



**THE  
PREMISES**  
A Good Place to Start  
**ISSUE #7**  
**MARCH 2009**



**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS ENCOUNTER SOMEONE,  
SOMETHING, OR SOME PLACE FROM THEIR PAST  
THAT THEY HAD GOOD REASON TO BELIEVE THEY  
WOULD NEVER ENCOUNTER AGAIN.**

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## Plans for the Future

Like many of you, I suspect, I come up with at least a few intriguing ideas every week for things I could do with my life, or things On The Premises could do, and so forth. These ideas would all require significant time to pursue, so even if I had just won the Powerball Lottery and never needed to work again or something, there's no way I could do even 10% of these ideas in a typical human lifespan, especially one that's approaching the "probably half over" mark and which could end at any time for any number of random reasons.

I've also been convinced, though, that publicly announcing and/or writing down goals makes them more serious and more likely to be at least attempted. So here are some goals for On The Premises, and I'll be reporting progress on them in future issues and in newsletters.

1) Become an Amazon.com affiliate.

I'd like to have a section of the website that links to books and other resources on Amazon, but only if I personally trust those books and resources. When I recommend a book of short stories or a book on writing or something, I want to be able to give a URL that lets you buy it, and I'd like that URL to have our name in it somewhere.

2) Work out some kind of partnership with *Narrative* magazine.

I have strongly mixed feelings about *Narrative*. I'm not alone in thinking that they publish the highest quality on-line fiction today, but that's because they resolutely stick to the best and (justifiably) most famous short story writers. Yet they claim to represent "emerging writers," too.

No, they don't. They represent writers who have had three or four stories published already, who just finished a prestigious MFA program, and/or who just won a grant to continue writing fiction. I've got news for you: if you just got an MFA from the Iowa Writer's Workshop and a grant to spend the next six months writing fiction, then to me, you're not "emerging," you've already emerged.

*On The Premises* and other minor-league magazines are where you can find my definition of emerging writers. I bet we've already published authors who have decided the writing life isn't for them and haven't written since, or decided that writing will be a hobby, not a career. But those people can write good stories, too! *Narrative* ignores writers like that. We don't. But rather than start a flame war, maybe *Narrative* and OTP could work together somehow.

It's worth looking into.

I have other ideas, and I'm willing to listen to yours, too, so send them to [Feedback@OnThePremises.com](mailto:Feedback@OnThePremises.com). In the meantime, please enjoy this issue.

Keep writing and keep reading,

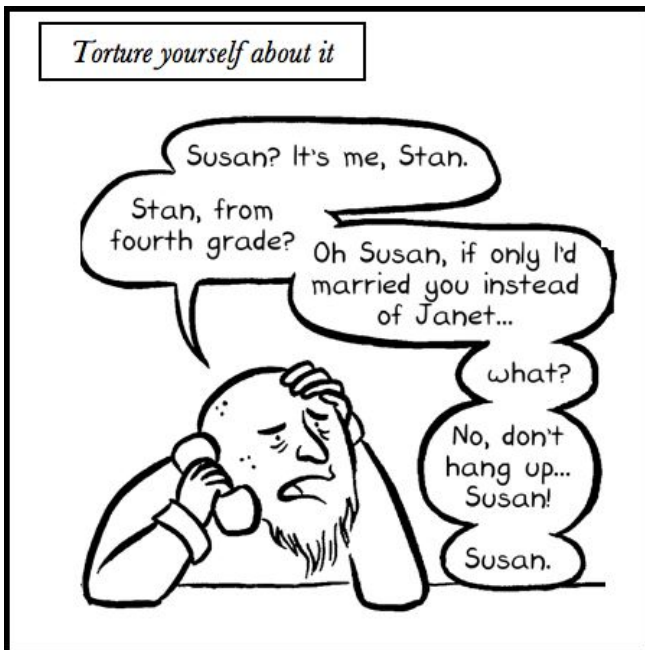
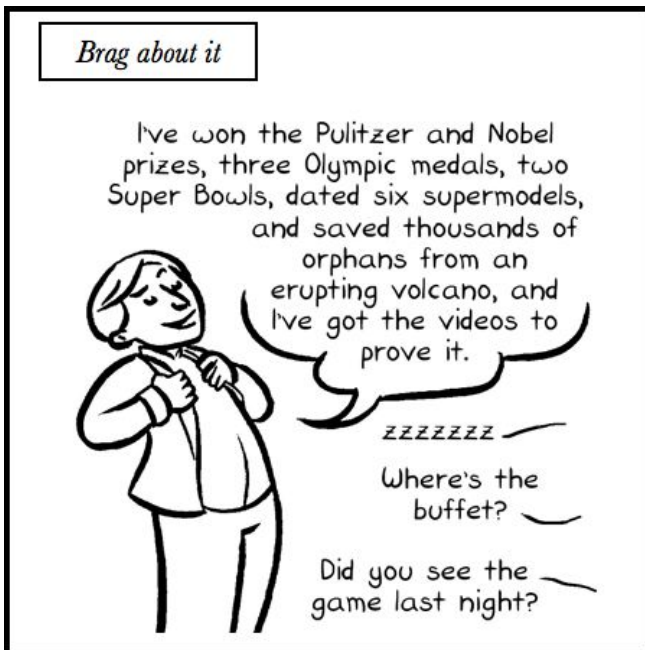
Tarl Roger Kudrick and/or Bethany Granger  
co-publisher of *On The Premises* magazine

# Cartoons!

by Erika Moen (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)

Ah, the past. It gets bigger and more complicated every day. It isn't easy to figure out what to do with it all, either, so in the public interest, *On The Premises* is proud to present the latest collaboration between writer Tarl Kudrick and cartoonist Erika Moen (check out her web site at <http://www.projectkooky.com/Erika>).

## How to Deal With Your Past



*Deny it*

Hi Teresa, it's Matt!



*Worry that your peers will outlive you*

Everyone says Kelli was a great humanitarian, but I went to school with her. Want to hear me speak ill of the dead?



*Know that your best days are far, far behind you*

I know you! You won the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes, and Olympic medals, and dated supermodels, and saved all those orphans...



*Enjoy one small consolation*

It may take hundreds, thousands, or even billions of years, but someday, everything you are and do will be completely forgotten.

And so will all the people who knew you... and all the people who knew THEM.

So eventually, the problem of coping with your past will take care of itself. The trick is figuring out what to do in the meantime!

## FIRST PRIZE

Neil James Hudson lives in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the UK with too many cats. His fiction has appeared in *Ballista*, *The Labyrinth Inhabitant* and *Nemonymous*. He will shortly become a full-time writer; *i.e.*, he's about to lose his job.

### John Comes Back

*by Neil James Hudson*

I feel cold. Why do I feel cold? I wish they'd do something about it. Where's Gwynneth? She'd do something about the cold. It's rubbish being here. You'd think they'd keep you warm at least.

Gwynneth never lets me get cold. She's always careful to make sure I have the duvet over me. I reach out for her, but she isn't here. That's why I'm not warm enough. She's too good for me.

I wish she was here now. I need the toilet. There's a dim nightlight in the ceiling, just enough to see by, so I take myself. It's a bit strange but I get myself back to bed. It's cold though.

Some young lass comes in. I don't recognize her. "Mr. Bedford," she says. "You're not supposed to go to the toilet on your own."

They treat me like a child.

The next thing I know, all the lights are on. There's two of them. "He's always doing it," says the first one. Dark hair and a touch of the oriental about her. I don't trust her. "You'll just have to get used to it. He thinks he's at home."

“Home,” I say. “That’s right. Where’s Gwynneth?”

“I know I shouldn’t say this,” says the dark girl. “But I don’t know if we’re doing the right thing. Maybe we should, you know, call it a day with some of them.”

“That’s horrible,” says the other. I think it’s horrible as well, but I don’t know what they’re on about. This one’s blonde. A sweet little baby face. Very pretty. It’s a good job Gwynneth’s here, or I might not be able to control myself.

I look around me. This isn’t my room. There’s a window, but the curtains are drawn, and most of the light comes from a fluorescent tube in the ceiling. It’s all a bit clinical, but not like a hospital: there’s a carpet, bedside cabinet, a picture of a boat on the wall. It’s like a bedroom that no one lives in: maybe I’m in a hotel.

These must be the chambermaids. I remember the hotel where we went on our honeymoon. And the chambermaid there—she walked in on us! I was mortified, but Gwynneth almost died of laughter, and I couldn’t help but join in.

“That was funny,” I say. They don’t look impressed. “It’s cold,” I say. “Why won’t you do anything about the cold?”

“Go back to bed,” says one of the chambermaids. It was the one who’d said the horrible thing, but I can’t remember what it was now. She doesn’t look as if she meant anything horrible. I think she means well. She looks tired, actually, as if she should be the one that goes back to bed. I start to feel guilty, as if I’m the one responsible.

They put me back to bed. The sweet one, my favorite, gives me a smile before they leave. The dark one has a much more difficult expression. It’s as if she’s feeling two things at once. Gwynneth is dark-haired. I prefer the dark ones, but after we met I swore I’d never look at another woman again. I close my eyes. We’ll sort it out in the morning. I hope I haven’t got drunk again, had an argument. I always seem to muck things up.

I fall asleep.

\*



I wake to the sound of curtains opening. It's light outside, must be morning. I'm somewhere strange.

"Where am I? Where's Gwynneth?"

There's a young blonde lass here. "You're fine, Mr. Bedford. It's a big day today. Are you ready for breakfast?"

"I'll be late for work," I say.

"It's okay, Mr. Bedford. Do you need the toilet?"

"I'll find the toilet on my own," I say. She's nice though, I shouldn't be rude. "Why is it so cold? Why's this bed wet?"

\*

"I had to come," says the man. "I had to come for God."

"Are you a vicar?" I say. I shouldn't be rude though. I was rude to the man who married me and Gwynneth, and she's never forgiven me.

"Don't you recognize me?" he says. I look at him more closely. He seems to be getting on a bit. He's got a moustache: I don't like them, and there's something about a vicar with a moustache that I don't like especially.

"Course I don't. Are you giving me the last rites? Are you Derek?"

"Who's Derek?"

"How the bloody hell should I know?" I say. What's the point of asking me about these people? "You should know, you're a vicar."

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry," he said.

"You should be." I don't like him, he looks like the kind of person you can't trust. God knows who he is. The bellboy? "Second floor," I say, but he doesn't seem to like it.

I have an idea that I used to know what all this was about, and that I lost something. It's at the back of my mind. But there's a lot of stuff at the back of my mind, and I reckon that's the best place for it. Sometimes I think I don't remember anything because I'm scared of it, and I don't want to remember.

Then another man comes in. The vicar seems to look up to him. Perhaps he's God. The vicar leaves. Good riddance.

The new man must be the hero, he's all square jawed and blue eyed and ready to sweep the heroine off her feet. He seems to be in charge. He sticks a needle in my arm. It hurts and I start to cry. The maids fuss over me. They seem to think it's for my own good. I must be going to Africa. We've got a holiday planned to Africa, me and Gwynneth, and you get your arm hurt before you can go. "I'm going to Africa," I say, but I'm still crying, and I don't know why.

\*

I wake up in the night. I reach out for Gwynneth, but she's not there. Maybe she's gone to the toilet. I realize that I need the toilet. I get out of bed, but I can't find my way around. I seem to be in some kind of hotel room. We must be on our honeymoon. We stayed in a hotel then.

