



**THE  
PREMISES**  
A Good Place to Start  
**ISSUE #10  
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**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS HAVE TO HANDLE AN OBJECT, PERSON, OR SITUATION THAT THEY CONSIDER “DELICATE” (WHETHER IT REALLY IS OR NOT)...**

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## What Happened to the First-Time Author Idea?

In our last issue (and a few newsletters ago) we discussed the idea of reserving a spot in our magazine for the best story by an unpublished author. We asked for our readers' advice first, of course.

Did we ever get it!

Most people are at least somewhat in favor of the idea. But discussions with everyone who responded raised two sets of difficult questions.

1) What if, in one particular contest, no unpublished author sends us a story that meets our standards for publication? Would we publish a not-very-good story just to fill the slot?

2) What does "unpublished author" mean? If someone has never sold fiction before, but they've written five best-selling non-fiction books, are they unpublished? What if they've had plays produced, but no prose? (And *where* have those plays been produced?) What if they've flooded the chapbook market with self-published poetry, some of which has gotten positive reviews? What if they've been a professional editor for a long time but only now are seriously trying to write their own fiction?

We could try to pin down concrete answers to these questions, or we could take a step back and ask what our real goal was all along. Our real goal was to help people who are seriously trying to improve their fiction writing write something we'd be proud to publish.

So that's what we're going to do. We found a story in Contest #9 that we loved despite its problems and helped its author fix it, then published it under our "Guest Writer" category. It turned out that author had been published before. Oh well! We liked the story, so we stuck with the plan. (In case you're wondering, the story was *Cot.*)

We found a similar story in Contest #10, and are working with its author over the next couple of months to get *that* story fixed up. This time we're pretty sure the

author doesn't already have a serious publication track record. We plan to publish the story in issue #11.

So this is what we're going to do. We're going to keep an eye out for *one* story per contest that we can't accept in current form, but which thrills us anyway for some reason, and then we'll try to strike a deal with the author. If they agree to our deal (which will vary depending on the story), then we'll work with them on the story, and if we can get the story to a point where both sides are happy with it, we'll make that author a guest writer. Because we're serious about helping those who aren't quite there yet, whether they've managed to sell fiction before or not.

If you have an opinion on this idea, send it to [Feedback@OnThePremises.com](mailto:Feedback@OnThePremises.com). In the meantime, please enjoy this issue, and don't forget to check out the cartoons drawn our cartoonist, Matt Howarth! (He even has his own section on "Who We Are" now.)

Keep writing and reading,

Tarl Roger Kudrick  
co-publisher of *On The Premises* magazine

# Cartoons!

*by Matt Howarth (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)*

Is any situation in life more delicate than telling one person “You’re hired,” while turning down all the other applicants for the job?

Well... yes. Nevertheless, Tarl Kudrick (writer) and Matt Howarth (artist) are proud to present an illustrated story we call:

## *The On The Premises Guide to Making Those Delicate Hiring Decisions*

Real discrimination, perceived discrimination, bureaucracy and lawyers all guarantee that the best person for the job ends up working somewhere else. The best you can hope for is that the people you *don't* hire don't sue you.

There are plenty of rules about hiring in the U.S., but the essence is: give everyone a fair chance.



It is critical to modern hiring law that every job applicant be treated equally.



Treating every applicant equally may be harder than you think.



I have nightmares about needing to hire an Equal Opportunity lawyer, and getting four candidates of equal merit but with different demographics.

Just *try* to select one over the others without looking prejudiced.



Small businesses don't face nearly as many legal restrictions on hiring decisions, which is why nepotism is so rampant...

(cough) I mean, which is why family businesses do so well in the U.S.



So how can you hire people and still avoid the courtroom? How about selecting people based on their ignorance of labor law? It's worth a try.





## FIRST PRIZE

Laura Loomis is a social worker. She was a semifinalist for the 2009 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. This story is part of a series that will eventually become a novel in short stories. Other stories from the same series have appeared in *Many Mountains Moving*, *Alalit*, *Flashquake*, and issues #3 and #4 of *On The Premises*. Laura lives in the San Francisco area with her partner, their niece, and a zoo-like assortment of dogs and cats.

### Not in This Life

*by Laura Loomis*

It's Roy, not his sister Angel, who is calling to deliver the news. That means the call is business, not a polite attempt at being social.

"Dr. Patel," he is saying carefully. Roy never uses my first name, Krishnamoorthy, even though he can say it in a convincing Gujarat accent. "Dr. Patel, it's Roy McLogan."

"What can I do for you, Roy?" I can't return the courtesy and call him Mr. McLogan; I've known him since he was ten.

"I'm not sure if Angel told you. Mom had a stroke a little while ago."

"I hadn't heard. I'm so sorry. How is she?" I am staring at the silver-framed photo on my desk, me with my wife Minda.

"She had another one, three days ago. The doctors aren't holding out much hope."

"I'm so sorry. What hospital is she at?"

“She’s here at home. I have a nurse coming in.”

Of course he does. Roy owns a successful business, and he’d have the best of care for his mother.

I ask a few medical questions about her condition, thank him for calling me, and tell him one more time how sorry I am. All while managing not to inquire about coming to see her.

I set the phone back in its cradle next to the picture. It was taken by a nephew with no talent for photography: Minda and I take up only half the frame, as if leaving room for more family members who should be there.

I’m a psychiatrist—Roy’s mother was one of my patients—but I’m not sure what he wants from me. Surely he can’t mean for me to come one more time and tear open old wounds?

I dig up Angel’s number and call, getting a recording that tells me this is no longer a working number. She’s probably staying at Roy’s house. I find her cell number, which is still working, and leave a message. “Hello Angel. Your brother let me know about your mother’s condition. Call me if you want to talk.” Then, unnecessarily, I add, “This is your father.”

\*

Eleanor McLogan walked into my clinic twenty-one years ago. She was a small, graceful woman with dirty-blond hair chopped short for easy maintenance, and eyes that could shift from blue to green to hazy gray. Roy had the same narrow features, but his eyes were always a righteous blue. I am picturing Roy leading her by the hand, but that’s probably more embellishment than true memory. At ten, he had already been his mother’s caretaker for two or three years, ever since her husband’s death in a car accident. Roy did his Spanish homework in the waiting room while Ellie came in for therapy.

Ellie’s diagnosis was the subject of some disagreement among the doctors who’d seen her before. Some form of atypical dementia, or dissociative disorder; possibly some form of psychosis. She would disconnect in the middle of a

conversation, forgetting how to finish her sentence or turn off a burner on the stove. Roy helped her with shopping and cooking, even showing her which bus to take to my office.

I tried not to get pulled into her habit of depending on Roy, who was quick to finish her sentences if I let him stay in the room. Her last doctor had taken Roy at his word, that Ellie's symptoms had started with her husband's death. I began to suspect the problem was organic, that she was already ill before, and his influence had kept her from decompensating too much. Roy insisted with a child's certainty that everything would have been all right, if his father had been there.

There were times when relying on Roy was unavoidable. One evening he called me just as I was about to leave the clinic. "Mom's doing it again!" he shouted without introduction. "She's just sitting on the floor laughing, and she won't stop!"

I grabbed a pen and paper. "Tell me how to get to your house." His directions were good, and I was there within ten minutes. Ellie was no longer laughing, but was still sitting on the floor, staring at her right foot. Occasionally a tear would roll down, but she didn't seem to notice.

"Ellie? Ellie, can you hear me?" I thought I saw something flicker in her eyes, as if she'd been gone and surreptitiously returned. I laid a hand on her cheek, which was hot to the touch. Ellie closed her eyes and rubbed her face against my hand, like a cat. Finally she looked up at me.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Patel. I don't know what happened."

Roy and I helped her up from the floor, and she sat on the bed. Since there were no chairs in her bedroom, I sat next to her. "I don't understand," she said.

"Sometimes it's just like everything is shaken out of my head. I'm not stupid. I was going to be a teacher, when Roy was older and I could go back to work."

"Of course you're not stupid. Why would you be saying such a thing?"

“This morning I couldn’t remember my husband’s name. What kind of a person forgets that? What if I forget who Roy is?” It wouldn’t have occurred to her to keep a question like that out of Roy’s hearing.

“That won’t be happening,” I told her with more confidence than I felt. “You’ve been doing better since we started the medication.” Because I was the doctor, she believed me, and so did Roy.

“She was laughing for a long time,” Roy told me, “and singing.”

“The song just kept going through my head,” Ellie added. She sang a verse, a hymn about being lifted on eagle’s wings.

“That’s from Dad’s funeral,” Roy supplied.

“Do you believe in heaven?” she asked me.

“I’m a Hindu,” I told her, breaking a cardinal rule of psychiatry at the time. Patients were not supposed to know personal information about their doctors. “Not a very good one, really. But Hindus believe that we have many lives, that we are reborn in different incarnations.”

I didn’t know if this would offend Ellie, a devout churchgoer. After a moment’s thought, she said, “That’s a nice idea. So if you made any mistakes this time, you get a chance to fix them.”

She looked at Roy with an unspoken question. He swallowed. “Dad’s name was Andrew. You called him Drew.”

“Andrew.” She closed her eyes. “That’s your middle name.”

Roy’s face blurred with relief.

Ellie did seem to be getting better. She would come into my office and announce some little accomplishment: three days in a row without forgetting anything, or perhaps she’d made a casserole for dinner without any help from Roy. Once or twice she and Roy showed up on days when she wasn’t scheduled for therapy, because she just couldn’t wait to tell me.

Every achievement for her was an achievement for me too. I was the one who had diagnosed her properly and found the right medication. The senior doctor who ran my clinic leaned toward psychoanalytic theories and talk therapy; pharmacology was viewed with suspicion. I was young and smart and new to the country, and I decided that the stodgy older doctors didn't know so much after all.

I noted in her file, "Patient is taking better care of her appearance." I didn't add that, when she was putting on coral lipstick and flowered dresses, she was doing it for me. She wanted my approval, almost as much as I wanted hers. I said nothing about it to her, except to compliment how pretty her hair was looking, now that she'd let it grow to her shoulders.

I started looking forward to her appointments. My psychiatric tomes were glaring down at me from the shelves above my desk, admonishing that it's common for doctors to imagine they're in love with their patients.

This was different, I told myself. Perhaps some other doctors got themselves caught up in egotistical fantasies, but what I was feeling for Ellie was real. I could see flashes of the person Ellie had been before she got sick. I was setting her free, at first only for minutes, then for days at a time. She missed her husband. She missed being loved. No one but me was paying enough attention to her to see that she was worthy of love.

That doesn't make it right.

She was the one who kissed me first. That doesn't make it right, either.

I convinced her to take Roy to the zoo, let him do a normal childhood thing for a change. Ellie and I went over the instructions of how she was to take the bus, pack the picnic basket, and so forth, all without help from Roy. Ellie was fretting that she would get lost or bring on some other catastrophe. I promised to make sure they arrived safely, so I drove to the zoo and met them as they got off the bus. Once I did, it seemed only natural to go in with them.

Roy was moody at first. He was accustomed to being the man of the house, and didn't know how to let his mother take the lead. Ellie gave me a conspiratorial

smile and stopped to look at the sign in front of a gray wolf's cage. "Roy, what does this say?"

"*Canus Lopus*. It's the Latin name."

"You remember that Spanish and French both come from Latin?" she asked. Roy had just started studying French, after testing out of the honors Spanish class.

Roy made the connection. "*Lopus*. Like *loup*, or *lobo*."

"And a wolf and a dog would both be...?"

It took him a moment. "Canines!" He ran to the next cage to read about the animals there. This was his game for the rest of the day, puzzling out the Latin words and seeing what they resembled. And since he was in a better mood, he looked at the animals too.

