



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #15
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**IN SOME WAY, SOME KIND OF MYTH OR LEGEND
NEEDS TO BE IMPORTANT TO THE STORY...**

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Resubmitting, and Vague Premises

Another contest has come and gone. We got 206 entries this time, which indicates this issue's premise struck a chord with you folks.

The SubMishMash (soon to be "Submittal") site is, for the most part, working well. One problem we didn't anticipate is duplicate entries. Some stories were uploaded three or four times, and we had trouble knowing whether the story was being revised and re-submitted, or just re-submitted because the author was afraid it didn't go through the first time. If a revision is subtle enough, we might not catch it, and we might not read the second version because we think it's the same as the first one we'd already made a decision about. If you resubmit a story, please mark in the cover letter that it's a revision. (You can also withdraw the previous version, using SubMishMash's/Submittal's tools.)

As for the contest itself, authors took two distinctly different approaches to the "Myths and Legends" premise. The first one was to have a legend or myth be in the background of the story, or acting as a plot element. The second way was to have legendary characters themselves be in the story, sometimes doing the things that made them legendary. Our intention was to have everyone use the first interpretation of the premise, but so many people took the other approach we decided to accept all of those stories, too. Both types of stories made the final round of judging, and at least one of each kind was chosen for publication.

Still, in the future, we're going to be more explicit about our intentions. We'll either be broader or narrower in our interpretation, but we'll do our best to make sure you, the contestant, know what we're looking for. (For contest #16, I'd say we're going to be broader.)

If you have an opinion on any of this, let me know by writing to Feedback@OnThePremises.com. In the meantime, enjoy Issue #15 of *On The Premises*!

Tarl Roger Kudrick and Bethany Granger
co-publishers of On The Premises magazine

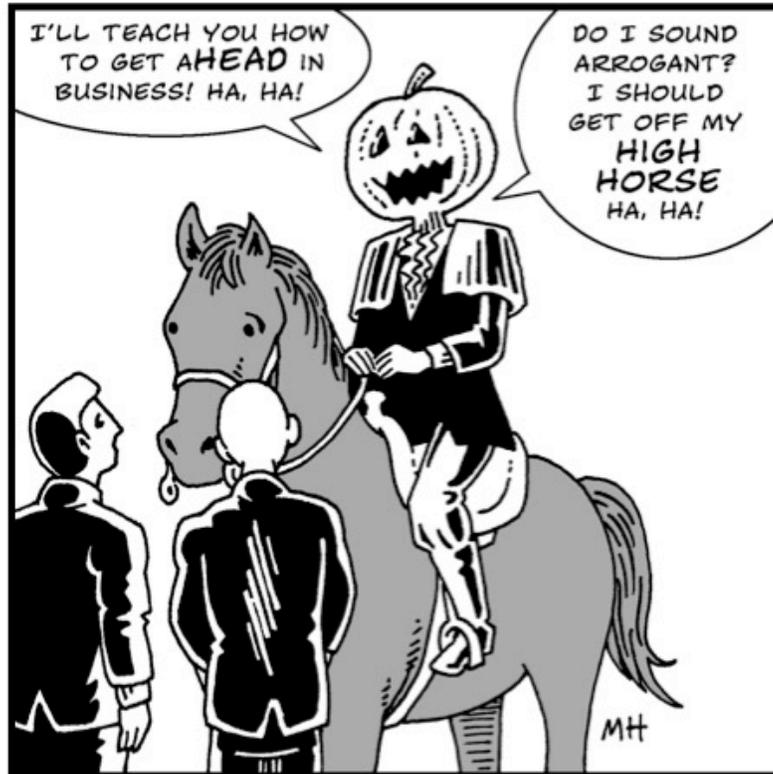
Cartoons!

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

If you're an adult, you've probably had at least one boss who was kind of a pain to work for. Working for an honest-to-goodness legend, though, has drawbacks I didn't expect.

Tarl Kudrick (writer) and Matt Howarth (illustrator) show exactly...

Why It's No Fun When the Headless Horseman is Your Boss



The incessant puns

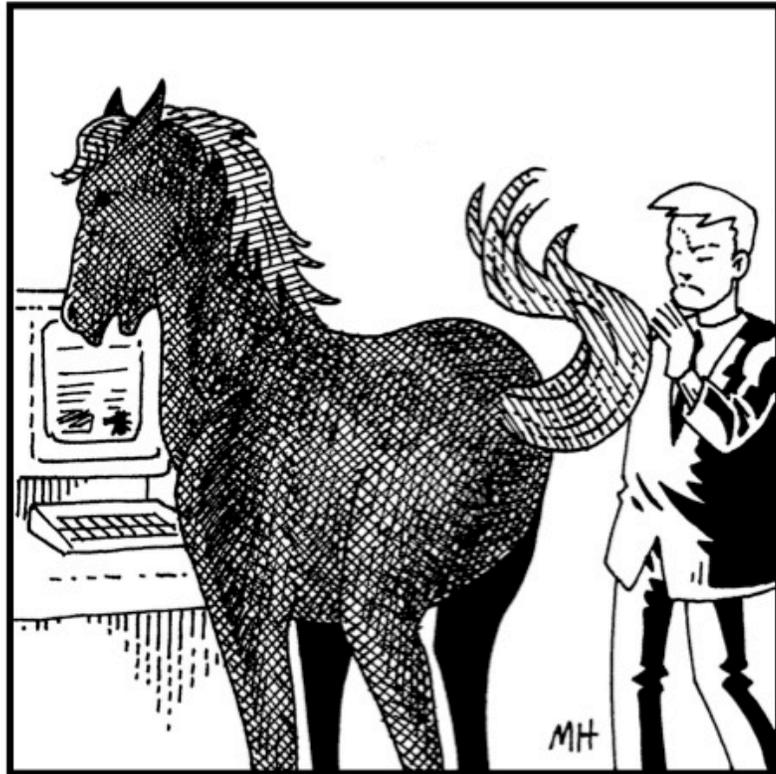
Doesn't change his pumpkin often enough



The "life of the party" joke gets old faster than you'd think



Cubicles are not
stables



His horse isn't
officetrained



But at least we know how to make him nervous...



FIRST PRIZE

Rachel says: "A 30 year-old woman living in Montreal, Canada, I've been writing since before I could actually write. I recall that my first work was the story of an elephant that ran away from the circus. I wrote it when I was four years old, and it was told entirely in pictures. Since then, I've earned two degrees, one in literature and one in wildlife biology, but the writing has never stopped." This story is her first published fiction.

Blood and Ivory

by Rachel Verkade

The streets are dark and empty, and no one is there to stop me. Chances are no one would anyway. Crazy old drunk woman visiting her bones, why should they stir themselves? I move through the shadows, avoiding the streetlamps, and the flask bumps my leg in a soothing rhythm. The liquid inside sloshes. I've had plenty already, but I always leave some for when I go see him. Cut through alleys, across dirty cobbles, past refuse bins tucked so-discretely behind stately homes. Around to the eastern wall of the palace, near the kitchen gates. That's where he is.

He's not alone. There are others hanging there, some fresh, some old. There's enough of them now that they almost ring the palace, a tribute to the king's hunting prowess. How many of them the king actually killed, I don't know, but I suppose it doesn't matter. It's been enough years now that he's bone entire, but I still know him. They moved him, once—the castle servants tend to shift them around to the back once the meat starts to rot—but I found him again. I like to think I'll always know him, but as I get older and the drink fogs my brain... well. For now I have no trouble. My pace quickens when I see him in the moonlight, pale and ghostly against the grey stone wall.

His jawbone is hard and ridged, and I run my fingers along its edge, making my hellos. I wonder if he's glad to see me. I wonder if he blames me.

I blame me.

*

When the soldiers came for me, they didn't lie. They told me what they needed me for, and why, and what would come afterwards. They showed me more money than I'd ever seen before, told me it would be easy. They didn't lie. And I looked at that money and I looked at my shabby home and my empty pantry and my patched dress and I said yes.

First was the doctor, with his cold stone table and his hard eyes. Take your dress off girl, get up on the table and spread your legs. Don't fuss so, this won't hurt. They have to be sure or it'll all be for nothing. The hard, twisting intrusion of his finger, and my own sharp yelp of pain followed by a stinging slap to my thigh. I said not to *fuss*, didn't I? He barely gave me time to slip my dress back on before he let the soldiers back in, confirming that yes, I was intact. They were pleased.

I'd never been on a horse before, but they set me on a stolid pony, its reins clipped to a ring on one of the soldiers' saddles, and we rode into the woods. I'd never been this far out of town either, but the prince assured me that I was perfectly safe. Who would not be, with all of these guards around them? They reassured me, and gave me food and wine when we stopped, both of which I barely touched. My stomach had tied itself in knots.

The prince himself helped me dismount when we reached the glade. It was quiet and sun-drenched, soft with grass and moss and the sound of flowing water. He told me to sit with my back against the largest tree. I could sing if I liked. I was perfectly safe, for they'd be all around me, even if I couldn't see them. Just sit there and be still and everything will be fine.

So I sat, and they left me, and the glade was quiet. At first I was nervous, restless, plucking at the grass and twisting my skirt between my hands. It was very different from the town. No shouts or rattling wheels on cobbles or barking dogs, no smells of dung and sweat and cooking, and I was alone, and I was scared. But before an

hour had passed I started to calm down. The air was easier to breathe, and the sun was warmer. The trunk of the tree was solid and sun-warmed, and I found myself almost dozing, which I suppose is why he surprised me.

I just remember looking up and the unicorn was there. I heard nothing, saw no movement, and he was just there. It didn't seem right that something so big could be so quiet. He gleamed in the sun like snow or bone, his eyes were bottomless. The horn on his head blushed softly with blood, and his testicles hung like soft fruit. I looked at him and I knew that he was the most beautiful thing I would ever see. When he bent his neck and his breath whispered along my cheek, I thought I might cry. Have you ever realized that this moment, whatever you might happen to be doing or wherever you might be or whoever you are with, this moment is utterly perfect? And have you grieved because you knew that moment would be gone in an instant, and you would never see its like ever again? Then you and I, we understand each other.

I reached up and stroked along his jaw, making my hellos. I marveled at how soft his coat was. He brushed his lips against my face, like a kiss, and then knelt down. His head in my lap was a startling weight, and the rush of his breath along my thigh was hot and damp. The fear had left me, and my hand was steady as I caressed his face, feeling his sighs, seeing those deep eyes close in contentment. His whole body shivered as my fingers brushed the warm length of his horn. His muzzle pressed against my leg, his horn laid across my thigh, and I shuddered with him, the warmth and the softness and the weight.

And then someone yelled, and the glade was filled with men, shouting and clattering with swords and boots. He started to get to his feet, but three men pulled me violently out from under him, and they pinned him beneath their weight. One of them drove a spear into his side, bringing rivers of blood, crimson on white. He screamed, his hooves digging great crescent divots in the grass.

I don't know that I could have done anything. I could have tackled the men, maybe forced one of them away, but I think they'd have caught him anyway, now that he was injured. Or maybe that's me trying to justify it to myself. The three guards held him down as he thrashed, his eyes rolling towards me, and the prince came up with an axe in his hands. One, two, three blows, a sound like teeth breaking,

and blood sprayed across the grass in great arterial gouts. The prince stood, laughing with the broken horn in his hands. The guards pushed off him, a spear in his side, his horn a ragged stump oozing heart's blood on the grass. His eyelids were twitching and his tongue was sticking out. I watched as it started to turn blue.