Eventually I ring for assistance. The maid, a dark-haired young girl sees me standing there and looks on the floor. Then she realizes what I've called for, and helps me to the toilet. She looks amazed. I suppose she would: you're not really supposed to ask maids to do that, are you?

\*

When I wake up, I don't know where I am. I also don't know why I'm alone. I'm in a single bed, and it's not comfortable.

"Where's Gwynneth?" I ask, when the maid comes in. It's the dark one: I suppose they work different shifts.

“No change there, then,” she says, to herself I reckon, and sets about getting my breakfast. Then later, she says, “you’ll be on your best behavior today, won’t you, Mr. Bedford? Dr. Sanders is coming to see you.”

“Who?”

“The doctor who saw you yesterday.”

“I should knock his block off,” I say. “He hurt me.”

She seems to freeze. “What did he do?”

“He hurt my arm.” I frown. “But then, that’s because we’re going to Africa.”

She smiles at me. “You silly,” she says. “That’s your injection. He’ll do it again today: it doesn’t hurt really.” Then she looks at me more seriously. “You remember Dr. Sanders?”

“I should knock his block off,” I say. “He hurt me.” She leaves, looking thoughtful. I like her, she’s pretty.

\*

So it’s Dr. Sanders, I think, as the man comes back. He hasn’t got any of those sharp things with him this time, so with any luck my arm will be all right. What would a doctor want with me? I hope there’s nothing wrong with Gwynneth.

“So, Mr. Bedford, how are we feeling this morning?”

“Don’t hurt me,” I say. “I’m on my honeymoon.” The doctor is a young man, although he’s older than me. Or is he? I’m not sure, now, if I’m young or old, it’s just confusing. I try not to think about it.

“I understand you’ve been a bit more talkative today.”

“Just being friendly.” Then he asks me loads of questions. Questions about myself, like how old am I, how many children, and he gives me some puzzles to do. I’m cross with him, I don’t like him. He doesn’t ask me about Gwynneth, which is just

as well. I don't want her dragged into it. He makes me feel stupid though, because he looks as if I got the answers wrong.

"Well, you seem brighter, but there's no real progress showing up. Still, early days yet. You'll get another injection this afternoon."

"I know," I said. "The nurse said."

Even I realize what I said when I've said it. "The nurse?" said Dr. Sanders. "I thought you said they were maids."

I think about it. No maid would help me go to the toilet in the night. "They're nurses, aren't they?" I say. "And I'm not on my honeymoon. I'm in hospital. What's wrong with me?"

"It's not a hospital, it's a care home," he says. "We'll discuss this another time." It's only when he's gone that I start to cry.

In the afternoon they hurt my arm again, but I don't mind this time, because I know you have to have these before you can get into Africa.

\*

Next day that bloody vicar's back again.

"I'm not a vicar," he says, but I don't believe him. It would be typical of them to lie like that. You don't know where you are with vicars. I told him that, the one that married me and Gwynneth—

But of course, that's in the past now.

"I know where I am," I say. "I always told her, don't put me in a home. But she did, didn't she? I'm here on my own."

"You still don't know who I am, do you?"

I look at him, more closely this time. I still don't like him. He has a pathetic look to him: he'd be no use in a fight. He has a good head of hair on him, but a face that

looks as if he's spent his life running and hiding. He's not a vicar, I can see that now. He's not wearing the costume. So it's probably not the last rites.

"I'll call you Vic," I say. His moustache looks as if he's not trying—or rather, as if he's tried and tried, and that's the best he can grow. People with moustaches like that should give up and shave. They're just embarrassing themselves.

He looks as if he's about to cry. "Okay," he says. "Call me Vic." There's a tear in his eye. Men shouldn't cry. You'd think he was the one in hospital.

"I'm not going to die," I say, to reassure him. It doesn't help.

"No, you're not," he says. "I can't believe it. I didn't think you were coming back to us."

I don't know if I want to come back to him. He looks familiar, I'll give him that. Mind you, everyone's starting to look familiar. I seem to know those nurses quite well. My God, how long have I been here?

I can't work it out. I don't want to work it out. It's like growing up, I think. You never want to do it: you know what's waiting for you.

"There's no point," he says. "Not until you remember me." And then he leaves, and I couldn't be happier.

\*

I hold my arm out, and Dr. Sanders gives me my next injection.

\*

"Am I stupid?" I ask. It's the blonde nurse tonight. Sometimes they work together, sometimes not. She looks startled.

"Stupid?" she says.

"There's something wrong with me. I don't know what. I think of some of what I've done, and I think—"

“No, not stupid,” she says, firmly. “That must be the worst of it. You’re very intelligent, Mr. Bedford. It’s your memory that’s gone.”

A word comes to me. It’s not an easy one, but it’s important. I’m pleased with myself for remembering it. “Asshammers!” I cry out.

I can see that she’s trying to keep a straight face. “Alzheimer’s,” she says. “You’re close.”

She can’t wait to pass that on. She’s the joker of the two: all smiles and laughs, dimples, rosy cheeks, the one you’d want to meet after work. The other one’s too serious, always thinking. Repressed, maybe. She’d get the joke, but not laugh at it. She’ll get lines on her face if she’s not careful.

I lie back, and try to remember.

\*

I get up in the night. I find my own way to the toilet, now that the nurse showed me the way last night.

Before I get back in bed, I retrace my steps towards the part of the floor where I used to do it. Out of bed, through the door, turn left.

It’s where the toilet used to be at home, in the house that I lived in with Gwynneth.

I stand there for a bit, but then I think the nurse will think I’m going to do it again, so I go back to bed.

\*

“You don’t know me,” I tell the dark nurse in the morning.

“Of course I know you, Mr. Bedford,” she says, talking to me as if I’m a child.

“No you don’t. You only know the cabbage that lies in bed and makes a mess on the floor. But I had a life, you don’t know that. I was young, just as you are now. I had friends, family, a job. Do you write poems?”

She looks as if I’ve just caught her with no clothes on.

“I knew it,” I continue. “I’ve seen you in the middle of the night with that notebook. Well, I wrote poems as well. I can’t remember any of them now. I don’t know where they are or even if they exist. But you look at me as if I was always like this, always a vegetable.”

I wonder if she’ll look guilty at this. I hope she will. But she doesn’t. She just looks thoughtful.

“I was remembering my honeymoon,” I say. “We went to Africa. Lovely girl. Gwynneth. I’ve told you about her, haven’t I?”

She nods.

I sigh, lean back. “I’m a lot older now, aren’t I?”

She nods again.

“You don’t have to play games with me,” I say. “I’m not stupid. The other nurse said so last night. I still don’t remember,” I say. “I can’t remember what happened. But I’ve worked it out.”

She continues to look at me, this time with some compassion.

“She’s not going to come back, is she, Gwynneth? She’s gone now.”

And finally, treating me like an adult, as if I’m finally worthy of her attention, the dark nurse nods again.

\*

This time when Dr. Sanders comes back to give me my injection, I’m waiting for him.

“This is an experiment, isn’t it?” I say.

“Yes, it is,” he says.

“Then who gave permission? I was in no position.”

He avoids my eyes. “We contacted your next-of-kin.”

“Gwynneth?” I say. I know it couldn’t have been her: but I’m trying to provoke him into telling me.

“I’m afraid that wasn’t possible,” he says. The nurses were chosen for their skills with people. Dr. Sanders was chosen for his skills with needles. It’s not that he has no sympathy. It’s just that he can only express that sympathy in an impersonal way. In this situation, he has nothing to offer.

I wait for him to change the subject.

“So, are you feeling any better, Mr. Bedford?”

As if he’s going to listen to my answer. He’s come armed with his questions and puzzles again, and he’s going to measure how much better I feel, even if it goes against my own expression of wellness. I feel that I may as well make small talk.

“I do feel better,” I say. “A lot better. But.”

He looks at me again, as if I’ve moved to a safe subject.

“But. Getting better feels worse.”

He nods then, like the nurse did. “Yes. Yes, I’m afraid it does.”

\*

“I still don’t remember you,” I tell my visitor with the moustache. He doesn’t seem to know how to react to this. Some of him wants to feel relief, some of him wants to feel despair. I watch him for a while, to see if either side will win.



“But I’m not stupid,” I say. “I can’t remember, but I can work things out.” I take a deep breath. “Someone had to sign the consent forms, didn’t they?”

“It was me.”

“I asked one of the nurses how old I am. She didn’t want to tell me at first, but she knew she’d have to. I’m seventy-two. That’s about twenty years older than you, am I right?”

He makes no gesture in reply, waiting to see what will happen.

“I was twenty when I went on that honeymoon to Africa. So I suppose that makes you my—” I couldn’t bring myself to say it. “My next of kin.”

Finally he breaks down. “Oh, Dad!” he manages to say, and flings his arms around me, sobbing against my shoulder. I must have done this so many times when he was a child, and I hold him, but more out of politeness than anything else. Because, after all, I don’t actually remember him yet, and there’s only one thing about him that I do know. One thing that I’m absolutely certain of, that goes to the very core of my being, that I could never forget no matter how far my condition worsens.

I hate him.

\*

“John,” I say, to Dr. Sanders, the next day: Friday, I think.

“I beg your pardon?” he replies, but I can see that I’ve got an answer right. He can’t hide it.

“John is the name of my son,” I say proudly. “He was born a year after we got back from Africa. Gwynneth wanted him christened, but I refused—I’d fallen out with the vicar.”

“Welcome back, Mr. Bedford.”

“I’m not back yet,” I say. “But I’m on my way.”

A door opens in my mind. But it closes again. It's a strange feeling.

"What does that mean?" asked Dr. Sanders, curious.

"Sorry?"

"What you just said."

"What did I say?"

"You said, the worst thing was that you were only concerned with yourself."

I frown. I don't remember saying it, and don't know what it means.

"It will come back to you," says Dr. Sanders. "Next injection?"

\*

"Your name's John," I tell him.

"You do remember," he says. "You really do remember."

"I don't remember everything," I say. "In fact, I don't remember much at all. I remember you being born: I remember some of your childhood. I've got a lot of catching up to do."

"I never thought you'd come back," he says. "I've been coming here for six months, and you've never known who I am."

"Well," I say, considering things, "I never thought I'd see you again either." There is a brief silence. "You were a difficult child," I say, although it's still more of a guess.

"I've not been good to you," he admits. "That's why I'm back. And that's why I've brought you back. I want to make amends."

But I can see now that another of his sides has gained control: the side that doesn't want me to remember who he was.

\*

“Can I read you one of my poems?” asks the dark nurse.

Inwardly, I groan. “Go on,” I say.

She has her notebook with her, one of those pocket ones spiral-bound at the top. “It was inspired by you,” she says.

“I’m flattered,” I lie.

She begins to read.

*“The door opens.  
Inside, darkness.  
I look through, across the dim threshold,  
From light into its absence  
Hurting my eyes as I strain to see—”*

I start to scream.

\*

The door opened. Inside, darkness. I looked through, straining my eyes.

“Gwynneth?” I called.

Something was wrong. The light should have been on. It was only just gone six, but it was the middle of January and it was still dark. She usually met me at the door. I wondered if she was ill and had gone to bed.

But I could hear something, something between sobbing and heavy breathing. I fumbled for the light switch.

“Are you all right?” I called.