In the reptile house, I pointed out a legless creature. "He is looking like a snake, but really he is a lizard."

"Why do you talk like that?" Roy asked. "'He is looking,' instead of, 'He looks like a snake.'"

I hadn't been noticing. "Just a habit from speaking Hindi. It sneaks into my English sometimes."

"But when you speak English, don't you think in English? I can think in Spanish and French." Without waiting for an answer, he added, "When I learn Hindi, I'm going to think in Hindi."

I looked around for Ellie. She stood a few cages back, staring at a jeweled frog. "It's beautiful," she said. It was, and I would never have noticed if not for her.

Ellie asked, "You know the story of the prince and the frog?"

"Vaguely. The frog turns into a prince when the princess is kissing him, something like that?"

“He started out as a prince, but then the witch turned him into a frog, and only love could save him from....” Ellie trailed off with that vague look she always got when she lost her train of thought.

“Mom?” Roy rushed to her side.

“Just wait,” she whispered. She put a hand on the glass partition, her eyes wandering the room. “The thing is... the thing is, the prince was always in there, but everyone else just saw the frog. And he couldn’t tell them, he could only croak. Until they found each other.”

Roy’s mouth was open in awe. She’d never been able to pull herself back from the edge like that before.

After all her careful planning to get here on the bus, Ellie had forgotten to bring enough fare for the ride home. Roy was grumbling that he’d have remembered, and sent me an accusing look. I did what seemed the reasonable thing, and took them home in my car, then walked them to the front door.

I knew what Ellie was going to do, a moment before it happened. She moved close to me, shut her eyes, and kissed me.

I could have said no. I could have told her this was inappropriate, she was my patient, I was married, she was just having a transference reaction to the therapy. At the very least, I could have gotten her a new psychiatrist. Instead I took the key from her hand and opened the door, and the next year Angel was born. My first and only child.

Roy and I kept an uneasy truce based on mutual fear. He had the power to ruin me with the truth, and I had the power to take him away from his mother. I could have said she wasn’t competent to raise a child, which was true. Because I couldn’t bear to be hurting Ellie, I condemned Roy to a life with no childhood, raising both his mother and his new younger sister.

Ellie’s improvement turned out to be one more temporary digression in an endless cycle of ups and downs. The periods of catatonia and hysteria increased,

and nothing I did seemed to be helping. I was trying different medications, more therapy. I wasn't her savior, just another bystander to her illness.

Ellie slipped and called me by my first name once or twice at the clinic, and her pregnancy was starting to show. I imagined my colleagues were staring, though nothing was said, and I don't know now if I was being perceptive or paranoid. What if the child looked like me? My choices weren't good: if I lost my job, I would lose my visa as well, and my wife and I would have to be returning to India.

On my next visit to her home, Ellie was completely lucid. I sat her down in the bedroom. "This isn't right," I told her, "this thing between us. I have a wife."

"I know," Ellie said. This conversation was months too late. "Did you tell her?"

"No. She can't find out. We need to stop seeing each other."

Ellie bowed her head. "What about the baby?"

"I will help you with buying food and diapers and... whatever you need." I wasn't sure what supplies one needed for an infant. "And I would like to be seeing the baby sometimes, if that is all right."

Ellie didn't speak or move. She might have slipped away into one of her unresponsive states again, but by now I could tell the difference. I pressed on. "I have made arrangements for you to see a doctor at another clinic. I can show you how to get there."

Ellie's head jerked up, and her blue eyes were the clearest I'd ever seen. "You already made arrangements? Before you talked to me?"

She began to sob, not with hysteria as I'd seen her do before, but with the ear-piercing grief of a woman abandoned. Roy burst in to see what was wrong. "He's leaving us!" Ellie wailed.

Roy grabbed my arm and pulled me away from his mother. "Go away! We don't need you!" I tried to tell her I was sorry, that I did love her, but the force of Roy's



anger was propelling me toward the door. After it slammed behind me, I heard Roy slide the chain into place.

Still, when our daughter was born, Ellie called to tell me. At the hospital I found Roy standing by his mother's bedside, his new sister cradled in his arms while he explained the importance of supporting the baby's head. Even then, Angel was more his child than mine or even Ellie's.

I hadn't seen Ellie in months, and it was as if I'd just put my glasses on and was finally seeing her clearly. Her lost, tentative look was back.

"Hello, Dr. Patel," Ellie said, giving me the same admiring smile as always. "We're calling her Angel. Angel Samantha McLogan."

McLogan. Angel would carry the name of Roy's dead father. My shame was tainted with relief.

Roy was coaxed into letting me hold her for a moment, but reclaimed her as soon as she began to fuss. I realized with a pang that I had missed Roy, his childish maturity and his endless appetite for words.

He asked, "How do you say Angel in Hindi?"

"*Pharista.*"

"*Pharista,*" he repeated, listening to the sound. He got the accent right on the first try.

"Roy wanted to call her Samantha," Ellie added, "that's why it's her middle name." I made myself look at her. It was as if she didn't remember how I'd hurt her, or that she used to call me Krishna. "Will you come and see us sometimes, Dr. Patel?"

"Yes. Of course."

I didn't stay long. When I left, Roy gave the baby back to Ellie and followed me into the hallway. "We'll be all right," he said. "You don't have to come again, if you don't want to."

“Of course I’ll be coming again. I’m her father.”

“I know.”

Perhaps I misunderstood; it’s hard to remember after twenty years. Perhaps I was thinking Roy was afraid of my leaving. As with Ellie, I was imagining a different relationship than the one we had. “Sometimes I feel like you’re my child too, as much as Angel is.”

Roy’s face hardened like a jailer’s. In his most adult voice, he used an expression I hadn’t heard before.

“Not in this life.”

Throughout Angel’s childhood I remained what I had been that day: an occasional visitor, no longer part of the family. Ellie was still greeting me with a smile and a kiss on the cheek. Roy took the money I offered for Angel’s care, but otherwise pretended I didn’t exist. I meant to take Angel to the zoo like with Roy, but somehow never did.

It was years later when my wife found out. She never told me exactly how she learned, but I saw Roy’s handiwork in it. I got home and Minda unfolded Angel’s birth certificate and laid it on the table in front of me. I hadn’t even known Ellie put my name on it, but there it was, letter perfect like the diploma on my wall: *Krishnamoorthy Patel*.

I said the things that men say: that I was sorry, that I hadn’t meant to hurt her. Useless scraps that weren’t shielding her from my blistering betrayal.

Minda put her hand under my chin and forced me to look at her. I could see every line around her eyes, every black hair left among the gray. “Three abortions, Krishna. Three abortions because the test said they were going to be girls. Why didn’t this woman have an abortion?”

This wasn’t the question I’d been expecting. “She doesn’t believe in abortion. She’s a Christian.”

“And this Christian woman who is sleeping with other women’s husbands, she can have your daughter? She can have your daughter and I can’t?”

“It’s different in America,” I stammered. “She’s not Indian. She doesn’t have to be thinking about dowries. You agreed that the abortions were the right thing.”

“Is that the way you remember it?”

Is that the way I remember it? “We couldn’t afford a girl, not back then.”

“Can you afford a divorce?”

Minda didn’t divorce me. She spent three weeks at her sister’s, but was too ashamed to tell her family my transgression. She came home and I tried to be a good husband, as if there was really such a thing as making it up to her, as if a living child could be unborn and unconceived.

\*

The second call comes on my answering machine, ten days after the first. In his most businesslike voice, the now adult Roy gives the time and place for his mother’s funeral.

The funeral is confusing, as I’m not really familiar with Christian services. Everyone else seems to know when to be sitting or standing, and can say the prayers from memory. I recognize the song about being lifted on an eagle’s wings. Ellie’s casket gleams in dark wood and bronze hinges.

The minister is talking about heaven and the resurrection of the flesh. Perhaps there is nothing beyond this life, but I am clinging to that long-ago conversation about reincarnation. I want Ellie to have a fresh start somewhere in the universe, a chance for life to be treating her fairly. In the next life, Ellie can thrive without her illness, Minda can have her child, and I can... I don’t know. Unlike them, I have no one but myself to blame for my circumstances, so I’ll likely be making all the same mistakes again.

After the service, I join the line of cars to Roy’s house for coffee. The living room displays the success of his translation business. It’s filled with elegant souvenirs

of the places he's traveled, the Chinese tables somehow harmonizing with the Mexican rug.

I hold back from the knots of people talking. I don't recognize anyone except Angel, Roy, and Roy's wife; I'm no longer connected enough to Ellie to know who is important in her life. Most of them are from church, probably. Ellie didn't have a lot of other friends, and no family close enough to keep her from being raised by her son.

I watch Angel with Roy. She has a lot of my face, round features and dark eyes, even if she doesn't have my name. Her thick black hair is coming loose from its pins. Roy kisses her temple, and I hear him call her *Pharista*.

Angel stumbles in her high heels, and catches Roy's arm to steady herself. He helps her to a seat before moving on to greet another group of guests. Angel looks like she'd rather be alone, but I sit next to her anyway.

"I got your message," she says. "Thanks." Her eyes are swollen and veined with red. She accepts my embrace. I can't remember the last time I touched her.

"How are you?"

I am wanting her to tell me how she really is, how she's coping with a shattering loss, but she gives a distracted smile and says, "Fine, thanks for asking."

A young man is approaching, with spiked hair and a black nose ring that matches the one in his eyebrow. I have an unsettling feeling that he'll turn out to be Angel's boyfriend. Sure enough, she is reaching for his hand, and he bends down to kiss her. "How you holding up, babe?" His jacket smells like marijuana.

"I just can't believe she's gone." Angel lets herself be pulled up into his arms. She lets go slowly, then remembers my presence. "Stuart, have you met Dr. Patel?"

"Hello," I say, extending a hand. It's too awkward to be explaining that I'm her father when she didn't mention it.

After shaking my hand, he tells Angel, “I need to go. My band’s playing at Rusty’s tonight.” His tongue is pierced too, with a big silver ball in the center. “I’ll see you at home.”

Angel’s eyes widen with hurt. “Excuse us a minute,” she says to me, and follows him outside. By the time she returns alone, I’ve been captured in conversation with Roy’s wife, whose name I’ve forgotten in a moment of supreme idiocy.

“How long has Angel been seeing that young man?”

“Not long. He’s all right, I guess. You should have seen the last one.” Roy’s wife is visibly pregnant. I’ve spoken to Angel twice in the last few months, and she hadn’t mentioned it.

I see Roy heading into the kitchen, so I make my excuses to his wife—Julie, I remember belatedly—to follow him in there. I manage to catch him alone, arranging trays of cold cuts.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, and want to be adding more, but I can’t imagine where to begin.

“Thank you for coming.” The accusation behind the words slaps at me, though Roy’s still using the same businesslike voice.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Not now.” After a moment, he adds, “We’ll be fine.”

After years of teasing out meaning from fragmentary disclosures, I can say it for him. “I know how you feel about me, and I know it took a lot for you to put that aside and call me. I’m sorry I didn’t come to see her.”

“Too busy with some other woman patient?” The words are carefully measured as anything Roy says, delivered on ice.

“No. I never crossed that boundary with any other patient.”

“Crossed that boundary.” Ever the linguist, Roy is trying out the phrase. “I’m not exploiting a sick woman and betraying my wife, I’m just crossing a boundary.”

“What do you want me to say? I know it was wrong. But I –”

“Loved her, right. But not enough to tell her you were going to leave her with a baby and a bottle of pills. Not enough to be any help when she was standing there with a jar of baby food in her hand and a crying baby and she couldn’t remember what to do next. Not enough to see her when she was dying and she thought I was still ten years old and we needed to go to your clinic. You mattered to her, and I’m damned if I know why. I hope it was just because of your daughter that I raised.”

