single student failed his philosophy tests. We just weren't good at abstract thought. We were from Planet Earth, not Planet Mongo. Our imaginations just weren't quite up to speed with Fr. Dan's.

It was always fun to get Fr. Dan to do his impressions. He did an excellent elephant when he got down on his hands and knees, used an arm for the trunk and acted like an elephant complete, with sounds. But his most memorable impression will always be Quasimodo, the Hunchback of Notre Dame. Everyone has their own special memory of "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!" I will always remember my mother coming home from the Meet the Teachers Night in shock and disbelief of Fr. Dan. Two students had gotten Fr. Dan to do his Quasimodo impression for a chocolate chip cookie. My mother, who had never quite believed me about Fr. Dan's behavior, couldn't believe that a teacher, and not just a teacher, but a priest, had just ran around the room screaming, "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!"

After awhile, Fr. Dan's behavior didn't faze us anymore. It became as ordinary to us as any other teaching method until we told others about Fr. Dan. They would look at us like we couldn't be serious, but we always reassured them that it was very true. "How could this person be allowed to teach students, let alone be left unsupervised in the presence of children?" they would cry out.

At the end of 11th grade, Fr. Dan announced that he would be teaching us next year for 12th grade Religion. I practically had a heart attack. Why did I have to have him for three years? This just wasn't reasonable. A major injustice had just occurred.

Fr. Dan had a new toy for 12th grade, an arm including the shoulder blade. This just wasn't an arm, but a skeleton - Bones. He would walk around the class with it, tapping a boney finger against students' backs. And of course, he would talk to it. He would have in-depth conversations and ask Bones questions, where of course it would respond. I felt like I had watched Fr. Dan's mental state deteriorate before my eyes. It was a little eerie and sad to watch.

Looking back on Fr. Dan's behavior I think it was just to break the monotony of the school day. I think he knew that Religion was never very up there on our importance, and he wanted to make us laugh. He loved getting strange looks from acting like Quasimodo or laying in the hallways when class got out - I almost stepped on him once. He wanted to make us pay attention to his class, and we had to because you never knew what to expect. "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!"
Selecting A Partner
Amber Hickman

First, I would have him be ferine, walking eagerly toward my carnal presence at the loneliest moment of my abstinent life, his body still damp with sweat from the hunt. He would be wearing a shirt of ink, with metal in his nipples from the penetration of a hard needle.

He will drop his fiction, and there in the bookstore, he will seize my hips, pressing my pelvis against his uncircumcised tale, he will say nothing and snatch my throat, forcing me onto the table, taking my abstinence from me.

Queen Of Crime
Tina Piazza

PLACE: Greenfield Women’s Correctional Institution, Greenfield, Nebraska
DATE: February 1957
Characters: GRACE "CAT" NEILSON
Crime: Murder
Verdict: Guilty of 1st degree murder
Sentence: Life in prison without parole
Quote: “I’m the Queen of Crime in this joint.”
Cell # 26789

JOANNE KARSEN
Crime: Grand larceny
Verdict: Guilty of attempted bank robbery in the 2nd degree
Sentence: 5-10, parole on good behaviour after 5 years
Quote: “Mother hens don’t commit crimes; I was framed.”
Cell # 26788

MAGGIE PETERSON
Crime: Attempted murder
Verdict: Guilty of attempted murder in the 2nd degree
Sentence: 25-35, parole on good behavior after 20 years
Quote: “I should have shot that bastard in the balls”
Cell # 26790

BOARD MEMBER #1
BOARD MEMBER #2
BOARD MEMBER #3
GUARD

(A catwalk runs above the stage, which leads to three prison cells - from stage right to left are 26788, 26789, 26790. A metal stair case leads down from the catwalk stage right. Stage right is a cafeteria table. Stage left is a separate room that takes up about ¼ of the stage. On the front of the room is a window with bars for check-ins, and next to the window is a metal door where guards and other officials can enter the room. A door with
bars separates the cafeteria from the separate room, and a door
downstage left is called the Door to Freedom. GRACE is a young
woman about 20 years old with long black hair. JOANNIE is the
mother hen of Greenfield, and about 49 with severely graying
hair. MAGGIE is beginning to age at 35 with short brown hair.