I wondered if John was back. He’d been arrested again yesterday, but they never seemed to charge him, and Gwynneth would have tried to intervene, no matter how much I told her not to. He hadn’t been here since summer though, and I had

hoped—ghastly thing to say about your own son—that he wouldn't trouble us again.

I found the light switch, and had a sudden feeling. The feeling said, don't press it. Turn round: go back to work. Do anything except turn on the light.

I turned on the light.

John was back. He sat in the corner, half glaring, half grinning. He wasn't sane, I knew that, but now I saw worse. He didn't even seem to be himself. The person on his haunches, with that sick expression, I knew to be my son, and yet I felt as if I'd never seen him before in my life.

At the opposite side of the room lay Gwynneth. She was face down, thank God. There was a lot of blood. The blood was smeared across the floor, between my wife and my son. He was holding a knife.

I screamed, and then I rushed from the house, not knowing where I was going, just trying to get away. That was what hurt the most, I think. I didn't try to help Gwynneth or even see if she was still alive. I was only concerned with myself.

\*

Two men are trying to hold me down: security staff I suppose, although I haven't seen them before. The dark nurse is trying to help but she can't do much. "We didn't know!" she is shouting, trying to be heard above my own screams. "I swear to you, we didn't know what had happened!"

Dr. Sanders enters the room at a run. He looks haggard, he must have been woken up.

"Please," says the dark nurse. "Help him."

"I'll give him a sedative," he says, keeping his distance, and prepares a syringe.

"No!" I shout, desperate. "No! No more injections."

He comes towards me with the syringe. I turn to the nurse, pleading. “No more injections!”

She understands, and blocks Dr. Sanders. “He’s right,” she says. “Please. No more injections.”

\*

It’s cold in this bed, and I don’t know where I am. But the dark lass is pretty enough. There’s only one of them here at the moment. I think she must be the chambermaid, although she isn’t doing much cleaning. She looks familiar, although I don’t think I’ve seen her before. I like her voice. She reads to me, out of a notebook. I don’t know what she’s going on about, but it’s nice to hear.

“What did you think of that, Mr. Bedford?” she asks.

I can’t remember what she’s asking about. “Gwynneth would like it. Where is she?”

And something funny happens. The dark lass looks at me seriously, and says, “Gwynneth isn’t coming back, Mr. Bedford.”

And I feel sick inside myself, because I know she’s right, that Gwynneth isn’t coming back. But the feeling passes, and she begins to read to me again. I don’t know what she’s on about, but I like her voice.

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## SECOND PRIZE

Mercedes M. Yardley lives in the howling Nevada desert. Her publication credits include *The Vestal Review*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Reflection's Edge*, and the upcoming debut issue of *Shock Totem*. Mercedes writes whimsical horror and wears poisonous flowers in her hair. You can learn more about her at [www.abrokenlaptop.wordpress.com](http://www.abrokenlaptop.wordpress.com).

### The ABCs of Murder

*by Mercedes M. Yardley*

I got really tired of murdering Billy Cords.

I know how that sounds, but I can't help it. I'm a peaceful guy at heart, and the constant scheming and planning and carrying out murder after murder was really getting to me. To be honest, I'd rather be playing basketball. And I hate basketball.

Besides, Billy was my best friend, a fact that he kept bringing up.

"Hey, loser," he said, popping up at the foot of my bed one evening. I sat up, clutching my bed sheet and screaming. This was most likely because we had buried Billy two days ago.

"Cripes, Jake, knock it off," He covered his ears and bared his teeth. This was such a Billy move that it only made me scream harder. I heard pounding feet come tearing down the hall. Billy sighed and slid under my bed. My father flew into the room, wearing his boxers and wielding a golf club like a weapon. The way that my father played, that was most likely the case.

“What’s wrong?” He sidled up to the window and peeked outside. I had stopped screaming and was hunched over, open mouthed. My dad looked at me.

“You look as if you’ve seen a ghost, son,” my father said. I winced. That line was so clichéd, I was embarrassed. Under the bed I heard a muffled snerk. Billy was trying his best to keep himself under control.

“Dad, it was Billy. I saw Billy, he was right at the foot of my bed and-“

Dad sat down, and his face was sad. He ran his hand over his balding head.

“Jake,” he said, and didn’t seem to know what to say after that. I looked at him, waiting. I heard Billy squirm under the bed a bit and I felt the same way. Dad had acted like this when Mom died, and it was awkward enough the first time.

My father swooped me into his arms for a punishing hug. I struggled, but he held me fast and used his chin to hold my shoulder in place. “I love you, son!” He said with feeling, and hugged me even tighter. I let myself go loose in his grip. Kinda like playing dead, but a little bit smarter.

“I...love you too, Dad,” I said. My eyes narrowed as I heard another giggle from Billy, but I was sure that Dad didn’t pick up on it. On account of his sobbing.

“I don’t know what to do for you, boy. Losing Billy. You’re going to see him everywhere, that’s the way of it. Behind corners and in crowds and picking green olives out at the grocery store. But he’s gone, and you’re going to have to accept it, although you can talk to him whenever you’re lonely and...”

I kinda tuned out, then. It’s not that I didn’t appreciate my dad and this unusual display of affection, but come on. Plus my dead best friend was getting all restless under the bed. He didn’t have an awful lot of patience. ADD, practically. I knew it was time for this craziness to end.

“Boy, Dad, thanks a lot,” I interrupted, and then I faked a big, jaw-cracking yawn. “And I sure am tired. Big test tomorrow, and all that.” I smiled sweetly. A bit too sweetly, actually, but Dad was relieved enough to cut his parenting short.

“Sleep well, son,” he said, and hovered his face around my head for an instant. I was afraid that he was going to go in for a kiss like I was ten years old or something, but instead he just mussed up my hair and left the room, taking the golf club with him.

“That was close,” Billy said, sliding out from under my bed. I just stared at him.

“What?” he said.

“What do you mean what? You’re dead!” I climbed out of bed and smacked his arm. There was a little resistance there, but not much, and my hand went all of the way through pretty easily.

“Ow!” Billy yowled, jerking his arm away.

“What, that hurt?” I asked. A little hopefully, I had to admit. If he was going to scare me so bad, then he at least ought to get a slap out of it. It’s just the way our relationship always went.

“Nah, it doesn’t hurt. Just kidding ya. Hey, Jake,” he said, and suddenly his brown eyes were very serious. “I need your help with something. As you can see, something’s not right.”

“What do you need?” It was a simple question, but I wasn’t prepared for the answer or the look on his face when he answered.

“I need you to kill me.”

\*

“I can’t do this,” I told him the next morning. We were standing behind my house. I was holding the wood axe in my hand like it had been dipped in poison. Something gross and acidic was in my mouth. This was so uncool.

“Dude, I told you I can’t feel anything,” Billy said. He was sounding ticked off. “Just do it already!” He closed his eyes and turned his face away.



“Billy,” I said. I was speaking very calmly so that he could understand me. I heard that’s what you’re supposed to do with crazy people. “I don’t want to kill you in the first place. I mean, what’s so bad about being a ghost? I know,” I said when he angrily opened his mouth, “you said it’s boring and you feel like you’re not in the right place, but come on! Killing you with an axe? An axe!”

I pointed at the axe with my other hand. Billy didn’t look impressed.

“Look, just do it. I can’t explain it, but I just need to die, okay? Be a pal.”

I sighed and squinched my eyes shut. “You so owe me,” I said. I peeked through one eye to make sure that the axe blade would land squarely in his heart, and then I swung with all of my might.

Billy made a strangled gasping sound and then fell to the ground. He disappeared. I left the axe where it was and ran into the bushes, vomiting. It was the worst day of my life.

At least it was until nightfall, when Billy popped over my bed again.

“Didn’t work,” he said. He shook his head. “We’ll have to find another way to do it.”

“Billy!” I kept running my hands over where the axe had hit him, but there wasn’t a mark, just that same resistance before my hands passed through.

“Dude, you can never ask me to do that again.” My hands were shaking. “Do you know what it’s like to kill somebody? It’s the sickest, heaviest, most repulsive...”

He merely looked at me. “I’m already dead. For the most part. And we’re going to try again tomorrow. I need your help, Jake.”

So we did.

\*

Nothing worked. We tried poison, guns, knives. I pushed him off of buildings, ran over him with cars and set him on fire. That one almost burned down the shed.

“This sucks,” I said, after my father berated me for “acting out”. “Dad totally thinks I’m an arsonist. He’s getting creeped out seeing me parade in and out of the house with all sorts of different weapons. Obviously this isn’t working.”

“What about that wrench?” Billy said, perking up. “What if you just, you know, crack me over the head a good one? Think that will work?”

“It’s worth a try,” I sighed, and thonked Billy as hard as I could right over his eye. He jerked, fell backwards, and faded away. I wasn’t at all surprised to see him sitting on my bed after I came up from dinner.

“Not wrenches, either.” He cursed. “This is taking too long. It’s been weeks already.”

“Tell me about it!” I exploded, and he opened his eyes wide. “Man, it’s giving me nightmares! It’s changing the way I’m seeing things, you know! I’m always looking around, wondering exactly how I should go about murdering you. It gets old.” I flopped on the bed, and Billy was quiet for a minute. Which was unusual for him.

“So I meant to ask you, how are your college plans coming along?” Billy tried to sound disinterested, like it didn’t really matter. College scared the crap out of me, and he knew it. But it’s important to Dad, so it’s supposed to be important to me.

“Not so well, you know? I signed up to volunteer at the animal shelter, because it’ll look good on an application one day. I meant to spend some time out there lately, but I’ve been kinda busy.” If Billy felt guilty, he didn’t show it. And I didn’t want him to feel guilty, not really. I punched my pillow and Billy looked at me.

“What?” he asked. His eyebrows were arched.

“I don’t know. How about...” I went through the options in my head. “What if it has to be something from your house? Something symbolic or something. Could that be the case?”

Billy perked up. “It’s worth a try,” he said.

\*

After school the next day I stopped off to visit Billy's mom.

"Hi, Rose," I said, hugging her when she opened the door. "How are you holding up?"

Rose's eyes turned wet when she saw me, but her smile didn't tremble at all. "Good," she said, and hugged me back harder than I thought she had strength for. Billy slipped in through the bedroom window while Rose and I were talking. We weren't sure if she'd be able to see him or not, but he didn't want to take the chance.

"You want to go poke around in his room?" Rose offered after a while. "Spend time with Billy's memory? If there's something particularly special to you, feel free to have it. Just run it past me first, will you?"

"Sure thing, Rose," I said, and grinned at her. Rose was good people. Even Billy thought so.

"Go on up, then," she said. Then she looked me dead in the eye. "Sometimes I feel like Billy is still around. You ever get that feeling?"

I swallowed hard, but managed to answer in a clear voice. "That's because he is. He's right here." I gestured vaguely at the room and Rose smiled.

"You're a good kid, Jakob. Always were. Always will be. You're a credit to your mama, may she rest in peace." She crossed herself with a finger bedecked in rings. Then she went into the kitchen, leaving me to search Billy's room in private.

Billy was leaning by his bedroom door. He had been listening.

"Ever check in on your mom?" I asked him, shutting the door. He shook his head and used a sleeve to wipe his eyes. I pretended I was looking elsewhere. Friends do that.

"No," he said finally. "It's too hard." He cleared his throat and began to go through his room, looking for something special and wonderful and mercifully deadly.