*Your daughter.* Angel isn’t mine, except in some random biological sense. I’m not important enough for her to hate me the way Roy does.

Roy’s not finished. “You know what else? Angel’s life is a mess. She dropped out of college and she’s living with some loser guy. She’s been through a half dozen boyfriends in the last year, and there wasn’t one who treated her with any kind of respect. I guess I didn’t do a very good job. But what did I know, I was only a kid!”

“Roy—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

The silence lasts a long time. Long enough for me to hope, when Angel walks in, that she didn’t hear any of that. “Oh, hello.” Her shoes are dangling from her hand. “I thought I’d come in here and hide for a few minutes. Too many people.”

“Why don’t you go upstairs,” Roy offers. “It’s still your room.”

“Thanks. Maybe I will.” But instead she sets down the shoes and pours a glass of water, gulping it over the sink.

“I was just saying goodbye,” I tell her. I want to stay, try to explain myself to Angel and Roy, why I did the things I did. But I’m the intruder here. I offer condolences one more time, and give my daughter a kiss on the cheek.

I loiter in the living room for a few minutes longer, sipping a cup of tea to avoid eye contact with anyone. Roy and Angel come out of the kitchen and walk upstairs together, talking softly. Without the shoes, she looks tiny next to him. A minute later, Roy comes down, stopping at the bottom of the stairs to wipe his eyes. I slip out the door before he can see me.

I understand now that I want Roy's forgiveness, even more than Angel's. Angel was still in preschool the last time we spent more than an hour or two together. And while Angel can't hate me for bringing her into the world, Roy understands the depth of my crime.

In the twenty years since Ellie, I've had other patients who seemed to blossom under my attention. I never touched any of them, but I saw myself feeding on their admiration. Two of them claimed to love me, and I told them they were having a transference reaction to the doctor-patient relationship.

If I had gone to visit Ellie one last time, perhaps the princess would still have shone through. I couldn't bring myself to risk seeing what the other doctors had seen, what I saw the day Angel was born, a fragile woman who had made me feel important. Wanting to believe in a love that was outside other people's rules, I was telling myself a fairy tale. Roy knew this at eleven years old, and I will not be forgiven in this life.

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## SECOND PRIZE

Joe received his MFA in fiction from Bowling Green State University. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Redivider*, *Pank*, *Fiction Weekly*, *Southpaw Journal* and others. He has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

### The Problem with Ike

*by Joe Celizic*

I've been jealous of my little brother ever since I found out he has superpowers. I don't. It's not fair that Ike has them—either no one should have them or everyone should. Or just Ike and me. And maybe Mom and Dad too, because I guess then it would be in our blood. But it's not fair that it's just him.

I think he first got them a couple weeks ago. We were all watching Jeopardy after dinner because that's what Mom likes to watch and she's the one who cooks so I guess it's only fair. She made chicken parmesan, peas and broccoli and Ike was still at the table with his broccoli because he said he shouldn't have to eat two vegetables. We never had to eat two vegetables, unless one of them was corn or something, but corn doesn't count. I don't know why Mom made both peas and broccoli, but I ate them anyway. There's no point in fighting over stuff like that.

"You're lucky to have dinner at all," Dad had told him. "Brett had no problem eating them. You shouldn't either."

"For Pete's sake," Ike said.



Dad scowled. Two months ago, Dad had said, “For Pete’s sake,” once and Ike picked it up, but only after asking who Pete was for half an hour, trying to be funny. Now he says it all the time. That’s how seven-year olds are.

Dad said Ike couldn’t leave the table until his plate was clean, so he crossed his pudgy arms and the three of us went to the family room. Ike sat as still as a blank TV, his bubble cheeks shining under the light fixture, one where the light bulbs are covered by cloudy glass bowls with frilly edges. I’d never paid attention to them until that night.

During a Daily Double, I looked at Ike to see if he’d caved yet, but he was still sitting, arms crossed, staring off into space. Well, it looked like he was staring into space, but then I realized he was looking at something in the air. I had to squint, but I spotted a broccoli tree floating a foot above his head, rising toward the glass bowls with frilly edges. He floated it up into the bowl and proceeded with the next piece. I wasn’t sure if what I saw was real, but sure enough, before the first round of Jeopardy was over, the glass bowl was a stuffed miniature broccoli forest, electric sun hiding inside.

Dad eventually found the broccoli and yelled at Ike. He made him eat all the dusty pieces, but Ike didn’t care. He popped them in his mouth one by one, smirk on his face. I didn’t say a thing because if I had powers I wouldn’t want Ike telling Dad or anyone. Not until we’d sorted it out together.

\*

We lay in our dark bedroom that night, our beds hugging opposite walls. The train hollered in the distance like it does every night. Neither of us could sleep.

The light flipped on and it startled me, hurt my eyes. Soon, I realized Ike had used his mind again. Still lying in bed, he dragged open a desk drawer. While he buoyed my new X-Men comic to his hands, I sat up and rubbed my eyes. By this point, I was sure his powers were real. And for some reason, Ike didn’t mind if I knew about them.

“How do you do that?” I asked.

Ike put his hands behind his head and turned the first page of the hovering comic. It was a good one. Colossus got brainwashed into a bad guy. No one could stop him the entire issue, but he snapped out of it just in time to save some humans from Magneto. Those stories were always the best kind.

“Do you think you’ll have those powers forever? Because you could become a real superhero.”

“Duh,” Ike said. “Why do you think I’m reading? I gotta study.”

It was true. Ike didn’t usually like to read, not even comic books. He liked TV. He liked it so much, Mom made me take him outside whenever I played baseball with Joel Johns and Henry Buber. I wondered if Ike’s new powers would make him want to go outside more often so he could lift more stuff. Then I started to wonder how much he could lift. Cars? Houses?

“Tell me if you need to know anything, okay?” I told him. He acted like he wasn’t listening.

I knew more about mutants and superpowers than any of my friends combined. What I wouldn’t give for powers like that! It was around that time I started feeling jealous, but I still wanted to be nice to Ike, too. Maybe he would let me tell him how to use his powers sometimes, take his mind for a test-drive. I was two years older than him, after all. I was smarter. And all heroes need a sidekick.

“I don’t need any help. I know what I can do.”

“Just make sure you use them for good,” I told him, even though I couldn’t really make him do anything, not anymore.

Ike was quiet, just flung my comic on the desk. I heard the sick crinkle of ripping pages. Any other night, I would’ve yelled at him, but I still felt like I should be nice. I never really cared before, but now I wanted him to like me. And I was a little scared because I still didn’t know how powerful he was.

\*

Mince Avenue was the quietest street in the neighborhood, all the way in the back. It took Mom about fifty turns whenever she drove us to school or Kroger, but it was nice because our house was on the cul-de-sac and we could play baseball and hockey in the street. In the summer, when it was really hot, me and my friends chased each other with squirt guns, the hot road burning our bare feet. We took breaks, getting drinks from the hose, cooling our soles on the slick grass.

We stayed with Joel and Mrs. Johns most summer weekdays. She took us to play at the park with the jungle gym and basketball court. Ike didn't like Joel and he didn't like gyms or basketballs. He liked Muffy, though, the annoying collie nearby that yelped at us all day like we were cats. He barked back at her sometimes and she'd go crazy, pulling her chain so tight it choked her yelps into dry heaves.

But the day after the broccoli incident was Work Wednesday. Mom stayed home from work and made us study Math and English even though it was summer vacation. It wasn't fair to have to work on vacation, but it was only one day a week. Sometimes we got ice cream afterwards. Most days it ended early with Ike crying in his bed, kicking the mattress, screaming about how he wanted to watch Nickelodeon. Mom never gave in.

This time when Mom brought out the textbooks, Ike just sat quietly, wearing the same smirk. I knew he was up to something, but I didn't figure it out until the TV turned on, the three of us still working at the kitchen table.

"That's funny," Mom said.

She stood to turn it off, but before she could reach the button, it turned off. Puzzled, she turned around. Then *boom*, it turned on again. Ike and I laughed.

"Who has it?" she said, holding out her hand. "Who has the remote?"

Ike and I shook our heads and she checked our hands and pockets and shirts and pants and all the while Ike flicked the TV on and off, giggling like Elmo.

"To your room. Both of you."

She kept us there for hours. I sat on my bed and watched Ike use his mind to move stuff around the room. Our chair. Our dresser. He never strained. Nothing seemed too heavy. It didn't seem right, like taking shots to feel better or seeing Dad cry. It wasn't right.

\*

Mom finally cooled off and told us to go play while she made dinner. The air outside was about as nice as it could be, as warm as my body, like it was part of my skin. The sun was still up, but it was thick like orange juice and it didn't hurt to look at it. Hanging around with Ike outside was tense. I kept waiting for him to pick something up with his mind, but he never did. I watched him kick at the grass, digging up tufts, exposing dirt and yellow roots. I didn't know what to say and I didn't want to say the wrong thing or be too quiet either, so I told him we should play baseball and I went and got my wooden bat from the garage.

We went to Joel's house first, then we got Henry. Henry got his older brother Mark and his sister Laura. We all liked Mark because he had big curly hair and was almost old enough to drive. Laura was just about the prettiest girl at Shanahan Elementary. She was two years older than me, but I liked her even if she was too old. If I could trade Ike for Mark and Laura, I would. But if I could trade all three of them for Ike's powers, I'd probably do that too. I'd even throw in Henry or Joel.

Mark said he'd pitch for us and Laura said she just wanted to watch, which made me pretty happy because then she could see how far I could hit the tennis balls we played with. We hit straight down the street, but I could still hit the balls so hard that they landed on roofs and rolled into gutters. I'd already hit five that summer.

I batted first and Mark threw some fast pitches I could barely keep up with. I hit a few grounders and Joel and Henry chased them down while Ike played catcher. Mark looked over at Laura, who was sitting so pretty in the grass with her legs straight out in front of her, ankles crossed. I think he must've known that I liked his sister or something because he winked at me and threw me a nice slow lob that floated to me like a birthday balloon. I nailed it on top of the Johnson's roof.

“There’s the dinger!” Mark yelled. Laura clapped and I felt pretty great. It was one of the best moments of my life.

Behind me, Ike started saying my name.

“Can I have a turn?” he said.

“A few more,” I told him.

“I want a turn.”

His voice got all whiney and I knew a tantrum was on the way, but I didn’t want to give up the bat, not when Laura was smiling at me, rocking her feet back and forth. I held up my hand and stood ready for the next pitch.

Mark tossed another slow one for me. I took a step and wound up. But mid-swing my bat weighed about a thousand pounds. It collapsed down in front of me, ball floating by. Joel and Henry laughed and I think I even heard Laura giggle a little bit. I felt really stupid. My face grew red and stingy like it used to when I was little, right before I would cry. But I don’t cry anymore.

“Come on. Try again, Brett,” Mark said.

I swung at another one, but this time the ball sped up at the last second. I whiffed, spinning around, skidding on my toes.

Mark chuckled and I glared at Ike. But he just threw the ball back, not looking at me, acting like nothing happened.

Mark said he’d try to slow it down. He set himself, fingering the ball. As he wound up, the back of his jeans began to sag, showing the sky-blue of his boxers. I could hear Ike snickering behind me and before I could tell him to stop, Mark’s pants dropped to his ankles.

Mark shrank to the ground, grasping to pull them up. Joel and Henry pointed and laughed, but within seconds, their pants dropped too. They dove down, covering their tightsy-whiteys, and all that was left was Laura laughing in the grass, Ike cackling, already on his way back home.

I followed him, grabbed his soft fleshy shoulder. He shrugged me off with more strength than I remember him having.

“You can’t keep doing this, Ike. It isn’t funny.”

“It’s funny to me.”

