



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #23
JULY 2014



**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS FACE A DIFFICULT
DECISION...**

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FIRST PLACE

Susan M. Lemere is a social worker and mother who has moonlighted as a tooth fairy, though not this particular one. She graduated from the Solstice MFA Program in Creative Writing at Pine Manor College. She has had poetry published in *The Quotable* and *Waterhouse Review*, and is thrilled to have won first place with this, her first published story. She would be equally thrilled to hear from other readers and writers at Susanmlemere@gmail.com.

Incgonito

by Susan M. Lemere

Friday, March 19, 2010

Dear Tooth Fairy,

I am writing on behalf of Billy LaGrange, a student in my first grade class at Fairfield Elementary School. This afternoon at recess, his tooth fell onto the playground amidst patches of grass and loose gravel, where it was impossible to find, despite the best efforts of Billy, his friends, and a recess aide. Poor Billy was inconsolable about having nothing to leave under his pillow, and he begged me to write this for him.

I should mention that Billy told me he was planning to use the proceeds from his tooth, along with some piggy bank money, to purchase the children's book *Standing Pride*. Since Billy is a good kid (and frankly, the only one in my class who would care about owning a book!), I am writing to vouch for the fact that his tooth was in fact quite wobbly this week, and that I witnessed his genuine tears when he was made to come in from the schoolyard empty-handed.

Please accept this note as verification of said tooth, and please tell him his teacher said that any proceeds from the tooth fairy should go toward reading material only.

Sincerely,

Katherine Campbell

*

E-Mail to Katherine Campbell

Saturday, March 20, 2010

To PinkPeony12@gmail.com

Dear Katherine,

Thanks for looking out for young Billy. You'll be glad to know that the lost tooth issue has been addressed to Billy's satisfaction. Frankly, though, I'm less concerned about Billy's plight than I am about your own. Didn't you promise yourself you were going to apply for that Masters program in Speech Pathology this year? What about that reading group you told everybody you were "looking into"? And do I even need to mention your vowing you'd get back to the gym? You're not looking so hot these days, and it's hard to imagine what excuse you would have for staying so stagnant in your life.

Forgive my bluntness, Katherine, but it *is* your time that's ticking away. You may be too old for quarters under your pillow, but you're just the right age for this particular wake-up call. So wake up, honey. The world is waiting for you to stop sleepwalking through it.

Yours,

The Tooth Fairy

*

Saturday, March 20, 2010

To: TheToothFairy@gmail.com

Dear “Tooth Fairy”,

Okay, hee hee, ha ha, that was a good one. Is this you, Mom? Roberta? And how’d you even know about Billy’s tooth fairy note? I don’t remember talking about it. Please fess up and say who you are—I want to be able to share the laugh.

Katherine

*

Sunday, March 28, 2010

To: PinkPeony12@gmail.com

Dear Katherine,

I told you, I’m the Tooth Fairy. If I’d decided to go under an alias, don’t you think I’d be Cleopatra or Angelina Jolie? Besides, my identity is no big deal compared to the mess you’re getting yourself into even as I write.

Listen up, dear. Do not, do *not* go on a second date with that Neanderthal from East County. You have absolutely nothing in common with the man, no matter what the stupid compatibility dimensions on NewLove.com say, and you were so bored with him at that ridiculous barbeque place, I don’t know why you would subject yourself to more of the same. For crying out loud, stop selling yourself short! The pickings are never *that* slim.

Your Concerned and Watchful Tooth Fairy

*

Monday, March 29, 2010

To: TeacherOfTheYear@gmail.com

Dear Roberta,

Ha! You are so busted! You're the only one who knew about that awful date, Madame "Tooth Fairy," so you've given your identity away. Aren't you clever. Maybe we should join forces and start a small business doing tooth fairy letters for grownups. It has to pay better than teaching.

Katherine

*

Monday, March 29, 2010

To: PinkPeony12@gmail.com

Katherine,

What the hell are you talking about? Are you drunk? Call me soon for girl talk. Extra credit if you actually make sense.

Roberta

*

Sunday, April 4, 2010

To: PinkPeony12@gmail.com

Katherine,

Although I sympathize with your latest predicament, you can't say I didn't warn you. If you had left it as just a bad first date, you would've been able to write off the experience completely as just a long, forgettable evening with a complete bore. Now what you have on your hands is an ongoing problem with a stalker-bore. Aren't you wishing now you had followed my advice about being a little more selective?

And another thing. That Ativan you're supposed to take "as needed" for anxiety? I'm pretty sure "as needed" doesn't mean every time you've had a bad day and

just want to drop off fast to sleep. Are you looking to becoming an addict like your uncle?

Hope your feathers aren't ruffled. I know that I, for one, am sometimes in need of some tough love from my inner circle of friends. I wouldn't mention any of it if I didn't care, dear.

The Tooth Fairy

*

Monday, April 5, 2010

To: TheToothFairy@gmail.com

Dear "Tooth Fairy",

Okay, I don't know who the hell you are, but now you're starting to piss me off. Maybe the stalker reference fits you better than it fits the barbeque guy. People think they're so anonymous in cyberspace, but all this is more traceable than you might suppose. So cut the crap, or I'm going to the police.

K.

*

Friday, April 9, 2010

To: Ladybibliophile@yahoo.com

Katherine,

You silly person, you. Why you would go to the trouble of setting up a whole new email account when 1) I know about everything about you to begin with, and 2) I am obviously *on your side*. Did you even stop to think that your hostility in the face of my well-intentioned efforts to help you might be a tad hurtful on this end? Most people would jump at the chance for a little omniscient guidance now and then, but you—what? You're too stubborn? Too proud?

Whatever happened to the girl who used to read *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*? The girl who hid that banged-up robin under the porch so you could still try to tend to it after your father said you had to let it go? I miss that girl. What's become of the Katherine you work so hard at hiding from the world?

Worn out but still devoted,

The Tooth Fairy

*

Sunday, April 11, 2010

To: TheToothFairy@gmail.com

Dear Unsettling Anonymous Correspondent,

I know you're caught up in this tooth fairy prank thing, but you're starting to creep me out. Nobody knows about the robin. Not even my parents.

Who *are* you?

Katherine

*

To: Teacheroftheyear@gmail.com

Hey, Roberta.

It feels ridiculous writing to you when we pass each other in the hall six times a day, but I think I need a girl's night out with you. Or maybe an Ashram or a lobotomy or something. I definitely need something.

Lately my life feels like a slow ride on the Titanic, and while I can paste on the great big I'm-fine-thanks face with the best of them, at the end of the day, I just wish I'd wake up and be somebody else. Anybody else. Know what I mean?

Maybe I just want to be you. You're as psyched about teaching as when we started. You go scuba diving and skiing. You're single without being lonely or down on yourself. You date if you want to, when you want to, who you want to.

So can you just hear my confession coming? Yeah, I slept with the barbeque guy. The one I told you I wasn't seeing anymore. God knows why. I never liked him, not even a little. Guess I thought it would be nice to not wake up alone. Only the second it was over, all I wanted was to be alone. And of course, by then, it was too late.

Roberta, the man is calling me 25 times a day now. I think last night he drove by my place a few times, too, but I may have just imagined that, or maybe it was the vodka talking. Admittedly, the vodka has been getting some extra air time lately.

It's late, and I'm so exhausted, I'm not even sure any of my rambling is making sense. I'll save this for now and look at again in the morning. If it makes me sound as pathetic as I feel right now, I can just delete the whole thing. But it would be cool if you could read my mind and know how much I need to talk to you.

Katherine

*

Dear Katherine,

I'm so glad you hit "send" instead of "delete". I have Saturday night free, and we are going out together, period. In the meantime, please do the following, no questions asked:

Block the Neanderthal on phone and email. If you don't know how to do this, call me or come by, and I'll show you. You are being too nice for your own good, and there is a fine line between sparing someone's feelings and painting a giant target on yourself.

Gather all pills and booze at your house and flush them. Seriously. Do not replenish supply until we've had a chance to talk.

Tell yourself five hundred times at the start and end of each day: "Roberta Hartnick has outstanding taste in friends." Repeat as needed until you believe it.

Above all, hang in there, sweetie. Things will get better. I've got your back.

Your friend,

Roberta

*

Friday, May 28, 2010

To: Ladybibliophile@yahoo.com

Dear Katherine,

I've left you alone for a while because you seemed so put off by my earlier attempts at communication, and my tooth fairy identity turned out to be a much harder sell than I expected. In fact, I wasn't planning to write again at all. But please keep reading, and in a moment you'll understand why I'm reaching out again at this time.

What I'm about to tell you is hard. Roberta has just had a stroke. She's on her way to the hospital now, and she probably isn't going to make it. I know she is your best friend, and more than that, I know she's the only one you really confide in these days. So I know that this will hit you hard.

Here's the thing. When I picture you six months from now, I can picture two scenarios clearly, and I don't know which one will happen. But I feel like you need to know about both of them, so here goes.

In the first scenario, you drink too much. You start drinking every day, actually, and you take Ativan more often, too. Teaching is all you do anymore, but the trouble is, you're going to be fired because you won't be able to keep getting up

in the morning. Or because you crash the car and get a DUI charge and it's all over the news. Or maybe you'll quit so the job isn't interfering with your new priority, drinking. Whichever the case, the result will be the same. You will not be teaching. And you know that old saying about not putting all your eggs in one basket? All of your eggs have been in the teaching basket, and once they break—well, I don't know what will happen to you.

But let's talk about the other scenario, so you'll know that I'm not just Ms. Gloom and Doom. In that scenario, you've moved to a smaller apartment. It's an attic apartment, kind of cute with the dormered ceiling you've always wanted, and it's a lot more affordable than where you are now. You're saving money to apply to graduate school.

You've also joined that book club. One night, the book club is discussing that Andres Dubus III novel *House of Sand and Fog*, and suddenly you start to cry, without even seeing it coming. You're totally embarrassed, and you want to just leave, but then people start sharing about the awful things they've been through, and about making it the other side of terrible times. Your eyes are puffy and you feel like you're so ugly to everyone, and you just want to get the hell out of there. But you stick it out, and you listen to the radio on the way home, and by the time you pull in the driveway, Angie from the book club has left a message on your voice mail. She wonders if you'd like to go to a poetry reading this weekend, even though you know nothing whatsoever about poetry and are not turning cartwheels over the prospect of having a new pal.