At the beginning of the scene, the lights are down except for a
light coming from the window of the separate room. The girls
are in their cells. A SPOTLIGHT appears on GRACE. She is
sitting on her bed clutching the bars.

GRACE: I learned a long time ago not to trust anybody. It never got me nowhere but
I've been here...

(LIGHT comes up on cell # 26788)

JOANNIE: Shut the hell up, Cat!
GRACE: Fuck you, Joannie. You ain't my ma. I'm trying to tell a story here.
JOANNIE: Go ta Hell. How'm I supposed ta sleep with ya moanin' in the next cell?

(Footsteps are heard coming up the stairs. The girls withdraw
to the back of their cells, and the LIGHTS go out. A
SPOTLIGHT follows a GUARD walking up the stairs and
down the catwalk. He disappears off the stage. The stage is dark
and still. A light comes back on GRACE's cell.)

GRACE: All's silent and well. Joannie's kinda like the mother hen around here. She
wants to control us, but she can never truly be number one. That title belongs to me.
I have the most heinous crime in this place, and that's why I have a cell of my own.
Joannie can't claim that. All she's here for is bank robbery, and she don't even a'mit
it. She's still sayin' how her guy framed her. Not me. I a'mit it and everyone knows
it, and that's why I got a pad to myself. Hey Maggie, who's the Queen of Crime?

(LIGHT comes up on cell # 26790)

(MAGGIE withdraws and her cell goes dark.)

MAGGIE: Leave me alone, Grace.
GRACE: Hey! Nobody calls me Grace!
MAGGIE: Just shut your schizophrenic self up. Nobody wants to hear ya.
GRACE: Only reason you know what schizophrenic is is 'cause of your defense,
and guess what? They didn't do such a good job, now did they?
MAGGIE: Fuck you, Grace!
GRACE: And don't be tryin' to tell me what to do, 'cause you can't. No one can
tell me what to do. You want me to do to you what I did to my ma?
MAGGIE: Do you want to be put to death, Cat? You can't touch me.
GRACE: Goddamn you, Maggie. Why do ya have to go to such a touchy topic?
MAGGIE: Why can't ya just leave me alone?

(THE LIGHT on her cell goes out. A SPOTLIGHT follows a
GUARD walking up the stairs and down the catwalk. He
disappears off stage. The stage is dark and still. The LIGHTS
come up slowly on the entire stage. Focus is drawn to the
cafeteria. The three girls are having lunch.)
Tina Piazza

GRACE: So then I said to the copper, if ya want me, you’re just gonna have to come in the shower and get me. He said he had a loaded gun pointed right at me and he would shot me if he had to. I stuck my head out of the shower and told him, “I guess that’s not the only thing ya have loaded on ya.” He turned bright red, and put his gun back in his holster. I went back to showering.

MAGGIE: I bet that was one long shower, Cat.

GRACE: I wasn’t goin’ ta let anybody interfere with my one last shower in freedom. I used up every bit of hot water I could find. When I finally turned off the water, I poked my head out and asked in my most polite way, “Could ya be a doll, and hand me a towel. I would hate to be indecent in front of a gentleman such as you.”

JOANNIE: Oh God! Only you could get away with something like that and not get shot dead.

GRACE: It was an amazing performance. He handed me a towel and every piece of clothing I had in the bathroom. Then when I finally got out, I looked at myself in the mirror and said, “Oh dear, just look at me! I can’t go anywhere looking like this!” And he let me do my hair and make-up before he arrested me! (Laughs.) Ya know my defense called him in as a character witness to say how nice and sweet I am. When they called his name, I wanted to roll on the floor laughing, but I kept my composure. It worked a little though. At my sentencing hearing, the jury let me out of death row, but the judge still called me the most unremorseful creature he’s ever seen in his courtroom. I was truly honored.

(They all burst into laughter. A GUARD comes up to them.)

GUARD: Come on, gals, lunch is over.

(He escorts them back to their cells and carefully locks each one. He goes back down the stairs and enters the metal door going into the separate room. He can be seen through the window. The LIGHTS go down on the cafeteria. GRACE, MAGGIE, and JOANNIE can be seen leaning against the bars of their cell doors. They are blankly staring out.)

MAGGIE: Hey, Joannie. Whatcha gonna do after you get out of here?

Queen Of Crime

JOANNIE: Hunt down that lyin’ son-of-a-bitch and kill him like the rat he is.