“You’re being a big brat.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” he said and he kept on walking, like he didn’t care about anything but himself. I wanted to hit him, but I was too scared.

\*

When we got home, Mom was in a much better mood. At dinner, her and Dad were smiling and kissing, making baby jokes, asking us how we’d feel about having a little brother or sister. I always said, “Only if we get a bigger house.” One, it made them laugh. Second, I wasn’t sharing my room with a baby because Ike was bad enough. Ike always pouted and said, “No way,” and my parents said, “We’ll see,” and that usually shot Ike into another tantrum.

After dinner, Mom made coffee for her and Dad, and Ike and I each got a fudge-stripe cookie. We were all quiet around the table, eating and drinking. Mom brought the coffee pot to the table for a refill and when she turned to offer Dad some, the whole pot flew out of her hand and onto my dad’s lap.

“Margaret!”

Dad jumped to his feet and hurried to pull down his pants. The pot dropped, splashing the tile brown, steam wafting. I jumped from my seat. Ike just sat.

Mom grabbed some towels and Dad snatched them from her, said he would take care of it. I looked at Ike’s face, his brown hair hanging over his ears. He was smirking, but only a little. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, if he was the one who spilled the coffee or not. I don’t know. It was a weird look. I don’t think I had ever seen it before.

\*

That night, I stayed away from Ike. I even took a bath and spent a whole hour in the water by myself, just so I could think of what to do. I didn't have any powers, so I couldn't fight Ike, if it came to that. He could drop a whole tree on me or attack me with a dozen wooden bats, and what would I do then? But I needed to convince him to use his powers for good, to be a superhero instead of a villain.

So I decided to dognap Muffy.

The whole reason I did it was to teach Ike a lesson. I thought if he saw Muffy all tied up on the railroad tracks with the train coming, he'd have to save her. And then he'd feel good about rescuing somebody and would decide it's better to be a hero than a villain. Just like Colossus in that comic. He had to learn to help people before he could snap out of his evil brainwash.

The next day, I took the line the Johnson's use to tie up their dog, Samson. Leash in hand, I went to Muffy's house. I made sure no one was home and unhooked her chain. It was a long walk, but I led her over to the train tracks on the other side of the neighborhood. I even passed people who had no idea what I was doing, probably just thought I was walking my dog. That was pretty funny.

I got to the tracks and as it turns out, tying a border collie down on a set of train tracks is harder than it looks. Finally, I hooked the chain onto a railroad spike, then tied the leash on a flat wooden board so she was double-leashed, unable to move out of the way of the train. Not without help.

To tell the truth, I felt pretty bad about trapping Muffy there at first. I thought about just taking her back and thinking of something else. But she didn't even care, just laid down on the tracks, head between her paws, panting the way my uncle does after we eat Thanksgiving dinner. So I left and went to tell Ike.

I walked all the way back home and I have to admit, I was getting pretty tired. So when I told Ike that I needed him for something really important and he refused to get off the couch, I was pretty irritated. I grabbed him by the shoulders and told him it was a matter of life and death. Finally he said, "Fine, fine," and let me take him outside.

"What's this all about?" he asked. We weren't even halfway there yet.

I almost told him that someone was in trouble, but I realized that wouldn't be enough to convince Ike to follow me.

"Money," I said. "I found a lot of money."

It was like I hit his power switch. He started walking so fast I almost had to jog to keep up with him and his face looked like someone stuffed a light bulb inside his face. It was a good thing, too, because I heard some whistles in the distance, and that meant we only had a few minutes before the train showed. But we got to the railroad and there was Muffy, still lying down like a bag of dirt. I had to call her name to get her stand up.

"What's she doing here?"

"I lied," I said. "There's no money. But if you don't free Muffy, the train's going to run over her. You have to be a hero, Ike."

But my brother just looked at me like I was an idiot. Or maybe like he was an idiot. Then something clicked in his mind and he glared at me. "You tied her here!"

"No, I didn't," I lied some more. "It doesn't matter how she got here. The train--"

And that's when Ike lifted me with his mind and threw me into the air. It felt nice at first, like I was swinging backwards on a swing. Then I felt sharp stabs in my back, heard the rustles of leaves. I closed my eyes and cried out in pain, dropping onto something hard. I opened my eyes and saw Ike had thrown me into a tree. I looked down. I was stuck ten feet up, clothes hooked on branches.

The train whistled.

Muffy saw the train and finally realized what was going on. She yelped, pulling against her leash and chain, jumping up onto her back legs. I watched Ike try to free her with his mind, lifting her every which way, but he couldn't break the ties. I tried to yell at him to just unhook the chain, untie the leash. He couldn't hear me. Maybe he didn't trust me.



Up in the tree, I could see how close the train was. From so high, it looked like it was moving slow, like ocean waves, but I knew it wasn't.

"Let me down," I yelled. "It's our only chance."

"This is your fault!" he said.

He wasn't going to listen to me, but it didn't look like he could free Muffy. I seriously began considering what life in prison for pet murder would be like. It didn't look good.

I bit my cheek, crouched on the branch, and dropped.

Dust clouds erupted as I landed hard in the gray and white rocks that littered the train tracks, scuffing my hands and knees. I ran to Muffy and Ike, the train in front of me, just seconds away. I went for the leash and pointed at the chain, told Ike to try to unhook it.

The leash felt like it was made of metal, it was so stiff. I tugged with all my might, wiggled it side to side, slowly slid it over the wood. With one final yank, it pulled off and I watched as Muffy went flying to the opposite side of the track, skimming the front of the train, Ike guiding her with his eyes.

The train whooshed and chugged between us. For five whole minutes, I watched Ike through the cars as he lowered Muffy into his arms, stroked her fur, told her things I couldn't hear over the rumbling of metal on metal. I felt awful and good and guilty and relieved all at the same time. Everything was loud and confusing. I had no idea what would happen next, what Ike might do to me, what type of man he'd grow into, hero or villain. And what was I?

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## THIRD PRIZE

Dawn Allison has always wondered why people mention their dogs and cats in their introductions. She has some, but fears alienating readers by admitting she doesn't really care for the cat. Her work has been featured in *Necrotic Tissue*, *BURST*, *Lobster Cult Magazine*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Bound Off Literary Pod-Cast*, and others. Her favorite thing to do is to laugh.

### The Boxer

*by Dawn Allison*

The mat was slick with sweat and blood, residual fear, residual fight from those wheeled-out wounded or walking victorious. And now it was Len's turn. He sat in his corner, his arms on the ropes, the ropes alive against his skin—a conduit for the bloodlust from the stands. In the other corner, his opponent flashed a toothless grin, smack talk without words. Denali the Dancer, light on his feet for a heavyweight, quick as a bolt. And ugly. The man the meat grinder spat back out, too graceful to match his square jaw, his crooked nose. But you didn't get by in this business by being pretty. You did it by wanting, by needing. By being confident that if you fight hard enough, long enough, that you will win her back. That each punch will bring you closer to the one you lost.

The ring is where delusions come to die, and Denali looked hungry. Len was tired. He could feel the soles of his feet sweating already. No gription (one of April's words, that one). It was over before it'd begun, but Len was resigned to it. When the bell rang, he would stand, and every punch would bring him closer to her. Len ignored the quick-talk advice of his manager, a man who only knew how to hit people when the odds were stacked in his favor. He ignored the thrum of

anticipation, ignored those rooting for him, against. He towed the bottoms of his feet and waited for the bell.

A second too soon, Denali rose and he was coming all speed and need. Len couldn't help but wonder who he was fighting for, or what. But the bell had rung, and Denali was there. Len saw destiny in his opponent's eyes, in the sweat beading on his forehead, and he knew that today was the day, boy-howdy. Denali faked with his left and swung with his right while Len was looking for destiny. What he found was darkness, cottony silence thick in his ears. History lives in the darkness that follows a one-two punch.

\*

She said she'd come to see the fight because she had to see others hurt, to know that she wasn't alone. She was tiny and insubstantial, her face all liquid eyes, tight puckered mouth. He wanted to see what she would look like when she smiled, and it started as simple as that. She waited after the match, sat in the stands long after everyone else had filed out. They were alone under the dimmed lights. She startled him when she called his name, he smiled sheepishly. She asked if she could tend his wounds. It was just like her, he learned, she wanted everything and everyone to be all right. All the time. Even when she had to see them hurt so she knew she wasn't alone. Especially then.

She held ice to his face, gently fingered his split lip, kept asking him if it hurt, and winced when he told her that it did. After that, he never told her. She had no agenda, which was new to him, no goal but to drift through the world with some shred of innocence clenched tight in her fist. A precious shred, a tiny shred. All that she had left. All that she wanted. And him. After that night, she wanted him. And her wanting him became all that he wanted, that he needed.

\*

He took her to the Spillway because she'd asked to see it. He brought her home to meet his ma, promised her a trip to the park to see the fireworks, except it was closed that year, had finally gone bankrupt after all. So they milled around and he wished for something to show her, something wonderful. Not the Spillway,

not where the ducks walked on the backs of the fish. But she asked when she saw the sign.

They bought a loaf of bread from a little shack painted violent red so the tourists couldn't miss it. Expired bread that cost nearly as much as the fresh stuff. It was moldy, but the fish didn't complain. They might have, though, if they'd had the capacity. Might have had something to say about the pus white gaps where eyes had been before they were plucked by careless beaks grappling for crumbs, or punctured by whip slick fins reacting to pain, or hunger, or the constant state of almost suffocation in the water that was more fish than good old h-two-oh.

He watched her toss out whole slices, then squeeze her eyes shut to miss the gape-mouthed whirl. The truth was that she really didn't like to see things hurt, no matter what she said. She swallowed the world's pain and it ate her up inside. He watched her, and by then he knew her well enough to know that she didn't want to be there. He grabbed the bag from her fingers, dumped the whole loaf at once, then put his arm around her shoulder (so slight, almost nothing) and led her to the car.

His love couldn't make her happy but he could make her feel safe. He could protect her. Because she had been through enough. She made him promise that he wouldn't go after her father for what he'd done, but he might have, anyway, if the old bastard hadn't died of his own accord. He froze to death on his front porch that winter, had pneumonia but wouldn't stay put in the hospital because it didn't have a bar. A neighbor found him the next morning, frozen beer clenched in a frozen fist.

She hurt for the loss of him, even though he didn't deserve to be mourned. And this was somehow different than being hurt by him, not as lasting. By that summer, she seemed to have come around. She was lovely when she smiled. Her whole face smoothed, and you almost could believe she'd never lost any innocence at all.

He got into the car beside her, cupped her chin in his hand. "I love you," he whispered. He hadn't said it before and didn't know why he mentioned it just then, unless it was that he just couldn't not.

She pulled back and stared blankly at the fish, watching them fight in all their ugliness, and he wondered if she saw him like that, a writhing, violent thing, a fish in a sea drowning with them. She turned back to face him. The smile she wore was weary.

“How many have you loved before me?” she asked. And he could see it. He’d said it too soon, the words sat wrong on her like a stained second-hand garment. He told himself it was just too new. Love, to her, had been just a word. A dirty word that spoke of misery in the night, that meant a slow grinding away of the soul, a forever trip to the dentist, drilling, penetrating, leaving a lasting ache that grew sharp when the wind blew wrong. Her father had been a dentist, until he’d lost his license.

Len was sorry he’d said it, but meant it no less and couldn’t call the words back.

“How many?”

“A few,” he answered, and wanted to add none like this, but he couldn’t. She had to know it for herself.

“And how many will you love after?”

“None,” he said too quickly. There was a question in her eyes. *How could he know that?* “Marry me,” he said.

He could never tell the happy tears from the sad, saw no difference in color or shape. But then she smiled, and he knew. Because it was that sad smile that he both loved and never wanted to see again.