But you decide to go to the reading, and discover that you don't, in fact, hate all poetry, and that some even makes a bit of sense to you when you listen to it. Angie's not Roberta—not by a long shot!—but she has a goofy sense of humor and will listen when you tell her about books you've read or movies you've seen, and she may not be a best friend, but she's a first friend. A first friend of the new era. And from what I can tell, she's actually pretty cool.

So much of life, Katherine, is what we do with what happens to us. Don't you think? Isn't it what we try to set the stage for with our kids? Lose a tooth, but hey, check this out. Put it under your pillow, and here's a shiny new quarter for

you. You don't get back what you lost, but you do get something different, and good, and maybe it even goes toward something you really want.

I'm sorry if this message from me is yet another annoyance to you, but I really felt compelled to write it. I'm so sorry about Roberta, and sincerely hope this will soften the blow, to whatever extent that a blow like that can be softened.

In case you haven't figured it out yet, you were one of my favorite loose-tooth kids. I guess any one of us, at any time, can have some trouble letting go.

All my best,

The Tooth Fairy

*

July 16, 2010

To: TheToothFairy@gmail.com

Dear Tooth Fairy,

Well, you were right about the condition, but not the prognosis. Roberta did have a stroke, but she's a fighter, and she has rallied. In terms of her rehabilitation, well, so far, so good.

My life is as changed as you predicted. I'm in that new apartment, which is as cozy and adorable as you suggested, in a total-lack-of-storage-space kind of way. And I did indeed join the Book Club. I try to read out loud to Roberta as often as I can get there, because that's what she would do for me if the shoe was on the other foot. As for Angie, I decided to cut to the chase and invite her out first. No sense forming a friendship on bawling your eyes out over a piece of fiction.

As far as you're concerned, I keep our correspondence to myself, as I am not looking to find myself in the psych unit above Roberta's floor. But I'm remembering the coins you used to leave under my pillow, and the way it made me believe as a little girl that good things could come my way. I'm sure there's an age limit for the whole coin-leaving thing, but I'm wondering if you've had

any experience writing letters of recommendation for graduate school admissions? I'm told that it helps to ask someone that everyone knows.

Of course you know I'm kidding. I've been a good secret-keeper ever since I was a little girl.

Katherine

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SECOND PLACE

Helen Rossiter has finally settled in Ottawa, Canada, after a life time wandering the globe. This makes her accent something of an anomaly and allows her to re-invent herself every time someone asks: "Now where do you come from?" This ability to make things up has led to the writing of numerous short stories. "The Quality of Life" is the eighth story she has had published in the past year.

The Quality of Life

by Helen Rossiter

Julia had a problem with the term 'significant other'. It was on the invitation to join Steven's employers in celebrating the Christmas season. Management invites you and your significant other, etcetera etcetera.

"Why not just say spouse?" Julia grumbled.

"Not every significant other is a spouse," Steven said. "Do you want a drink?" He pulled glasses from the cupboard and a bottle of tonic water from the fridge.

Julia couldn't think of anything she'd enjoy less than spending an evening with a group of overindulging computer savants. "I'm not going," she said. She watched Steven pour gin and tonic, heavy on the tonic.

"It'll be fun." Fun wasn't something that Steven did well so his argument wasn't convincing. He told Julia that if she didn't go, she'd be fueling the office gossip columns. "They think that because you're my wife, you must be odd," he said. So she agreed to go, if for no other reason than to prove them right.

And then of course, Steven destroyed any fun she might have had, left to her own devices. Just as his co-workers and their significant others began to lose their social inhibitions, he turned the conversation to death. It was his latest obsession, as the geological formation of Antarctica had been the year before, and the year before that, the unknown—except, apparently, to Steven—hazards of space travel.

“Did you know,” he said, waving his glass in the air and splashing a good portion of cabernet over his white shirt, “that over 50 billion of our cells die every day? We start dying the moment we’re born.” The spreading wine stain made it look as if he had been stabbed.

His comments were met with a long, dark silence, and then someone poured another round of drinks and someone else suggested moving on to a nightclub for some real debauchery. Julia persuaded Steven that they should leave before the party degenerated further.

“If you have to talk,” she said on their way home, “talk about the weather. Talk about taxes, talk about anything but death. Just stop showing your negativity to all and sundry.”

“They’re not all and sundry,” Steven said. “They’re my friends.”

“They’re not your friends, they’re your co-workers.”

“And death isn’t necessarily negative.”

Julia had nothing to say to that one.

*

But now Steven really is dying. It’s early June and they have been summoned to Dr. Wainwright’s office. “It just so happens he can fit you in this afternoon,” a cheery voice said over the phone. “We’ll see you at two. And have a wonderful day.” (Later, Steven would forgive the girl her cheerful disposition, said that she must have inherited it honestly through her genes.)

Julia and Steven watch Dr. Wainwright shuffle the papers on his desk. His disciple, a pale young woman in a white coat that hasn't yet lost any of its freshness, sits to one side and cracks her knuckles. She studies her fingernails and smiles an awkward smile. Julia suspects that she is a medical student, but Dr. Wainwright offers no introduction.

“Your results have been checked by the whole team,” Dr. Wainwright says. “And I’m afraid that surgery is out of the question.” He sounds as if he is apologizing for being unable to fix a dripping tap, not for presenting a death sentence. “We can give you eight months to a year. A little longer with chemotherapy.” He takes off his glasses and wipes them on a tissue. He looks at the view outside the window and at the papers in his hands and at the filing cabinet against the wall. Everywhere but at Steven or Julia. The young woman is the one who looks at them, compassion washing her eyes with tears she hasn't yet learned to hide. Julia wonders if this is the first time she's sat in on the delivery of really bad news.

With no hesitation, as if he's been aware of his diagnosis for a long time, Steven says that he doesn't want chemo, that he'd rather have quality of life than quantity. Yes, Julia thinks, he'll accept the permanently dripping tap, just as he's always accepted it.

Dr. Wainwright pulls some forms from a binder and pushes them across his desk towards Steven. “Perhaps we'd better discuss your options, then.”

“I need a glass of water,” Julia says and leaves the office. She has forgotten how to breathe, how to draw air into her lungs without hurting. She walks past the receptionist who is chirruping over the phone. In a corner of the waiting room, a pale, elderly couple hold hands and whisper quietly, their faces inches apart. Julia notices the woman's smile and the bright blue scarf on her head before she rushes through the maze of corridors and into the sunlight and early summer warmth. She opens her mouth and gags as bile rises in her throat. Oily tears slide down her cheeks. It's anger that makes her cry, not shock or grief, not empathy for Steven's plight, but cold, hard anger. How dare Steven do this to her? How dare Dr. Wainwright and his insipid student be so complicit? She has never

anticipated a moment like this, and all the preparation and all the planning she has done is now wasted, pointless.

Because you can't leave a dying man.

With effort she fills her lungs, and feels the blood circulate through numb fingers. She lets the sun do its best to warm her before she heads back to Dr. Wainwright's office. They are waiting for her, standing together in front of Dr. Wainwright's desk. Steven holds out his hand to Dr. Wainwright. "Now my wife's returned, we'll be off," he says. "Thank you, Doctor Wainwright. And Doctor...?" He looks at Dr. Wainwright's sidekick.

"Petronius," she says.

"Yes. Dr. Petronius. Thank you." He offers his hand and she takes it in both of hers and holds it. Through closed lips, she makes a strange, mewling sound as if she is afraid to speak.

Dr. Wainwright walks towards the door. "Ask my receptionist for the phone numbers for support groups. And make an appointment for next week."

Julia leaves Steven to discuss support groups and appointment times and goes directly to the car. She opens her purse and pulls out an envelope. It is addressed to the Curator of the Cairo Museum, and inside is her application to join an archaeological dig on the Nile Delta. She pushes it back inside her purse. She breathes deeply and waits for Steven.

They don't speak until she pulls onto the highway. Julia knows that the right thing to do would be to tell him they'll get through this together, that he mustn't be afraid. She wants to tell him about the smile on the face of the woman with the bright blue scarf. What she finally says is, "What do you mean by quality of life?"

"I don't want to spend what's left of my life with my head in a toilet bowl throwing up," Steven says. He points to a small, red car ahead of them. "Watch that car, Julia, it's swerving all over the road."

Julia watches the red car. “There are drugs to stop the nausea,” she says.

“Let’s just play it by ear,” he says. “Take it one day at a time. You can always put me in a hospice when things get too hard for you. We need to stop at Supersave for some milk. And perhaps some of those biscuity things you like.”

Julia wants to tell him that he’ll be the one to find it hard, but she doesn’t know that this is true. She imagines Steven lying in bed, nobly accepting his fate. He will ring a little bell to summon her when he is thirsty or in pain. She will change his sheets, plump his pillow, dole out his meds and hold a glass of water to cracked lips. She will fall to pieces while he remains stoic and apologetic. While relatives and neighbors pat her on the arm and say, “Poor Steven. But so brave,” and mutter to each other, “Poor Julia, she isn’t taking this well.”

“This is all so unfair,” she says, meaning her loss rather than Steven’s. She swings into the Supersave parking lot. “Are you going to stay in the car, or do you want to come in?”

He follows her into the grocery store. They pick up milk and the biscuity things Julia likes, and bread and sliced ham and a ready packed salad. Steven disappears into the deli section while Julia stands in the express lane and counts the number of items the woman in front offloads from her grocery cart. There are eleven. Julia wonders why the cashier doesn’t say anything when the sign above the cash register states in bold, red letters, “8 ITEMS CASH ONLY”.

Steven appears beside her with a jar of pickled eggs and some paté.

“You don’t eat pickled eggs,” Julia says, counting the items in her basket now that Steven has added to them.

“I do now,” he says and tosses a Globe & Mail on top of the pickled eggs. “That’s eight,” he says, because Julia is still counting.

*

Julia phones Mariette who lives four houses down. She phones Mariette because she doesn’t want to call her mother or her sister who have never taken to Steven.

She calls Mariette because there is no one else. Mariette is in her sixties and long widowed, and she likes Steven. She likes his odd little ways and his intensity, and the way he grabs on to something, like his obsession with death, and won't let go. She finds him *interesting*, and has told Julia this on numerous occasions. "He's not like other men," she says.

Julia tacitly agrees. He has never been like other men for as long as she's known him, which is close to fifteen years.

*

He was hard to miss around campus with his old-fashioned dress sense, the button down shirts and corduroy pants and the red leather satchel that had seen better days. He was in her Physical Anthropology class, a vocal, eager presence who annoyed the professor and amused his fellow students with his off-topic questions, but until the day he stood behind her in the cafeteria, he had never spoken to her.