“How about this?” I asked, holding up a dragon pewter letter opener. It was shaped like a dagger and dreadfully tacky. We both thought it was pretty cool.

“Maybe. Throw it in the bag. We’ll try it later.” It was hard to hear his voice because he was rifling through the closet. He emerged and tossed a backpack at me. “Keep these,” he said. I knew what it was without looking. The bag had all of his playstation games, and a couple of the old school NES’s. They were gold to me.

“Thanks!” I said, and Billy grinned.

“No problem,” he said.

We put together a pretty good stash of murder weapons by the end. We were starting to get creative, using extension cords for hanging and trying to figure out how to electrocute him. I mean, we had to. We were struggling here. Murder For Hire we weren’t.

“So what was it like to die?” I asked him. I’d been dying (ha ha) to know, but hadn’t brought it up until now.

He stopped flipping through a magazine and stared out of the window.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “It wasn’t like I thought it would be.”

“What do you mean? Like you thought it would be? How would you know that?”

Billy started to grind his molars together, and suddenly I knew that I wouldn’t like what he was going to say.

“When I went out driving that night, I was pretty freaked out.” He watched me to see my reaction, but I wasn’t looking at him. Suddenly the bag of video games seemed very interesting.

“I mean, I was freaked out about graduation, you know. And college. Where I’d end up. I’m not as smart as you,” he almost yelled, and I was surprised at how angry he sounded. Surprised enough to look at him. He took a deep breath and said much more calmly, “I’m not as smart as you. I didn’t think we’d end up at the

same college. I was freaked about getting a job to put myself through school, wherever it is. And you know how I am with girls.”

I snorted. I couldn't help it. Billy nodded.

“Exactly,” he said. “And in college there's school and jobs and girls. That's pretty much it, yeah? So while I was driving, I had this thought. Very brief. I thought, ‘What if I...’”

“No,” I said. My eyes felt wide enough that they could fall out of my head. “Don't say it. You didn't.”

“I did,” Billy said, looking at me. I could tell this was taking all of his courage. “For half of a second, I did. I stomped on the gas and headed for the trees.”

I was shaking.

“I think I hate you,” I said, and my teeth chattered.

Billy bowed his head, and then he looked up. His eyes were glowing.

“What gives you the right to hate me? I screwed up, okay? All of a sudden I came to my senses and I jerked the car back onto the road, but I jerked it too far. The car's spinning, and you know what? It's surreal. It's like a ride. And I'm sitting there thinking, ‘Wow, this is fun, I bet Jake would love this’ and then it's all *over*. It's *over* and I'm sitting there alone without my frickin' body and I need to die and kill me kill me *kill me kill me!*”

He was screaming at the top of his lungs, and, I realized, so was I. I pushed him down onto the floor and sat on top of him. I wrapped my hands around his throat and pushed down and squeezed as hard as I could. That familiar resistance, but I was stronger than that, I could press harder than that, and I was yelling and crying and my sweat and tears were dropping down onto his face. Billy was gasping, but I didn't care. I'd already killed him a million times by now. I squeezed until his eyes changed and he faded away, but I didn't move. I crouched over where he had been, my hands clawed and ready to squeeze if he came back. He didn't.

Eventually I pushed the hair out of my eyes and took the bag of games. I didn't touch the bag of weapons. I wanted nothing to do with them. I wiped my sweaty palm on my pants. I didn't need weapons, anyway.

Downstairs, Rose greeted me with a knowing glance.

"May I have his games, Rose?" I asked in a voice that didn't sound at all like mine. I was surprised when Rose brushed tears off of my face. I had thought I'd stopped crying long ago.

"Of course you may, dear," she said. I was prepared to apologize for the screaming that she had heard, but she simply never asked. Maybe she had covered her ears and turned away from the sound. Perhaps she had done the same thing in his room late at night.

Billy didn't show up in my room again. I don't exactly know why that is. Maybe it's because I killed him in anger with my bare hands. Or maybe it's because now I know the truth. That he was frightened. That he screwed up. Maybe it's because it turned out that we were both killers.

My dad is relieved now. No longer does he have to watch me throwing axes in the backyard. No more seeing me with guns and nooses made out of shoelaces and setting the shed on fire, screaming at myself. No more saying a prayer and locking his bedroom door against me at night, just in case, his trusty golf club by his side.

"I'm glad everything's back to normal, Jake," he told me. "You don't know what a relief it is." He turned to me, and I had to look away from his sincerity. "I know that Billy's death has been hard for you, and things were rough for a while. But you're coming out of this just fine. Something like this, and the way that you act under stress, well, it shows you just what kind of a person you really are."

I glanced down at my killing hands, which were curled into fists.

Yeah. That's exactly what I'm afraid of.

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## THIRD PRIZE

K. Curran Mayer was raised in Vermont and likes to travel around with a backpack (usually overloaded with books). After a couple of internships on organic vegetable farms, she's trying out a warehouse day-job in Pennsylvania. Current writing projects include a children's fantasy, a historical novel, and various short stories. So far she's been published in *The First Line*, and has a story in Whortleberry Press's upcoming *Strange Mysteries* anthology.

### Foundling

*by K. Curran Mayer*

The doorbell rang in the middle of the night while Felicia stirred her second batch of tomato sauce. The day before, she'd charmed her favorite vendor at the farmer's market into bringing her the bruised, unevenly ripened, ugly, and unwanted tomatoes that would never sell and couldn't keep. So then she had bushels of cheap tomatoes, already attracting fruit flies and more important than sleep.

Cursing the bell under her breath, Felicia turned down the heat under the pot and swiped her palms across her apron as she went to answer the door. None of her friends would drop by at this hour. It occurred to her vaguely that she was a single woman and should look through the peephole, but that always felt paranoid and melodramatic. Usually she didn't mind drama, but right now she was too impatient to bother. She yanked the door open.

In the apartment hallway stood a girl caught on the uncanny threshold between child and adult. The ponytail binding the curly, black hair could go for any age. The backpack could have suggested she was still in high school, but the out-of-

fashion pink sweater wrinkling under the pack's straps hinted that this girl didn't follow trends. Felicia didn't recognize her, though she felt perhaps she should.

The unexpected guest took a step back under Felicia's gaze, and tugged anxiously on her sweater hem. That motion settled that she was still a girl. She hadn't yet grown into grace.

"Felicia?" Something about the voice struck a familiar vibration in the back of Felicia's mind, the way a violin string will hum softly when it has been tuned to a note that's being played. "I don't know if you remember - can I come in?"

Without a word, Felicia opened the door wider. The girl marched in with a fragile air of entitlement, her chin held very high. Felicia wasn't sure whether to be irritated by the royal manner or amused by the chutzpah. Amused, on the whole.

The strange girl assessed the house, her head tilted to one side. Felicia watched her eyes slide over the basic wooden furniture, the well-swept floor, the incongruously wild note of the turquoise-and-red rag carpet under the table, the Roman shades, the potted herbs on the windowsill, the braid of garlic on the wall by the kitchen. It was impossible to read a reaction in the cool teenage face.

At the end of her inspection, the girl slipped the backpack off her shoulders and let it thud to the floor. "Could I use your bathroom?"

Felicia raised her eyebrows, a little of her amusement peeling away. "It's at the end of that hall."

The girl nodded, took a step away, but then looked back. "Something's burning."

Felicia's hand flew to her mouth in a gesture of dismay. A Gallic gesture of dismay, one of her old lovers used to call it, no matter how many times Felicia told him it was an inheritance from an Italian grandmother, not a French one. She fled to the kitchen, oversized apron flapping around her knees, leaving the mysterious girl to find the bathroom herself.

The tomato sauce was only just starting to stick to the bottom of the pan, and Felicia let out a breath of relief. As long as she kept stirring and was careful not to



scrape too much burnt muck off the bottom, it would probably be all right. The steam was almost too hot to bear on her hand. She slipped on an oven mitt for protection.

The toilet flushed, the water ran in the bathroom sink, then the girl padded in to join her. Felicia glanced down, suspicious of the quiet footsteps; sure enough, the stranger had removed her shoes. She was evidently making herself right at home. “So,” Felicia said, still stirring the pot, her voice crackling. “Are you planning to stay here long?”

The girl followed her gaze, staring down at her dirty cotton socks against the blue-and-white linoleum. “I didn’t mean—well, I need to stay overnight, because I haven’t anywhere else to go.”

Felicia always had liked the sensation of riding a conversation like a small boat pitching in a turbulent sea. She’d tried to break the habit of steering straight for storms over the years, but this mysterious situation was begging for a confrontation of some kind. She let her voice sound fierce as she demanded, “Why not?”

“I just got off the Greyhound,” the girl said, as if she was explaining to an old friend. She drifted over to the counter and began re-arranging the half-dozen jars of already-canned sauce. It puzzled Felicia how comfortable this conversation felt, as if they’d known each other a long time. It could have made her uneasy if it weren’t so interesting. The girl went on, “I’m sorry about coming at this hour, but that’s just when it came in, and I don’t have money left for a hotel - I don’t know anyone else around here.”

Felicia considered this, nodded. She rode Greyhound herself sometimes. “I don’t understand how they get away with having buses coming in at all kinds of times,” she said, her softened tone absolving the girl of any blame for her tactless midnight arrival. “And anyway, I’m still awake.”

The glass bottoms of the jars grated softly on the countertop as the girl continued to arrange and re-arrange them. The boiling tomato sauce was almost concentrated enough now, the bubbles gasping as they burst through its thick red

surface. Felicia's voice grew harsher again as she added, "But that doesn't really answer *why* you're here. You say you know me. How?"

The girl finished lining the jars of sauce up in a straight line, pushed back against the kitchen wall as if they were facing a firing squad. Then she turned to Felicia with wide-eyed vulnerability. The older woman wasn't surprised to find that lurking under the cool exterior, but it yanked at her heart all the same. The girl whispered, "You really don't remember?"

Felicia paused with the spoon poised over the steaming pot, staring into the girl's face. Those wide eyes—they were vibrating the strings of her memory, if only she could recognize the notes—

The girl's voice was very small. "I'm Iona."

Felicia let out a long breath. So that was it. She snapped the stove burner off with a flick of her wrist and dropped the spoon onto the stovetop, ignoring the sauce it dribbled onto the shiny-clean surface. Of course the girl looked like Tristan. When Felicia was living with them both, she had never fully realized how much Iona was a miniature version of her father, because she had simply been Iona. But she did have his wild hair, his slender mouth with the expressive corners, his round eyes with the heavy lids that occasionally reminded Felicia of a particular portrait out of a high-school history book, though she'd long ago forgotten the name attached to it. She would have expected Iona to forget her.

She turned back from the sauce to the girl, controlling her voice carefully for fear of any sudden, unnecessary tears. "I know it's a stupid thing to say, but you've grown."

Iona smiled nervously, playing with a tendril of hair that had escaped her ponytail, teasing it in ringlets around her finger. It was a girlish mannerism, girlier than anything Felicia had seen Iona do when she really was a little girl, and she wondered when Iona had picked it up.

Felicia drew a deep breath. "Where do we begin?"

Iona shrugged, and turned away from Felicia's gaze again to stare at the jars on the counter. This time she reached for the empty ones that were laid out on a clean towel by the stove.

"Leave those alone," Felicia ordered automatically. "They've been sterilized."

Iona's hand dropped back to her side, as helpless as her father's hands used to look.

Felicia picked up a knife. "Here. If you want something to do, cut tomatoes."