“I don’t know, I guess so, I...” and the words faltered on her tongue, but that was okay. He didn’t need to hear it just yet. He only needed assent and the rest would follow.

\*

“Three-four-five—” He opened his eyes to the sight of his manager, hopping outside the ropes, screaming “GET UP! GET UP!” He could barely make out his voice over the ringing in his ears, over the count. By eight, he’d struggled to his

feet, the world spinning, the lights blinding and sharp. Denali danced from foot to foot, wearing a mouth guard smile as though there was anything left there to protect. Cheering, jeering faces in a sea of humanity. The referee looked to him and Len nodded. Denali waited impatiently for the whistle.

Len barely noticed it when it came. His inner eye was fixed on April. The way she looked before the habit, the last time he'd ever seen her hair turn to spun gold in the sunshine. He had promised he would never love another, and he hadn't. She had.

A blow to his chest shook Len from his reverie, but it didn't sting like it should have. Denali was wearing himself out, or at least wanted Len to believe that he was. Hope, that's what the silly bastard was doing, holding out hope like a carrot on a stick. A man who's riding on hope is a man who makes mistakes. Len kicked and failed to connect, but it put a little distance between them. The world grew clearer, more stable with each second.

"It's over," Denali said thickly, a mouth guard slur. "You might as well fall, man, spare yourself some."

Len liked to believe he wasn't the sort of man who would spare himself anything. He stood firm, waiting for his shot to open up and missing it when it did. He was tired. But so was Denali. He danced around Len, needlessly burning up his energy in distraction. Sleight of fist. He didn't need to bother, Len's mind was so distant it was gone. *He* couldn't recall why he was there. How it would bring her back to him, or bring him closer to her.

Denali struck with an iron fist and Len went down wondering if Denali somehow weighted his gloves. The mat smelled tinny, blood and sweat, but this smell was replaced by another.

\*

Church incense and lit candles. Wooden Christ on the cross, muscular, beautiful, carved into an ideal. The real Jesus probably had unkempt fingernails and calloused heels. So, he died for our sins. But what about the rest, what about the ones who die for nothing? Is it less of a sacrifice?

The girl he loved was dead, the woman across the table someone else. Someone who twisted rosary beads between her fingers and anxiously watched the clock, willing visiting hour to end and muttering prayers under her breath to fill the awkward silence, faith and God intrusions that kept expanding between them.

She'd taken back her unspoken love and given it to Him, all of it. She even had them baptize her, remold her into a sinless virgin, just in case God paid a visit to separate the clean from the unclean.

She promised to pray for him. That was the worst of it. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her, like he meant to wake her from this dream. He begged her to love him.

"I love all God's children," she said, empty voice, empty words. Fear. Tears in her eyes when she said it, and he hadn't wanted it to be like this.

He was just one of God's children to her, nothing more.

"Don't waste your time praying for me," he'd said. "If you want to give your love to a figment, a fucking figment, then..." that was where he ran out of words. How can you argue? What can you say?

"God's love is what makes me happy." Tears in her eyes when she said it. The same ones? Or had those fallen, given way to others with new reasons, new denials, lost promises or found ones? Cottony silence between them like a one-two punch.

She turned away, to study the resident rectory goldfish swimming lonely in a tank, nothing to do, nowhere to go. He let his voice drop, deflated, and he whispered that he loved her again. If he left here and never saw her after, he didn't want her to forget. He reached out for her hands, but she drew away.

"My love has been called to a higher purpose. I mustn't squander it."

Squander, such a fucking word. As though that's what it had been. A waste, an extravagance, a fling. Squander.

“I’m sure that was the divine fucking plan, to give up love and life for let’s pretend.” Hands white knuckled grasping at the table just for something to hold on to. She said nothing. The clock stole their last chance.

The world dissolved, but the words rang in his ears. Let’s pretend.

\*

“Six-seven-”

Len staggered to his feet, holding the ropes for support. *Let’s pretend*. The world swam and he was drowning in it. Two concerned referees, two screaming managers. Two Denalis hungry for victory. And what was he hungry for? Every punch brought him closer to what? To what?

To her.

He nodded and they rang the bell. A church bell, a death knell. They would have gotten married at Saint Gabriel’s. He closed his eyes and waited for the knock-out blow. When it didn’t come, he opened them, just in time to see Denali’s glove fill his vision, to see a tidal wave of red. Let’s pretend, but the words had lost their power. The ring was where delusions came to die. Where History swam through the darkness, where insidious truth snaked its way under his skin.

A sea of red. He’d never seen so much.

\*

Hers.

No.

She’d said it was a travesty. The fish living the way they did, never knowing it was unnatural to suffocate themselves in so many. In so much. To have an itch like hunger that can only be scratched by the kindness of strangers, the sweat-battered bread of tourists. What did they eat in the winter? What did they eat when it rained? What did God say to them as they flailed against each other? Go forth and multiply?



*Let's Pretend.*

All their moments together pressed in on him at once. Warm and comfortable, but too heavy to bear.

The first time he'd seen her smile, because he had ice cream on his nose. And on his cheek. On his forehead. He painted himself banana split for her amusement. And it worked. She smiled. But it wasn't enough, he had to hear her laugh.

That came when he asked her to stay the night for the first time. She agreed, reluctantly, and she brought a teddy bear with her, a threadbare thing with one eye. She'd named it Mr. Wrinkles and when he teased her for it she dared him to do better. He named it Mortise. Very upscale and dignified. Until he made Mortise go cruising across the coffee table, looking for foxy lady-bears and a fix. She grabbed it out of his hands, clutched it to her chest.

"Oh, yeah, that's the stuff," he'd said in a decidedly Mortise voice. She held the bear out at arm's length. Defiled.

"You've ruined him."

"I didn't do anything. It was the bear. Probably been like that all along, and you just didn't know." He hadn't known about her father, then, or he wouldn't have said it. And if he hadn't said it, she wouldn't have laughed. It had a musical sound, light and airy. She dropped Mortise on the floor and kicked him halfway across his living room. Then she asked him who was supposed to keep the nightmares at bay now. He didn't say what he wanted to, but knew that she saw him thinking it, because she asked if he minded if she slept on the couch. He didn't. And when he came out that morning, Mortise was back in her arms, nuzzled into that enviable place.

One day she'd tried to teach him how to dance. Failed, of course, even though she swore it would help him in the ring. He couldn't concentrate, and the lesson ended in the bedroom, where she showed her unsaid love.

She showed it other ways, too. Notes slipped into his jacket pockets to remind him of her at odd moments, like when his hands got cold or he needed change.

Always they ended with a smiley face, even on the days when sadness hollowed her out. And *Love, April*. Never *I love you*. She showed it, though, in the way she curled into his chest at night. The way she was a perfect fit. How she let him wrap around her and keep her safe from the world. *But he couldn't keep her safe.*

She'd read Shakespeare to him. They'd sat on the floor, her between his legs, his arms around her waist. She was smarter than he was but she was patient, too. She didn't mind stopping to explain the archaic language, and she did different voices for each character. He remembered *Hamlet*, father-induced madness and "Get thee to a nunnery." That line stuck, circled in the back of his mind. The way she explained its meaning, Hamlet playfully accusing Ophelia of soiled virtue, it reminded him of the first time he'd told her that he loved her.

She sang about flowers, as Ophelia, madness beyond the page in the lilt of the words. Ophelia should have had a happy ending, should not have slept with the fishes. Hungry, ugly things. No dress to drag her down. No gun in her cold hand at The End of the Road.

Insidious.

He should have seen it coming. The way she'd been preoccupied with God, with His whereabouts. She couldn't pin Him down, couldn't find Him. Had to go on a pilgrimage to search. She was gone a long, miserable time before he found her at Saint Gabe's. Where she married God instead of him.

\*

*"Jesus, somebody call an ambulance! Get the paramedics!"* The voice was distant, white noise. His eyelids flickered. He saw red.

\*

Splashed against a windshield. Apologetic when they called. She had no kin, kin you believe it? So they called the only number in her cell phone. Fragile body folded on the car floor, wasted face. Splashed face. Red. No, he couldn't.

\*

“*Clear!*” A useless jolt. Ghosts hiding under his eyelids. A face in a habit, or did they call it a wimple? It wasn’t hers, it never had been.

The tear-stained note tucked into his jacket pocket that finally said that she loved him, yes, that had been hers. It even ended with a smiley face. She loved him, it said, dear God, she loved him. Didn’t love herself. Couldn’t, nor this world.

No.

He hadn’t affirmed that it was her to a police officer after he finished vomiting on the verge. At The End of the Road. That was what it was called, because it went nowhere. Stupid name, stupid fucking name. But she’d never been there. She’d gone to God by a different road, a higher road. A road that wouldn’t ensure that no God would want her. Got thee to a nunnery. And where was hope now? Where was the carrot on the stick? Where was her face, put back together and whole, waiting for him here at the end like he’d known, ever since and in the back of his mind, he’d known it would be. Because every punch would bring him closer.

White noise faded to black, and Len lay belly up, waiting for April in the long engulfing darkness.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

After over two decades in molecular genetics, Beverly Akerman realized she'd been learning more and more about less and less. Skittish at the prospect of knowing everything about nothing, she turned, for solace, to writing, and recently received her first Pushcart nomination. This is her 18th story published or accepted. Beverly lives in Montreal, Canada. It pleases her strangely to believe she's the only short story writer ever to have sequenced her own DNA.

### Father's Day

*by Beverly Akerman*

It was late afternoon and ninety-three in the shade. Within minutes of boarding the bus, Donald could practically see the over-crowded cross-town Express transform its previously polite occupants into lurching, sweaty malcontents. The air conditioning was on the fritz—Murphy's law, Toronto-style. The air was thick enough to scoop and spread on toast. Donald winced as the binoculars, in their weathered leather case, plunked onto his lap. "You carry them, then," Nash said, grasping the overhang bar as the bus swayed. Donald looked up, catching his father's eye.

"Why does Donald get to sit when I have to stand," Nash grumped. At twenty-two, Nash was three years older than Donald, with the look and composure of a wrestler on steroids.

Their father said, "You are one sullen pain in the neck, you know that, Nash? You two should be getting along fine after a game like that. That Carter's something else."

“Not compared to Molly. Nobody steals bases like that guy,” Nash said.

“Figures your hero’d be someone who steals things,” Donald snapped.

“Fuck off, faggot.”

His father laughed and shook his head. “Oh, now come on, you two.”

“Could you please watch your language?” a woman asked. She stood beside Nash, clutching the grab bar and swaying above her two listless children. Donald quickly apologized.

The passengers reeled as the driver took a curve with particular malice. Donald’s leg ached as he braced himself to avoid being propelled from his seat. It was true, they should be in better spirits, he thought. The Jays had hammered the Phillies, a triumph all the sweeter for having been so unexpected.

“What are you anyways, ten years old?” their father went on. “You know he has to sit, on account of his leg.”

“That happened two years ago. It’s amazing, the mileage he gets out of that.”

“You think this is my idea of a good time, sitting here with your pits hanging in my face?” Donald bit off a hangnail and spat it out the window. “You know what Nash? You smell like shit.”

The woman, glaring, said, “I don’t believe this.”

“Sorry,” Donald’s father said. “Can’t take you two anywhere. And on Father’s Day, yet,” but he was smiling.

Nash said, “Something funny?”

“The way you carry on. Makes me feel like a young man again.”

Back at the small clapboard house, Nash made a couple of phone calls and dashed off for a game of hoops with his girlfriend Tanya’s younger brothers.

“Don’t forget, dinner’s six-thirty,” Donald called after him. Nash grunted.