"I like your shoes," he said.

She looked down at her worn Doc Martens. "What's wrong with my shoes?"

"I said I liked them, not that there's something wrong with them. They're no-nonsense. I like no-nonsense shoes. They're worn by no-nonsense women."

She threw the Doc Martens away and bought herself some flimsy, flighty footwear, but that didn't deter Steven. He turned up at her side on a regular basis, popping up behind shelves at the library, or waiting as she stepped out of class. He had conversations with her that began somewhere in the middle, so she had to scramble to catch on, and then he'd walk off without saying goodbye, only to meet up with her later and continue talking as if he'd never left off.

"I think we should get married," he said, five months after the disappearance of the Doc Martens. "Is there any reason why we shouldn't?"

"I'm too young to get married," Julia said, scrambling to find an argument, any argument.

“You’re twenty-four,” Steven said. “In medieval times, you’d be an old maid.”

“We don’t live in medieval times,” Julia said. “And I have no intention of settling down. I want to travel. I want to visit Egypt. I want to buy a cottage on the lake and live in seclusion. More importantly, Steven, I’m afraid I just don’t love you.”

“Seclusion isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” he said. “And people who marry for love generally fall out of love rather quickly. Dashed expectations. So think about it and I’ll get back to you.” And he pushed his leather satchel under his arm and disappeared.

Two days later, he caught up with her after class. “You’re a very indecisive woman,” he said. “That’s not a bad thing, it just means you’re cautious. Which is another reason why you should marry me. I accept life as it comes. Things happen over which we have no control, and we have to make the best of them. Like me running into you. Face it, Julia, you’re one of the smartest women around, but the sort of man you want to marry doesn’t want to marry you. I, on the other hand, find your intelligence very attractive.”

They were married one year later, because by the time Steven had finished pointing out all the reasons they should marry, Julia could no longer come up with any valid reasons why they shouldn’t. Not that she had fallen in love with him, but she had grown used to him and missed him when he wasn’t there in the way she still missed her old Doc Martens. They graduated from university and found work and after another year or two, bought a small but adequate house in suburbia. They settled into a life of quiet predictability, what Julia thought of—on those nights when she was too angry or frustrated to sleep—as their marital pothole.

*

Now their quiet predictability has been shattered and the pothole filled in. Over the phone, Julia tells Mariette about their visit to Dr. Wainwright and within minutes, Mariette is at her door, her face dripping with pity and grief.

“How is he? How’s Steven? Oh, this is just terrible, Julia.” She pulls Julia into her arms, hugging her tight, patting her on the back.

Julia escapes from Mariette's embrace and leads her to the kitchen. "There's coffee," she says. "And Steven's in the living room, reading the paper."

"He's reading the paper at a time like this?"

"You know Steven. He's not someone given to great emotion."

Mariette accepts the coffee and wraps her hands around the mug. "He should take the chemo."

"He wants quality of life," Julia says. "He bought pickled eggs."

"Perhaps I can talk him into it. The chemo, I mean. And what do pickled eggs have to do with quality of life?"

Julia wants to ask Mariette how she thinks she can talk him into chemo when his mind is made up. "He seems to have accepted it really well," she says. "But that's Steven. Do you want anything to eat?"

"He's only thirty-nine," says Mariette. "Weren't there any symptoms? Are the doctors sure?"

"Apparently there rarely are symptoms with this sort of cancer," Julia says. "He thought it was indigestion. He had routine blood tests that picked up some abnormality. And yes, the doctors are sure."

"Can I go and see him? Will he mind being interrupted?"

"He's only reading the paper, not praying or meditating."

Mariette leaves her coffee undrunk and disappears down the hallway. Julia is alone with thoughts that whirl like dust in her head.

She thinks about her application to the curator, now buried in her purse among old shopping lists and grocery store receipts and a bill from the utility company. She thinks about her newly opened bank account and the nine hundred dollars she's saved towards her airfare to Egypt, and the sensible shoes she's bought that are hidden in her closet. Only last night, she'd left a brochure on Egyptian

travel on the coffee table, along with a book about the lost cities of Egypt. She'd imagined Steven looking through the brochure and saying, "You've always wanted to visit Egypt, Julia, so why don't you go?" and she'd say, "Are you sure you don't mind?" and he'd say, "I can get by without you." And he'd give her one of his rare smiles and offer to help her pack. Only later would she tell him that she wouldn't be coming back.

Leaving him had not been a sudden decision. It had been years in the making, in fact, years in which Julia hated herself for marrying a good man like Steven instead of marrying for love. Once she'd said to him, "Do you ever think that we're addicted to boredom? We never do anything to make our lives interesting or even enjoyable. It's killing me, Steven, it really is."

"What do you want me to do about it?" he asked. "Organize an intervention?"

"I could change husbands," she replied.

"You'd never do it," Steven said with great conviction, and she knew he was right.

*

Julia can hear the hum of voices from the living room as she tidies the kitchen. She stacks the dishes in the dishwasher and wipes the counter and aims a jet of Grease Eater at an oily ring on the stovetop. By the time Mariette returns, the kitchen is spotless and the dishwasher is clunking away under the sink. Julia is at the table with her head in her hands.

Mariette touches her shoulder. "He's very stubborn," she says. "Maybe when this has sunk in, he'll change his mind."

I don't want him to change his mind, Julia thinks. "I was going to leave him," she says. Mariette looks at her for so long that Julia wonders if she'd spoken out loud, or just thought the words, as she so often has conversations with Steven that only take place in her head. "He doesn't know," she says. "I don't think he even suspects."

“But why, Julia? Is there someone else?”

Julia can't help but laugh at the absurdity of there being someone else. “No.” She can't expect Mariette to understand that being on her own, alone, is better than being alone with Steven. “There's no one else.”

“But you're the perfect couple. You never fight. You do everything together...”

“Illusions,” says Julia. Because that's what their marriage is, theater for the benefit of others. “We never fight, Mariette, because we never talk. Not the way that normal couples talk, anyway.”

“I didn't know. I thought...”

“We've had separate bedrooms for eight years.” She feels as if she's confessing a monumental sin. “We just don't love each other anymore. I don't think we ever did.”

Mariette opens her mouth, then closes it without speaking. She twirls a wisp of hair around her finger and with her other hand, traces the outline of an old stain on the table.

“So how can I leave him now?” Julia says.

“What are you going to do?”

“Continue with the illusion, I suppose.”

Mariette, who has been so close to tears, bursts into sobs. “Oh, Julia, this is just awful. Poor you. Poor Steven.”

Later, Steven peers into the kitchen. He asks if Mariette has gone and when Julia says yes, she left a while ago, he sits down opposite her. “We can't make this harder for other people,” he says. “They won't know who to pity most, you or me, and I'd rather they pitied you.”

“How do you intend to make that happen?”

“We should separate. Before they know I’m dying. I’ll tell everyone I threw you out.”

There is a moment of panic then, a moment of anger. She wants to tell him that it’s not his decision to make. “Who would look after you? Who’d drive you to your appointments? Take you to buy groceries? And what happens when you’re too sick to live on your own?”

“There are people whose job it is to take care of the dying.” He smiles, as if he has suddenly worked it all out, and then in typically Steven fashion, changes direction. “I feel like steak, and one of those fancy little cocktails with an umbrella. Let’s go out for dinner tonight.”

So Julia squeezes her feet into a pair of not quite stilettos and Steven spends five minutes trying to decide if he should or should not wear a tie. He is unusually indecisive, and Julia puts up a hand to straighten his collar. “No tie,” she says. She can feel his breath on her forehead, a sharp whisper of mint and vinegar that lifts a strand of her hair and settles it back down again.

They drive into town and Julia parks the car outside Lucky Strikes Steak House. They haven’t spoken much on the way there, and Julia wonders if Steven is saving everything up until they’re sitting down. She isn’t sure that she’ll have anything to say and she hopes that the service is swift, that they can get the meal over and done with and get back home as quickly as possible. She wants to escape to her bedroom, the one she no longer shares with Steven, and close the door.

But she opens the conversation instead, even before the waiter has taken their order. “I don’t know how to handle this,” she says.

“Well,” says Steven, shaking his napkin over his knees and straightening it as if he’s arranging a shroud. “You can decide when to move out. Find yourself somewhere nice to live.”

“I don’t mean that, Steven. I mean... the other thing. Your diagnosis. What are you going to do? What do you want me to do?” Her voice is little more than a whisper as she tries to keep the hurt from leaping out.

The waiter interrupts them and takes their order. Steven orders a Hurricane. “Make sure you embellish it with an umbrella,” he says, and Julia asks for carbonated water. She asks the waiter what vegetables are served with the steak. She asks him for bread. She asks his name and how long he’s worked here. She asks him what night of the week is busiest. When he leaves, she excuses herself to Steven and heads towards the restroom.

“Have you been crying?” Steven asks when she returns.

“No,” she says, and curses the light above their table. “Did you have a good talk with Mariette this afternoon?”

“Mariette wants to take care of you when I’m gone,” Steven says. “But I told her that you’re quite capable of taking care of yourself. Which is why I think it’s a good idea for you to move out soon, while I’m still relatively healthy. Show her you don’t need anyone to look after you.”

“But what about you? You’re the one who’s going to need looking after.”

“When I reach that stage,” he says, “I’ll move into one of those palliative care places. By that time, you’ll be used to living on your own. You can come and visit me if you want. Bring me flowers. Or grapes. I prefer grapes. Those nice big seedless black ones. Not the little green ones. I don’t like the little green ones.”

Their order arrives. Steven asks for a glass of red wine for himself and more water for Julia. “Because she’s driving,” he tells the waiter. They talk about Julia’s work as an archivist at the Museum of History, a solitary job that she enjoys. Steven says he thinks it would be a good idea for Julia to get a dog, or at the very least, a kitten for company, and briefly, they discuss dog breeds and cat allergies. They talk about their food and the waiter’s level of service. For much of the meal, they sit in silence. Then Steven pays the bill. He leaves a generous tip and follows Julia to the car. They must, Julia thinks as she buckles her seat belt, look like any married couple on a night out.

Later, when she can’t sleep, and the house has settled for the night and its boards have stopped creaking, and the envelope to the curator is lying among the detritus at the bottom of her purse, Julia tip-toes across the hall to Steven’s

room. When they first bought the house, they'd allocated it as the nursery, but the babies never came and so it became Steven's room, with a world map on one wall and a photograph of Julia looking uncomfortably posed on another.