"Are you going to make more sauce tonight?" It was hard to tell if this teenage Iona was dismayed, amused, or interested. When she was small, Felicia would have known without thinking about it.

She handed Iona a couple of gallon-sized plastic bags. "No. We'll freeze the rest for now. I just want to be rid of the fruit flies. Does your father know where you are?"

Iona began chopping without a reply, and Felicia turned to ladling tomato sauce into sterile jars while she waited for an answer. Listening to the hesitant thumps and scrapes against the cutting board, she thought that Iona had been more familiar with a knife when she was seven. Somehow this forgotten expertise made the stretch of time since their last meeting seem longer than anything else—hair twirling, height, puberty, anything. In the old days, Iona had always been at her elbow in the kitchen, small hands reaching to help long before she could see over the countertop, absorbing everything. Felicia had finally bought a stepstool for her, a gift that had earned a wild hug in one of Iona's rare, spontaneous demonstrations of affection.

Felicia had almost forgotten her dutiful question by the time Iona answered it. "I left a note. I'll call him in the morning and let him know I got here safely." She added defensively, "I have a calling card, it won't be a long-distance charge for you or anything."

"That's all right," Felicia said. "Do you think he'll mind?"

Iona shrugged. “He—we haven’t—it might be a relief. At first, anyway.”

Felicia put down the ladle and went to Iona’s side. “Little one, please tell me why you’re here. You’re welcome, of course, but why?” When Iona looked at her, Felicia cupped a careful hand around the girl’s chin the way she used to do. Her hand felt older than it should have, the skin soft and wrinkled from tomato juice.

Iona shrank away from the touch, and Felicia frowned. She and Tristan had their quarrels, but she had thought Iona was safe with him. At his worst, she had considered him only a rather stupid man. Five and a half years in his house, five of them in his bed—surely she should have known if there was anything wrong there.

“No, it’s not like that,” Iona blurted, interpreting the frown correctly. “He—we’ve just been fighting. A lot. He thinks I’m still a baby.”

Felicia’s jaw loosened. That was closer to what she would have expected of Tristan. Harmless, yes, but thick-skulled. How indeed could he ever cope with an intelligent, determined teenager? An intelligent, determined toddler had been bad enough.

“And I thought—well—” Iona poked with the tip of the knife at some of the tomato seeds swimming over the cutting board in their watery juice. “I haven’t seen you in a long time. You haven’t written in ages. I was hoping you were the right Felicia all the way here—I found the address on Google, you know?”

Felicia drew a breath so sharp it cut at her throat at the thought of the girl setting out across the country on the hope that she had the right address, on the chance that Felicia would be there when she arrived in the middle of the night. She managed to say, “It is good to see you.”

She waited for Iona to ask why Felicia had left or maybe why she hadn’t tried harder to visit, to call, to write; but none of these questions seemed to occur to the girl. After a minute, she went on cutting tomatoes, and Felicia sighed, turning back to her canning, adding spoonfuls of lemon juice to each jar to make sure the acidity was high enough for safety. The Iona that Felicia used to know had always got around to communicating faster if she was left alone.

When the last jars were plunged in the hot-water bath and the timer was set, Felicia focused on Iona again, demanding with maternal concern, “Have you eaten?”

Iona smiled slightly at that, taking a second too long to nod—too much like her father in that for Felicia to let it pass unquestioned. “When?”

Iona waved a vague hand. “A little bit ago—no, I’m fine.”

Felicia went to the refrigerator and pulled out a carrot from the drawer. “Here, start on this, and I’ll cook some pasta. I’m getting hungry too—we can use the tomato sauce that wouldn’t fit in the last jar.” She thrust the carrot in Iona’s general direction, raw and unpeeled. Iona burst into tears.

\*

“It always used to be carrots,” she sobbed into Felicia’s shoulder some minutes later, when she could talk again at all. Her tomato-wet fists clutched the back of Felicia’s shirt. “I remember—all the time—if I wanted a snack—maybe with peanut butter—”

Felicia patted the girl’s back, rocking her ever so slightly, murmuring soothing, indecipherable noises into Iona’s hair as if Iona was still her child. “Little one, it’s all right, my little dove, my dear. I’m sorry.”

“The jars,” Iona snuffled, pulling back at last as the timer buzzed to indicate the hot water bath had been long enough. Felicia made a sweeping gesture that almost knocked one of the leftover sterile jars off the counter, as if to say she did not care in the least about the tomatoes. But Iona blew her nose on a paper towel and went back to the last tomatoes on the cutting board.

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By unspoken agreement, neither of them questioned the other further that night. Felicia reflected that their supper was more awkward than many a first date. Iona volunteered to wash the dishes and wipe down the counters while Felicia made up a bed on the couch for her. Felicia accepted gratefully, thankful that it occurred to

Iona to make the offer. Tristan never would have volunteered. Though she could not regret that Tristan himself did not wash dishes; if he had, then Iona would not be in her apartment now.

\*

After Iona was settled for the night, Felicia lay awake for a long time, thinking back to that first sink of dirty dishes and all that had followed on from it.

She had just broken up with an exasperating man when she met Tristan, and had been joking that if she didn't find a good challenge she would consider a convent. Her lack of commitment felt like decay eating out the heartwood of a tree. She wanted someone or something that would demand all her ingenuity and loyalty. But she could never lead a life that was out of her control, either, and so far her sense of self-preservation had shielded her from any heedless, storybook devotion.

The ex-boyfriend's most notable features had been persistence and money. For two entire years she had sat across from him at expensive restaurants, insisting to him that it would never work out. He had always smiled his white, orthodontist-approved smile and said they would see. Felicia had enjoyed the food. Finally the day came when they were sitting together and watching a chef cooking hibachi for them, and she realized she was bored despite all the flashing knives and flames. That ended it.

She hadn't been interested when Tristan asked her out on a date. Tristan was too well-ironed. He had only transferred to her department recently, but she'd noticed his bitter complaints about schedule changes and the way he seemed to throw his entire soul into spreadsheets. Still, she had no other plans and decided that one dinner would do no harm.

The interest came when he called to say his babysitter had canceled, he couldn't make it. On a whim, she offered to just come to his house and have dinner there, knowing he'd never agree. Her ex-boyfriend had been upset if she merely passed his house when the yard hadn't been raked. But Tristan said, "That might be great, actually." She wondered if she was imagining the faint note of desperation.

When she arrived, he swept her off her feet with his chaos of dirty dishes and diapers, with toddler toys crunching underfoot in the living room and a faint stench of vomit on the carpet outside the bathroom. She had known he was a widower with a child. She had not known that his wife had died in a car crash only a year ago or that the child was barely two or that he was spectacularly failing to cope.

Nor had she known that the child would be precious Iona, busy sizing up the world with wide eyes like a baby seal. The little girl sat under the kitchen table with a stuffed toy cat for most of the evening, and Felicia felt that she was assessing the adults with uncanny perception. “She’s shy,” Tristan explained several times as he wandered vaguely around the kitchen attempting to convince Felicia to sit down, to relax, to enjoy herself, to stop scrubbing his dishes.

It only took an hour for Felicia to decide that “shy” was the wrong word. Iona seemed merely reserved, distancing herself politely from the big people. Not a comfortable child for a grieving man to try to rear alone, Felicia thought as she cooked dinner for the three of them out of what she could find in the cupboards. (Tristan, she concluded after some prying, mostly lived on Ramen noodles, cans of soup, and frozen pizza. She wondered if he even bothered to heat the soup—his dirty-dish collection didn’t seem to suggest it.)

A week later, Felicia moved in. They didn’t start sleeping together immediately, of course, though it was the scandal of the office for about a month until finally an unknown party spilled coffee all over the copy machine and gave them something else to talk about. Tristan was uneasy about his brief notoriety, but Felicia just laughed. “They’ve gossiped about me being a gold-digger for years,” she told him over the kitchen table one evening. “This is just an entertaining new spin.”

“I have no gold,” Tristan had told her as he smiled crookedly down at the lasagna she’d just plunked on the table. “So what do you want from me?”

“This baby,” Felicia had told him as she tucked Iona into her high chair and fastened a bib firmly around the chubby neck. “She’s gorgeous, you know.”

Tristan's crooked smile had widened, and Felicia wondered if he was smiling because he believed her or because he didn't. She never did know that. She supposed it was the sort of thing most men wouldn't want to believe, if they could help it. And Tristan really was gorgeous himself, in an everyday sort of way - not like a movie star in the least, but still, quite good-looking. She confessed to herself that she thought his crowded, uneven teeth were a refreshing change.

True to her pattern, Felicia thought the relationship was pleasant enough for the first couple of years. After that, she would have been willing to move on as usual, as her old restlessness stirred like a frost-laden wind biting at the heels of summer. She stayed several years longer for the child.

Felicia theoretically preferred friendly separations, but never achieved them. She had especially wanted to keep on good terms with Tristan—at least good enough to keep visiting Iona. But by the end, Felicia decided a clean break was the best she could do.

It would take a few more years before she decided she was finished with this kind of emotional ring-around-the-rosy—both for her own sake and other people's – and arranged for solitude. Close relationships were something that worked out for other people. She had expected to settle for solitude for the rest of her life by the time Iona rang her doorbell.

Sixteen years old. If Tristan wanted his daughter back, he could presumably insist on it.

\*

Despite the late night, Felicia woke before her alarm clock as usual. She came out to start the coffee and found Iona already in the kitchen. She was standing barefoot in front of the refrigerator, her hair hanging over her shoulders in a tangled mess. Felicia itched to comb it out and bind it into the same old pigtails. Instead she said, "You're up early."

"My schedule's wacky as ever." Iona's cool had returned overnight. Felicia was glad she hadn't said anything about the hair. She watched as Iona shifted some magnets from the comics on the refrigerator and started putting up a handful of



photographs between them. Felicia considered what this environment-modification implied—that Iona expected to be here a while – before she recognized the pictures. “Oh!”

Iona nodded calmly. “I took them when I came away.”

Felicia came and looked over her shoulder at the old photographs of Iona’s birth mother. Despite much fading, they were still more familiar than this unexpected daughter. “Were they still on the refrigerator at your house? After all these years?”

Iona grinned. “I don’t think he dared take them down after you yelled at him.”

Felicia remembered that; it had been one of their early quarrels. She was surprised it remained in Iona’s memory, unless Tristan talked of it. Felicia had insisted the photos should be visible to remind Iona of her mother.

“She’s forgotten her already,” Tristan protested, but Felicia kept shaking her head. Of course Iona had forgotten for now, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t stare at the pictures someday as if they were warped mirrors.

Sometimes Felicia also used to gaze into the pictures when she was alone. She was sure there must be a trace of Iona’s mother somewhere in the girl, if you knew where to look. But the photos were so blurry that Iona would have been able to see what she wanted in them, whatever that was.

“Shall I start the coffee?” Iona offered.

Felicia nodded slowly. “I have to leave for work soon. But we need to talk. To your father, too.”

Iona nodded. Felicia glimpsed the woman starting to emerge, like a dragonfly nymph splitting the skin on its back and crawling out with crumpled wings, spreading them to dry, already planning its flight. “Of course. I’ll call him this morning, and then you and I can talk tonight.”