GRACE: Oh, so we can expect ya back here waiting your death sentence?

JOANNIE: Fuck you, Cat. Can’t ya take anything as a joke? I’m going to have a life. I’m going to walk through the Door of Freedom, and ya ain’t ever gonna see me come back.

MAGGIE: Freedom don’t exist, Joannie. There’s always somebody you’re gonna have ta put up with – bosses, landlords, bill collectors. There’s always someone wantin’ ta screw ya. You want a life? Well, parole won’t ever give it to ya.

JOANNIE: What do you know? I’ll have my life. You’ll see. I only have three years left, and if they ever decide to parole me, sooner. I’m gonna be somebody.

GRACE: Hey, Joannie. When you get out, send me a postcard. No, send me pictures. I want to see a world where freedom exists. You two forget, someday you’ll get out. Me, I’m here for life, and that sucks more than you’ll ever know. You tow can see freedom. I can only see death.

JOANNIE: Cat, ya moan about life more than anyone I’ve ever known.

MAGGIE: Amen ta that.

GRACE: Fuck y’all. This is why people think I’m bitter and mean. Every time I try to share my feelings I just get put down until I can’t take it anymore and snap. That’s why my ma’s dead. Do y’all want that ta happen to you?

MAGGIE: Do you want ta be put ta death?

GRACE: Do y’all really think I’m scared of death? I’m going to die in this hell-hole while y’all will be able to get out of here. I’ll never be able ta see more of this world than that fuckin’ courtyard out there! Do ya think it really matter ta me if I hurry up the death process?

JOANNIE: And that’s why ya called the Queen of Crime – melodramatic to the very end.

(JOANNIE and MAGGIE laugh. GRACE remains gloomy. A GUARD comes up the stairs and unlocks JOANNIE’s cell.)

GUARD: Come on, Joannie, this could be your lucky day.

(He escorts her down the flight of stairs. The table has been pushed back, and now a smaller table with three chairs on one
Tina Piazza

side and a fourth on the other takes its place. Three members from the Board of Parole sit sternly facing the audience. Stacks of files are in front of them. The GUARD sits JOANNIE down on a chair and backs away to the foot of the stairs where he intently watches the procedure. From the time JOANNIE sits, she instantly becomes milder and seems somewhat shier.

JOANNIE: Good afternoon, gentlemen.
BOARD MEMBER #1: Good afternoon, Miss Karsen.
BOARD MEMBER #2: Miss Karsen, you have been in prison for seven years serving out your sentence for attempted bank robbery.
JOANNIE: Yes, sir, that is correct.
BOARD MEMBER #3: What have you learned during your time here?
JOANNIE: I've learned that you can't blame somebody else for what you did. You have to face the facts and accept your punishment. If you don't, you'll never be able to be truly free, and it will always weigh on you.

(The BOARD MEMBERS huddle together for a brief conference. They all nod their heads and then face JOANNIE. During this time, JOANNIE is intently staring at her hands. She seems very nervous.)

BOARD MEMBER #2: Well, it seems to us that you are fully rehabilitated and ready to go back to society.

(BOARD MEMBER #1 and #3 stamp her file - one saying Rehabilitated and the other saying Paroled. BOARD MEMBER #2 closes her file and sets it down on a tall stack of files.)

BOARD MEMBER #2: When you are released tomorrow, you will receive two addresses. One will be to your apartment, and the other to your place of employment. Your job starts two days from now, which will give you a day to settle into your apartment. Good luck with your new life.

Queen of Crime

(JOANNIE smiles and stands. The GUARD comes and brings her back to her cell. Crying his heard as the LIGHTS go off. The LIGHTS come back on the cafeteria. This is JOANNIE's last breakfast with the girls. MAGGIE and GRACE look happy, and JOANNIE looks like she's in shock.)

GRACE: Hey, Joannie, those pictures can come sooner than I expected.
MAGGIE: Cat, did ya ever think that pictures aren't the first thing she wants to do when she gets out of here?
GRACE: Hey, she can take her time. What's the matter Joannie?
JOANNIE: I'm scared.
GRACE: Scared?
JOANNIE: What if freedom isn't everything I've been dreaming about? What if something goes wrong?
GRACE: Like what?
JOANNIE: What if the apartment is a piece of crap? What if I get fired from my job? What if I end up back here?