He was still trying to move when the prince looked at me, blood all down his front, and said we don't need a virgin anymore, do we? And the guards laughed too, and I think they expected me to laugh as well. They'd warned me. But all I could do was stare at the blood on the grass and the splinters of horn even as they grabbed me. And before they were done he was dead.

When they'd done what they wanted they bundled me back onto the pony. The prince gave me his cloak to wear, since they'd torn my dress, and they lead me back to town. I didn't watch when the last guardsman went back with the axe. I didn't look at the dripping sack on the prince's saddlehorn, or the dead horn strapped to his back. I looked down at my lap and saw there was blood there too.

*

It was long enough ago that his skull has rotted clean. Long enough ago that the prince has become a king. And I still see him riding out sometimes, with his guards and a clear-eyed girl on a pony. Sometimes when they come back the girl is weeping. Sometimes she is as bloody as they are, and she laughs with them when they go to hang the head. But they always take the money. I did. Why not? It's more than they'd ever see otherwise. It's enough that I never had to work another day, or suffer through another empty belly. And it's enough to buy my wine.

I take one more swallow from the flask, and then I stand on my tiptoes to upend it over him. I watch the dark fluid course over the ridges of his skull, the shattered and splintered stump of his horn, and the moonlight turns the wine to blood.

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SECOND PRIZE

Adam Knight is a writer and English teacher in northern New Jersey. He has had stories accepted recently in several anthologies, including Hall Brothers' Entertainment's *Villainy*, Dare to Dream Press's *Extinct Doesn't Mean Forever*, and Pill Hill Press's *Told You So*. He is currently revising a novel, ghostwriting a non-fiction book, and working on a miniseries for Hall Brothers Entertainment.

Immortal Amelia

by Adam Knight

"Dessert."

Amelia needed a little time to think. "Do you mean, apple pie and ice cream? Or you shouldn't desert your friends?"

Mr. Dertweiller, Amelia's teacher, coughed in mild embarrassment. He was a tall, slight man who always wore silly ties and hardly ever laughed. "The first kind."

"D-E-S-S-E-R-T."

"Very good," said Mr. Dertweiller. Amelia sat down, and the annual Spelling Bee charged ahead. Some students like Amelia tore through the words without difficulty, while others foundered in the first round. All of them understood the stakes, however.

"Crumble," said Mr. Dertweiller. The pair of boys sitting next to Amelia moved their heads together. They whispered back and forth, and one of them stood up.

"C-R-U-M-B-E-L."

In the silence that followed, all knew the boys were wrong.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen, that’s incorrect.”

The boy sat down, and his friend consoled him. After all, Mr. Dertweiller’s Spelling Bee was a big deal.

Amelia thought back to when Mr. Dertweiller had explained the Spelling Bee.

“Pick your own teams of however small or large you like,” he had said, “Of course, I would expect that not *all* of you will join the same team.” As usual, his comment drew no laughter from the class. Only Amelia ever appreciated his humor. She thought he could be very funny, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the class’ bafflement at his jokes. Mr. Dertweiller had continued.

“The first team is given a word to spell. They may discuss it as much as they like, but only the team captain may answer. If the team answers correctly, they move to the next round. If not, the word is passed to the next team. If that team spells the word correctly, the first team is eliminated. If not, then the first team is spared and the second team comes in danger of elimination. Words are passed down the teams until they are answered correctly.

“But there’s a twist. At any point in the competition—even in the middle of answering a question—teams may shift. Players may leave teams, or switch to other ones. Eliminated players may play again by joining another team already in existence.

“And the reward. I am sure that all of you would be happy with the honor of winning, but this is a contest, and to win a contest is to earn the reward. To the winning team comes a treat of ice cream sundaes from the shop on Lerna Street, which I shall pay for. If your team has fifteen members and you win, well, then I’ll have to talk to the principal into getting me a raise.”

Again, no one in the class had laughed or even smiled, except for Amelia.

“But some of you may want more than a sugar rush to honor your achievement. I have, as you all know, kept an album with all the previous winners of this Spelling Bee. The winning team is photographed, and their names recorded.

“Yet there is a still greater honor to strive for. Most of you will join a team with your friends, and this is understandable. But some of you may be more independent,” his eyes flickered to Amelia, “and will compete alone. Should you win the Spelling Bee, not only will you win ice cream, and not only will your photograph and name enter the album, but you will be enshrined in my Spellers Hall of Fame. Only a few students, in all my years as a teacher, have earned this honor. Being in the Hall of Fame shows you have exceptional bravery, not to mention great skill with the English language.”

After that, he had shown them the Hall of Fame, a wooden plaque mounted on the wall. Four names, written in adhesive letters, graced the plaque, with empty space below them waiting to be filled by future great spellers. More than getting a photo in an album, and far more than getting ice cream, the thought of being immortalized in the Hall of Fame mesmerized Amelia.

The first round of the Spelling Bee ended much as Amelia thought it would—most of the class clowns and lazy kids had already been knocked out. Only a few teams remained. Her lone friend, Carlo, had been eliminated. He was a scattershot speller; he could rattle off “beautify” and “marginalize” without trouble, but had been eliminated on the word “tricky.” Only Amelia, a few small teams, and one large team had made it through. This large team was Amelia’s greatest obstacle. Beating them would be impossible. Few students could match intellectual powers with the Brain Trust.

The Brain Trust consisted of nine boys, all of whom wore sweater vests and glasses and pressed khakis—never jeans. Their hair was never combed in flattering ways, or at all. They carried books with them everywhere. They traveled in one group as if they were one student with nine heads, yet they possessed great power. Students looked to members of the Brain Trust to cheat on in exams or to help with homework. If they opposed you, you would be doomed.

Uniting these nine brains took one extraordinarily powerful brain, and one imposing figure. This was Randall, the leader of the Brain Trust. Randall's father was wealthy, and had sent Randall to private school for one year. Randall used these two facts as proof that he was an elite fourth grader, and one around whom others should flock. And they did. The eight most devoted of these students were in the Brain Trust, but nearly the whole class held Randall in awe. Only Amelia and Carlo did not.

The next day was the second round of the Spelling Bee. Five teams remained, and the first was a group of girls.

"Foundation," said Mr. Dertweiller, doing his best to sound sonorous and failing.

The three girls looked at one another with scrunched eyebrows. One discreetly shrugged. The second girl whispered to the captain, and the captain stood up.

"F-O-U-N-D-A...I-T-I-O-N?" she said.

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Dertweiller, and a few murmurs floated around the class. The girl sat down, and Mr. Dertweiller turned to Amelia.

"Amelia, can you spell 'foundation'?"

Amelia stood up. She took a deep breath in, and one out. She knew the word, but she would not want to rush and make an error. So far her patience had kept her fear away. Amelia would not admit it to herself, but her confidence was like a raft floating on a sea of fear. A tiny push would drown her. She stood up.

"F-O-U-N-D-A-T-I-O-N."

"Very good, Amelia. I'm sorry ladies," Mr. Dertweiller said, looking at the trio of girls. "But you are eliminated."

The next team consisted of two boys who were scorned by most of the rest of the class. Everyone knew the boys lived in the town's trailer park, and they wore tee shirts with holes and always wore the same dirty pairs of jeans. To have such squalor in their midst was upsetting to many in the class, especially Randall, whose family tried to shelter him from the likes of the Trailer Boys. Though

Amelia did not hold the same contempt, she felt uneasy around them. She felt as if she ought to do something charitable, but she never knew quite what to do.

“Kitchen,” said Mr. Dertweiller. The two boys conferred for a short time, apparently disagreeing but coming to a consensus.

“K-I-T-C-H-E-N.”

“Excellent!” said Mr. Dertweiller.

The next team consisted of a boy and a girl who were both quite intelligent but no one acknowledged it, because once at recess they kissed under the slide. Their passion destroyed their credibility.

“Pickle,” said Mr. Dertweiller. The boy and girl looked at one another. The boy nodded, and the girl stood up.

“P-I-C-K-E-L.”

“That’s not correct,” said Mr. Dertweiller, and The Kissers frowned. With their fate in the hands of the Brain Trust, there was no hope of survival. Mr. Dertweiller turned to the Brain Trust.

“Pickle,” he said.

The Brain Trust came to life. They leaned in towards one another, with Randall at the center. Whispers of possible spellings escaped their crescent of imposing genius. Randall nodded at all of the suggestions, and after discussion with the rest of the team, he placed his hands together, fingertip to fingertip. The conferring, the whispers, the sagely postures, all were meant to intimidate. It worked. Finally, after Randall felt enough ado had been made, he stood up.

“P-I-C-K-L-E,” he said. A tiny smirk crept on to his face, and he did not hide it.

“Very good, gentlemen,” said Mr. Dertweiller, “That concludes our second round. The final round will take place tomorrow. Only three teams left. Who will win the ice cream sundaes? And the opportunity to be remembered by my future students? We will find out tomorrow.”

*

During recess that day, Amelia sat on a swing alone. She pushed herself clockwise, winding the chains together, then let herself spin. No one paid attention to her, but she didn't mind. No one ever paid her much attention, but after the Spelling Bee, they would. In her mind, she saw the Hall of Fame, mounted on the classroom wall. If she closed her eyes, she could see the letters of her name on the plaque.

"Hey Amelia," said Carlo, sitting on the swing next to her.

Though Amelia never asked him for his company, she welcomed it. "Hey Carlo."

He did not ask Amelia how she was doing. He knew. Nor did he ask her if she wanted him to join her team; he had already asked her, and she had already politely turned him down. She would not settle for any goal less than the Hall of Fame.

"You've really got a shot at winning," said Carlo. He hoped it would encourage her. But she just frowned.

"Maybe. But against Randall and the Brain Trust? I don't know."

"Ahh, none of them are as smart as you are," said Carlo, "Everyone knows that."

Amelia looked at Carlo. "Who cares about being smart? I want to be great."

Carlo did not need to ask why she cared so much about the bee. He knew it was her parents. Amelia's parents were nice; whenever he came over they made a batch of cookies, or at least left instructions and a roll of cookie dough. They were usually off doing what they called "cultural events" at museums, galleries, and fancy parties that Amelia could never attend. On Open House night, Amelia's father spent nearly the entire evening in the hallway on his cell phone, while her mother sent text messages as Mr. Dertweiller spoke. Maybe winning the bee would get them to pay attention, but Carlo doubted it. He put his hand on Amelia's shoulder, but could think of nothing to say.

“See, people like you,” Amelia said. “You’re nice and you’re fun to talk to. No one really likes me, except for you. I don’t want to be liked. I want people to remember me.”

A commotion across the playground attracted the attention of Amelia and Carlo. Randall, surrounded by the Brain Trust, stood on a picnic table.

“Attention eeeeeveryone,” he said to the students gathered around him, “the Brain Trust needs your help.”

This created a stir among the class. The Brain Trust? Need help?

“We want to win the Spelling Bee, and yes, we want your help. So I’m making an offer to everyone—if you join our team today, my dad will throw a pizza party for everyone on my team when we win!”

Students turned to each other excitedly, waved their hands in the air, and woo-hooed. Some crowded in closer to the pizza-promising genius. One called out,

“How do you know your dad will do it?”

“Oh, he will,” Randall said. It was all he needed to say. Everyone knew that Randall’s wish was his father’s command. If Randall promised his team a pizza party, the next weekend they would all be gums deep in cheese, sauce, and dough.