His bed is under the window, and the drapes as always are pulled back so that a pale sliver of light from the quarter moon catches the roundness of his chin and his solid cheek bones. She thinks at first that his eyes are open, but it's just the lights of a passing car playing on the ceiling that make them appear to flutter. He is lying on his side, one arm outside the covers and he is breathing solidly.

Slowly, carefully, so that she won't wake him, she lies down beside him and pulls the covers over them both. She puts an arm around him, and touches the place where she imagines the tumor has been growing unchecked for months. Her cheek is against his shoulder and she feels the warmth of his skin and the hardness of his bones against her face. She lies like that until fingers of sunlight creep through the window.

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THIRD PLACE

After growing up in Texas, Curtis James McConnell visited all fifty states and ventured into Mexico and Canada. "Bare Bones" is his first successful submission to *OTP* after years of trying. He is the recipient of the largest single grant bestowed by the Charles L. Lewis Endowment for the Arts, which he used to complete his forthcoming noir novel, *Cherchez la Femme*.

Bare Bones

by Curtis James McConnell

I had been with the skull eleven days when Jenkins walked in at five minutes to eight. He had been on vacation. I hoped he had enjoyed it. He sure as hell wasn't going to enjoy what I was about to show him.

"Hey, chief, whacha got there?" Jenkins piped. Ignorance is bliss. He poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Two-million-year-old skull," I informed him dully.

Jenkins made a face and a sound like he was bringing up a hairball. "Well I hope it's the guy who made this coffee. If so, justice has been done." He poured it out. I said nothing as he got a fresh pot going. Then he strolled over and looked at the skull.

"Nice skull. Sulphur overdose? Where's the one you called me about?"

"This is it." I wouldn't look at him.

"No, I mean the one Josiah sent us. What's up?"

I stared into the skull's eyesockets. *Here it comes*, I thought. I tried to keep my tone even. "This is the skull Josiah sent us."

Jenkins still didn't get it. "I thought he sent us one as old as—"

"He did," I said.

"Right. So where is it?"

I took a breath. "This *Homo sapiens* skull, Dr. Jenkins, is, as near as I can determine, two million years old. Give or take ten percent." I waited.

"Pull the other leg," Jenkins said blithely, "it rings." I continued to wait. He stopped. Something in the tone of my silence got through to him. "That's impossible," Jenkins said, as the first dark glimmer of what we were in for washed over him in a distasteful bath. He said again, "That's impossible."

"I know," I said.

Jenkins came over and looked at the skull. I noticed he didn't pick it up. He dismissed the matter, just as I had eleven days ago. "It's too developed to be that old."

"I know."

Jenkins paused. He looked at the skull. I could almost see him counting the years. Every bit of training from high school geology to his time at this institute denied what was before him. "That's impossible," he said with less conviction.

I was barely audible. "I know."

Jenkins broke his gaze from the skull and looked at me. "Man oh man. Have you been up all night with this thing?"

"Mostly. Since it came, really. Eleven days," I said, rubbing my eyes. I got off the stool and stretched. "I caught little naps. It stared at me with that implacable grin, even in my dreams."

We looked at it. It scornfully defied us with that brain cavity as big as our own, leering at us with those tiny teeth in that impossibly evolved jaw.

The coffee boiled over. I strolled over and turned it off. Jenkins wouldn't need any. He was awake now. I casually wiped up the spill with a paper towel as he looked over the computer printouts of the carbon dating runs I had verified four times. He flipped the sheet away with a loud rattle. He didn't even look at the chemical dating reports. He knew what they said. He bit his lip and thought a moment.

He tried again. "So it's wrong. Some weird soil composition leached the carbon out at an advanced rate of decay, making this skull seem two million years older than it is. This is probably Jimmy Hoffa's skull."

I showed him Josiah Thibert's letter. As he skimmed it, I told him what was in it, more to hear myself—anyone—speaking. Anything to drown out the scornful laughter echoing down time's misty, dank corridors.

"It was found in a pit with other skulls of the same age, below the flood strata, a pit in a dig with fossils around it all consistent with the era. All the other skulls were as undeveloped as the time frame suggests. Barely *Homo erectus*. Low ape-like foreheads, large gorilla-like jaws, fangs and diminished brain pans; presumably undeveloped cortices. All except our friend here." The skull grinned, as if with pride.

Jenkins pursed his lips. He started to say something a few times, then went back to the pursed lips. Finally, he got it.

"That's im—what you're saying is, two million years ago, we had a fully developed *Homo sapiens* running around with a bunch of monkeyish *Homo erecti*."

"That's about the size of it. Unless Josiah is playing a huge prank on us. Not a common practice for a Nobel laureate who didn't want to hire you because your tie was too loud."

Jenkins paused. “Two million years... a brain...” It wouldn’t catch in his head. “That’s impossible.”

“You keep saying that,” I pointed out.

“I know,” he fretted.

I poured a glass of water. I sipped.

“The last time evolution got knocked on its ass this hard was Piltown Man. And that took *how* many years before the hoax was revealed?”

I took another sip, telling myself to let him talk it out, let him get to it on his own.

He walked over to a chart, with a timeline and evolution down the various branches of the human family tree. “Evolution isn’t steady, we know that. Plateaus and spurts. Couple of gaps here and there, a missing link or two.”

He looked at the chart, as if willing it to come to life and agree with him.

He turned to me. “But until now, they’ve all had the courtesy to wait their turn in line. No one skipped to the front of the line two million years early.”

I waited. He was almost there. I wasn’t gonna do it for him. Not the first leap. Once he took the first one, I’d hit him with the second one, and that would make it all easier. He and I had to be on the same page for me to do it.

“What we have here—if this is really real, we have positive disproof of evolution.”

I smacked my lips. “Yup. Either that or we have proof of time travel,” I added with casual mischief. I shrugged, but this was just a curve ball for Jenkins.

“I mean—or time travel, yes. Aw, *man*.” He confronted the enormity. “Man oh man. Either way, we’re in a lot of trouble.”

The skull leered smugly.

Jenkins began pacing. “Well thanks a *lot*. Great. Freaking great. So what do we do? If we publish this, we’ll be lucky if all they do is laugh at us.”

I smiled and pointed at the poster above the coffee pot. It showed a picture of Galileo appearing before a Papal Tribunal. “Every idea that turns out to be true goes through three stages to acceptance. First it is ridiculed, then it is violently opposed, then it is accepted as having always been true.”

Jenkins just shook his head. His words were quiet, at first. “We can’t break this. We can’t be the ones to break this. We’ll become saints, heretics, mad prophets. Josiah just mailed us the coup of the century.” He stopped.

I looked up.

“I don’t want that,” he said.

I turned away.

“I didn’t sign on for that kind of glory ride. I don’t want to be a heretic,” he continued. “I don’t want to be a heretic, I don’t want to be a mystic, and I sure as hell don’t want to be a saint.” He looked at the skull. “Do you hear me?” he asked me.

“Do *you* hear me?” he asked it. He broke contact with the skull and came over to me. “And why was it just a pit of skulls? That’s too weird. This guy and his buddies must’ve had bodies under those skulls. Where’d they go?”

“Josiah doesn’t know anything about this society or its burial rituals. We just discovered it three months ago.” He looked at me, demanding more evidence. All he got was, “Africa’s a big continent.”

“Oh thanks.”

I took a conciliatory tone. “There’re probably hundreds of unknown proto-cultures within two hundred miles of this dig. If the civil war breaks out again we might even lose the other skulls.”

Jenkins threw his arms up. “And boy, how convenient for our hoax, the papers’ll say. Great.”

“I know,” I said.

“We have to do something,” Jenkins said.

“And what do you suggest?”

“Let’s send it somewhere else. We’ll have to let others examine it anyway. Let them break it.” He looked at the skull.

I spoke what he was thinking anyway. “That’s what Josiah did.”

Jenkins pursed his lips. “Yeah. Okay. And?”

I pursed my lips right back at him. I looked at the incredibly dark and deep sockets of the skull. If it had had eyebrows, they would have been raised.

“And so we’ll try not to be tormented too much after today,” I said, as I brought a hammer down on it.

The skull seemed to be smiling.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Jeremy Szal is a nineteen-year-old student in Sydney, Australia. He has had over a dozen publications, earned an honorable mention from the *Writers of the Future* contest and was nominated for the 2014 Parsec award. He hopes to one day become a full time writer and take over the world with his army of robot dragon hybrids. He can be found over at:
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A Dome of Chrome

by Jeremy Szal

Miranda Axel didn't think much of The Domes when she first arrived. They were plain grey spheres cut in half and slapped against the ground, their alien humps out of place on the red desert sand of Solastam.

Now that she'd gotten a closer look, sitting there with a bottle of Iced Brandy, she was never going to think about her time on Solastam without remembering the mysterious alien city.

As much as she wanted to see what it looked like from the inside, it wasn't going to happen. Outsiders were *strictly* forbidden. The Kyith had extended their hospitality enough by even permitting her kind to stay on Solastam. Asking for permission to enter the Domes would probably test their tolerance.

"Very beautiful city. Cannot believe my people built it. Very fascinating."

Miranda smiled, turning to the young Kyith as he drummed his four-fingered hands hastily on the bench. She wasn't sure if his fragmented sentences were a

result of speaking English, or if it was a species thing. It would be rude to ask. “Yes, Vortex. It is.”

Vortex stared back at her with his inky eyes, blinking upwards as he cocked his elongated head. “Sounds like you don’t mean it.”

“No, I really do.” Up close they were quite beautiful. Covering almost a dozen square kilometres in ground, the five hemispheres were grouped together in a circle; their transparent chrome surfaces covered in what looked like countless tiny hexagons with gel swirling inside their nanometre ducts. The smoky substance prevented her from seeing detail, but piecing together what she could see and what vague hints Vortex had dropped over time, Miranda gathered that each Dome was built in parallel to the one before it with lexicon-like rings that served as suspended walkways, running along the inner-wall of The Domes. According to Vortex, they were billions upon billions of years old.

The Kyith took a last, quick gulp of the tea he had been drinking before standing up, patting down the creases in his ornate tunic. “Must go. Have appointment with associates. Mustn’t be late.”

Miranda nodded, trying to hide her disappointment as Vortex strode down the hill, his thin frame eventually vanishing into the distance. She’d have to go back to the base now. The assortment of eggheads and dim-witted marines that she had been placed in charge of had the personality of soggy toilet paper. The only one worth spending time with was Ethan Alcatraz. He was one of the few scientists based on Solastam who realized there was more to life than molecules, tissue samples and chemicals that smelled like six month-old feces.