An hour later, doing his best to control his limp, Donald rolled the barbeque from the garage out onto the melting asphalt. He had dumped bottled marinade over some chicken legs that morning, and planned to make rice with chicken stock, a green salad, and to serve it all with wholegrain bread and a store-bought blueberry pie, their father's favorite. And vanilla ice cream, he decided, putting the chicken on the grill and turning the flame down a bit. He'd go over to the corner store after dinner. Donald thought the meal would turn out pretty well. He rarely made anything more complicated than hotdogs, though he did like to barbeque, but he'd inherited the kitchen duties while his mother—the peacemaker—had gone to Atlantic City with her women's club. They weren't really gamblers; he knew the women did it mostly just to get away, see something different. Sometimes a change of scene bled the pressure off. Donald understood the feeling.

The men, stewing in their testosterone, only had to make it through another day or so. Donald wondered if they would manage without a major blow-up. The heat was making things worse. He kept hoping it was about to break, but the weatherman was offering no promises, jawing on about the latest smog alert instead, and warning those with respiratory illnesses to either leave the city or locate some air-conditioned shelter and stay there.

The screen door slammed as his father came out of the bungalow, showered and clad in a sleeveless undershirt and grey plaid seersucker shorts, black plastic thongs on his feet. He had a sort of rolling waddle—Donald was startled to realize how old he looked—and carried two Labatt Blue. Bottles, not cans. Donald came over and took one. They sat on the shaded porch swing without talking much, a beat-up transistor on the window ledge belting out *Born in the USA*. Donald raised his beer. "Happy Father's Day," he said.

"Eyup," said his father, clinking bottles. The two of them sat companionably, nodding to the radio for a while.

"You should work at forgiving him," his father finally said. "He only acts up when you pick on him. He's feeling guilty."

"You give him too much credit, Pa."

“Oh come on now. You and Nash, you boys ought to be best friends. I remember when I was your age, Uncle Vern and me...” Donald tuned his father out, faking interested noises from time to time. He tried to convince himself he could feel a breeze.

\*

Around seven-thirty, Donald decided it was time to clean up. If Nash did show, he could just fish for leftovers in the fridge. He lifted his mother’s flowered bib apron from its hook by the back door and slipped it on, tying it behind him, and proceeded to stow the food and scrape the plates off. He wiped down the surfaces and applied himself to the dishes, glancing occasionally out the window. The sky began filling with billowy cumulus towers. A thunderstorm would be an improvement if it broke this sweat bath. A bus passed, its spew of exhaust coughing a little more body into the air.

Just after ten o’clock, the TV reception wavered momentarily and then righted itself. Occasional flickers of lightning had Donald wondering if it was just heat or the real thing.

At eleven his dad hoisted himself from the La-Z-Boy and said, “Well, I’m off to bed.”

“Sorry about Nash,” Donald said.

“You got nothing to be sorry about and neither does he. I enjoyed the ball game. That was enough.”

“Yes, sir,” Donald said. “Goodnight.” A few minutes later, he fetched himself another couple of beers. His leg ached as he eased himself back onto the sofa. He really hoped it would rain. The TV mumbled as he lifted a magazine from a stack on the coffee table and flipped through it, one of those glossies about cars and gadgets, trends and celebrities that Nash favored. He paused at an ad for some cologne, transfixed by the black and white torso arched across the page. The man lay on wet sand, his eyes closed, face turned away. Beads of water clung to his prominent six-pack.

“Donald!”

Donald jumped up, wincing as pain shot up his leg. “Yeah, Pa?”

“Did I hear the phone ringing? Was that your mother?”

“No, Pa, no one called.”

“Guess I must be dreaming.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Well good night, then.”

“Goodnight, Pa.”

Donald sank back down onto the sofa, his underarms sticky, his mouth suddenly dry.

\*

Donald was dozing when Nash burst through the door. “Rain’s started,” Nash announced, shambling to the kitchen.

“You make it sound like you’re proud of it or something.” Donald got up from the couch to put his empty bottles in the case under the sink. “Would it have killed you to come home for dinner? It is Father’s Day.”

“I wasn’t hungry then. Besides, we took him to the ball game.” Nash smirked and gestured at Donald. “Fucken pansy.”

Donald looked down—he still had on the flowered apron. He blushed and let the beer bottles slip from his hands, then pulled the apron off, pitching it across the room. It landed in a heap near the back door. “Never miss an opportunity, do you Nash?”

“You just give me too much material, bro.” Nash shook his head. Still snickering, he rummaged through the fridge scrupulously, pawing around in the freezer for good measure. “Just what the doctor ordered,” he said, retrieving a forty-ouncer



like he'd conjured that up, too. He unscrewed the cap and took a shot, tilting his head back. Liquid slipped down the side of his mouth and dribbled to the floor. Nash came up for air smacking his lips. He wiped his mouth with the back of one hand, scuffed a huge Nike through the streak of liquid, and left a muddy smear on the gold-flecked white linoleum.

"You can be a real pig sometimes, you know that, Nash?"

"My, aren't we fas-tid-i-ous tonight?" Nash struck a mincing pose, laughed, and said, "One more for the road," before taking a final swig. He screwed the cap on and shoved the vodka back in the freezer. From a cookie jar on the counter he retrieved a jangly set of keys. "I'm taking the car," he announced.

"The car? You're not allowed to drive that car."

"What, you going to run upstairs and cry to the old man?" Lightning flashed like a strobe.

"No one's driven that car in two years. It probably won't even start."

"Me and Tanya, we're meeting some people downtown. It's raining. And she wants to take the car."

"Vodka, an empty stomach, and a Camaro. Now there's a brilliant combination." There was the sound of thunder.

Nash cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. "Never miss an opportunity, do you, Donny boy? Just keep out of my business, okay? Anyway, you can wear her apron—" Donald blushed—"but you ain't my mother." The lights guttered again.

"At least think about Tanya," Donald shot back. "It's not like you don't know what can happen."

In a heartbeat, Nash crossed the kitchen. "How many times you been told to stop bringing that up?" Donald stumbled as Nash pushed him. "How many times I have to tell you I'm sorry?" He pushed Donald again. Nash breathed fumes into Donald's face. "It was an accident, man. You got to get over it, you got to stop living in the past." Push, push, push. Donald's back finally thumped against the

wall. He slid down to the floor, the two bottles, dribbling beer like urine, beside him. His bum leg was thrust out, the long scar angrily gnarled. “Yeah, that’s me, I got to stop living in the past. Just wish someone would explain how I’m supposed to forget you’re the one with the girlfriend and I’m the one that’s crippled.”

Nash drew back his fist. “Jesus Christ. Sometimes, Donny boy, sometimes...” Nash exhaled, let his arm fall, and turned away. “You ain’t interested in girls anyway.”

Donald looked around. He grabbed one of the beer bottles. He hoisted himself up and swung it with all his might at the side of Nash’s head.

I must have a death wish, Donald thought.

Outside, it began to pour.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Cassandra Lewis is the writer at Bastille Arts. Her plays have been performed in London, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Valdez, Alaska, and Kitchener, Canada. Notable book publications: *The Best Plays of The Strawberry One-Act Festival Anthology*, *International Centre for Women Playwrights' Mother/Daughter Monologues Volume 1: Babes and Beginnings*, and a forthcoming literary anthology to be published by Editions Bibliotekos called *Common Boundary*. She's a member of The Dramatists Guild, ICWP, and PEN USA.

### Trouble in Melee

*by Cassandra Lewis*

Lately the whole town has been on edge because a local nicknamed Pretty-Pretty (to compensate for hideous burn scars covering her face) has been carrying around her dead baby. The baby died a week and a half ago. During the first two days people paid their respects and offered their help and moral support. When she was seen wandering around Grassy Knoll Road on the third day with the listless bundle, Deputy Mayor ordered a town meeting.

The meeting was held where our town meetings are always held—Mad Dog's bar where I work trying to save enough money to finish converting my grandmother's old barn into a theater. Forty-five of the forty-seven free residents of Melee piled into the bar and I made more money that day than I had all year. Most people had to stand and hover between a few square tables and the ten-stool-length bar and I forced the Hitchmeyer twins to quit playing darts for fear they might accidentally pierce one of the townspeople. To lighten up the mood, the Sunset Gunslingers played their rockabilly music on the platform

stage beside the loo. After a warm up drink, Deputy Mayor ordered a round for everyone tall enough before announcing his controversial “west-proposal”.

The latest town resolution toward establishing sovereignty was to add the word “west” in front of words of importance, claiming them as part of our unified western identity.

“Free citizens of Melee, I have a west-proposal that I suggest we discuss and vote on.” Deputy Mayor continued with his pointed chin aimed at the ceiling rafters, “Since our poor befallen citizen is quite troubled and in need of mental health attention and since it is also a concern of proper sanitation—I would be negligent in my duties as Deputy Mayor if I did not propose the temporary bending of our west-stance by calling on the assistance of the police.”

Before the Deputy Mayor’s lips finished forming the word “police,” a parade of shots fired into Mad Dog’s ceiling. White plaster fireworks dropped on the crowd like dead leaves at the end of autumn. One of the shots nicked the left horn of Rufus, the bullhead skull above the cash register. All I could think about as I hid under the counter clutching Mad Dog’s Remington was how angry Mad Dog would be when he discovered someone had desecrated Rufus, his great souvenir of mortality. Rufus was the bull that killed Mad Dog’s father during a state rodeo and his head has hung up there ever since.

The violent rumpus of voices and gunfire grew so loud the floor vibrated, threatening collapse. Finally, a shot more powerful than twelve hand grenades exploded through the ceiling, creating an opening wide enough to see a full cloud in the afternoon sky. I knew at once it came from Mad Dog’s prized Mossberg Maverick shotgun. The confirmation of Mad Dog’s presence was enough for me to stretch out of fetal position and raise his Remington in the air. I was not alone. Mad Dog’s Mossberg Maverick had the voice of God and seemed to silence everyone as they stared with disbelief.

He stomped up on one of the tables near the door with his shotgun ready for action.

“How dare you shoot up my bar! And for what—one stupid proposal? That’s why we vote, people. Now, let’s pretend we’re civilized for five minutes while Missy fixes us up with more west-drinks,” he said tilting his gray cowboy hat and shading his face so all I could see is the silhouette of the soggy toothpick drooping out of the side of his mouth.

The crowd chuckled as the collective holstering of guns whispered like storm wind pushing through branches of an old cottonwood tree. Uninterrupted lines of light varying in width sliced through the dust-stirred, smoky atmosphere from where the bullets punctured the roof.

I love Mad Dog like family, but I’ll never understand why he succumbs to the irritating local habit of calling me Missy. It started last year when I first introduced my plan to bring theater to Melee. It was during the town meeting after Mayor John Pummelman, the president of the Melee Militia, disappeared at the annual conference where the heads of militias from all over the country gather in Texas. Maybe he was assassinated by one of our opponents, jealous of Melee’s Wild West lifestyle.

That’s an unfortunate side of militias—secrecy and wariness of outside help can be a hindrance when someone important goes missing. I offered to name one of the theater’s dressing rooms after the Mayor but apparently I was the only citizen in favor of that idea. Instead, the town awarded John Pummelman’s bulldog the title of Mayor and Melee continues holding meetings to strategize our sovereignty (and I continue updating the town on the progress of the new theater, ignoring the town’s attempts to change my name from Timothy Dove to “Missy”).

The nickname really sets off my mother. After Mad Dog’s remark she ran into the loo, shielding her contorted face with her hands, but her bawling echoed throughout the bar like a pig on a slaughter rack. With all of her health problems I worry that stress might be deadly.