“So unless you want to be a loser,” Randall said loudly, now looking directly at Amelia from across the playground, “Join me for—”

The playground monitor marched over towards the picnic table, blowing a whistle with great urgency.

“Get off that table, young man!” she shouted, and Randall hopped down. The crowd of children dispersed as their leader was scolded, but once the monitor left, they flocked back to him. Carlo, however, did not move. Amelia looked at him.

“You going to join?” she asked. Carlo dug his toe into the ground.

“Nah,” he said, “Who’d want to be on Randall’s team?”

It appeared the entire class did.

“Why would Randall do that?” asked Amelia, irritation in her voice covering fear.

“You’ve seen how he plays kickball. He’s not happy just getting on base; he has to get a home run, or kick the ball in someone’s face. Randall doesn’t like just winning. He has to cream you.”

“Yeah,” said Amelia, “but why would he want all the bad spellers to join his team?”

Carlo shrugged. “He knows you’re brave. Maybe he thinks that if he gets everyone on his team, it’ll scare you.”

“I’m not scared of him,” Amelia said. She had no idea that being brave would involve lying. Carlo smiled.

“I know,” he said, “That’s why you’ve got a good shot of winning. And remember, if you need...” He trailed off, and said nothing else.

*

The next day, the entire class was jittery with anticipation. Who would come out on top? The two Trailer Boys who no one wanted to play with? The imposing and awesome Brain Trust led by the charismatic genius Randall? Or Amelia, the lone, proud girl who refused help? Tension was palpable the moment the day begun.

When Mr. Dertweiller entered the classroom, he started. Sitting around Randall was not only the Brain Trust but also most of the class, their chairs pulled up to Randall’s side of the room, each student hoping their input would garner a victory for Randall and a pizza party for themselves. Only four students in the class did not sit near Randall—the two Trailer Boys, who sat with glum faces, seeing their imminent demise, Carlo, and Amelia. She was horrified. Against Randall and the Brain Trust, victory was impossible. Against the whole class, victory was even more impossible. Amelia drew in a breath, resolving to battle as well as she could, but she had lost all hope of winning.

“Well...” started Mr. Dertweiller, looking at smug Randall’s massive team, “I can see we had a change of teams since yesterday’s competition. While such a move is within the rules, I must admit it is the only time I have ever seen such a thing happen.”

If his words were meant to sway Randall from his plan, they did nothing. Mr. Dertweiller turned to the Trailer Boys.

“Gentlemen, the first word is yours. Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” said one of them, though he did not sound eager.

“Crutches.”

The boys huddled and whispered. After a minute, one of them stood up.

“C-R-U-C-H-E-S,” he said, his voice empty of hope. Mr. Dertweiller frowned.

“I’m sorry, that’s not correct. The word goes to Amelia. Are you ready?”

Amelia said nothing, but stood up.

“Crutches,” said the teacher.

“C-R-U-T-C-H-E-S,” said Amelia. Easy.

“Very good,” said Mr. Dertweiller. He turned to the Trailer Boys, “I’m sorry, fellows, but you have been eliminated.”

The boys did not seem disappointed; rather, they seemed relieved that their end came quickly. Before Mr. Dertweiller addressed Randall’s massive team, the captain of the Trailer Boys walked over to Randall. He bent down and spoke in whispers. Randall paused, then nodded. The two Trailer Boys pulled their chairs over to join Randall’s team. Randall said to Mr. Dertweiller,

“They’re joining my team.”

Mr. Dertweiller stared at him.

“Um, that’s fine,” he said, fumbling with the word list in his hands. Randall’s team now consisted of all but two students in the class—the quiet Carlo and the defiant Amelia. Amelia wanted to put her head in her arms, but instead, held it up higher.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Dertweiller said. “Your word is ‘frighten.’”

All at once, Randall’s entire team, as though it were one creature, came to life. Heads swiveled on necks, whispering and debating, turning to and from one another. At the center of the massive team-creature was Randall. Several Brain Trust members whispered suggestions in his ears. Randall heard the input, and raised his hand. The whispers stopped, and the heads fell still. Randall stood.

“F-R-I-G-H-T-E-N.”

“Very good, Randall, er, team,” said Mr. Dertweiller. The team cheered and tried to pat Randall on his back, as though reaching through a crowd to touch a celebrity. Randall’s eyes fell not upon Amelia, but upon Carlo. Carlo returned the look. Amelia saw this, and for a second, thought Carlo would cave in and join Randall. Carlo remained seated, however. Amelia realized that Carlo would help the best way he could—by remaining neutral. Mr. Dertweiller turned to Amelia.

“Your word is ‘intense.’”

Intense. Amelia had to think. Was it “N-S-E” or “N-C-E”? She thought it was the first... maybe. But wasn’t “incense” with an “N-C-E”? Or wasn’t it? She looked up, and her eyes latched on to Randall’s. The boy was staring at her, and the other heads on his team-creature were doing the same. Amelia squirmed. Intense. Incense. “N-S-E.” “N-C-E.” Randall’s eyes. His intense eyes. “N-S-E”? “N-C-E?” Amelia felt her lower jaw tremble. It was too much. How would she spell the word? And why wouldn’t Randall stop looking at her? She was going to lose. Her chest heaved and tears choked her eyes. With her blurry vision she looked at Carlo. To her surprise, the boy’s face was hopeful and encouraging. Amelia mouthed one word to him.

“Help.”

Carlo looked to Mr. Dertweiller and said,

“I’m joining Amelia’s team.”

“Is that all right with Amelia?” asked Mr. Dertweiller. Amelia nodded. Carlo stood up from his chair and walked over to Amelia. He laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t cry, Amelia.”

“But I don’t know how to spell ‘intense,’” she said between tearful gulps of air.

“I do.”

Amelia’s crying slowed for a minute. She sniffed. She could no longer enter the Hall of Fame with Carlo on her team. But the class was waiting. And she had asked for Carlo’s help. The Hall of Fame was lost. Now her sights were set on one thing—victory. She leaned over to Carlo, who whispered in her ear. Amelia stood up, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

“I-N-T-E-N-S-E.”

“Very good,” said Mr. Dertweiller, who had seen students break down in tears during his Spelling Bees before. He turned to Randall’s team.

“All right team, your word is ‘disguise.’”

The team-creature came to life again, but Randall only stared at Carlo. Carlo alone had defied his intimidation, and now the pair would suffer. Randall would not listen to his team’s wisdom. He stood up quickly.

“D-E-S-G-U-I-S-E,” he said, spitting out each letter over the debate of his teammates. Mr. Dertweiller frowned.

“I’m sorry, team, but that is incorrect.”

The team fell silent, staring at their hero. Randall, the most powerful mind in a collective of the class’s most powerful minds, had failed them. They hoped the girl, proud but clearly not as unbreakable as she thought, would falter.

Before Mr. Dertweiller had finished turning to Amelia, she stood up. Her tears were gone, and the classroom lights were bright and clear. She took a deep breath, and even smiled. Mr. Dertweiller just nodded. Amelia took a look down at Carlo for reassurance, and stared right at Randall.

“D-I-S-G-U-I-S-E.”

A narrow smile came over Mr. Dertweiller’s face. “That is correct. Congratulations, Amelia and Carlo. You are this year’s Spelling Bee champions!”

There was no cheering from the class. Randall hid his face in shame. Carlo and Amelia hugged one another. Randall later tried to use this to sully Amelia’s reputation—perhaps Carlo and Amelia were *boyfriend* and *girlfriend*. But no one in the class would listen to Randall from then on.

*

At the end of the day, the rest of the class left to go home. Amelia and Carlo stayed behind to receive their prizes. Amelia frowning and downcast, stared at the floor as Mr. Dertweiller handed her the gift certificate to the ice cream shop.

“What’s wrong, Amelia?” he said.

Amelia shrugged.

“I really wanted to be in the Hall of Fame.”

Mr. Dertweiller handed the pair their certificates, and lined them up together for the winner’s photograph. He went to his desk to get his camera.

“Why?” he asked.

“Well... I want to be remembered. I wanted everyone to see my name on the Hall of Fame.”

Mr. Dertweiller paused before taking the photo.

“Amelia, I will never forget what you and Carlo did today. And I don’t think anyone else in the class will, either. Trust me; you’ll be remembered.”

Mr. Dertweiller held up the camera, aimed, and snapped a picture. The flash was brilliant.

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THIRD PRIZE

Melanie Fogel is a freelance editor and writer, and short story fanatic. You can find out more about her at <http://tinyurl.com/bitcheditor>. "The Yellow Fox" was inspired by a real incident Melanie saw on a television documentary. When the truth began to get in the way of the story developing in her head, she shut the TV off.

The Yellow Fox

by Melanie Fogel

Myké stood under the grass-thatch shade of a hut by the village well, watching Lanna approach.

"Good morning, sister," he greeted when she drew near.

"Good morning, brother," she replied.

They addressed each other as brother and sister, for all children are brother and sister, and they were still children.

The steady thump-thump of the women pounding millet echoed the thump-thump of Myké's heart. At his feet, Lanna's dune-cat mewed, thirsty and awaiting its drink. "Patience," Lanna told it—or perhaps told Myké.

Lanna stooped to pull the well's rope and raise the bucket. Her heavy breasts hung, swinging, over the well's mouth. Myké's breath caught as the ache in his groin, almost constant nowadays, pulsed harder. *It isn't happening*, he told himself. As his parents instructed him to tell himself. *It cannot happen because such things do not happen to children, and I am a child.* But it was happening, as the

peak in his loincloth proved. It happened to his friends, although they denied it because they, too, were children and such things do not happen to children. But the peaks in their loincloths proved otherwise.

Life can be painful for those who are twenty and still considered children.

Lanna began to raise the bucket. Myké forced himself to move to help her. “Thank you, brother,” she said, not looking at him. But when Myké took the bucket and poured the water into her calabash, she did face him, and her eyes said more than “thank you.” They could not face each other so for long; children did not stare in hunger at each other, imagine their lips together, their bodies pressing. The adults who noticed such things would, with awkwardness born of sympathy, tell them to get on with their chores.

Lanna lifted the calabash to her head, her breasts rising with her arms, and Myké whimpered, not quite silently. “Sundown,” she mouthed. “Cave.” Myké understood, and his heart swelled, too.

It wouldn’t be so bad, he thought as his gaze followed her down the dusty, winding path to her hut, the dune-cat trailing her, sand-colored rump swaying almost as much as Lanna’s, if only they could dress as adults. But children wore the child’s loincloth and nothing more. For years now, Myké had understood the wisdom of the loose-fitting adult’s caftan.

At the east end of the village, Lanna stooped to pour a little water into the dune-cat’s bowl. She stroked it as it drank, and Myké felt a pang of envy. Lanna was not the first, nor the only girl-child in the village to adopt a dune-cat or other small animal; many of the older ones had of late, for they needed something small to love. At times, Myké worried that Lanna loved the cat more than she loved him.

*

In this land of mostly brush and rock and sand, bountiful harvests were rare. So rare, that any harvest producing more than enough to feed all the village required a menka: the celebration of thanksgiving. Myké’s people, understanding that new mouths were hungry mouths, held their coming-of-age ritual as part of the menka.

There had not been a menka in nine years.