She hoisted herself to her feet and began the return trip to the camp, dry tufts of bronze colored grass whipping against her bare legs as the hot wind blew in her face. That was another thing about Solastam; it was far too hot. It was never this hot back in Stockholm.

The marines gave her brisk nods as she approached the camp, assault rifles cradled in their arms. Sweltering in their stuffy suits of armor, their days consisted of finding new ways to fight off the never-ending heat, as well as the

army of bloated, mosquito-like insectoids that seemed to invade the camp at this time on a daily basis. The marines had started calling them *Bloaters*, and the name stuck.

“Commander.” *Oh hell.* Miranda turned around to face Ryan Butterfield, a scientist with hawk-like eyes and a thin face. The sun was turning his skin into a salmon pink. It seemed he had forgotten her instructions to use SunBlocker gel before stepping outside. Again.

“Where have you been?” Miranda asked.

“Looking for you,” he responded. “I wanted to ask you something before you head off to quarantine.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have any samples?” he asked, holding up a hand before she could interrupt. “I don’t mean live tissue samples. I mean leaves stuck to your boots or something.”

“You know the rules,” Miranda said, “we can’t take anything outside of the perimeter. I believe the Kyith made that very clear when we arrived.”

“You can’t stop leaves from sticking to your shoes,” Butterfield murmured.

“It’s not happening,” Miranda said, maybe a little too harshly. “If you’re having trouble keeping up with the rules, then I suggest you put in a transfer request.”

Butterfield had no response to that. Miranda felt a twinge of guilt, but stamped down on it, hard. She knew there was no room for negotiation. It wasn’t something she was going to admit, but ultimately it *really* wasn’t up to her. They could only be on the planet as long as they had the approval of the Kyith. That meant they had to play by their rules. If that meant maintaining a good relationship with the aliens, she was more than happy to comply.

She entered the quarantine room, where the door snapped shut and locked behind her as the decontamination commenced. It was an annoying process, but the essential ones usually were. Quarantine was part of the deal. Miranda

promised Vortex that they wouldn't take samples of anything outside their perimeter and she felt compelled to stick to that agreement. Every time someone wandered outside the base, going through quarantine was a must. That meant that everything—grass, sand, leaves, fauna—was melted away and dissolved. Miranda was once tempted to ask Vortex why the grass behind the perimeter was fine to study when the grass beyond it wasn't, but she thought better of it.

“Decontamination complete,” said the androgynous voice that somehow managed to sound bored. “Thank you for your patience.”

The doors at the other end of the room parted like a curtain, revealing the human camp that had been Miranda's home for the past few months.

It had been built without style, but it was comfortable and provided a decent living space. It was made up of a dining area, conference hall, and bunks for the different departments. As commanding officer, Miranda was provided with her office that doubled as a cabin. She hadn't had much time to unpack, but she did manage to set up her datapad to receive and send messages. She turned it on now, waiting patiently as the screen flipped over and booted up.

There was one new message waiting for her. It was from a science magazine based on Earth Central. They were asking if it would be possible to have an interview with some of the aliens, and if it wasn't much trouble at all, could she please set up a cam-recording to capture video footage of the interview as well? Miranda snorted, deleting the file before she bothered to read the “*I know you're busy, but—*” paragraph.

There was a brief knock of warning on the door before it slid open and allowed Ethan Alcatraz into the room.

“Commander,” he nodded. “Are you busy?”

“Not really,” Miranda said. “Why?”

“There's something I think we need to discuss,” Ethan replied, biting his lip. His cyan eyes focused on her. “Privately.”

This can't be good, Miranda thought, stabbing a button on the desk and locking the door shut. She turned to Ethan as he sat down in the chair opposite her.

“What happened?”

“Butterfield,” Ethan said gravely. “He’s been wandering outside the perimeter again. Without an escort.”

Miranda frowned. “Why? It’s safer to go with an escort.”

“It’s not about safety. He wants privacy,” Ethan replied. “He took a biotube with him.”

Oh no. “I guess it wasn’t empty when he came back?”

“Of course not,” Ethan replied. “It was quite full.”

“Shit. What was inside?”

“No idea. He locked himself away and started performing tests before I could see.”

“I’m going to give him a thrashing for this,” Miranda muttered. She saw the expression on Ethan’s face and smiled. “Verbally, of course.”

Ethan was about to respond when Miranda’s comms device *pinged* loudly. She had received a message from—she looked at the sender—Vortex. *Damn*.

“Miranda. Must speak with you this afternoon. Maybe important. Meet at usual place? Thank you.”

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Miranda asked. It was a rhetorical question, but she needed to hear Ethan say it.

He nodded solemnly. “Yep. It means that we’ve officially pissed off the Kyith.”

*

“Ah, glad you could make it. Usually not so late.”

“Sorry Vortex,” Miranda said, climbing the rocky slope that lead up to where Vortex was waiting. “Had to fix a few things first.” What she didn’t mention was the long debate that she had with Butterfield about his screw-up. Apologies were made and promises to never do it again were uttered. But Miranda wasn’t fooled.

What really mattered was what happened now—whether Vortex was going to get angry with her or not, if there would be consequences or not, and if they would have to leave Solastam or not.

But Vortex didn’t look angry. He was sitting down, hands cupped behind his head in a very human-like manner. “Very beautiful at this time of day,” he said, pointing out to the desert plains as the sun became a perfect disk cut in half by the horizon. “Always liked it.”

Miranda shifted uncomfortably. If there would be trouble, she wanted it over as soon as possible. “So, what did you want to discuss?”

“Well,” Vortex began, “been talking to Conclave elders.”

“Ah.” Miranda had been told about the notorious Conclave elders. They served as overseers of The Domes. If they were involved then it couldn’t be good.

“About what?”

“Possibility of your entrance to The Domes,” Vortex stated matter-of-factly.

“May allow access to you in a few days.”

“Wait, really?”

“Not yet. Must prepare some things for biggest Dome. Much to discuss. Possibility of alliance between species no small issue.”

“No,” Miranda agreed, “definitely not.”

“Also something else.” Vortex had a grim look on his face. He looked directly at her. “I know what your scientist did.”

Miranda felt the relieved smile wilt on her lips. Vortex was watching her carefully. Saying something would be a wise move.

“How did you find out?” she asked carefully.

“Surveillance drones,” Vortex replied. “Was unsure of purpose. Then saw him collecting fertilizer and fauna.”

So that's what he took. “Butterfield isn't the sharpest tool in the shed,” Miranda murmured. “I spoke with him about it. He won't be doing it again.”

Vortex smiled tightly. “Happy to hear that.”

Miranda suspected there was more to it. “What does this mean now?”

Vortex seemed to consider this. “Have not told the Conclave. Will not.”

“Why?”

The Kyith inhaled sharply through his nostrils. “You are good friend. Not want to see you go away. Enjoy your company. Also interested in humans. Much to learn from you.”

Miranda thought fast. *Does he want something?* A human certainly would. It was also possible that he was being genuinely sincere and did want her to stick around. She decided to take it at face value.

“That's good to know,” Miranda replied. “I like you too.”

Vortex stroked his chin with a bony finger. “Surprising. Always thought relationship was for professional purposes.”

Miranda smiled. “Not completely, no.”

Vortex cocked his head to the side. “In that case, would you like to go near Domes? Can take you on fascinating walk.”

Miranda hoisted herself to her feet, failing to conceal her excitement.

“Definitely.”

*

Vortex led her on a pathway cut straight into the rocky slope, tufts of black grass and bushes of strange fauna surrounding them. Occasionally Vortex would bend down to pick them, placing them in his satchel.

“What’s that for?” Miranda asked.

“Use plants for tea,” he explained. “Very refreshing.”

At the edge of the slope was a rolling black grassland, the wind scattering the sand in every direction. Miranda failed to see how grass managed to grow on such a harsh landscape, let alone fruit and vegetables. She asked Vortex about it.

“Pipe conductors from Domes,” he explained. “Spread underground like tree roots. Pump nutrients and fertilizer into soil.”

“If you have everything you need inside the Domes, why use resources on the outside?” Miranda asked.

“Kyith are guardians of Solastam,” Vortex said, speaking to her like a patient parent. “Is our duty to take care of all life on planet.”

“Ah,” Miranda said. “That’s why you don’t want us to take samples.”

Vortex nodded. “All natural resources may remain on planet, untouched and pure. Belong to planet only. Not for tampering. As protectors of planet we take care of home.”

They were on the desert planes now, heading towards the grassland. This was closer than Miranda had ever been to the Domes. She heard a tiny vibrating noise, like an electronic pulse.

“Noise is anti-EMP emission from Domes,” Vortex explained, seeing her strain to listen. “Protects inside from damage.”

So they *did* have some sort of defense system. It was also possible they had railguns and automatic turrets to counter any unwanted predators getting too close to the Domes.

Vortex led her to a pathway of white quarry stone that snaked right through the black grass, leading towards a clearing dotted with jagged bushes and red-leaved trees. At least ten Kyith were there, half a dozen of whom were squatting back on their haunches in a circle. It reminded Miranda of a meditating group. Their eyes darted back and forth uneasily as they spoke in hushed whispers, blinking rapidly.

“What are they saying?” she asked.

“Asking what you’re doing here. If you’re going to hurt them.”

“What?”

Vortex spoke to his kin in their guttural language. They visibly relaxed when he finished, going back to their business, pretending not to steal nervous glances at her.

“Explained situation. Apologize for misunderstanding,” Vortex explained to her, doing a half-bow. “Uncertain of humans. Willing to accept you if I am present.”

That’s a start, Miranda thought. Vortex led her next to a great tree, where they sat down on the hot sand. Miranda gazed up and noticed a group of Kyith children playing in the tree. They were climbing around easily, hooting playfully. It reminded Miranda far too much of human children.

“Will be building facilities here soon,” Vortex explained. “Will be very enjoyable. Perhaps humans can use as well. ”

“How do you get your energy?” Miranda asked suddenly.

“The sun,” Vortex said, pointing upwards to the Dome’s edge. “Dome panels collect energy. Use to power generators and conductors.”

So the Domes also acted as solar panels. That was *definitely* interesting.

Miranda glanced around the clearing. It was peaceful here. She settled on a family gathered round a table of purple fruits. They shied away when they

realized she was watching them. “Do you ever think we can coexist on a large scale?”