Felicia didn’t intervene as Iona poked through her cupboards, letting her discover the coffeepot and beans and grinder and filters on her own. She pretended to be absorbed in tapping the tomato sauce lids to test the seals. Out of the corner of

her eye, she watched Iona's hands flowing through the motions of grinding coffee and measuring water, even in a strange kitchen. That confidence was familiar. Not from Tristan. Not from vague photographs. Not even from the reserved, retiring child she remembered.

If anyone had ever asked her if she wanted Iona to take after her, she probably would have shrugged and said not really. Still, she caught the eye of one of the images on the refrigerator and returned the dead woman's smile. Whatever happened next, her daughter had come home.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Greta's short fiction has been published in *Long Story Short*, *Tuesday Shorts*, *Word Riot*, *Six Sentences*, *Every Day Fiction*, and *Boston Literary Magazine*. Her short fiction was selected for *The Best of Every Day Fiction 2008* anthology and the upcoming *Best of Boston Literary Magazine Chapbook*. She was selected as the September 2008 Author of the Month at *Every Day Fiction*. For more about Greta's writing, please visit her blog here. (<http://gretaigl.blogspot.com>)

### The Market

by Greta Igl

Perhaps it's his lack of vision that has him in this predicament, standing under a canopy in a hot, crowded farmer's market while some stranger embraces his wife. He plays it over in his head, the look on her face. First, surprise, as she looks up from the fingerling potatoes and sees this man, whoever he is. Then, the worrisome softening.

"David." Her voice surges.

Now she's in this David's arms.

Mark watches. The sun beats down hot on the braid of people browsing asparagus at white-canopied tables. The capitol dome arcs across the too-blue sky. A relaxed Saturday morning scene, complete with shoppers reclining on the thick green lawn, Ecuadorian pan flute music drifting over from the corner. Someone yells *Get your hot and spicy cheese bread here!* Cheese bread, for God's sake.

David.

Mark feels like he should know the name. But he never wanted to know about what came in Leslie's life before him. It was neater that way. Less room for misinterpretation. Only now he sees the error in his thinking. Leslie plus this grabby David person equals a complete unknown.

Then David leans over and presses his mouth to Leslie's cheek.

There's something in the way his lips linger, like he's reveling in the curves and scent of her. Leslie's lashes drop and Mark's throat tightens. He knows that look, how she hides behind her lashes.

Mark notices she doesn't pull away.

"David," she says again, when David eventually pulls back. "What a surprise!" Her voice is too high and a little skittery, like the time she told him about the ding in the Lexus.

"I live here now," David says.

"Oh! I didn't know!" She laughs and her fifteen years with Mark makes him feel her nervousness like a hot wire.

"What about you?" David says, whoever he is. "What are you doing here? Do you live in Madison?"

David's hopeful nosiness makes Mark inhale with a slow rasp.

"No." Leslie's hand fiddles with the potatoes, turning them like worry stones, her eyes locked on them. "We just came for the day." A flush splotches her cheeks. Mark feels the awkward hanging of her *we*.

Mark clears his throat, taking it for his cue to enter the peculiar stage play.

Leslie turns. "Oh!" Her hand flutters to her chest. Time stretches. "David. My husband. This is Mark."

Mark tries to ignore the juxtaposition, but it makes his legs and smile stiff as he staggers forward. He holds out a sunburned hand.

“Mark Jacobs. Don’t worry. I’m the husband, not you.”

The joke trips and lays there.

Mark notes David’s hand is clammy.

“David Shaw.”

Whoever that is, Mark thinks, then reminds himself he’d probably know if he wasn’t such a damned coward.

“Is your wife here?” Leslie asks, then she must catch herself. “I’m assuming you’re married. I mean, I think someone told me that.”

Mark wonders who she heard it from, this helpful friend or acquaintance or maybe even relative who provided news flashes to Leslie about old boyfriends.

“Yeah,” David says, his own hand dropping to the potatoes. “She’s here. Somewhere.” He looks around, shrugs. “She wanders.”

Mark feels his eyes go tight and squinty.

A large family pushes past, Indian, the women in saris, while the men and children wear American t-shirts and shorts.

“Excuse me,” the woman in the yellow sari says. She reaches between Mark and David to examine some bunched scallions. Mark steps aside, making David a pair with Leslie. David’s arm brushes Leslie’s and she starts.

“Sorry,” David says, but Mark sees he’s not, that his breath has grown shallow and his eyes are melting as he stands there touching Mark’s wife.

Leslie looks down, eyes again behind her lashes. Mark’s heart beats with helpless panic.

The sari woman pays for her onions and leaves.

“David!”

Mark shakes off the jittery heaviness. A woman in a denim jumper and white t-shirt prances up, smiling, clearly oblivious.

“Excuse me,” She says as she squeezes between David and Leslie. “Wait until you see the strawberries I found. Fabulous! I thought I’d make...”

Something must register with her. She steps back and looks at the uneasy group clustered around the fingerlings.

“Hi.” Her voice is careful now, in front of this larger audience.

David clears his throat. “Nancy.” He runs a hand through the hair at his nape. “This is Leslie. And her husband. Mark.”

Mark sees Nancy stopped listening at *Leslie*. Nancy’s eyes narrow, then she forces a smile.

“Leslie.” She gives Leslie a hard stare that clashes with her smiling mouth. Mark sees a side to her that David must find a bitch to live with. “How nice to meet you.” She threads her arm through David’s crooked elbow and hangs.

Leslie smiles, but behind it, her face looks guilty. “Yes,” she says, her voice a murmur. “So nice to meet you, too.”

They stand there, lost in their own shades of awkward.

“I just can’t believe this coincidence,” Leslie says eventually. Of course, Leslie is the first to speak. She never could stand those uncomfortable silences. He remembers their first date, how they’d sat fiddling with their drinks, their minds stretching for something to talk about.

He wonders if she’d struggled like that with David.

“Yes,” David says, grabbing her conversational lifeline. Then the pause comes back and David seems reluctant to let things go. “Of course, I’m not one to believe in coincidence,” he continues, “Isn’t that right, Nancy? You know how I’ve always believed in fate. And that’s what this is. Fate. It must be. It’s fate that we ran into each other.”

Leslie's eyes widen. Nancy clamps her lips tight. David smiles sheepishly with an apologetic eye wrinkle.

"Yes," Nancy says, her eyes drilling into David. "I've spent hours listening to your discourse on fate, David."

Mark shifts on his feet, looks away from David. As much as he dislikes the guy, he can't violate the unspoken rule: no man ever watches another man get henpecked.

"Can I help you?"

Mark tries to shake off the funk he's in, sees the woman who runs the stand smiling at them with exaggerated patience. Mark can't blame her for not wanting their little drama to unfold at the feet of her business. She looks like a forty-something, hippie version of Heidi, two gray-laced brown pigtail braids trailing over her pendulous, unbrassiered breasts. A tie-dyed sleeveless sack dress brushes the burnished buckles on her Bierkenstocks.

"Did you have any questions?" she asks, her smile widening now that she has their attention. "Perhaps you wanted to purchase some potatoes?"

"Um, yes," Leslie says, slipping into her usual smiling self. Mark knows she'd never be rude to a stranger, even if her world was crashing down around her. "I'll take two pounds of baby Yukons."

Hippie Heidi starts scooping them into a paper bag. Before long, Leslie hands over the money and the transaction is complete.

"Well!" Nancy says, her mouth a wedge of counterfeit glee. She places a hand on David's arm. "As lovely as this has been, we'd better get going, David. My mom has bridge with her lady friends in about an hour." She says it as though it explains everything.

David looks down. The toe of his left sport sandal scuffs the sidewalk. Again, he looks up with that sheepish grin. "Kids," he says. "Nancy's mom had the kids overnight."

Leslie lets out a long breath, swallows and nods.

“Yes,” she says, hugging her bag of fingerling potatoes close to her chest. She shakes her head and smiles. “Yes, it’s been lovely seeing you, David. And to meet you, also, Nancy.”

David’s eyes meet with Leslie’s and Mark watches from the sidelines, wishing he could erase whatever was happening, go back to this morning before they saw this David, go back even further to all the nights he stayed late at work when Leslie begged him to come straight home. If he’d only dawdled a little over his shave this morning. Or refused to take Addison as a client. It was Addison who wore Mark down, with his complex portfolio and his questionable ethics. It took all Mark’s shrewdness to keep his feet this side of legal.

Nancy pulls at David’s arm and David starts to drift with it, a few shuffling steps that put him back in the stream of pedestrian traffic. He’ll be gone now, Mark thinks, this David and his penetrating looks and his unhappy, fake-smiling wife. He can feel something humming off Leslie, a resonance that stands his neck hairs on end. It will pass, he tells himself. They’ll go home and she’ll feel badly for awhile, a little melancholy for whatever she thinks she’s missing. But slowly, they’ll drift into their comfortable routine: Leslie busy with her garden and her painting, Mark with Addison and his portfolio and tax landmines.

Then David stops and turns.

“It really has been great seeing you again, Leslie.”

Leslie lets out a shuddering breath.

“You too, David.” Her words float out on a sigh.

They watch each other again, his wife and David. Mark’s eyes meet Nancy’s and it’s like a carnival mirror, fear reflecting fear reflecting fear into infinity. He can’t tell which one of them is the source.

“Perhaps...,” David says and his eyes blaze. “Perhaps we could get together for lunch when you come into town next? Or I get back to Milwaukee often enough. It would be nice to catch up. You know. When we have more time.”



Mark waits, his breath held. The crowd braids around David, the stream of men and women and children diverting and converging around him. Mark wants to pull Leslie close, to squeeze her shoulder, but he's too sour with fear and the pounding of his cowardly heart.

"Sure," Leslie says. "That would be nice."

Mark sinks. He waits for Leslie to offer their phone number, for David to hand her his card, but the stream of pedestrians grows denser and Nancy's tug on David's arm more relentless. David teeters, fighting the flow, but a lady with a double stroller presses the surge until slowly, David is swept away, one splayed hand raised toward Leslie.

"I'll call you!" he cries over the laughter and the convivial Saturday morning chatter. Then David and the moment are gone.

The sun beats down. The capitol dome gleams white under the sunshine. The crowd flows past, full of harmless faces.

Mark makes a choice.

"How nice for you to run into an old friend." He strokes a hand down Leslie's sun-warmed arm.

Leslie looks down. Mark holds his breath. Eventually, she raises liquid-sad eyes. Her mouth slides into a melancholy smile.

"Yes," she says, hooking her arm into the crook of Mark's elbow. She lets out a long breath. "Now, let's go home," she says. "I think I'll make a *torta* with these little potatoes."

Something wells in Mark. He presses a kiss to her temple. "That sounds delicious." His voice croaks, thick with relief.

This time, he decides, he'll pay closer attention, watch more carefully, come home every night before six. Okay, seven. Come Monday, he'll tell Addison to go to hell, to find some other financial advisor to deal with his tax evading bullshit. That will

fix this mess, make Leslie happy. Maybe he'll plan that trip to Europe they've always talked about.

His hand finds the small of her back, absorbs her familiar feel. Warm, with enough curve to rest his hand on. They merge into the throng of pedestrians, the bag of potatoes clutched to Leslie's chest. They're swept toward the car and home.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Ryan Priest is a modern day nomad; having lived all over the country he now finds himself in the vast Midwest. He is an avid martial artist and a die hard fan and proponent of Mixed Martial Arts known to much of the nation as "Ultimate Fighting." He loves beauty in all her forms and eschews cruelty wherever it may be.