Myké's grand-grand-father was the oldest man in the village, and its chief. Nine years ago, when Grand-grand-father became chief, the fortune-teller summoned the yellow fox to tell Grand-grand-father about the problems the village would face. The yellow fox foretold disaster: Grand-grand-father would die during the next menka. For nine years, children had been born, although none came of age. For nine years, despite harvests so plentiful the village had become rich selling the surplus, no menka had been held. For nine years, as children aged but did not become men or women, their labor and the labor of those who were not spending time raising children was put into digging irrigation ditches, expanding the millet, bean, and onion fields, raising more chickens and goats, and building more granaries. The granaries attracted mice, the mice attracted the dune-cats, and the dune-cats had attracted the girl-children who would not have been children if not for the yellow fox.

The village prospered. Grand-grand-father prospered. But if he stayed alive much longer, the village would die.

Myké went to his work in the millet field. Unlike many other things among his people, the work one performed was dictated by size, not age. The crop would be good this year, as would the onions and beans—unless drought, sudden and severe, came to punish the village for their ingratitude for previous good harvests. And while other children, younger than Myké but old enough to feel the pain of childhood going on too long, could complain, Myké could not. He could not disrespect his grand-grand-father so. He, of all people, could not wish his death.

But, he thought as he bent his back to the burning sun, he could speak to the fortune-teller.

*

The fortune-teller's hut lay outside the village, so that no one would see who came to consult him. Myké went there when the sun hung low in the sky, an orange glare behind the baobab tree. Before he stepped inside, the fortune-teller's voice came from within: "Enter, child Myké."

If he knows who I am, thought Myké, perhaps he also knows what I want.

Indeed, the fortune-teller showed no surprise when Myké made his request. “I did not mistake,” he said as if for the fiftieth time. “The yellow fox’s signs were clear. The chief will die during the next menka.”

“Then,” said Myké, “can you summon the yellow fox for me?”

The fortune-teller shook his head. “You are not important enough, Myké. You are only a child.”

Myké became angry. He would have stood, to shout over the fortune-teller’s head, but the ceiling was too low—deliberately so—for him to do more than rise to his knees. “No child aches as I do,” he said. “No child sways as Lanna sways as she walks with the calabash on her head. I die for love; the village is dying. I wish my grand-grand-father no harm, but this cannot go on.”

The fortune-teller raised his chin; his eyes grew angry. “The yellow fox has spoken.”

“There must be something you can do!” Myké pleaded.

“No,” said the fortune-teller. “If you wish special dispensation, you must speak to the chief.”

*

Myké had to wait until the sun had completely set to speak to his grand-grand-father, since children are too young to have serious problems on which the chief can judge or advise, and all such judgments and advisements are done while the sun can observe them.

Then, the family had to eat.

“Grand-grand-father,” Myké said at last, eager to meet with Lanna at the cave, “I need your help. I am in love.”

Grand-grand-father laughed, long and hard, showing his empty gums. “Children do not fall in love. You are just imagining.”

“Please, Grand-grand-father. I love Lanna, and wish her to be my wife.”

Grand-grand-father smacked his lips, which meant he was angry. He smacked his lips three times. “You cannot marry until you come of age. You cannot come of age until there is a menka. There will be no menka until the harvest is sufficiently bountiful. It will not be sufficiently bountiful this year. You know all this. Now leave me alone.”

“But— But—The millet grows higher than I am! The onions are fat and round, the size of my fist.” Myké almost made a fist, but thought better of it. “The vines sag from the weight of the beans. The granaries are already full—”

“Go,” said the chief. He smacked his lips four times. “Go before I have your father beat you.”

But Myké did not go. Instead he said, in a voice hollow with fear and stony with determination: “I wish the fortune-teller to summon the yellow fox. I want to know how long I must wait before I come of age.”

“A child’s questions are not important enough for the fox. Why don’t you ask the fortune-teller to cast beans?”

“I want the fox.”

“Perhaps your father could manage a goat...”

“I want the fox. Grand-grand-father, I am the oldest child in the village. Surely that distinction merits a dispensation. And,” he went on before grand-grand-father could deny it, “no one has summoned the fox in nine years. We have asked nothing of him in nine years. Perhaps he thinks we have forgotten him. It may make him angry.”

The chief thought for a long time, until tears came into his eyes. He took in a long, slow breath, and let it out again even more slowly. Then he said, “I will call a meeting of the whole village. They will decide if they want to see me dead.”

*

Not many days later, when the sun once more tried to hide behind the baobab tree, Myké's grand-grand-father, the fortune-teller, and the assistant chief assembled at the village well to begin the meeting. The assistant chief, who was the second oldest man in the village and had given up hope that he would live long enough to take Myké's grand-grand-father's place, beat the drum to summon all the adults. The village well had enough space around it to hold them all—more than enough space, since many had died in the past nine years, and none had come of age to replace them. People emerged from their huts and hurried to the well, knowing what the meeting could mean, and eager to solve their predicament once and for all. Myké watched from behind a nearby hut, as did most of the children (children were prohibited from such meetings; they had not the reason to understand the topics under discussion). But, as the last stragglers made their way to the edge of the crowd, Lanna strode up, and among them, and through them, to confront the chief face-to-face.

“Shoo!” he said, waving his hand at her as if she were a dune-cat. “Children are not allowed at meetings.”

“I am not a child,” Lanna said.

“You are.” The chief looked her up and down and up again. “You are,” he repeated, less certainly.

“I am not a child,” she said with pride. “I can prove I am not a child.”

The chief squinted at her, then laughed. “Go ahead then, prove it.”

“I'm pregnant.”

Many voices gasped. The chief's head snapped back, as if he'd been slapped. The fortune-teller closed his eyes and mumbled something. The assistant chief grinned. Some in the crowd laughed. Myké felt his face grow hot. And then, a great rush of joy filled him almost to bursting.

When the murmurs, titters and whispers finally died away, the chief said, “You’re not.”

“I am,” Lanna said. She stood tall and proud, her belly flat but her breasts perhaps a bit heavier.

“You’re not,” insisted the chief. “Children can’t get pregnant, and you’re a child.”

Now it was Lanna who looked as if she’d been slapped. “But I am!”

“A child, yes. Now go and join the other children hiding behind the huts to listen in.”

Lanna turned to face the people. She looked at each one, seeking help. But none, not even her father and mother, would speak with a child amongst them. Her eyes filled with tears but she would not weep. Instead, she squared her shoulders and strode through the crowd, not to join Myké and the others, but off to her parents’ hut. Myké wanted to follow her, to soothe her and stroke her soft skin and tell her how much joy he felt, but his curiosity over what would happen now was too strong. Lanna would understand when he explained.

“We hold this meeting...” the chief began, but now Lanna’s father stepped up to speak: “My daughter is not pregnant, because she is a child,” he said. “But something has stopped her monthly courses, which she didn’t have because children don’t have monthly courses, and the midwife says it’s because she’s pregnant. But perhaps the midwife is mistaken. After all, she’s out of practice.”

Before the chief could answer, the midwife, who was almost as old as he, stepped up. “I’m not mistaken. But I’ll tell you that I only hope to live long enough to deliver this child. Because if I don’t, who else will do it? Only old women give birth nowadays, and the problems of young women are different. Only twice has my apprentice assisted at the birth of a first child, and that was long ago. She has forgotten.”

“My daughter began her courses four years ago!” came a voice from the middle of the crowd.

“My son’s dreams soil his bed!” came another.

“I will die without grandchildren!” shouted a third.

And then everyone began shouting. For nine years, none had said anything, because they did not want to disrespect the chief. But now it seemed they no longer cared. Soon, the children behind the hut joined in. “I want children of my own!” “I will get Henra pregnant!” “And I Sephra!”

The chief spoke into the fortune-teller’s ear. The fortune-teller began to sweat, although he stood in the shade of a hut. The chief raised his arms for silence. The shouts continued. The assistant chief beat the drum, but not immediately. Finally, the noise stopped and everyone faced the chief. He smacked his lips too many times to count, then said: “Perhaps the fortune-teller was mistaken. We will summon the yellow fox.”

*

The very next day, the fortune-teller built a fortune-pit behind his hut where the land was flat. He used logs made from old, dead tamarind trees he kept for this purpose. He formed them into a rough square, to protect the pit from the wind, then smoothed the sand within the square. The whole village watched as he used a pointed stick to draw a large box in the sand, then many smaller boxes inside it. All the while he sang the song of the yellow fox, to tempt it from its lair. The yellow fox came out only at night, and from a great distance for it did not like people, but it had superb hearing. Finally, the fortune-teller retrieved a handful of groundnuts from his pouch, closed his eyes and scattered them on the sand. Most fell within the boxes, and all within the tamarind logs, which already was a good sign. “The yellow fox will have much to tell us,” he pronounced, then headed back into his hut.

The people went back to their tasks. They knew the yellow fox would not come if it could smell them nearby. All worked anxiously, pounding millet, watering goats, weeding the onions. That evening, they went to bed early, but few slept.

The next morning, Myké was the first to reach the fortune-pit. He could not read the marks the fox left in the sand; did not know which paw print in which box

signified what, although he understood that usually, sand swept by the fox's tail was a good sign. But this morning, his ignorance made no difference. The sand was untouched, the groundnuts undisturbed.

The fortune-teller sighed behind him. "I will make another," he said.

The fortune-teller made six more fortune pits, and still the fox did not come.

"I was right nine years ago," the fortune-teller told the people. "The fox will not come just to say what he said back then."

"He's forgotten how to build the pit, or sing the song," the people said. "It's been too long, he's out of practice."

"Like the midwife," said others, especially those who worried about their aging children.

But some understood the truth: the fox didn't like people, and stayed as far away as possible. With their expanded fields and irrigation ditches and goat pens, they had increased their own territory, and driven the fox away.

*

Myké met Lanna outside her hut. She sat in the shade cast by the setting sun, the dune-cat sleeping in her lap. "Good evening, sister," he greeted.

Lanna said nothing. She stroked the cat.

"Good evening," he said again.

Lanna looked up at him, her eyes narrow. She said softly, perhaps so none would hear, perhaps just not to wake the cat: "I have done what I can, now you must do something."

"What?" Myké asked, exasperated. "I cannot kill my grand-grand-father. What else can we do?"

"Find a fox," she said, then put aside the cat, stood, and went into the hut.

The cat extended its forepaws, raised its tawny rump, stretched, yawned, then trotted away, tail high in the air. Myké wanted to kick it. How could it treat leaving Lanna's lap so casually?

Because it knew it would be back again, unlike Myké. If the fortune-teller could not find a fox, how could he?

Days went by; the moon waxed and waned; still no fox came.

*

On the day before the millet harvest, which was a traditional day of rest, Myké passed Lanna outside her hut, playing with her cat. She swung a dead mouse by its tail, and the cat batted it with its paw. Myké had not seen Lanna for several days, and had worried she was ill. Her belly was rounder than it had been, her breasts definitely larger. He greeted her: "Good afternoon, sister."

"Have you found a fox yet?" It was the only thing she ever said to him, since that evening.

"Are you well, sister?"

"Have you found a fox yet?" She jerked the mouse up and down.

He hung his head. "All day I work in the millet field, all night I search. But, no, I have found no fox."

Lanna sighed, quite noisily, then went back to swinging the mouse.

Eventually, she would let the cat eat it, Myké knew. She wanted its belly full so that it wouldn't join the wild cats hunting in the granaries tonight. Useless creature, he muttered to himself. At least the wild ones kept the mice down... and could, perhaps, serve the people in other ways.

Myké looked to his right and his left. On this day of rest, many lounged outside their huts, or those of their friends and relations. Almost everyone saw him walk out of the village, although few thought to question where he could be heading.