Vortex seemed to consider this. “Impossible to be certain. Likely if coordinated in correct manner.”

Any further conversation was cut off by a Kyith that approached them, eyeing Miranda with suspicion. He said something quickly to Vortex before hurrying off.

“What’s that about?” Miranda asked. A worried expression had come over Vortex’s face.

“Some children are missing.”

“How?” Miranda asked, looking at the oblivious Kyith children playing in the tree. “Aren’t they all here?”

“One never came here,” Vortex explained. “Has not been seen all day. Has not come back for hours. Family is worried.”

“Do they often go missing?” Miranda asked.

Vortex shook his head. “Never. Always come back safely. Something wrong this time.”

Miranda could tell it was time to go. She was already getting awkward glances instead of just curious ones. “I’ll head off. I’ll keep a look out for the kid.”

“Yes, yes,” Vortex replied, his expression brightening up. “Will also speak with Conclave tonight.”

Miranda stood up and exited the clearing, feeling dozens of eyes boring into her back as she walked away.

*

Something was wrong. She could sense it even before she stepped out of quarantine. Everyone was rushing about, avoiding her gaze and pretending to be

busy. She was about to start drilling everyone for info when Ethan came running up.

“Can you tell me what the hell is going on?” Miranda demanded.

“It’s Butterfield, Commander,” Ethan said, biting his lip viciously.

I knew it. “What’s the idiot done now?”

“Screwed us all over, that’s what.”

“How?”

“He left without an escort again,” Ethan replied. “He came back with a bio-sealed satchel and locked himself in the lab.”

Miranda started to feel a cold lump in the pit of her stomach. Ethan wasn’t telling her something. She had to ask. “What was in the bag?”

Ethan seemed to force the words out of his mouth. “A child. A dead Kyith child.”

Miranda froze for about four seconds for the words to fully kick in. She swore hoarsely and stormed down the corridor, her intestines in knots. She began pounding on the solid door, Butterfield’s figure visible through the smoky glass frame.

“Butterfield! Open the damn door!”

There was no response and his figure didn’t move. She violently swiped her access card into the reader slot. Nothing. She tried again. Still no access. *The bastard went to my computer.* It was the only way he would have been able to override her authorization.

A small crowd was gathering behind her. She grabbed a pistol from the hands of the nearest marine and fired upwards at the glass, shattering it. Kicking down the large shards of stuck glass she thundered inside, rage blurring her vision. Butterfield was standing there, coat stained with blue blood.

“Now—” He got no further. Miranda slammed her fist into his face, spurting blood from his nose, bones cracking. Ignoring his groans she looked down at the dissection table, a small hole growing her in the heart.

On a small metallic tray was a lump of alien flesh the size of a baby, its guts spilled out like loose cables. Its black eyes were shiny and hollow, its skin marked and dented by the collection of syringes, scalpels, and probes that lay on a nearby tray. *We're too late. He dissected a baby alien.* It felt like someone had slammed a hammer into her stomach. Her knees threatened to turn to jelly as she swallowed the rage inside her. *If I wasn't Commander...*

“Cuff him to a chair in the mess hall,” she ordered, not turning around. “Then go back to your stations.”

They filed out like a collective herd, only a few marines staying behind to escort Butterfield to her office. Ethan stood next to her, a look of disgust on his face.

“I’m going to have to tell Vortex about this,” Miranda said quietly, the lump resurfacing in her throat as she gazed at what once was a Kyith child.

“I know.”

“You know what it’ll probably mean, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I do.”

*

Miranda thought that Butterfield could have had some sense knocked into him by now, sitting there with one hand cuffed to the chair and the other holding a tissue around his bloody nose. But it seemed do have done him no good. No good at all. It was tempting to punch him again, but she held herself back. *For now.*

“I know we’re not meant to do this type of stuff, but it was just lying there. We need data and tissue samples. I did what I had to do.”

“So you thought a baby would bring you those results?” said Ethan icily. There were a few nameless marines hanging around in the mess, most of whom were

pretending to ignore the interview, even though they were hanging on every word. Miranda didn't care. She *wanted* them to hear this.

"It was a dumb animal," Butterfield insisted. "They're not humans. It doesn't matter."

"Have you even seen the Domes?" Miranda asked, leaning forward intensely. "They're protected against radiation. The whole planet could have a nuclear fallout and they wouldn't even notice. They could even nuke us to oblivion if they wanted."

The threat of radioactive destruction seemed to finally have a visible affect on Butterfield. "They could?"

"Hell if I know," Miranda muttered. "We'll all be kicked off the planet at the very least."

"Do you think they'll even notice?" Butterfield asked.

Was he *really* that stupid? "Part of the deal is that we don't take any samples or objects from the planet. They saw what you did. Taking dirt was pushing it. Then you decided to use a *child* for research. What do you think is going to happen now?"

"There's no law against it. They're not human," Butterfield insisted with that stupid expression on his face. Never before had Miranda wanted to punch someone's lights out so badly. "Who cares?"

"I care," Miranda said, her voice deceptively calm. "Let me conjure up a little scenario for you. You find the body of a human child in an alley back on Earth. You don't tell the parents. You don't tell the police. You don't tell anyone. You take it away from the scene, slice it up and dissect it, all for your *research*. Then you wonder why people have a problem." She tapped the side of her head with her finger. "Do you get it now? Is it sinking in?"

If Butterfield had anything to say he gave no indication of it. Miranda abruptly stood up and turned to the marines. "Get him out of my sight."

“What’s going to happen to him?” Ethan asked as the marines led Butterfield away, none too gently.

“He’ll be demoted at the very least,” Miranda said. “Maybe a dishonorable discharge and time in containment.”

“I mean with the Kyith,” Ethan said. “I doubt they’ll let this go unpunished.”

“I know.” Miranda had been mentally preparing this whole time what she would say to Vortex, how she would explain to him that a scientist operating under her command had taken and dissected a helpless child. It could be enough to start a war. “I’ve got to go.”

“You’re off to tell him already?”

“Have to. They’ll find out sooner or later and I’d much rather Vortex hears it from me.”

“How do you know he’ll listen?”

“I don’t.”

*

It hadn’t taken the scientists long to clean up the bloody mess that Butterfield’s screw-up had created, but Miranda knew that it wasn’t the physical bloodstains that were going to leave a mark. She had what remained of the baby Kyith carcass placed in a biosealed container. Hopefully Vortex would give it to the parents of the child so they could bury it, or do whatever they did with their dead.

Walking up the familiar rocky path with the wavy black grass, it dawned on her that this might be the last time she would do this. There was no way of knowing how the Kyith—or Vortex—would react, but she felt obliged to take whatever was coming. She was no coward.

She hadn't told Vortex the news over the comms, and the bright look of blissful ignorance on his face as he waved to her pierced her heart. She reached the top of the hill and set the container down on the ground.

"Ah. Miranda." Vortex bowed his head lightly. "Have you been well?" He hadn't noticed the container yet. "Something important to discuss?"

"Yeah," Miranda said as she sat down next to him.

"About what?" He blinked rapidly. "News about child?"

Miranda lifted the container from the ground. It suddenly weighed a ton. She handed it to him and undid the seal wordlessly.

Vortex glanced at her with a puzzled expression before opening the container. The smile vanished as his eyes widened, darting back and forth at the container's contents. He seemed to notice the deep slashes with their tell-tale serrated markings on the outer flesh. "Humans did this?" His voice was dry and husky.

Miranda swallowed the heart in her mouth and told him everything that had happened. Vortex listened to her wordlessly, fingers grasped around the container.

"I'm sorry, Vortex," Miranda said as she was done. "I'm so sorry."

Vortex blinked heavily and took a deep breath. "Not your fault, Miranda. Cannot be held responsible for actions of others."

"Will the Conclave see it that way?" Miranda asked. "Will the parents?"

Vortex shook his head solemnly.

Miranda began to feel cold for the first time on Solastam. "What now?"

"Must report this to Conclave. Will try to convince them that you knew nothing of this and came forth on own accord."

"You can tell me the worst and best outcomes?"

“Cannot guarantee anything. But will promise to do best. For you.”

Miranda gave him a watery smile. “Thanks.”

*

By the time Vortex contacted her again, almost six days had dragged by. Butterfield had been contained in a cell the entire time. Miranda still wasn't sure what was going to happen to him. *Or any of us.* Vortex said he would try his best and she believed him.

She told herself there was nothing to worry about, and she believed that lie right until the time she started up the pathway, spotting Vortex at the top of the hill. He smiled tightly as she reached the top. While she definitely had no eye for Kyith attire, it seemed that Vortex was especially well dressed day. It must have been for the Conclave.

“Miranda,” he said, not quite hiding the strain in his voice. “How are you?”

Miranda shrugged. “Been better. You?”

“Tired. Not had much sleep. Been debating with Conclave,” he said as they sat down on the chairs. “Many insist that you all leave Solastam. Some suggest you all be executed.”

“And?”

“Final decision has been made.” Miranda mentally braced herself. “Scientist responsible must be executed. Request non-negotiable. Refusal results in execution of all humans.”

“And if we do hand him over?” Miranda felt strangely calm, juggling lives like this. Was this how politicians felt?

“Entire settlement will have to leave planet immediately. Under no circumstances can you return.” He glanced at her sadly. “Sorry, Miranda. Best I could do.”

Miranda could feel her chest tightening, but in her gut she knew they had gotten off easy. But leaving this place, never coming back, never seeing Vortex again... that was going to be a tough pill to swallow.

But Butterfield's would be a different kind of pill entirely.

And it was nothing less than bastard deserved.

She turned back to Vortex. "When does this happen?"

"Immediately." Behind him she could see half a dozen Kyith marching their way, rifles and slick carbines cradled in their arms. It was strange, seeing them with weapons.

Miranda got to her feet. "Let's get this done."

*

You had to owe it to him, the man didn't freak out like Miranda guessed he would when she made the announcements. He had an expression of bewilderment plastered on his face as they led him away, like he couldn't believe this was happening. Everyone stood in silence as they marched Butterfield the hills and towards The Dome for execution.

"Will it be painless?" Miranda asked Vortex as everyone shuffled away, equally confused. There had been few protests, but they had withered and died when the Kyith soldiers had marched down the hill with rifles.

"Entirely up to parents of child," Vortex said. He glanced around the encampment. "Human quarters very cramped."

Miranda allowed herself a small smile. "Just this one. At least there's not much equipment to pack up."

Vortex's face darkened. "How long do you need?"

"Three days, I guess."