After I replenished the beverage needs of the town and started sweeping up the ceiling shards, the Deputy Mayor asked the townspeople for other suggestions to help Pretty-Pretty. One of the Hitchmeyer twins hollered something about an

old fashioned hanging, but of course no one took him seriously. We take care of our own in Melee. *No child, dog or man left behind*—that’s our motto. The women? Well, they can usually take care of themselves or maybe they’re the ones forced to take care of the child, dog and man. Who knows? We’ve had our share of gun fights—jealous husbands busting through the bar’s swinging doors with a pistol drawn shooting a wife’s naïve lover—but we never had someone lose their mind to the point where we couldn’t reason with them. We never call in the police.

Doc, a tall garden gnome-looking citizen known for his potent marijuana plants, suggested we invite Pretty-Pretty into the bar and stone her back to sanity. A handful of citizens supported his idea. Apparently this gave Mad Dog an idea and he spoke up.

“Hey, let’s bring her in here and find out who the father is. After all, this crisis situation is his responsibility before it is Melee’s.”

By this time my mother shuffled out of the loo, dabbing her raw and swollen eyelids with a fistful of toilet paper. She’s an aged woman, her wide Germanic face covered with creases. She could be an animated cutout from a Renaissance painting with her flawless eggshell skin and fiery long curls. I tried to meet her eyes, but she seemed determined not to look at me. Since she was closest to the swinging doors, Mad Dog asked her if she’d mind fetching Pretty-Pretty.

“No, I’m sorry, but I need to be careful of excessive germs,” my mother said.

There was a rumbling in the crowd and a few chuckles, but I couldn’t hear what was said. I had a feeling it was in protest to my mother’s healthful caution. As supportive as the town is, sometimes the people regress into a twisted adolescence with their gossip and unfounded cynicism. My mother was right to look out for her health.

“I’ll go,” I offered.

“Missy, you know you can’t go. We need you to make the drinks,” Mad Dog ordered.

My mother promptly stormed back into the loo, upset all over again.

“Thanks a lot,” I said, violently wiping down the counter.

“Oh I’m sorry, kid. I was just looking out for you. Besides, you need to make all the money you can to open your the-ate-er!” His chiding led the town into a bout of hysterical laughter.

Ever since I was a child I knew my place was on the stage. I would create characters to complete certain chores. Raking the leaves became a dramatic miracle. Doing the dishes transformed me into a front-page showstopper. In my mind I was never without an awe-struck audience. I remember watching the movie *A Chorus Line* and plotting my escape to New York to be discovered and worshipped for my innate acting gifts. Unfortunately, my role as Dutiful Son Taking Care Of His Sickly Mother upstaged all my other roles and ambitions. But I know it’s for the best. Some say theater is a dying art and just as I struggle each day to fight the impending death of my mother, I will also fight the impending death of the theater. I’m starting a grassroots effort to bring theater back to the people—starting with Melee.

“Well, your buddy Senator Schiffy seemed to think opening a theater was a brilliant idea. He might even consider donating some state funds,” I said.

“What? You told a money-bag that Melee was planning to open some kind of artsy-fartsy theater?” Mad Dog raised his voice as he approached the counter, the spurs of his boots clamoring with each stomp.

Melee makes much of its revenue from visiting politicians and other tourists. The town decided years ago to encourage visiting politicians who not only spend tons of cash, but also may serve as highly influential in the fight to win Melee’s sovereignty. Mad Dog knows all of the visiting politicians personally and doubles as a hunting guide during their visits. In Melee there are no rules about hunting seasons. We hunt whatever we want whenever we want and this is a huge draw for visitors.

“Did you hear what I said?” Mad Dog asked, his chewing tobacco breath burning my nostrils.

“I don’t understand the problem,” I said, backing away from the counter.

Before he could respond, Pretty-Pretty pranced through the swinging doors holding the bundle at her heart. She exuded such pride that I wanted to believe I was imagining the putrid stench. A gust of wind ballooned her white cotton nightgown in front of her like a flag of surrender. Her long mahogany hair was neatly braided, emphasizing the scar tissue covering her ivory face and resembling a sad, unfinished papier-mâché project. The room suddenly muted and townspeople crowded away from her forming a horseshoe of rejection.

Deputy Mayor smiled his wide college graduate smile. He pulled out a stool for Pretty-Pretty as if she was still a normal Melee citizen. Pretty-Pretty politely accepted the seat and ordered two shots of tequila. No one said a word as she gulped each shot without expression. The protective way she held the bundle gave me an idea to eventually cast her as Stella Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

When her eyes, so pale I wondered if she had cried the color from them, beckoned another round, I noticed the dark rings beneath them—the mark of insomnia. I kept her shot glasses full as the Deputy Mayor worked his way up to the question of the baby’s father.

“Good Time Harry,” she announced between shots.

I heard the chorus of gasps and the nervous whispering of a town just notified of its looming end. Mad Dog rushed over to Deputy Mayor and mumbled something in his ear.

I’m usually an open-minded, everything-is-gray type of person, but it’s fair to say that Good Time Harry is a mean S.O.B. He’d rather shoot a man than say hello. The first time I met him I couldn’t have been more than thirteen years old. I was just learning how to mix drinks, studying under a much younger Mad Dog, when two cowboys exploded through the swinging doors crashing to the floor. Before I had time to take cover, Mad Dog howled, slapping his blue jean covered thigh, “Why Good Time Harry! Welcome back.”



Good Time Harry leapt up and gave the man he just tackled a good kick in the ribs with his pointed snakeskin boot and strutted over to us. He grinned in a way where he barely moved his crooked lips—to this day I don't know if he has any teeth. There was something behind his dark eyes as dangerous as a scorpion's tail. I remember thinking he'd be perfect for the role of Cardinal Wolsey in a Western adaptation of *King Henry VIII* with his intimidating charisma and unrelenting ambition.

He tipped his black hat to Mad Dog and ordered a Wild Turkey neat, straddling the barstool as if it were a feisty bull.

"When'd you get out?" Mad Dog asked when he handed over the tall glass.

"Just this morning. That there," he said, pointing to the crumpled cowboy on the floor, "was my ride from the pen."

Later, when Good Time Harry had gone through the whole bottle, Mad Dog told me to drive him wherever he wanted to go. I wasn't scared because I'd just witnessed Good Time Harry unleash random brutality on his last ride, I was scared because I thought he might be my father.

You see, I remember from when I was just a wee ankle biter that whenever my mother was mad at my father she would yell so loud I feared the veins in her neck would burst. She'd say: "You think you're such a Good Time Harry, but you're not." Naturally, I figured my mother was two-timing my father with this "Good Time Harry" fellow. My mother always had a strong command over her life and sensuality like Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House*. It didn't occur to me until I was somewhere in my twenties that "Good Time Harry" was just an expression of mockery she'd use to show her anger at my father's senseless spending of money they didn't have on booze and strippers in a neighboring town. So when I was introduced to the real life "Good Time Harry" at the foolish age of thirteen, I assumed the worst.

After I dropped him off at a gas station in the next town, which he planned to hold up, I returned to Mad Dog's side where he filled me in on the gossip about Good Time Harry. Harry had been in and out of the state penitentiary since

shortly after his birth. They even made a special law based on Harry's case where the pen would admit toddlers who were extremely violent. The story held that Harry murdered his mother and father on his third birthday, after they presented him his birthday cake. Apparently he didn't like vanilla frosting.

From that point onward, he let his vicious temper lead his life, killing with the frequency that pious folks go to Sunday church. When he was caught murdering in a county outside of Melee, he was thrown in jail. "Good Time" came from Harry's unique talent for getting out of so many life sentences. Just as soon as a judge would throw Harry in prison for life, Harry would earn enough "good time" credits in prison to make up for the years sentenced and the warden would release him again.

It was a racket though. Rumor had it that Harry made a special arrangement with the warden, who also happened to be his distant uncle. The first time Harry got out of prison early was on the same day the warden's troublesome wife went missing. It seemed every time Harry was let out, the warden would be rid of another enemy or two and soon the warden had no more enemies left. That's why folks in the know refer to him as "Good Time Harry"—because nobody but Harry earned that much good time credit in the history of prisons and criminals.

Imagine the town of Melee's surprise when Pretty-Pretty declared Good Time Harry the father of the dead baby. The first thing discussed after the shocking confession was who would be the poor bastard to break it to Good Time Harry and with what type of weapon should he be armed. (Mad Dog generously volunteered his 12 gauge Mossberg Maverick.) Melee voted and decided the messenger should be Deputy Mayor, since the town Mayor, as I said before, is now a community owned bulldog.

Deputy Mayor reluctantly agreed to deliver the bad news to Good Time Harry and Mad Dog took him out back to show him how to fire his beloved Mossberg Maverick. All of this happened yesterday and now every man, woman, and child is packing as much metal as they can carry. As a precaution, I've "86"ed Pretty-Pretty from Mad Dog's bar so I won't be caught in the crossfire if Good Time Harry shows up during my shift. Take it out to the road is what I'm telling everyone.

It's a few minutes before sunset when my mother pushes through the swinging doors. She's wearing her lavender church bonnet and the black dress she wore to my father's funeral. That was seven years ago and the dress fits her more like a straightjacket than an outfit of formal attire.

"You look beautiful," I tell her.

She stares at the wood-paneled floor that I've yet to sweep today. Her hands anxiously grasp at each other like two roosters in a cockfight.

"Would you like a cup of tea or a glass of water?" I ask.

"No, Timothy. I would not like anything to drink. Thank you."

"Is there something on your mind?" I ask, for it is very unusual for my mother to frequent the bar unless a town meeting is in order.

"I am not well," she says in the same manner a child might declare a playmate "it" during a game of tag.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mother. Is there anything I can do for you?"

She shakes her head.

Suddenly, Mad Dog bursts through the swinging doors and yells, "There's a fire! Come quick! It's the old Dove barn!"

The barn he's referring to is my grandmother's old barn, my theater in progress. Everyone rushes out of the bar except my mother and I. This is the first fire to burn Melee in almost twenty years when Pretty-Pretty survived a freak explosion at her father's gas station.

"I'm sorry, Timothy," my mother says to her lap.

My body is an endless current of cold shock, like the time when I was a toddler and stuck my finger in an electric socket. It was either really hot or really cold—such an extreme sensation that it was unidentifiable. This time instead of pulling away, I embrace the current. In hindsight, I might call this denial or

trauma, but right now it is shameless morbid intrigue. It is as if I'm watching my life like a gruesome accident viewed by a rubber necking stranger stuck in traffic.

"Why?" I ask.

Finally, she raises her eyes to mine. Her pupils are dilated and wild. She's no longer Ibsen's Nora Helmer. She's now Tennessee Williams's Blanche DuBois during the last two scenes of the play. But I know that I will never dream of casting my mother again.

"I couldn't listen to them laugh anymore," she explains, her carefully lined crimson lips quivering. The familiar pang of compassion this threat of emotion used to provoke is gone. I want her tears. I want her remorse. Any hint of humanity.

Before my mother has a chance to act human, Pretty-Pretty runs through the swinging doors screaming, "He stole my baby! He stole my baby!" She's still wearing the white nightgown but now her pale arms are empty and flailing.

I grab Mad Dog's Remington from under the counter, spinning it so it's pointed at the swinging doors. My mother slinks away to the end of the bar by the dartboard and Pretty-Pretty remains to my immediate left, still screaming even after I order her to pipe down.

A dark motion dashes outside the swinging doors, pounding them open. Reflexes I never knew existed take over and I pump three rounds in the direction of the bolter. Before I can identify the crouched intruder, I recognize Mad Dog's Mossberg Maverick.

Slamming the shotgun onto the counter as I leap over it, I rush over to Deputy Mayor Dipsit. Fortunately, all those years of refusing to shoot animals while practicing on heaps of dirt and discarded beer boxes has left me with worse aim than a drunken blind man.