The evening of the next day, as all sank wearily to their meals after the long, hot day harvesting millet, the drum beat. None knew what it could mean, but all left their porridge and beans and ran to the well. There they found the chief, the assistant chief and the fortune-teller. When all had assembled, the children behind the huts, the chief spoke:

“I... uh, Myké has persuaded the fortune-teller to summon the fox once more.”

Murmurs of excitement and frustration came from the crowd.

“He has gone to the next village, where there is a wizard, who gave him magic groundnuts that he guarantees the fox cannot resist.”

More murmurs, this time of surprise. No one had known the next village harbored a wizard.

“So, tomorrow, the fortune-teller will scatter those nuts.”

The people began to return to their huts, but the fortune-teller’s voice called them back. “I will build the pit tonight,” he said. “The groundnuts work better when scattered in the dark. By tomorrow morning, we shall all know our fate.”

Few could sleep that night. They wanted desperately to watch over the pit, but knew that the scent of a human would keep the fox away. When grey, predawn light broke through the chinks in their mud walls, they hastened to the fortune-teller’s hut, and then to the back, where the pit lay.

Myké was already there, staring at the marks in the pit. As others joined him, they stared, too. Those were definitely paw prints, but of a fox? They looked somehow familiar, something they had seen more recently than nine years ago.

And there, on the right—was that a tail mark? Perhaps, but not a very bushy tail. What could it mean? There were no nuts, which they knew was a good omen.

At last the fortune-teller came out of his hut. He, too, stared at the marks a long time. As he stared, Myké sidled up to him. Stood before him. Stared as hard at him as the fortune-teller stared at the pit.

Finally, the fortune-teller spoke:

“All the groundnuts are gone, which means this will be a bountiful harvest.”

Everyone cheered, although they already knew that.

“The marks tell me,” the fortune-teller continued, looking straight at Myké, “that if we hold the menka now, before we finish the harvest, the chief will not die.”

More cheers.

And so that very day the menka was held, and with it the coming-of-age ceremony, which took a long time, but no one minded.

Some months later, Lanna gave birth to a boy. By then all the women who had been girls too long were pregnant, so that soon the village was filled with children, and everyone had something small to love.

True to the fox’s word, Grand-grand-father lived on for many years. He did not die until the next in line to take his place was Myké, whose first task as chief was to decide where to build the new granaries. He did not consult the yellow fox on this or any other matter during his long reign.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Anna Dickinson lives in Edinburgh with her husband and two young sons. She doesn't believe in fairytales. However, "The Blue Hill" was her first ever fiction submission, so she's tempted to believe in magic.

The Blue Hill

by Anna Dickinson

The Blue Hill is beside our croft, just before the land shades off into rock and heather. We're up so high that our hills are only shifts in the planes of the earth, but the Blue Hill is different, a steep-sided lump with a bald top.

In a place like this, of course, people tell stories about it. The sort of knowing stories told with a wink so you're not sure if they believe them or are teasing you to see what you'll say. Animals don't go near it; I've always thought the sheep have too much sense to bother with something so steep when there's nothing to eat on top. But I'm alone in that, perhaps not surprisingly—who'd credit a sheep with sense if there was another explanation? And it's true that the sheep don't eat the blue-green grass that grows around it; the sharp grass that cuts your fingers and never seems to wither, no matter how hard the winter.

*

Nothing had happened in the village since Ailsa from the Manse had gone off to University, so everyone was excited when Charlie found a man asleep in the shadow of the Hill.

“I thought he was a bundle of rags,” Charlie told Mum as he drank his tea, the letters he’d delivered stacked by the teapot. “I had to stop the van to get a closer look.”

I passed him the plate of biscuits and leaned in to hear more.

“Thanks, Kate.” He took three. “It was a young man, now. When I spoke to him, he opened his eyes and talked back. ‘Thank you, Postman,’ he said, ‘I’m quite comfortable here.’ And he went back to sleep.”

He crunched through the second biscuit. “Something not quite right about it, sleeping in the shadow of that hill. Here, Katie—d’you think he came from beneath it?” He winked at me, with a straight face. “You know the story about Alex Finlayson’s great granddad. Taken by the hill on his wedding night to be husband to the Queen beneath.”

“Oh, Charlie.” Mum turned from the oven where the rest of the biscuits were cooling. “Mr. Finlayson’s great granddad fell down a crevasse.”

“They never found a body, did they?” Charlie’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “And only a hundred years ago, as well. Ah, Kate.” He reached for my hand and squeezed it, mock earnest. “Perhaps he’s come back.”

“Come now, don’t tease her,” Mum said. “It’s likely your lad there was sleeping off the drink. He’ll be on his way when his head clears.”

I couldn’t resist, of course. As soon as Charlie was back in the van and the cups washed, I was off over the fields and down to the Hill to have a look for myself. Sure enough, there was a man, all dressed in grey, his white hair spread out on the blue-green grass. I’d never seen such a young man with white hair; he seemed bleached of color, as if it had seeped away into the earth. His eyes, when he opened them, were the color of the sky.

“Well, you’re a pretty thing,” he said when he saw me standing at the fence, the wind blowing my hair every which way. “I’m sure I’ve seen you in a book. Surely you’re the Blackthorn fairy?” I waited for him to sit up, but he didn’t, he lay there

on the earth, his hair tangled in the grasses. “Can I expect a whole village-full of children, here to see the stranger, once the postman spreads the word?”

His guess was so accurate, and his voice so mild, that I overcame my shyness and laughed. “We’re not a big village, but you can expect nine or ten children to come and look at you before the end of the morning.”

He rolled his eyes. “Then I should be up to greet them, shouldn’t I?” But he didn’t move. His arms were flung out to the sides, his fingers as white as his hair. “Now, you know the stories, I expect. Will you help me?”

“The stories?”

“Oh come. How old are you? Seventeen? Surely you’ve heard enough of the stories to know the power of a kiss?”

“I’m sixteen. And I have more sense than to fall for that.” But I couldn’t help a tingle of excitement. His lips were thin and clever, and his eyes laughed at me.

“You’re a heartless fairy. Will you leave me here for the children to trample?”

I stifled laughter. “What good would a kiss be?”

“Don’t you see I’m all caught in earth? I’ve fought my way for seven nights and seven days, as the stories say I must, and I’m almost out of it. But if you come closer, fairy, you’ll see the earth won’t quite let go of me. It has me tangled by my hair and my hands and feet. Come and see—you’re safe from me, I can’t move.”

I stepped a little closer. The grasses twisted around his hair; his fingers were deep in among the blue stalks. His feet were all but invisible; I could see only the tips of his boots sticking out of the heather.

“You’re not! You’re only lying on the ground.”

His eyes twinkled. “It may look like that to you, but I’m trapped. I assure you.”

I couldn’t help giggling at the game; his smile suggested he found it funny too.

“All I need’s a kiss, fairy. One kiss from you and I’ll be free.”

“Why me?”

“You’re much prettier than the postman.” He was laughing at me, but something in his eyes wasn’t laughing—it was frightened. The blue-green grass is very sharp, and it was very close to his throat.

I thought of what Mum would say—how horrified she’d be that I’d even consider this. I ought to be sensible, get on the bus and buy new shoes for school. I fingered the shoe money in my pocket. That was what decided me, really. Mum always wanted me to be sensible; she never liked me doing what I wanted.

“Just one kiss?” The excitement shook my voice.

“Just one.” His eyes were suddenly serious, and I had the feeling I’d agreed to more than I knew. But I couldn’t back out now. I knelt by his head and bent to put my lips on his. His mouth tasted of clean earth, warm and sweet. He sat up, laughing, reaching for me.

I pulled away. “Where did you come from?”

“Would you believe me if I told you I come from deep under the hill?”

I snorted. “No.”

“Well then, I’m escaping from my wife. Do you like that explanation better?”

“Yes,” I said. “Anything’s better than fairytales.”

“I don’t like them either.” He brushed the dark soil from his sleeves. “And I’m damp from lying on this hillside all night. Is there a place to stay nearby?” He took my hand. His fingers were warm; they wrapped all the way around mine.

I chewed my lip. “Mrs. Morrison has a B&B.”

“To Mrs. Morrison’s B&B, then. On we go.”

He kept hold of my hand as we walked over the fields to the village. He looked strangely out of place against the backdrop of the lumpy ground where the sheep grazed. His eyes were brilliant with light from the wide blue sky.

I found myself asking, "What's your name?"

He grinned at me. "Tom, my name's always Tom. What's yours?"

"Kate. Why are you escaping from your wife?"

"She's a scary woman, little Katie, well worth escaping from."

"It's Kate. Is she beautiful?"

"Absolutely beautiful. Like a painting of an angel." He grinned down at me. "But she doesn't have pink cheeks like yours, Kitty."

"It's *Kate*," I said for the third time, annoyed at myself for blushing and making my cheeks even pinker. "What's her name?"

He winked at me. "If I speak it, she'll know."

"Oh," I said in disgust, "fairytales."

He looked at me sideways. "They're not all lies."

"If you say so." We stopped by a red metal gate. "Here's Mrs. Morrison's."

He gazed over the gate at the white cottage, his hand in his coat pocket.

"I thought I'd fled with nothing but the clothes I wore, but when I came through the hill I found this." He took his hand from his pocket. The coin shone against the whiteness of his skin.

I swallowed. "Is that gold?"

"It is, Kate." I felt a tingle as he said my name. "And it's for you."

It was heavy and bright, and warm from his hand. I put it in my pocket without saying anything, still determined not to believe in fairytales.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go and see Mrs. Morrison.”

Mrs. Morrison’s had one of those Scottish Tourism stickers in the window, but the way things had been recently, she hadn’t had a guest for months. She looked at Tom’s muddy boots, long grey coat and the tangled length of his pale hair and pursed her lips. I could see the struggle in her eyes. He smiled at her, a glorious, brilliant smile full of sharpness and light.

She cleared her throat. “Will you be staying long?”

“I hope so,” he said, his hand warm on mine.

“Do you have a deposit?” There was a still pause. Light fell on us, making Tom glitter, outlining Mrs. Morrison in all her ordinariness.

“Would forty pounds be enough, Mrs. Morrison?” I fished the shoe money out of my pocket, feeling grown up and not at all sensible. “Here.”

She frowned at me, then at him. “What name shall I put?”

“Allan,” said Tom. “Tom Allan.”

“Very well, Mr. Allan. We have the room at the back.” She led us down the dim hallway, filled with the smell of soap and stale air.

From the window, we could see the game bird cages.

“I hope they won’t disturb you, Mr. Allan,” she said, sounding as if she hoped they would. “They can make a shocking noise.”

He looked out at the bright birds turning in their stiff circles. “I’ll be fine, Mrs. Morrison, really.”

She nodded, glanced down at our linked hands, up at his wild, pale face. “Well... isn’t it time you were getting home, Kate? Your mother will be wondering where you are.”

“I’ll go in a minute.”

Her eyes moved to his. “Mr. Allan...”

“She will be safe with me, Mrs. Morrison.”

She wasn’t happy, but what could she do? She left the door open behind her.

As soon as she’d gone, a dark shadow swept past the window. The birds raised a great racket, whirring with stupid panic, and everything dimmed as if a cloud had covered the sun. It would have to be an eagle to get the pheasants so upset; I turned to see but Tom’s grip on my wrist grew painful.