“Will tell Conclave.” He started up the hills before turning around. “Will come and see you before you go.”

“Please do,” Miranda said quietly. “Please do.”

*

Within two days the entire team had packed up, leaving the base nothing more than an empty shell. Their ship had been fueled and prepped. Miranda had messaged Vortex for the last time, telling him that they were leaving. He was on his way over now.

Ethan came to stand next to her as the final crates were loaded into the ship. “Do you think we did the right thing? Giving him up like that, I mean.”

“It was him or all of us.” It wasn’t the first time Miranda had this conversation. “What do you think?”

Ethan was silent for a few seconds before replying. “I think he got off easy. Too easy.”

Miranda remembered Vortex’s words about the nature of the death. *If it were up to me, how would I treat the killer of my child?* The thoughts that followed chilled her more than she wanted to say. If the Kyith loved their kids the same way humans did, then Butterfield got exactly what he deserved.

Ethan headed towards the ship as Vortex descended down the hill, exchanging the briefest of nods. He strode up to her, hands in pockets.

“Hello Miranda,” he said, sighing quietly. “Never had to say goodbye to friend before. Especially not different species. Very sad experience.” He smiled tightly. “Will miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” Miranda said, her gut twisting again. “I wish I could stay.”

“Me too.” Vortex traced shapes in the sand with his foot. “Scientist has been dealt with.”

Miranda nodded. She hasn't going to ask for the details. She was afraid of the satisfaction she'd get from them. But Vortex seemed to indicate that Butterfield's death wasn't a painless one. She fished out the communicator from her pocket and gave it back to Vortex. "Won't be needing this anymore."

Vortex took it, taking her hands in his, nails digging into her skin. She felt something get pressed into her hands, something cool and metallic.

"Take care, Miranda. Wish you very happy life." Vortex gave her hands one last squeeze and walked away, disappearing behind the hill forever.

Miranda stood there for a few moments before uncurling her hands. She held a communicator in hands, although this one was larger and slicker. She was puzzled until she flicked it on, a set of digits crawling across the screen before a short message appeared.

Miranda,

When you get home, transmit these co-ordinates. Links to secure line. Will be waiting for your call.

Vortex

She smiled as she pocketed the device and walked over to the ship, the hatch shutting behind her.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Jordan spends most of his time delivering barbecues and making stuff up. He's originally from Oshawa, Ontario, and has just received a degree in English and Creative Writing from the University of Windsor. He's been published in *Nebula Rift* September 2012, *Swept Media*, *Circa Journal* 1.2, *Strong Verse*, and *Allegory eZine* January 2014. When he's not writing he enjoys drawing, soccer, reading, cycling, and maintaining his beard. Follow him on Twitter at @JordanLegg2.

Sharpie Stones

by Jordan Legg

Connor Durham wrenched his overstuffed backpack out of his locker and zipped it open, accidentally knocking the locker door against the girl beside him.

"Sorry," he said, probably too quietly for her to really hear. She pushed the door back.

"Hey man," Blake said, "you ready to go?"

Connor crammed a wad of papers into the bag. He zipped it back up, closed the locker, and he and Blake walked down the hallway towards the nearest exit.

Connor pushed through the doors and walked onto the concrete dais, heading toward the sidewalk. Blake chased him outside and caught him by the school bag. "Where you goin'?" he asked. "Practice starts in ten minutes. I don't wanna spend the first half hour doing push-ups."

Connor nodded. "Then you'd better get going."

“You’re not coming?”

Connor shook his head. “Sorry man. Something’s come up.”

“Okay,” Blake nodded, confused. “You still down to work on scholarship applications at the library later?”

“You can do that yourself, can’t you?”

“Dude, I am barely passing English as it is. I’m not gonna come up with a decent essay without help. Besides, I thought we were gonna do this together.”

“Sorry man,” Connor said slowly. “It’s gonna have to wait.”

Blake’s brow furrowed. “Hey, you okay? Something wrong?”

Connor didn’t answer.

Blake took a couple of steps closer and stood beside his friend. “Hey, c’mon man. It’s cool. You can tell me.” Connor avoided his eye, and glanced around at the front of the school. “What’s up?”

Connor tilted his head back and sighed again. He didn’t want to talk about it. He also didn’t want to keep it to himself. He looked around, discerning whether or not anyone was within earshot, and then said quietly, quickly, “Daphne’s pregnant.”

Blake’s eyes widened. Connor glared at him, willing him not to visibly react. Blake looked around, placed his hand on Connor’s shoulder, and led him onto the sidewalk and toward their neighborhood.

“How’d you find out?” he whispered.

“She told me last Monday morning,” Connor answered.

“When did she find out?”

Connor shook his head slowly. “Not sure. I didn’t have time to ask her before the bell rang. Haven’t really seen her since. Been avoiding her, I guess.”

Blake nodded. "You think she's telling the truth?"

Connor stopped and squinted at him with irritation. "Yes."

"Sorry," Blake breathed sheepishly. Connor half-expected a follow-up question about whether he was sure the baby was his. But it never came. "How are you feeling?"

"I dunno," Connor said. "Been thinking about it all this week, trying to figure that out. Scared, I guess. It's a lot of... I mean, I know I'm not ready to be a dad."

Blake nodded. "Well. Hey, at least you'll be pretty much out of here by the time the baby comes."

Connor's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"We'll be at school."

"Blake... I don't think I'm going to school next year."

"Sure you are, man. Playin' football. Livin' the college life. Florida State, baby! We had scouts comin' in all this fall. They know our work, they've seen us play. That's all we've—Hell, that's all you've been talkin' about the last four years! And it works out perfect—Daphne's still got another year of school left. Her mom won't let her go anywhere. You got an easy out."

"An easy out?"

"Yeah, out from bein' a dad."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I mean, if I were you I'd get out now, save her the heartache. You know—make it easier on everyo—"

"Shut up."

Blake looked up at Connor. His eyes were hard, unblinking, still; his mouth was thin and level. Connor swallowed. They had been friends for a long time, but

Blake had never seen Connor this angry. He waited nervously for him to speak again. But no sound came.

“All I meant was—”

“Shut up,” Connor said again. “I’m not gonna ditch my pregnant girlfriend in nine months to train for college football. I mean, the fact that you would even think that I would do that.” He shook his head. “You know what, forget it. I don’t have time for this. You gotta go to practice, and I’m going to Daphne’s to face the music. We’ll talk later.” Connor turned and walked silently the other way.

Connor realized he shouldn’t have been surprised at Blake’s reaction. He had applauded Connor when he and Daphne had first started dating—she was hot, after all. The kind of hot that wasn’t easy to forget, even after only a few seconds of contact. But Blake had never really understood the relationship. He’d always had the kind of approach to girls that assumed you won the dating game by locking in a high score. Ever since they had first met in the seventh grade. He knew his friend well enough that he should have seen his reaction coming. But Blake’s predictability didn’t soften the offense. The more he played the suggestion over in his mind, the more the prospect repulsed him. He walked over to the other side of the school and crossed the street.

Connor’s anger with Blake distracted him from the terror that would have otherwise plagued his journey to Daphne’s. It was a terror that had beset him most of the past two weeks. He had already played out the impending conversation about a hundred different ways in his head. He knew her well; well enough to predict most of her reactions, he thought. She would be angry with him, probably. Scared and confused, and silently indignant that he had been too scared to talk to her since that morning. He had meant to, but he had told himself that he needed that first day to force the facts to sink in. And he needed the time afterward to begin letting go of the dream. Hopefully skipping practice would lend him some credibility.

Blake was more right than he knew. Connor had wanted to play football. He was good, too. He’d been pretty certain that he’d made a few impressions in training camp that September. He remembered what it had felt like watching scouts

scribble observations onto their clipboards every time the team had run a play he had been proud of. He remembered the smell of freshly mown grass under his cleats. The thick perspiration under his shoulder pads. The rush of adrenaline that came after a catch. The mad bolt down the field, ducking and weaving around tackles, ball tucked in the fold of his elbow like a treasure. The eternity he crossed every time he ran into the end zone. The applause of his coach.

Daphne's applause from the sidelines.

It was all so intoxicating.

But it didn't matter. He couldn't go.

Connor had come home two weeks ago trying to reconcile football with fatherhood. For a moment he had wanted to believe that it wouldn't be that hard. But he immediately checked himself at the thought. He had heard his parents talk about how jarring the change had been for them when he was born. It had sounded exhausting. Still, he had spent the evening trying to come up with a way to go to college and be a dad at the same time. He had spent hours that week at the problem, but all of his solutions had him making demands of Daphne that he knew would never fly. Even if he played football locally, the sport would eat up too much of his time. Daphne had to come first. Daphne and the baby.

He had tried to imagine what it would be like to be a father. At home during the day. Working late nights at the grocery store. No school. No football. No leisure time. Vomit. Shit. Claustrophobia. Pressure. Responsibility.

Connor arrived at Daphne's house and walked up the empty driveway. Her mom had been away for the week, he remembered. She wouldn't know yet.

He mounted the porch and rang the doorbell. A few minutes passed. No response came. He rang again. Finally, the door opened, and he found himself staring at the angry expression of Daphne's older sister. Vicki.

"What do you want?"

“Is Daphne here?”

“Why?”

Connor hesitated. He didn't really want to talk to anyone else about it. He had barely wanted to talk to Blake.

“Look, I'm not here to do anything stupid, alright? I just... I just want to talk to her. Please?”

Vicki glowered at him, then finally opened the screen door and let him in.

“Thanks,” he said, trying to sound as sincere as possible. He walked into the kitchen and found Daphne sitting at the table, in a tank top and sweat pants, her hair tied up, staring at the fridge. Vicki walked in behind him, still glaring.

Connor looked at Daphne and suddenly thought guiltily of all the things he had just said to Blake, all the anger he had felt at Blake's suggestion. His stomach felt like lead. He swallowed as he realized how easy it was to spend two weeks in melodramatic internal turmoil about a problem and come out of it resolved to make the right choice. It was a hell of a lot different when she was sitting in front of him for the first time since he had heard the news. It made his situation all the more real. Imminent. Dangerous. He looked at her carefully, silently. Her eyes were dead with resignation. He felt a sickening weight in his gut shoving against his conscience, like a linebacker against a line of scrimmage. He thought about how easy it would be for him to wash his hands of all this. He hated himself for it.

“Hey,” he breathed.

She said nothing.

“I'm... sorry I haven't talked to you. You... told me on the Monday, and I... I dunno, I guess I just got scared.”