(JOANNIE begins to cry. GRACE and MAGGIE hug her.)

MAGGIE: Oh, Joannie. Ya have nothin' ta worry about. You're getting out of this hell-hole, and that's what's important – nothing else matters.

(A GUARD comes and gets JOANNIE.)

GUARD: So this finally your lucky day, Joannie.

(She smiles, and the GUARD takes her through the door and into the separate room.)

GRACE: Hell! Ta think that she's cryin' over leavin' this dump.
MAGGIE: Like I said, there's no such thing as freedom. It's only one hell-hole ta another. She'll be just as miserable out there as she was here.
GRACE: Go ta Hell, Maggie. Freedom exists, and Joannie's finally getting what she
Tina Piazza

deserves.

MAGGIE: Nobody deserves the treatment she’ll get when they find out she’s an ex-con. People like us can’t live in the outside world. We never get back in line with the normal “society.” People don’t accept us, and that’s all there is to it.

(GRACE glares at MAGGIE. JOANNIE comes out of the separate room dressed in the style of the time. She is handed a piece of paper with addresses on it. She carefully folds it and puts it in her purse. A beep is heard as the Door to Freedom is opened. She turns back and waves up to GRACE and MAGGIE.)

JOANNIE: Well, this is it. Door of Freedom, here I come.

(JOANNIE heads out the door with her head high and a huge smile on her face. The LIGHTS go out. The LIGHTS come on to GRACE’s and MAGGIE’s cells. MAGGIE is reading a newspaper.)

GRACE: Hey, Maggie, whatcha think Joannie’s doin’ right now? It’s been two months and she never sent me any pictures.

MAGGIE: Is all you can think about those goddamned pictures?

GRACE: No, but it would be nice if she would at least write, or—

MAGGIE: Shit! Maybe freedom isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be.

GRACE: Oh, Maggie, not again.

MAGGIE: No, not me. Look.

(MAGGIE shoves the paper through the bars. GRACE grabs it.)

GRACE: Oh my God! Joannie!

(MAGGIE and GRACE stare blankly out. MAGGIE withdraws and her cell goes dark. GRACE is left alone.)

Queen Of Crime

GRACE: It’s funny how the cookie crumbles. Never thought Joannie was capable of something like that. Just didn’t seem like the type. Now, the gal in cell 26758, now she’s the type, but I guess ya can never tell. Maggie’s right, freedom isn’t everything. The world is cruel. I know that; it’s why I’m here. I never did tell you why I’m the Queen of Crime, did i? where do i begin? I know.

My ma used ta call me Cat because she thought I was a hellcat on two feet. You wouldn’t want ta get me cornered or someone was gonna get shredded, and it wasn’t me. Those were good times. Everybody was scared of me, and how I would scare them. But I wasn’t stupid; nothin’ illegal. Didn’t want ta go ta jail. Sounds kinda funny now. I used ta have this dartboard in my room with my ma’s face on it. The prosecution used it ta help convict me. Said I was a danger ta society, and that I’d been plannin’ ta kill my ma. I never did plan it, but oh, I got her good!

I just snapped one day. I couldn’t take her crap for one more second, so I got a dart and threw it out the back of her head. That was the most fun I’d ever had with a dart. She started ta flop around on the floor, so I decided ta be merciful and stabbed her in the heart. She stopped movin’ after that. I dismembered her whole body and buried it in various locations. Evidently it was the bloodiest crime this county has ever seen, so...what do I hear? The night patrol — all’s silent and still.

(GRACE withdraws to the back of her cell, and the LIGHTS go out. A SPOTLIGHT follows a GUARD walking up the stairs and down the catwalk. The GUARD disappears off stage. The stage remains dark.)

GRACE: I can still see the blood on my hands. That bitch deserved it! And that’s why I’m the Queen of Crime.

(GRACE begins to laugh wickedly and uncontrollably at the thought of her dismembered mother.)

MAGGIE: Shut the fuck up!

(GRACE becomes eerily quiet. A SPOTLIGHT follows
another GUARD walking up the stairs, down the catwalk, and
disappearing off stage.)

GRACE: Just remember, I'M THE QUEEN OF CRIME!

(GRACE begins to laugh again as the curtain falls.)