“Kate,” he said. He dropped to his knees on the flowered carpet, his head leaning into the hollow of my hip. “Kate.” It sounded as if he was drowning.

I fell to my knees beside him. “What is it? What’s wrong?” His face was white and set, his eyes closed.

“It’s her. She wants me back.”

It felt as if there was no light in the room; everything was suddenly cold and sinister. I stiffened with fear like a stupid bird crouched on the moor. I wrapped my free arm around him and he buried his face in my shoulder. His voice was muffled. “I’m scared.” His hair smelled of sunlight and heather.

For a moment I held him and felt him trembling against me. Then the dark wings passed, the light returned and he leaned back, his eyes laughing. “She’s gone. You saved me again, Kate. How fortunate I didn’t ask the postman for my kiss.”

*

Mum wasn’t pleased that I was so late home. “I’d ask where you’ve been,” she said, “but Mrs. Morrison already told me.”

“He wanted shown to the B&B, Mum,” I said, washing my hands.

She nodded. “You be careful. We don’t know anything about him, and you’re very young.”

*

My Kate has been walking with the man from the hill. I wish Charlie had kept quiet. As if any girl would resist a mystery like that. The man is young enough to be interesting, I hear, in spite of his white hair. Gina Morrison took care to tell me that he was holding Kate’s hand, that when she left them alone together he was soon on his knees in front of her. Not sure what she thinks was going on, but she has a nasty mind. Everyone knows everyone else’s business here. It’s annoying but at least it means there are many eyes watching over Kate. I mustn’t worry.

*

That night he climbed in my window and into my bed. It was around midnight, and the stars hung low in the sky. His skin was cool with the night air, his hair tickled my face. I sat up and pushed him away.

“What are you *doing* here?” I had to whisper or Mum would’ve heard. She sleeps with her window open too. In the darkness I could feel him trembling. I pushed my hair back and tried to forget I was wearing only a t-shirt.

“I’m frightened.” His voice was hardly audible. “The world here is so wide and bright. The sky goes up forever.”

I wrapped my arms around him, kissed his tangled hair. “Stay if you like. But if Mum catches you, you’re dead.”

He turned in my arms and pressed against me. “Kate,” he murmured. “Hold me tight. My wife loves to hunt on nights like this.”

*

In the morning he was gone, but the consequences lasted all day. First was Mum in the kitchen.

“I had the strangest dreams,” she started, but stopped herself and shook her head. “You watch yourself, Kate.” She rubbed the flour off her hands onto the apron. “You know how people talk.”

Charlie came in early and stared at the bruises on my wrist. “Heard that stranger’s been hanging around Kate. Did he do that to you, pet?”

I shook my head. “It was an accident.”

I didn’t miss the glance they exchanged when they thought I wasn’t looking.

“Kate’s a sensible girl,” Mum said, as if saying it would make it true. “She just showed him where the B&B was, didn’t you, love.”

I smelled his hair all day, as if my brain had imprinted the memory. I felt his body against me too, his skin damp against mine. I walked from class to class in a blur. My friends spoke to me, but I didn’t hear myself replying, except when Elspeth took my arm and murmured in my ear, “Are you awake today?”

Kirsty, on my other side, whispered, “I heard about last night. Did you, you know...?”

I blinked at them. “No. No, of course not.”

“But he was in your room, right? That guy Charlie found by the hill? How old is he, Kate?”

Mum was right. People talked. There were no secrets anywhere.

*

Was he really in the house last night? I dreamt, I think, that he was in her bedroom.

This morning when I got up to feed the hens, I heard noises at her window. Surely no one would think six was early enough to go unnoticed in farming country?

She was sleepy this morning, but she’s at that age. She said nothing unusual. I can’t believe she would stay silent about a man—a stranger—in her room overnight. The

idea is just ridiculous. Gina Morrison and her nasty imagination have a lot to answer for.

I need to trust Kate.

I wish it wasn't so difficult.

*

He was waiting for me after school. Elspeth and Kirsty stood and stared. Seen on the grey street, by the school gate, he was almost unbearably exotic. He'd brushed his hair and cleaned the mud from his boots, but he still looked like he belonged in the wild. His bright eyes followed my every movement and I felt something shift in my chest, like I was being pulled towards him.

“How did you get here?”

“I walked.” He grinned at me, only me. “It's not so far. Walk back with me?”

“You are joking, aren't you? It's miles.”

“Not across the hills.” He took my hand with his warm strong fingers and I couldn't stop myself following him.

“But my bag...”

“Here, let me walk you home from school.” His smile had danger in it. “I'll take your bag.”

The walk took ages. I knew Mum would be furious when I got back; I couldn't even phone her—reception was hopeless over the hills. But that was only a tiny thought in the back of my mind. Tom stopped by the loch. “Will you kiss me?”

“I already did, didn't I?”

He laughed. “That kiss was to rescue me. I'd like a kiss just for me, because you want to. Do you?”

I looked at him with his white hair and his blue eyes. I remembered the way he tasted of sweet earth. His face was wicked and laughing.

“Yes.”

*

Mum was waiting for us when we got back, standing by the door with her most serious expression.

“Kate. Into the house.” She didn’t wait for me to obey. “Mr. Allan. Kate is fifteen years old.”

“Nearly sixteen, Mum.”

“Into the house *now*, Kate.” She turned back to Tom. “She is very young and you are a grown man. Now, I am not an ogre but I need to be sure that my daughter is safe. If you want to come and visit that is fine in the *daytime*. If you two go for a walk, I need to know where you are going and when you’ll be back.” She paused. “If that’s clear, then I expect we’ll see you tomorrow. Good evening.”

*

He’s handsome—no doubt about that—and she’s completely infatuated. What’s he after, though? He must be 25 at least. What does he want with a 15 year old? She’s pretty, my Kate, but she’s only a schoolgirl. I can guess, of course, but I don’t like my guesses.

Perhaps it’s just friendship, perhaps it’s innocent. I have no evidence they’ve done anything but hold hands and stay out later than I’m comfortable with.

I did my stern act—it didn’t take much acting, it was all I could do not to scream at them both until I was hoarse. But now he knows, at least, that someone is looking out for Kate, that he can’t do whatever he wants without consequences. I hope that helps. Actually, I hope it scares him off. We’ll have to see.

*

That night he didn't come. I lay awake until 2 a.m. In the morning, Mum looked at my shadowed eyes and hugged me. "I know it's hard, love."

Mrs. Morrison answered her door frowning. "Kate. Does your Mum know you're here?"

"Yes, Mrs. Morrison. She says I can go for a walk with Tom."

"Mm. It'd better be a short walk or you'll miss the bus to school."

Tom was sitting on the bed, a map spread out beside him.

"Where are you going?" My voice was tight.

He looked up, reached out a hand to pull me towards him. "I have to get away before she finds me. I need to cross water. Stornoway would be safe." He looked at the map. "Stavanger would be safer." He drew a deep breath. "Which would you prefer?"

"Don't go."

He put his hands, his long white hands, into my hair, and leaned his forehead against mine. His breath was warm on my skin. "Come with me."

I pulled away. "Don't be daft."

His lips quirked but his voice was serious. "Kate, please, you're my anchor to this world. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"But..." How could I show him how impossible it was if he couldn't see? "What about school?"

"They have schools in Stornoway. And Stavanger."

Behind him, I could see Mr. Morrison by the bird pens, undoing the clips that held the wire down. The birds clattered through the spaces and whirred off into the sky, brown and red. I looked down. I hated the season. I hated that the poor, stupid

pheasants, born in cages and fed like chickens, were released onto the hills for a few short days to taste freedom before they were shot.

“I’d miss Mum.”

He reached out again for my hand, the bones of his wrists were long and fragile.

“Yes. You will.”

“Why can’t you stay here?”

He looked out at the birds. “She’ll catch me. And—I don’t want to go back under the ground, Kate. It’s so cold, and the rivers are full of blood.” His throat moved as he swallowed. “Or she’ll have me killed out here, punishment for leaving her.”

I shook my head. “Don’t be silly. People don’t get killed here. The police would come over the mountain. They’d find out—she’d be in trouble.”

He stroked a hand over my hair, held me against him so I could hear the thunder of his heart. “No one would know it was her. I don’t want to leave you, but I have to go, I have to go soon.”

When he turned back to me, his eyes glittered with tears. I put my arms round him. Suddenly it didn’t seem important to stay and finish school. Mum would be all right. I wasn’t going far. All that mattered was going with him, because if I wasn’t with him, I couldn’t be touching him. And I needed to.

I had to clear my throat, and even then my voice was muffled. “I’ll come.”

He breathed against my hair. “Today?”

“No, tomorrow.” I needed to see Mum again, to steel myself to leave.

“Tomorrow, then.” His voice was warm. “I’ll meet you by the loch after school, then they won’t miss us until supper-time.”

I shook my head. “Not the loch. The season’s started. They’ll be shooting in the hills.”

“By the bus-stop, then. Pack a small bag and don’t tell anyone.”

“I’ll need to tell Mum.”

“Leave her a note, Kate, or she won’t let you go. And don’t tell her where we’re going. If anyone knows, my wife will discover.” He kissed me; my knees went weak. “This has to be our secret.”

*

I wasn’t used to hiding things from Mum. It was difficult, especially at supper-time. I kept my eyes on my food and said as little as possible. She thought I was sulking because of her rules about Tom. That just made it worse. As I stood to go to bed, I watched her bending close to her book, the familiar curve of her shoulders, and I nearly told her. She looked up as I hesitated and the light flashed on her glasses, turning her eyes blank and strange.

“Goodnight, Kate.”

“Goodnight, Mum. I love you.”

Her glance this time was surprise. “I know, darling. I love you too.” She paused; I turned and ran up the stairs. If I stayed I’d betray Tom and then he’d be found.

In my bedroom, I packed in the dark, trying to be quiet, unable to tell if I was packing my grey jeans or my blue ones. I left my toothbrush—if she saw it missing, Mum would know. I’d buy another. Outside, the pheasants were calling to each other on the hills, stupid and doomed.

Writing the note was impossible. I had so much I wanted to say and no words to say it. I settled for, “*Dear Mum, I’m going away with Tom. I’ll phone when I can. I love you*” and left it on my desk where she’d find it when she checked my room after I didn’t come home.

Then I sat on my bed and waited for morning.

*

Something's wrong with Kate. Something's wrong and I don't know what it is. I know she saw Tom this morning before school. She barely spoke at supper. She's done that ever since she was tiny—if she has a secret she stops talking, just in case she tells it.

I need to know how serious this secret is. It could be nothing—it could be a forbidden kiss with Mr. Allan. Please God don't let her have slept with him. Did I really hear him in her room? I must remember: Kate is sensible. She's almost old enough to decide these things for herself. But I need to know what's happened.

*

I couldn't concentrate at school. I was going to be with Tom. I would see his wild pale face whenever I wanted. I shivered, remembering the warm sweetness of his mouth on mine. It was frightening, to be leaving everything I knew, but not as frightening as losing him.

*

I found the note on her desk, as soon as I went into her room this morning. What a secret it was she was hiding.

I phoned the school. They couldn't find her. "She'll be out for lunch, Mrs. Macleod." But all I could think was that she'd gone. She'd gone—my baby gone with that man. I never guessed it was anything like this. Now he'd got her, he could do anything. I ran to the Morrisons. The door was locked. I ran round the house and stood by the empty bird cages, shouted at the window. And there he was—in the room at the back, calm as anything and smiling through the glass. Gina Morrison and Charlie came round the house after me. Mr. Allan just smiled and shook his head and said it was up to Kate and she was old enough to decide for herself.