### Hero's Homecoming

*by Ryan Priest*

His luck was amazing, the chance to get the most exclusive interview of the decade. Calvin hadn't been able to sleep for days leading up to it. He'd been floating on thin ice at the station ever since his unbiased coverage of the American/Jamaican war drew concerns about his patriotism. There was also concern among the network heads that his frequent flub of referring to the "country" as the "company" was intentional.

But this was a fluff piece, well not just a fluff piece but *the* fluff piece. There was no way for this to go wrong, it wasn't about politics and even more, the whole world would be watching. This was the chance for Calvin Stevens to become a household name.

So far the network had gone all out. They'd set him up with a posh hotel suite and even sent their "Eye on San Los Angeles" hover-car to ferry him to the airfield. It was reputed to be the fastest one in the SoCal metroplex.

Calvin couldn't believe how silently the car ascended, higher and higher into the sky without so much as the whirr of an engine. The peace gave him a chance to look over his final notes. They were planning to transmit live from the airfield

sending his high-definition, three-dimensional facsimile into homes across the English-speaking world.

Captain Peter “Lone Wolf” Benedict had never planned on returning to Earth. Twenty years ago, when the Nakagomi Rocket had first been unveiled, people around the world had cheered. The Nakagomi rocket was the first manned vessel with the ability to exit our solar system. The only problem had been finding someone to pilot it. The rocket could hold only enough provisions for one passenger. There were many volunteers—men and women willing to give their lives away to be the first individual shot into open space—though finding someone not only willing but also qualified to pilot the ship and conduct the necessary maintenance wasn’t so easy.

Benedict wasn’t technically a captain. He’d never served in any branch of the military or even flown his own plane. He was, however, the only volunteer with the requisite skills to take the mission. He’d made a name for himself as a genius in astrophysics not so much for his work but for his personality.

In the world of scientists and geeks he was like a rock star. Extremely photogenic, he came off really congenial on camera. A hint to why someone with so much going for him would throw it all away to catapult into the galaxy alone lay in an answer he’d given during a television interview shortly before leaving.

It was one of probably hundreds. Five minutes on this show, five minutes on that for Benedict to come out and make simple small talk to the hosts explaining his upcoming mission. They all had the same inane questions, “How do you go to the bathroom in space?” “Have a girlfriend?” And the never missed, “Why are you going if you know you can’t come back?”

On this particular show the host cut Benedict off when he gave his usual pre-composed sound bite about human endeavor and the spirit of exploration. “Come on, don’t give me that bull. Tell us the real reason you want to throw your life away on a rocket to nowhere.”

Benedict could always be counted on to wear a nice black suit and to have his fine black hair combed back to expose his deep brown eyes. He arched his naturally

curved eyebrows, looked directly into the camera, and gave a quick, succinct answer that he followed up with a soft, cryptic chuckle: “What can I say? I hate people.”

Looking over the network’s file on Benedict it was no surprise why he felt that way. As early as elementary school he’d shown such a powerful intellect that he’d skipped several grades. He entered college at fourteen, had his first BA at seventeen and his first PhD by the time he was twenty. People just couldn’t keep up with him. Calvin had no way to verify this claim on such short notice, but his report quoted others in the astrophysics community who secretly considered him a freak, too smart for his own good.

So it was twenty years ago, when Calvin was only in grade school himself, that the Nakagomi Rocket with its singular passenger had blasted off from U.S. Space Station Rumsfeld never expecting to return.

The Nakagomi project turned out to be a colossal piece of junk and the mission was a nearly immediate failure signaling the end of non-commercial space flight. The Nakagomi had lost all communications shortly after passing Jupiter in its second month. The last transmission received before complete blackout was from Benedict himself: “I’m about to lose communications, I can’t repair them, I’m all right. I just want everyone to know I regret nothing. This is Peter Benedict, signing off...”

From then on he was a modern day folk hero. The astronaut lost in space. Children were told to look for the Lone Wolf in the stars and would invariably claim, “I think I see him, that blinking dot there.” Statues of him popped up at every school, city, club or organization that could claim any affiliation with him.

As technology advanced, then advanced upon those advancements, the propulsion system fuelling the Nakagomi became outdated. Now interplanetary travel was a common luxury for billionaires without the need of even a single rocket firing. Large magnets and something to do with the firing of neutrinos had taken the place of fuel. If a billionaire wanted to visit the Mars Hilton, all he did now was take a seat on a large metallic platform as a cascade of sparkling lights sealed him in from all sides. There he had time to possibly watch a movie on his cell phone

and by the time the movie ended the lights would slow down and he'd find all of his atoms on a similar metal platform, only now in the lobby of the Five Star Martian Hotel with its catered room service, whirlpool baths and their specially confected Godiva mints left on the pillow.

All that aside, Captain Benedict's old friends at NASA hadn't forgotten about him. They'd never lost sight of his ship even if they couldn't communicate with it. The common consensus was that Benedict was alive. They had evidence of the ship making the calculated maneuvers of a pilot, though it would never be able to turn around and come back. In space, an object in motion tends to remain in motion, etc. etc. The initial blast and a series of increasing blasts thereafter had sent the ship flying at roughly 100,000 miles an hour, about 1/3600th the speed of light...point being, there was no reverse blast to take him home or even slow him down.

A year ago, that all changed . The plan was developed by students at the Puerto Rico Institute of Technology funded by a grant from soft drink conglomerate Cepsi, eager to combat the negative publicity of yet another lawsuit over the cocaine content of their number one drink line. Using a specifically modulated magnet powered by atmosphere static and a bunch of other science that made Calvin's eyes cross, the students were able to, in effect, lasso the Nakagomi Rocket.

It took only a year to bring the rocket back from a distance that had taken it twenty years to reach. Now was the day the thing would finally land and Calvin grabbed the first interview, an exclusive.

The crowd surrounding the airfield was enormous; tens of thousands of people hoping to get a view of the ship that had flown into legend. Calvin's hover-car buzzed the top of the crowd, crossing the fence to where only the military, NASA and Cepsi Executives were allowed.

He got out of the hover-car and scanned his face with a make-up box to make sure no blemishes would be seen by the billions watching at home. The thunderous applause and cheering from the on-lookers shook the very ground as the beaten,

space-scarred, Nakagomi suddenly descended from behind the gray cloud coverage.

“Hi, I’m Calvin Stevens and we’re live from the Frito-Lay airfield in California where the Nakagomi Rocket is slowly making its final descent after a twenty year flight.”

The plan was to pop the door, and if Benedict was alive they’d cover him in a Cepsi t-shirt and do the interview. If he was dead then a Cepsi representative would enter before the cameras so he could spread empty Poca cans around the ship to create the illusion that the Lone Wolf drank their product. They’d already made the commercials, the landing was a formality.

“Ladies, Gentlemen and Transgenders, we are moments away from an historic occasion. Your grandchildren will want to know where you were the day Earth’s greatest hero came home.” Calvin tossed his head left and right as he spoke so his manicured hair would bounce. Sure he was hamming it up some but that’s how reporters got ahead. The rocket slowly touched down, gently carried those last few feet by the magnetic tractor beam.

*This is it Cal, this is where you become a star.*

Calvin took a deep breath and put his hand on the outer hull door. A team of young Cepsi interns stood ready with handfuls of Cepsi merchandise and props. Calvin waited for the cue in his ear piece and then pressed the keypad to open the door.

A thick, stale odor immediately fled from the door, overpowering everyone close by and even causing a few of the interns to lose their stomachs. Calvin wasn’t going to get sick on camera, he was a professional. He was a professional and he really, really needed this job.

“Captain Benedict?” he asked, fighting the smell to pop his head into the darkened craft. He heard a rustling and banging inside. “Oh my god, he’s alive. I hear him moving in here!”

The entire world was at the edge of its seat. In the time he'd been gone, Peter Benedict's legend had far surpassed his real accomplishments. He was now considered one of the smartest men to ever live, one of the bravest too.

Apocryphal stories about his youth, winning football games and mixed martial arts contests, saving orphaned kittens and teaching the racist children not to pick on the new black girl filled the books and animated videos that an entire generation had now been raised on.

"There he is. Captain Benedict, it is my great honor on behalf of the entire planet to welcome... Captain?" Calvin's tongue swelled in his mouth as Benedict stepped out of the spaceship and into the light.

The crowd was understanding, for the most part. He'd been living alone in a cramped spaceship for twenty years; you don't come out of that looking like a fashion model. His hair was long, uncut for many years. He was naked too, with unkempt body hair. Had it just been the hair and clothing he probably would have been forgiven, but the mass of fecal matter smeared all over, stuck in with hair, that wasn't something that elicited compassion.

"Ooogh! Oooooooooogh!" Benedict began screaming before coughing out phlegm and blowing his nose using neither hand nor tissue to catch the spray, just letting even more filth find its way to his long beard.

"Captain?" Calvin needed to retake control of this interview. He was working without a net, no one could have foreseen such an undignified entrance from the captain. "Ladies and gentleman the Captain has been away a long—"

Benedict defecated into his own hand and smushed it against Calvin's face, smearing it into his mouth, screaming "Ooogh! Oooooooooogh!".

Around the world a billion people were laughing. Calvin's eyes watered as he ran from the rocket towards a refreshment table filled with tiny cups of complementary Poca, Diet Poca and the unpopular Hormone Free Poca. He had to get the taste out of his mouth, it was running down his throat and through his nostrils.



From out of the corner of his eye as he rinsed his mouth out with cup after cup of Poca, he could see one of the Cepsi executives break into a dead run at the team of interns who were now trying to get Benedict to sit still and quit throwing his waste long enough to put a “Drink Poca” shirt on him.

“Don’t put that shirt on him!” the executive cried out, almost collapsing from exhaustion.

“Calvin, Calvin this is the Network,” a stern voice in his earpiece said. “We’re changing the format of this piece right now. No more ‘Hero Returns.’ Now the story will be ‘Lunatic Driven Mad in Space.’ You’re out. Hector, can you do the English telecast after your Spanish.”

A new voice entered the conversation in Calvin’s ear. “Si.”

Calvin removed the earpiece and his tie. The earpiece he threw and the tie he used to wipe his face. He couldn’t be mad at the situation, nor at Cepsi or the network or Captain Benedict. Companies were a lot like Captain Benedict, sociopathic elitists driven mad by their inborn hatred of humanity.

Calvin wondered if they were all right about him. Maybe he was just anti-corporation. Oh well, he figured, it was just human nature, you fear that which wants to feed on you, to suck you up into itself and put your natural energy to its own purposes. He wondered if Pete Benedict had been insane before a year ago. If being pulled through the universe against his will, knowing he was being brought back to yet again play the part of freak to the masses he so hated, had driven him mad.

“At least you got twenty years,” Calvin said from too far away for Benedict to hear him. He gave one quick salute to the long-lost pilot who was being clumsily manhandled by interns determined to create a good photo-op. This was going to be history and they all knew it. The loss of dignity is the price one is asked to pay for public recognition; Calvin understood that now more than ever. He looked

around the airfield taking it all in before pushing through the crowd, fighting against the stream to get out of just one more circus.

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## GUEST WRITER

Lynn Stearns leads “Memoir” and “Story Construction” workshops at the Writer’s Center in Bethesda, and serves as an associate fiction editor for the Potomac Review. Her most recently published stories are in anthologies: *New Lines From The Old Line State* (MWA Books), *Not What I Expected* (Paycock Press), and *In Good Company* (Live Wire Press). She is currently writing a novel in flash fiction format.