Deputy Mayor Dipsit is shaken but unharmed. He brushes off the pant legs of his navy blue suit and looks at me as though he's never seen me before. His shaggy eyebrows are cocked in a frozen state of reproachful surprise. I apologize, but he

says nothing. Now I see that he's holding the dead baby like a football with the Maverick under his other arm.

The swinging doors crack open and Good Time Harry flies into the bar. His venomous eyes dart from the Deputy Mayor to Pretty-Pretty across the room, who has finally stopped screaming.

Deputy Mayor drops the decaying bundle to the floor and tosses Mad Dog's shotgun into aim in one swift motion. This startles Good Time Harry and he whips out his .44 Magnum from its holster. Both men are pointing their guns at each other like they're starring in some hokey western movie. But I realize that's all this town is about. This is what is talked about over drinks: the latest hullabaloo of who shot whom and why.

I'm tired. I've been wasting my youth taking care of my ungrateful mother, working to bring the theater arts to an ungrateful town. Frankly, at this point a round of bullets in the belly would be uplifting. I shuffle forward, centering myself between the business ends of two pointed guns.

"What the hell are you doing?" Good Time Harry hisses. I take a good look at him, sizing him up. Under his black cowboy hat his old face is a landmine of pockmarks. Two black eyes peer out of his fleshy half-closed eyelids. His eyes and mouth are mismatched, two disconnected features expressing nothing. I focus on his lopsided lips that look like two earthworms lined up for a race.

"What are you driving today?" I ask him.

His chuckle sounds like he's merely clearing his throat. "A 1967 Mustang convertible. Just picked it up this morning," he boasts.

The man must go through a car a week.

"Tell you what, you see my mother over there," I point to the end of the bar, "She has a sturdy old Vista Cruiser station wagon, tortoise green. How'd you like to make a trade?"

He cackles like he's choking on a chicken bone.

“Timothy, please get out of here,” Deputy Mayor says.

Good Time Harry tells him to shut up while I pick up Pretty-Pretty’s poor bundle. It’s light, but rock hard and bloated. I try not to look at it, breathing out of my mouth.

“I’m sorry for your loss. I’d stay for the funeral, but I’ve got to get out of here. How about a trade?” I say.

“Hand me the baby,” Good Time Harry orders.

I do and Pretty-Pretty rushes over to him and snatches away the bundle, holding it tightly and rubbing its middle with her sobbing face. Good Time Harry points his .44 Magnum at Deputy Mayor and myself with his other arm around Pretty-Pretty’s waist. He mutters something into her ear and her sobs lower in volume.

“If you hurry this along, I’ll give you a lift in my new ride,” I say.

“I’ll tell you what, kid,” Good Time Harry says with a gleam in his eye like a raccoon caught rummaging in a dumpster after dark. “I’ve got some unfinished business here, but I’ll give you a head start. The keys are in the car. If you make it away in one piece, the car’s yours. If not, you won’t remember it anyhow ‘cause you’ll be dead.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see my mother’s back straighten in disagreement, but I force myself not to meet her eyes. With one last wink to Deputy Mayor, I dash through the swinging doors and jump over the four steps of the porch, landing on the damp dirt of the parking area.

Sure enough, a fire engine red 1967 Mustang convertible awaits me with the top down, ready to assist my escape. A four-leaf clover plastic keychain, obviously a faulty good luck charm belonging to the original owner, dangles from the ignition. With one twist, the engine growls and I hit the gas racing onto Grassy Knoll Road. I hear three gunshots coming from the bar but I don’t take my eyes off the road. And I plan not to until I hit Broadway.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Tony Klein was born in 1970 in Gary, Indiana. After attending college for Biblical Studies, he joined the U.S. Army. He has degrees in Criminal Justice and Business. He worked around the world as a security consultant until his unexpected incarceration. Tony currently writes from prison, but not for long. His articles and stories have been published in *War Cry Magazine* and *Escape from the Prison System*, an anthology from Puckett-Brown Publishing.

### Last Meal

*by Tony Klein*

Jim was in the boss's office and watched our elusive prison library mouse run along the green rubber baseboard and into one of the sticky traps. He pulled out a chair, reached under the table, picked up the trap with the mouse attached, and put it in a bucket. He brought the bucket and the mouse back to the legal department to show us.

The poor gray mouse was really stuck. All four feet and its whole belly were deep in the sticky stuff on the trap that looked like a little pup tent with both sides open. He had almost made it across. His head was over the finish line at the far side of the trap and then the little mouse stopped abruptly and forever.

We all looked down into the bucket and saw a fuzzy little head sticking out one end of the trap. Its neck twisted around as it looked up at us with desperate black eyes, whiskers twitching. Its tail was stuck flat in the shape of a question mark.

I eased the bucket away from Jim and placed it on the floor around the corner where we would be hidden behind a tall shelf of law books, in case a guard or

curious snitching inmate looked over and saw us crowded around something with our full attention. If the boss got hold of our little treasure, he'd probably kill it on the spot or throw it out to suffer and die alone in the cold.

After talking about it, we decided we couldn't just let it suffer. It probably wasn't in any pain now, but it would eventually starve to death. If we threw it in the trash like that it would be carried alive to the giant trash crusher behind the prison kitchen and remain there, cold and in the dark until enough trash accumulated and the inmate who works there pushed the button to start the crushing process. That's no way to die. Too many of our fellow inmates had died better deaths than that and this mouse was a lot more innocent than any of us.

All work in the prison law library stopped.

"Let's name him Bob," I said. Jim looked at me like I was nuts.

"Why would you name a dead mouse?" he asked. "Why would you name any mouse?" But it was the first animal we'd seen in eight years except for birds on the recreation yard, before the warden decided to hang plastic owls around that keep everything away

"I don't know," I said. "What should we do with it?"

Jim had been raised on a farm. "We'll have to kill it quickly. Then we can throw it away." He said it like it was no big deal.

"Well, should we give it something to eat? You know, sort of like a last meal. Something nice. And some water." I went to my coat pocket where there was an open bag of corn chips. I broke one in half and lowered it into the bucket with in reach of Bob's tiny mouth. He was scared and shaking and breathing fast. Jim returned quietly to his desk.

Bubba went and got a coffee jar lid and put some water in it from the bathroom. He dipped the eraser end of a pencil into it and lowered a few drops of water down to Bob. I wondered if he'd be able to pee with his underside stuck to the sticky trap like it was, so I said "That's enough" to Bubba. He looked up at me and set the pencil and coffee lid on the table.



The library closed for lunch, so I slid Bob under the table that was against the wall in the corner. I looked to make sure the chip was still close to his head, and then slowly slid the bucket back against the wall. No guards would see him if they came in.

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We all left the prison library building, pulled up our coat collars against the cold wind, and returned to our cell houses for count. When count cleared we filed out to lunch. When they released us to go back to work, we rushed across the yard and took the sidewalk that led to the library building. The boss hadn't unlocked the library yet, so we stood outside in the cold.

"Hey, Tony did ya work out during lunch?" Jim asked me.

"Yeah," I answered. "I lifted a thousand pounds a thousand times and ran a marathon. What did you do?"

Jim smiled. "Smartass." Jim was always trying to prove he was better than me, so it was fun to mess with him when he did stupid stuff, which I guess made me just as bad. He recently messed up a guy's case because he missed a court deadline. As inmate law clerks working in the prison law library, our job was to help our fellow prisoners who refused to give up their fight against the justice system, even after they'd been convicted. We helped them find that rare, tiny loophole that would get their case in front of a judge just one more time. We weren't lawyers and couldn't represent anyone, but we gave them all the ammunition they needed and often carried them through the process.

We also helped angry convicts sue the prison system for what they considered to be violations of their civil rights. "What happened with that guy in the hole who missed his deadline?" I asked him, goading him further.

"I filed an extension and we're waiting to hear back," Jim snarled. "That idiot tried to sue the warden for five million bucks because a couple of guards broke his crock pot during a cell search. I told him it was a waste of time but he got all pissed about his civil rights and cried about destruction of private property. He doesn't know what he's talking about. These guys get a hold of a twenty-year-

old law book and suddenly everybody's a jailhouse lawyer." Jim was getting worked up, so I joined him.

"Yeah," I said indignantly, "makes our job harder when they think they know what they're doing. When a guy two cells down tells him he needs to sue the prison staff because his Salisbury steak was cold. Then they screw up all the paperwork and ask us for help. We take one look at it and it's hilarious. I mean, not only is it all wrong, but it's just stupid to begin with."

"True," Bubba said, "and then ya gotta help em at least a little because you know those freaks are gonna get outta the hole some day and come out here into general population, lookin' for ya."

"Nah, you can't worry about that, man." Jim said. "Those morons are self-destructive. Seems like they spend most of their time in the hole. They don't know any better. Suing the state for cold food. Nobody ever wins those cases. They're a bunch of whiners."

I glanced at Bubba.

"When I was growing up," Jim continued, "we didn't even have a bathroom in the house. Had to walk to the shed out back. Rain or snow, didn't matter. You had to go you had to go, you hear me?" We nodded and gave each other eye-rolling glances when Jim looked away.

There was no talk of Bob the mouse. A nice little distraction from our daily routine. I felt sorry for the little guy. He was probably the only one stuck here who was truly innocent. We certainly weren't qualified to decide his fate.

I regretted getting Jim started on his rant and felt glad when I saw the boss coming to let us in.

We went past the work stations in the main library and on to the law clerks' area in the back, separated from the main library by a half-brick, half-glass wall with a door.

I slid Bob's bucket out from under the table and thought he looked comfortable. There were still some corn chip crumbs and small pieces around his head. He looked at me and I smiled. I left him there and went to my desk. We were going to have to do something with him by the end of the day.

Bubba looked around and snuck over, pulled a chair next to the bucket, and took a wad of toilet paper from his pocket. He looked up and saw me watching. He looked over at Jim and saw that his back was turned, so he unwrapped a small piece of cheese and lowered it down into the bucket. He sat and watched for a minute and went to his desk.

Immediately, T-Bone was in the chair lowering into the bucket a pencil with a dab of peanut butter stuck to the end. He held it there for a while. Jim looked over and shook his head.

Tim went by, put a piece of bread crust in the bucket, and kept moving. Bubba gave Bob a little more water from the coffee jar lid, then went to his work area.

I worked for about an hour and went over and sat next to Bob. He just lay there breathing. Maybe he'd had too much to eat. At least he had a proper last meal.

It was three o'clock. Half an hour and we'd be leaving for the day. We couldn't leave Bob there alive all night. He wasn't in a position where he could properly relieve himself and probably needed to pretty bad about now. Someone would have to kill him in the next twenty minutes.

Jim looked over with questioning eyebrows. I returned a just perceptible nod. He went out to the main library and when he returned holding a folded newspaper, the rest of us were standing around the bucket looking down at the fragile condemned creature.

Jim opened the paper and laid it on the floor. He reached down, lifted the mousetrap and placed it on the paper. He paused. Bubba left. Tim looked away. I watched in horror.

Here we are in prison. Many of us will be stuck here for the rest of our lives. Who are we to serve this mouse his last meal and oversee his execution? What had he

done wrong? His only mistake was getting caught. But you could say that about some of us, too.

I tried to think of Bob as just a mouse, but here, for a little while, he'd been on death row like some of those guys in the hole, trapped and bored and awaiting their inevitable fate. Some of them I know have had two or three last meals already. They were granted a stay of execution just before they were scheduled to die. To me, that would be worse than actually going through with it. Just do it and get it over with. Why prolong the terrible anticipation longer than necessary?

Jim positioned his right foot with the heel of his boot on the paper beside the mouse's head and quickly shifted his weight forward. He cleaned up the mess and wiped his boot and we left for the day. Back to our cells.

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