"Don't be stupid—she's fifteen years old."

He opened the side window so I could hear his voice. "That's quite old enough to know."

My hand fell on the gun leaning against the cage. "Please, Mr. Allan. She's all I have." God why do I always talk in clichés when I'm upset? He'd noticed—his lips twitched.

“She’s grown up, Ms. Macleod. She wants to be with me now.”

“Mr. Allan. She’s just a child. She doesn’t understand what you want.”

His eyes were opaque, reflecting the cold blue of the sky. “She knows exactly what I want.”

I think I meant to threaten him. I lifted the gun, my hands shaking. His eyes widened, darkened. The light seemed to dim, to leave us alone in the darkness; there was nothing in the world but his face, white and drawn and wordless. I felt a rush of furious gladness, an ecstasy of wild power that flooded through me like honey, like vodka.

I didn’t know, at first, where the noise had come from or the thud of the butt against my stomach—had someone hit me? Then Gina screamed and Charlie grabbed the gun.

“Oh Beth.” His voice was shaking. “You’ve killed him.”

There was blood all over Gina’s back room; the window was shattered. Glass and blood all over the carpet inside, and Mr. Allan lying on the terrible carpet, half his head missing. His remaining eye staring at me. I was sick all over the windowsill. Sick again as soon as I turned around. Charlie’s hands were shaking. It was Gina who saved us.

“Hush now, both of you. It’s done. And perhaps just as well. I’ll make us a cup of tea, and we can talk about what to do now.”

*

After school I sat on the wall by the bus-stop and waited, but Tom didn’t come. Instead, Mum did. As soon as I saw her, I knew something was terribly wrong.

“What is it?” I jumped down, leaned in the open window of the car. “Mum—what’s happened?”

She opened the car door. Her hand was shaking. “Sit down, Kate. I have some bad news.”

Dread grabbed me round the throat. “Where’s Tom?”

She stared out at the street while she told me. Tom had been in the hills. Charlie had been hunting. There had been an accident. Terrible but no one's fault. The signs had been up for days. Everyone knew the season was starting. Tom shouldn't have been there. But he was an outsider, so maybe he hadn't known. Anyway, she was so sorry. There had been nothing anyone could do. No evidence of who he was, no cards or a drivers license. No point bothering the police, getting them to come over the mountain. No point getting people into trouble when no one had meant any harm.

*

They buried him under the Blue Hill. I pushed the coin into the scarred earth; perhaps he'd need it, perhaps it could pay his passage back under the hill.

Until I left for college in Aberdeen, I spent all my time by the fence, watching. I waited for the Queen of the Fae to break out of the earth in triumph; I waited for Tom, with his wild face and dangerous smile. But nothing changed. The Hill stayed a bald hump in the middle of the fields, even the scar at its base started to heal, covered again by the rough blue-green grass.

We should have left when he asked me.

I can't forgive myself, and I can't go home. I'll never forget he's there: back in the earth he came from.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Dawn Sperber lives and writes in New Mexico, in thankfulness for the beauty of the land, and dancing with hula hoops. She recently completed a collection of short stories, and is looking for the right publisher. Her writings have appeared in *Annalemma*, *Gargoyle*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Moon Milk Review*, and elsewhere.

Pill and the Ant Palace

by Dawn Sperber

Beyond the next hill's familiar horizon line, there in a hot valley, the ornate sand palace of the Queendom of the Ants quivers with energy. Its arched entrance streams with ants: workers, those of regal status, and even some wearing long velvet gowns, who walk on four legs and dangle two limp aristocratic arms.

From floor to ceiling, ants scurry everywhere; their bodies cover the palace in a scramble of efficiency. Whether it's cleaning or building or changing outfits throughout the day, each activity occurs in a flurry; some climb over others if it's the quickest path to their destination. Sure, it might look like chaos, but when they disperse—at once, leaving the area—their work has been precisely done. The place is immaculate.

Here, the walls are intricate as snowflakes, made of spit and sand and the highly valued sugar, which is the meal of the Queen. The sun shines down on the ant palace, and penetrates the transparent granules in the walls. Rays of light stream diagonally across rooms, and shine off the ants' large black eyes, which adds a sparkle to their gaze, as if they're all in love.

And though they all love keeping time, the palace contains not one clock. Only hourglasses. Hourglasses of all different sizes stand watch in rooms and halls and courtyards. For here, all time is relative. There are no pauses when something needs doing; jobs are their joy, and the ants love to be useful. They create new jobs in their minds even as their current one is half-done. Hurry, hurry, they urge, aloud, and also inside their large heads. And the exclamation is like a freedom chant. For the faster they go, the more tasks they can complete during their lifetimes, and that's the true freedom in their world: the time to get every job done.

Messages come in constantly on their antennae, of poor helpless projects that cannot complete themselves. The ants pride themselves on being champions for the helpless situations, who are like damsels in distress calling from the tower window. "I'll save you!" the ants bellow, and rush off to mend the banister, fourteen stories high, or carry a beetle shell awning, or aid in the dressing of a vain beauty. (The fanciest ants actually require a small army of helpers; some to hold the dressee still, while others bite belt-ties and run circles, to keep the division between thorax and abdomen fashionably thin.) No job is too small.

And no ant leg is too small either.

You might think ants have naturally thin legs. It's a common mistake; don't feel ashamed. But in actuality, an ant's legs could get fat. If an ant sat around all day eating the sugar in the walls, watching sand grains fall in the hourglass, and witnessing all the work being done, fast as chemical reactions... Why, if an ant didn't race, her legs would swell like sausages and waddle slowly as a gluttonous caterpillar's.

It happened once actually.

Her name was Pill. This was back many ant ancestors, but all know the tale as if it happened only an hourglass ago. She started out normal enough, with a healthy amount of busy in her veins, and legs as thin as anyone's. But then came the day when the main hall's hourglass broke.

It was a small tragedy. A pyramid of ants were tiered to clean the dust off the timepiece's top. Ladders are never used in the ant palace; it takes too much time to retrieve one from the storage closet, carry it over, and prop it up. Instead—Hup! Hup! 1,2,3!—like acrobats, the ants arrange in formation, which uses time and also many ants at once. The cleaning of the top of the hourglass was a daily job, but in trying to beat their last completion time, the ants became reckless. The pyramid wobbled, their bodies slipped, and a few reflexively climbed onto one edge. The additional weight shifted the hourglass off balance, and down the towering timepiece plummeted.

Pill fell from the middle of the ant pile. She somersaulted across the floor, and watched, dazed, an astounding vision that changed her life. The top globe of the hourglass fell like the setting sun, and at the floor's horizon, exploded. Then time scattered.

Sand flurried up, caught sunlight, and flew, sparkling like a wish granted. The moment was timeless. All Pill's life, there was a nearby hourglass at hand, trickling out how long the moment lasted. Each moment was measured, compared with the completion time of previous moments, a network of relation—no activity truly individual.

Except for this one. Equilibrium spun, a bruise beginning behind her eye, Pill couldn't move after her head knocked the floor. So, she peacefully watched the whole catastrophe occur. The sand of time looked whimsical as its floating dust lightly settled. For once, the reasoning of cause and effect, one moment connected to the next, got left behind, and Pill's eyes saw timeless beauty.

She was never the same again.

All the other ants started cleaning and working on repairs just as soon as their legs reached the floor. It was like a party: Look at all this new work that needs doing! Full of self-importance and efficiency, the room of ants ran to action.

Pill kept resting her head on the floor, and watched them go. Ants ran this way and that, climbed over her with their light feet as if she were a stepping stone, giving a critical eye to see if the corpse cavalry should be called.

But Pill wasn't dead. After a while, she wasn't stunned, and it's up for debate whether her fall did incur the brain damage used to explain her behavior for the rest of her life. She was simply enjoying the time.

A huddle of ants hefted up her reclined form and propped her by the wall to clear the area, and Pill thought about the enjoyment of being lifted; the military-like precision of her carriers' steps; the sturdiness of the wall behind her back; and the repairing ants' syncopated dance.

That day, Pill's mind gained a philosopher's slant and artist's vision, though artists and philosophers had never been heard of in the palace, so they called her a word they did know, and that was "lazy." From then on, Pill attentively absorbed beauty, as well as her normal ant-ration of food, and since she expended little energy with her quick appreciative eyes, or while carefully sculpting sand grains, her calories didn't burn away. Instead, they grew hefty in her body, until her thin ant legs turned fat.

Everyone worried about Pill, and tried not to. Tried to ignore her enormous happy form, contented grin, and antennae swaying to the rhythm of her private songs. But no one could ignore Pill for long. She regularly gave annoying cries like, "Beautiful!", "The joy of it all!", and "Did you see that?!" It made no sense.

She was always around, flaunting her fat larva legs and waiting for more hourglasses to fall. The children were kept away from her. Ants whispered that her condition might be contagious. For awhile, she seemed a useful example to make ants race faster. "Come on, Pill could hang a chandelier faster than this!" they'd say. And, "If you don't improve your time, we'll get Pill to take your place!" An insidious preoccupation with leg-width spread throughout the colony.

Any stragglers caught talking to Pill were shunned for weeks. Ants took longer passageway routes just to avoid her. Their necks craned the other way to avoid her sight. And their jobs took longer as Pill's laziness spawned more gossip.

This inefficiency quickly turned obvious. "What are we going to do?" one disgruntled ant would ask another, as an on-looking crowd tisked the sand grains wasted during the dialogue. All agreed, Pill's pleasure in watching actually slowed

jobs down. Their legs felt heavy and bloated, and many began skipping meals, worried about their figures, which resulted in a lack of energy later in the day. Pill would surely crumble the palace down to pieces.

Meanwhile, Pill's intellect, along with her legs, expanded. She contemplated colors' contrasting hues, and the harmony of trine angles. In the fractal design of tree roots, she saw her own fractal relationship of self within ant colony. And little by little, an idea started building inside her, a grand expression to channel her amassing inspiration.

The palace had never seen a more ostentatious disruption. Not when the tornado came and tore the onion-dome from the roof. Not when the glue in the ants' spit refused to hold, and walls came crashing down day and night (which resulted in a Queendom-wide change in diet). Not during the invasion of the giant termites who slaughtered half the colony.

Pill was a demon spirit, set to undo the pace of life. Oh sure, she looked placid as a transparent newborn unable yet to chew. But she was the true devil in disguise. She set the pace of activity at risk, and ant morale was sinking. All began to feel like second-class champions who just couldn't get to the damsel in time.

So, one morning when the tapestries might as well have been woven underwater, the ballroom cleaned by slugs, and the ladies dressed in a slow-motion dream; when it seemed all of ant society might well be crumbling, the chemical message was sent far and wide:

Pill must die.

Every ant rushed at once, jaws open, ready to bite down on the obstacle to freedom. They raided her in a massive force, believing she was the weight riding sand that made time speed. It was an exhilarating fight for all the ants believed in.

And to Pill, it was like a moment she'd always waited for. The coordination of her family, all their gleaming eyes, surrounded her like she was in the star-shot cosmos. She felt a sublime perfection: their bodies pressed her, full of adrenaline and unified purpose; fervor radiating throughout the crowd like one clear note.

On cue, the teeming swarm bit down. Each swallowed some of Pill's body, and once they did, a rush sizzled their collective system. Now, they believed, they would speed faster than ever. Their antennae chorused, "The evil is gone!"