### Ruptured

*by Lynn Stearns*

You come home from work and toss your keys onto the kitchen table, the day going like any other, actually better than most. He said he’d be over tonight, he wanted to talk to you about something important, and you think this is it—he’s finally ready to commit.

You’d fallen in love with everything about this man the first time you met, showing him condos outside of town and talking over coffee after—his leathery scent, and his voice, low and steady as he told you he was about to give up on ever finding his soul mate, until he met you. Then you remember the day you learned he was married, how you’d spotted his car parked in front of the dry cleaners, the yellow smiley face with a top hat on the antenna. You rarely went to that part of town, but had volunteered to pick up the summer rental brochures at the print shop next door. Everyone else was anxious to get home to hungry husbands and children or pets that needed attention.

You entered the dry cleaners with a big grin, imagining the surprise registering in his eyes when he saw you. A tall redhead, the only other person in the shop except a Chinese woman behind the counter, shot an annoyed glance in your direction

and shivered at the blast of cold air that came in with you. As she pulled the collar of an emerald green coat closer around her throat, the wide gold band on her finger caught the light. She straightened her posture as she handed the woman a suede jacket the color of honey, saying to cover the buttons before exposing them to chemicals. You stepped aside as she clicked out in leather heels the exact shade of her coat, and watched as she got into his car and drove away.

He arrived the next evening, a bag from Won Ton Louie's in one hand, a yellow rose in the other. As soon as you put the rose in water, you told him about seeing his car the day before, at the dry cleaners, and then you waited. Your mother had driven your father away with her constant nagging and accusations, making your life as well as his miserable, and you'd promised yourself you'd never be one of those women.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I've been a coward," he said. Dry hacking sounds came from his throat as he went on about how he dreaded leaving you each week and going back to the house they shared, that he only did it because a lawyer-friend had advised him he'd be sorry later if he didn't. He said he lived for Thursdays, when she thought he stayed after work for a staff meeting and poker game with the guys, that he slept in the guest room, and grabbed a muffin and cup of bad coffee from the office deli for breakfast every morning to avoid running into her in the kitchen. He told you they'd never had much in common, never should have gotten married. "I wanted to be honest with you, I swear, but I couldn't bear the thought of hurting you."

When he finally looked at you, the regret was obvious in his sigh and the slump of his shoulders. "And I was so afraid of losing you." He held you close and whispered, "as soon as I can, you and me, I promise," and you believed him.

You check the clock and smile, thinking you have time for a quick shower before slipping into the silk pajamas he gave you for your birthday, and then the phone is ringing. The next thing you know, you're leaning against the wall, feeling as though you just slit your wrists and your whole life is draining out.

You wish you could turn back time, not answer, not hear the voice of the woman he claimed he hadn't slept with since his first night with you. She sounded cool, in control, the way she was at the dry cleaners.

“His secretary told me he already left the office,” she said, “but I couldn't get through to his cell phone. He was probably going through the dead zone by the Navy Yard. I'm at Memorial Hospital. I was in an accident and may have a ruptured spleen. Tell him to come right away. He can have his little talk with you later.”

You visualize her in a hospital gown, but with make-up perfectly applied and gold jewelry sparkling. Then you wonder how she knew about you, and exactly what a ruptured spleen meant—how serious it was – and almost miss the rest. It comes to you after you dial his cell phone and he says he's glad you caught him before he got on the beltway. “I'll cut across South Capitol – it's shorter. If she calls again, tell her I'm on my way.”

You don't remember hanging up, only regretting that you dialed his number, but then, you never thought he'd go to her. You never thought a lot of things, until now, and suddenly realize that it has been hard work, trying not to think, to only focus on the way you feel when he's with you.

You look down at your wrists, expecting open gashes to be spilling your blood out on the floor. Instead you see that your hands are clenched into tight fists, the veins traveling just under the pale skin like highways on a road map.

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## GUEST WRITER

Ellen's short fiction has won a PEN Syndicate Fiction Prize, a Virginia Fiction Fellowship, and been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her stories have appeared in *First for Women*, as well as literary magazines such as *The Sonora Review* and *Fiction Weekly*. She teaches creative writing at the Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland and at Marymount U.

### Krakow, 1947

*by Ellen Herbert*

The woman steps into the showers. I think I recognize her, but I do not trust my eyes in the cement room's grainy gray light. I pinch myself. Perhaps I sleep standing, and this is a nightmare, for never did I expect to see her again. Maybe she is an imaginary enemy as once I had an imaginary friend, but she is real: Maria Mandel, the Oberaufseherin, mistress of life and death at Auschwitz, once so feared by us prisoners we could not look in her direction.

In the hollow at the base of my throat, my pulse begins to flutter.

Her eyes fix on me. Their dark kernels widen as she recognizes me.

I almost laugh. Oh Maria, once so lovely and smart, you are like me now, a prisoner. We are two naked women prisoners, waiting for the Bolsheviks to turn on the water.

Slowly she moves toward me. Does she think she can bully me here?

I glance at the wall behind me and notice a stone loose from the masonry. My fingers reach back and carefully take hold of it. I hide it behind my back. It is large enough, a killing stone.

Of course I knew Maria Mandel was here at Montelupich Prison. I saw her scrubbing the corridor floor the day they arrested me. She didn't see me because she kept her head down as I did in the camp. And now we are both here, both prisoners of the Bolsheviks.

How circular life is. Nazis arrested Papa for his membership in Polish Workers, a Bolshevik group, and Stalin's Bolsheviks arrest me at a Democracy and Independence meeting. My mother, *Matka*, used to tell my father *politics is in your blood* as if were a disease. Perhaps it is an inherited disease.

"It is the wrong time to be political," *Matka* would say to him.

"It is the wrong time to be," he would answer, smiling. "And yet here we are."

Whenever Papa came home from one of his meetings, *Matka* was so angry with him she refused to speak. So he brought his face close to hers and cooed like the pigeons that surrounded our flower stall on the Rynek, the beautiful market square here in Krakow. *Matka* could not help herself: she laughed. We all three laughed, and in this way she forgave him. She always forgave him. I grew up a point in the triangle of their love.

One Saturday when I was working for Papa at our flower stall, he told me pigeons the Rynek were once knights of a foolish duke, who'd taken gold in exchange for transforming them into pigeons. Upon the duke's coronation, they were to be changed back, but when the gold was lost, the coronation never took place, so the pigeons remained pigeons. "And now I am their duke," Papa said, laughing. With that he scattered bread crumbs for them. "And they have sworn to protect us Rynek flower sellers."

I was thirteen when he was executed with his comrades at Ulica Pomorska. How bitter my tears were. *It was the wrong time to be political. It was the wrong time to be and yet here we are.* Later at Auschwitz I came to see his death as better than the way *Matka* was turned to ash and blown by the wind.

Maria comes closer, she who had the power to turn people into air.

I face her, my back to the wall.

Perhaps she sees me as a witness against her and means to harm me. But Krakow is full of us witnesses. I see people from the camp everywhere, their bright eyes burning from pale faces in the window of a passing tram, in the green grocer's line, returning from the communion rail at St. Adalbert's. Going about the business of living, we look like everyone else, but we're not. Yet we recognize each other as if the number tattooed on our arms shines through our clothing. We exchange a look in which joy and sorrow and guilt mingle, a look that says: we survived.

A rumble overhead and the water comes on. Cold. I flinch, all the while holding tight to my stone.

Standing beneath her own spray, she watches me.

Now the world knows what happened *in the showers* at Auschwitz. At first they gave people towels and chips of soap to keep them calm and orderly. Was that your idea, Maria? But they dispensed with the towels and soap as more and more poured from box cars. They had a schedule to keep.

Sunrise to sunset I breathed the ash of Jews, gypsies, Czechs, Poles, the detritus of Europe, the inferior, *NA*, as they classified us, *non-Aryan*. Their ashes thickened my soup, settled on my skin like a blanket at night, darkened the day as I worked head down, believing soon I too would be settling on someone's skin. The others at the camp are part of me. I hear their hushed voices inside my head every night as I fall asleep, especially those women who cared for me after Matka died, Anya, Helenka, Leni, strangers who became little mothers, who shared their crusts of bread, their blankets, their stories. Because of them, I survived.

Maria is a meter away when I realize she is not taller than me. I raise my chin. Always I saw her from a distance astride a magnificent horse, emerging from the back of a car, a German officer giving her his hand. Always I kept my distance for those who got too close were burned by her sun.



I thrust out my breasts and stand tall. See how my body has returned to me. I was a child when I entered Auschwitz, sassy on my parents' love, a silly girl with an imaginary friend named Gerta. I am a woman now, that time in between, my youth, I lost at Auschwitz. But like my beautiful Krakow, which appears untouched by war, I am blessed. My skin hides my scars. I am strong now, strong enough to kill.

She comes even closer. My grip on the stone tightens.

The water turns warm, a Bolshevik gift, not to be trusted. Poles say the Bolsheviks smile with steel teeth. To the Nazis, we Poles were subhuman, *untarmenchen*, good only as slaves. Now the Bolsheviks want to *reeducate* me, turn me into a good worker, a willing slave. Unlike the Nazis, who ruled with brute force, these clever Bolsheviks try to convince us to turn on each other. Too many of us do. In Krakow, trust is as scarce as winter oranges.

The heat makes steam rise around us. I let my head drop back to enjoy the warmth.

Suddenly she moves out of the spray and kneels before me.

What is she doing?

Her head bows. Through her long curly hair, a patch of pale skin on the back of her neck appears like a rabbit in a thicket.

I lift the stone, ready to strike her in that white place, when she raises her face to me, her eyes shiny with tears. "Forgive me," she says in German, her words barely audible over the sound of the water.

Stunned I step back and drop the stone, which skitters across the floor.

"Please forgive me," she says in Polish and takes my hand.

Hearing my beloved language on her tongue astonishes me almost as much as her words. During the war, many of us Poles secretly studied a foreign language. Yet which language depended upon how we saw our world. Optimists studied English,

pessimists German, and realists Russian. But Maria has learned Polish, the language of her slaves.

The water goes off, the steam remains. In the steam I feel all of them crowd around me, Papa, Matka, the people who poured from the box cars and were burned, those few who worked beside me and survived, and especially those kind women, those little mothers, their names like a prayer, Anya, Helenka, Leni. All of them here in the steam with me.

I hear myself say to Maria, “In the name of the prisoners, I forgive you.”

She looks up at me a long moment, the pink flush of happiness spreading across her face. “Thank you,” she says in Polish. *Dziekuje.*

She remains kneeling, kissing my hand, both of us shivering with cold, when the guard comes in and shouts at us.

\*

By the end of the next year Maria is tried and found guilty of mass murder. Early in 1948 she is executed. By that time I am far far away from my beloved Krakow with its market square and pigeons and sunshine.

At my trial, the Bolsheviks tell me they wish to recruit my mind. They send me for reeducation to Siberia, believing—I suppose—that nothing helps one focus like bitter cold. *It was the wrong time to be political. It was the wrong time to be and yet here we are.*

In Siberia, summer is a green blink of the eye, while winters pile white and heavy over the windows, so that ice crystals can form around your heart if you let them. I won't let them. During the cold nights ahead at my new camp I remember the shower room, Maria's question to me, and my answer, and for that moment a burst of heat fills my body, and I am warm, so warm.

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