*

You might think that the ants were changed after they each swallowed a bit of Pill, that perhaps they gained a new easy acceptance of time. But if they'd been affected, they didn't stop to notice. They truly believed they'd vanquished their useless enemy.

After that day, the Queendom's palace grew in complexity. Ornate moldings lined spiral pathways; there were more acrobatic scaffolding poses, spotless hourglass tops, and no helpless jobs left undone. In fact, each year, a parade is still held in celebration of the Defeat of Pill, and a long synchronized line of velvet-gowned fancy ants quickly trot throughout the land.

Of course, none of the ants could know what an aerial view reveals, that their new parade formations trace animated spirals, fractal flower-of-life designs, perfect circles that unwind into rippling waves, and then retreat back into the palace's grotto door.

As for Pill, she died with a smile on her mandible, and was instantly reincarnated as a female human, fated to revolutionize the world of modern dance. As a young girl, she'd spin and leap through her dirt yard piled high with ant mounds, impervious to the sting of their venom. Decades later, in mid-performance one day, she'd recall a second-long flash of her previous ant life, then twirl out of the reverie with the stunningly economic grace, her specialty, that drove the crowds wild.

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GUEST WRITER

Ashley Mayrose lives in West Des Moines, IA, with her family and is currently finishing up her senior year of high school. She can usually be found reading, writing, playing her flute or violin, drawing, tormenting her younger brother, or daydreaming. She also enjoys history, Harry Potter, sarcasm, and coffee.

SPECIAL NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #14, "Numbers."

Falling Stars

by Ashley Mayrose

The shot rings out from 13 meters away, and you can't help counting it as the 1,187th one you've heard today. After the 113th bullet fired the noise quit hitting so hard. After a while, the bullets exiting the 31-inch barrels and ricocheting off stone buildings, easily passing through flesh and bone, are no longer single shots, but one loud, continuous rumble, like the purr of a giant cat or quaking thunder.

Two—no, three—bullets strike the wall above your head, next to your left knee, and in the gut of the comrade who's stood by you for 274 days, 16 hours, 30 minutes. Twenty seconds after the shots struck stone then flesh, he's on the ground, unconscious. If you could get him to a hospital, he could make it. There is no reason his name should be added to that unholy list of casualties. There are already 16,592 names on that list. For the last 17 days the list has added an average of 10 names a day. The odds are not in your friend's favor.

Or in yours.

You wish, as his blood creates a dark stain on the broken concrete of the street as large as a fallen eagle, that you weren't quite so sure of the statistics. But wishing doesn't stop the numbers from racing across your mind like they have ever since you were little. You can't stop the calculations as you kneel beside that man who is more than a friend. Numbers have been a natural part of your life since before you can remember; it's why the army came for you, asked for you, begged you to aid your country in her time of need. And it's how you know the wound your comrade acquired will kill him if he does not reach a hospital in 23 minutes.

23 minutes. That's how long it takes before he's gone, so completely and utterly gone.

The calm you'd established earlier threatens to run like the sun far, far away. Hours ago the sun fled behind the curvature of the earth. Horrified, you're sure, by the sights its light had illuminated. It is the moon, now, who lights your path. It is her cool light that looks unflinchingly down upon you and your fallen comrade, and the blood that soaks the cracked pavement. You look at the moon's face, weary with crags and crevices. You are wasting time. But looking at the moon, its distance from you doesn't seem as far as the 384,403 km that you know it is. You take heart from that still, unflinching face, and when the next bullets ring out you ignore them. Three blocks down and two and a half stories up, in a stone building with walls two and a half feet thick, you can hear an IED explode and the ground shivers.

You know if you continue to stand here your cover will be blown. What cover there still is, at least, after the hell that's blown this city apart. The grenades will come raining down, small falling stars like those that wink benignly beside the moon's troubled visage. But these stars splash the world in blood. They are the reason for the moon's sorrow.

You wonder if you can grab your fallen friend and take him somewhere, far away from the blood and the gore and the shots that ring out in groups of threes at sporadic intervals, twenty or so a minute. You're wearing your pack, fifty pounds of supplies and another twenty of ammunition. Your gun is another thirty. Your friend weighs 257 pounds all alone, without the field pack and ammunition he can no longer use.

If you run, there's a chance you can make it to a safe house five blocks away. The number of variables in that run is not reassuring. If you dodge the fifty bullets that will spring towards you, you can make it there in fifteen minutes. If you don't slip on the bits of broken pavement, or fall on the crystal shards of glass from shattered windows, you have a chance. If you fail, you die.

If, if, if. For a person for whom numbers and their solutions are always so close, this equation is uncommonly hard to look at. There's a difference, you realize, between crunching numbers in the basement levels of the army headquarters and in the middle of a battle-destroyed city. In that room in the sublevels, there was a pure, calming cocoon of silence for reflection and puzzle-solving. That kind of silence doesn't exist here.

A ninth shot rings out, then a tenth. That noise is nothing compared to the sounds made from the living, and from those passing on. Their shrieks and cries and moans have chased you ever since you came here. You force those sounds from your mind and focus on the shots. The enemy is at three and eight o'clock, give a meter left or right.

Your back is to the building, a mere two inches from the cold, broken stone wall. In front of you is a toppled army truck that could hold 8 men and all their baggage if it hadn't been destroyed. Gasoline leaks from a cracked tank onto the concrete, mixing with the blood of your friend. It has already formed a pool ten inches in diameter around his abdomen. The numbers race across your mind. To form a puddle that size....

You don't have much time.

You take his pack off him, that worthless 50 pound pack that did nothing to save his life. His hand is already cold beneath yours, cold as the fractured concrete and the shattered glass from the army truck. Cold as the light that spills from the moon and creates dark crevices of pain in your friend's face. Craters of age, and the shadow of death. You feel the cold seep into you, a creeping frost that lodges like a shard of ice in the pit of your stomach.

A sudden static noise from nearby tears your attention away. An order sounds, broken by the static, the order you don't want to hear. You shake your head, but the order repeats and repeats, each time inflicting a deeper pain in the depth of your gut, the same place your friend was shot. The ice cold despair threatens to stay forever.

*“Operation 5-3-4-7-Charlie-Foxtrot-Delta commencing in thirteen minutes.
Operation 5-3-4-7-Charlie-Foxtrot-Delta commencing in thirteen minutes. Operation
5-3-4-7....”*

You grab your friend by the shoulders and heave him onto your back. The warning runs through your mind as the shots ringing out accent each point like a thunderclap in your ears. The pavement is broken and rough beneath the worn boots you were issued. The ice has settled deeply, but you ignore it.

You hear the words go round and round your head, urging you on. “The nukes are coming,” you whisper to the man slung across your back. As if he can hear. “We have to get out.”

You look up at that moon, willing its rays to be brighter and guide you. Hoping somewhere someone else is looking at the same moon, far from any battlefield. Praying someday the moon will be able to find peace at night, instead of the horrors of war and mankind. Is there still such a place in the world?

Twelve minutes.

You run and run. A bullet grazes your left elbow, $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch deep, and debris from a falling building rains down on your shoulders. *Seven minutes.* You have 4.34 blocks to go. You run. Your friend's weight is constant and horrible on your back. He doesn't have much time.

Time. Four minutes.

The safe house is nearby, so close you can almost feel the walls around you that would protect you and your friend. Three stories below ground, a special composite of minerals that defy that death brought on by nuclear bombs. If they'd had those in Nagasaki, maybe the Second World War wouldn't have gone so well

for the Allies. More death and destruction might have occurred in that war a hundred-plus years ago, numbers far worse than 62 million.

Who knows. Maybe if the Allies had lost, you wouldn't be here now with a downed soldier across your back and your sleeve drenched in scarlet. Maybe if history had played out differently, you wouldn't have to run through streets marked with craters and blood. Maybe if no one had ever created the bombs that ruled this world, and the formula of death hadn't been found, your ability with numbers could have been put to use helping people instead of killing them.

But that's all history; a century-plus separates you from those childlike bombs that started the world, and you, down this death-strewn, fire-scarred path. You can calculate the meters, the paces, the time it will take you to make it to that safe house you're trying so hard to reach.

3.14 blocks. That's 1036.2 feet.

Speed of running: 3.8 miles per hour. That's 5.573 feet per second, or 334.38 feet every minute.

Number of blocks in a minute? 1.01327. Arrival time: 3.09 minutes from now.

Your commander said knowing numbers would save you.

"Operation 5-3-4-7-Charlie-Foxtrot-Delta commencing in 2.5 minutes."

2.5 minutes. You won't make that. The numbers won't allow it.

Numbers don't lie. But all the numbers you've calculated don't matter as the bullets—two on your left, one on the right—streak towards you. What's the good of being able to recall every formula for every bomb, every code from any country in the world, every birth and death day of every man you've ever known, if you're about to die?

And with that realization comes another, colder one. The moon, which had watched you unwaveringly this far in your struggle to live, seems to lose its luster as your mind continues its calculations, against your better judgment.

Time still left: 2.25 minutes

Speed needed to reach destination: 7.67 feet per second, or 5.22 mph

Variables that can quicken speed: 3

Variables that can quicken speed that you can control: 1

But you can't; not really. Because the only variable you can change to make you reach safety in time is the weight you carry that drags you down. The variable you can correct to make it is the 257 additional pounds slung across your back. The variable is the life of your friend. Your comrade. Your brother-in-arms.

You could drop him to that bloodied and soot-blackened concrete. You could leave him to die; it would be relatively quick, and even if you made it to the hospital they might not be able to save him. Your people have always been better at killing than saving. Isn't that why you should survive, even if it means leaving your brother behind? Wouldn't he understand that age old instinct for self preservation? Isn't that what every commander you've ever had would urge you to do?

Two minutes.

You've continued running through all your calculations. You don't have to think about it; the shots have quit firing, and there is an odd stillness in the air. Everyone can sense what is coming. But as that last thought crossed your mind, an older memory resurfaces of one of the army regiment's motto:

Sic itur ad astra.

This is the way to the stars.

Gradually, your feet slow their panicked movement. Your breath breaks from your chest in heaving gasps and splutters.

"This is it, Comrade," you whisper, lowering him gently from your back onto the pavement bathed in moonlight. The moon has washed this area of the road clean.

The blood and dust and soot is hidden beneath the pure light that lies across it like a blanket.

One minute. You take off your outer jacket and make it into a pillow beneath the wounded soldier's head. You arrange his hands peacefully across his chest and settle down beside him. After your frantic rush to safety, the odd stillness of this little patch of moonlight is soothing. The words, now, are what race across your mind. The moon, when you look up, is watching closely.

Thirty seconds. The face of the moon changes, and you see in her hollows and craters the faces of everyone you've ever loved. Your parents. Your sister. That girl you've had your eye on for years but never had the courage to talk to.

Courage. It's a funny thing.

Fifteen seconds.

You see the faces of your fallen comrades, and the face of the man who lies tranquil beside you, the bloodied shirt dyed pure white by the shine of the moon.

"This is the way to the stars," you tell the silent man beside you. *Ten seconds.*

"This is the way. With me beside you, until the end, and the moon shining down on us from oh, so far away. Someday she'll look down on a world filled with people who will live in peace and love each other. I promise." *Five seconds.*

"This is just the next path forward, Brother. We'll walk together down it." You look up, and against all odds your brother's eyes open to gaze upwards, too.

Two seconds.

"A path to the stars."

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