“You could have said something,” she said.

He paused. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. That’s no excuse. I should have talked to you about it sooner, and I didn’t, and that’s my fault, and I’m... I’m sorry.”

She relaxed in her chair a little. A good sign, Connor thought. Still, she said nothing.

“C’mon. Talk to me, Daph. What are you thinking?”

She turned her head and locked her reddened, near-watering eyes with his. “I’m not ready to be a mom,” she said quietly.

Connor nodded. “Yeah,” he said. He sat down on a nearby chair, pulled up beside her, and slid his hand over hers. “Yeah, I know. Baby, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry this happened.”

“My mom’s gonna kill me,” she said, trying to hold in a sob. “She’s gonna kill me. And people at school are gonna know, sooner or later. They’re gonna know. I can’t be a mom and do school, I can’t drop out, I have to go to college. Damn it, I can’t....” Her head fell towards his shoulder. He moved up closer and wrapped his arm around her. He had done it a million times before, but this time felt different. It felt irrevocable. Like a pair of handcuffs snapping into place. He tried to ignore the dry, dead feeling that cracked across his tongue.

“I know,” he said. “I know you’re scared. I am too. But I want you to listen to me, alright? It’s gonna be okay. We’re gonna get through this. You and me, we’re gonna make it work.” She looked up at him, confused. He kept talking. He was scared he might change his mind if he stopped. “We’re gonna be parents, and in nine months we’re gonna have a baby.”

She looked up at him and shook her head. “No. No, you have to go to school. Florida State. Connor, you have to play football—”

“I took the time to think about it,” he interrupted. “I... skipped practice. I’m not going to Florida State. I’m not going anywhere. I’m gonna stay. Here. Help,” he swallowed, “help raise our baby.” The words tasted like cement in his mouth.

“I can’t owe you that.”

“You won’t owe me anything. I’m doing it. My choice.”

Still, Daphne shook her head. “I can’t, I can’t...”

“You can,” Connor countered, forcing as calm a tone as he could. “You and I, we’re gonna do this. Together. And you know what? We’re gonna rock it.” He tried to force a smile. “We’re too awesome not to. C’mon. Hey. It’s gonna be okay. I promise.”

She paused. For a moment he was afraid that he had made a promise he wouldn’t be able to keep. Still, he thought. It had to be okay. He had to stick with her.

“Hey,” he said again. “Just think about it. You have a little life inside you right now. And I mean... we both know we want kids someday. Maybe that’s now. Maybe... I dunno, maybe one day, years from now, we’ll look back, and this will be the story of best thing that ever happened to us.”

She gave a subtle nod. It looked to Connor like she was putting on a brave face. For now, he was okay with that. He was doing the same thing. Vicki looked unimpressed.

*

Connor didn’t meet up with Blake at the library later.

The following Monday he walked into Coach Claybourne’s office to quit the football team. It wasn’t a fun conversation. The coach raised an eyebrow and asked him why.

“I need more hours at the grocery store.”

“Connor, if you need money for school, there are plenty of scholarships that’ll do the job for you. You’re a good receiver, son, I’d hate to lose that right at the end of the season.”

Connor shook his head. “I’m sorry sir. I just can’t play football anymore.”

“Alright.” Claybourne furrowed his brow. “You alright, Connor? Everything okay?”

Connor nodded silently. “Thanks,” he said. He turned and ducked out of the office.

He told his parents a week later. They took it with a kind of slow, stern silence—the sort of disapproval too strong to be expressed in words, the only kind Connor had ever received from them since he had turned thirteen. It was a disapproval laden with expectation, clear in his mother’s eyes as she looked across the dinner table: *You will take care of this girl*. Connor sometimes wondered if he would have still been willing to stick it out if not for that pressure.

It was another week before they told Daphne’s mother. Connor tried to take the lead, to shoulder the blame as much as he could. The kitchen rang that evening with a lengthy, curse-heavy lecture. Daphne’s fear had been well-founded.

For the next six or seven weeks, Connor divided his time between the grocery store, homework, and preparation for parenthood with Daphne. Fighting for shifts took constant haggling with his manager and coworkers, but he was making it work as best he could. When he wasn’t stocking shelves or checking carts, he was at the library. He used his library card more in those first three weeks than he ever had before. He would spend hours poring over articles about gestation, and clicking through pages of X-rays, photographs, and diagrams on Google Images. They helped, he realized. They made it easier to be okay with being a father.

There was an upside to his reclusion, he realized—this way, neither he nor Daphne were likely to tell anyone at school what was going on. Blake was the only one he had told about the pregnancy, and Daphne had told a few close friends, but beyond that, they were able to keep it quiet.

Winter break was a welcome relief. Connor didn’t have to see anyone he didn’t want to see. Little was said at Christmas with his family. Or Daphne’s. Neither of them really wanted to talk about it more than they had to. Daphne’s mom was embarrassed, Connor figured. She didn’t want the rest of the family to know.

When school returned, people began to ask about him. Why he had quit the football team. How he was spending the days. Every conversation started to scare him—the memory of the conversation with Blake haunted him, and though Blake later promised that he hadn't spoken to anyone about it, he couldn't help but wonder if someone knew that Daphne was pregnant.

By the eighth week, people had started to talk. It had gotten out somehow. No one knew for sure, but at lunch one day Connor thought he overheard someone talking about it in hushed tones as he and Daphne walked past. His first instinct was to lash out, but he refrained—he couldn't be sure they were talking about Daphne, and even then, that would only confirm the suspicion. They had known knew people would find out sooner or later, but apart from the select few they had already told, they would prefer to put off the announcement as long as possible.

It was around ten o'clock one night that Connor came by from the grocery store to see how she was doing. Vicki and Daphne were standing against the counter talking when he walked in. Daphne looked like she'd been crying.

“Hey,” he said quietly. Daphne raised her hand in greeting. “Where's your mom?”

“In bed,” Vicki said. “It's been a long day.”

Connor nodded.

“How's it going?” he asked Daphne.

“It's okay,” she said. “They know.”

“Who knows?”

“People at school,” she said. “Somehow it got out. They know. People know I'm a teen mom.”

Connor swallowed and walked over to give her a hug. “We knew that would happen sooner or later,” he whispered.

Daphne pulled away and nodded. “I know,” she said. “I know we did.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she sniffled, “I’m okay. Um, Vicki and I have been talking, and Mum too, and I—Connor, I don’t think I can do this.”

“Baby, it’s okay,” he said. “It’s gonna be okay, we’re gonna make it through this together, you and me—”

“No,” she interrupted. Her eyes started to water again. “No, I mean... Connor... Connor, I *can’t*. I can’t have a baby. I *can’t* be a mother.”

Connor stared at her quietly, stunned, trying to decide what to say. “So... so what, you want to put it up for adoption?”

“No,” she shook her head again. “No, I mean... I can’t have a baby.”

“You... you what?”

“I thought I could, I thought I could be ready for this, that it would be okay, but I just—I can’t—”

“We already made an appointment,” Vicki said dispassionately. “She’s gonna think about it some more, and then we’re going in for an appointment.”

“Appointment for what?” Connor asked. “For—for an abortion?” He could feel his chest tighten. “You wanna kill our baby?”

Slowly, Daphne walked towards the stairs.

“Daphne,” he said, following her a few steps. “Daphne please.” His breath caught in his throat for a moment. “Please don’t do this. If you’re not willing to raise the baby, give him to someone who will.” Daphne walked softly, indifferently upstairs. “I meant what I said, I’ll stay here and raise it with you. I’ll raise it alone if that’s what it takes. Give me that at least, Daph, it’s my kid too. Please. Just please don’t kill this kid.”

Vicki inserted herself between Connor and the staircase. “I think you should go now,” she said sharply.

“Please Vicki. I know you don’t like me very much, but please, for the love of God, don’t let her do it. That’s a little kid in there, Vicki, just as much mine as it is hers. At least give me a chance to talk to her out of it, please—”

“Shut your mouth, Durham,” she said, stepping closer to him than he was comfortable with. “It’s bad enough you already suckered my sister into sleeping with you, but you do not get to tell her what to do with her body. This is her decision. Not yours. Back off and get out.” He pursed his lips and looked back towards the front door.

“What to do with her body,” he gasped. “What to—what, and you do? You and your mom? How is that not what you’ve just done?”

“Shut your mouth.”

He threw his arms wide in frustration. “Just let me talk to her, Vicki! It’s been what, less than three months that I’ve known I might be a father, and what I want to happen to that kid is written off just because you don’t like me?”

Vicki crossed her arms. “I’m not going to force my sister into a world that’ll see her as a slut five months down the line. Especially when there’s no guarantee that she’ll be stable enough to take good care of the baby when it comes.”

“I’ll help her!”

Vicki grunted in frustration.

“When have I ever given you a reason to believe that I won’t?”

She looked away from him.

“Look. Vicki. I know you’ve got some trust issues. You’ve known some bad guys, and you don’t want your sister to get hurt like you were. I get that. It’s why I’m glad you’re her sister. I’m glad she’s got you looking out for her. But if you’re really not willing to trust me, at least let me be the reason for that. I’m doing

everything I can to make sure that kid's provided for. I'll say it was all my idea if that's what it takes. Take the fall for her pregnancy. I don't know what else you expect me to do."

"You really think the world will let you do that, Connor? She's the one who'll carry a brand on her belly. She's the one with the scarlet letter. Not you. There's nothing else you can do."

"So, so what, just... just kill it? That's the solution?"

"Best one I've got," Vicki whispered coldly.

"That's a human life in there!" he retorted. "A little kid!"

"A clump of cells."

Connor tried to keep calm and turned his head towards the door. He couldn't think of anything else to say. He walked down the entrance hallway and looked down the drive. His hand touched the doorknob. Then he took one look back at Vicki. "What if the situation were reversed?" he said. "What if she was the one who wanted it and I was the one who wanted out? You'd call me a deadbeat. A coward. Too afraid of taking responsibility for my actions that I left my girlfriend out in the cold with a baby because I was selfish enough to put my convenience before hers. You'd look at me as a monster. Oh, but when it's the other way around—when I'm in it for the long haul, ready to put my dreams on hold, I'm just as much a monster for wanting to stick with her and do the right thing."

"So my sister's a monster now?"

Connor wagged his head. "I didn't mean that. I just—"

"Get out, Durham," Vicki said.

Connor glowered. He was loath to leave, but he knew that staying would get him nowhere. He turned around and made for the front door.

Connor didn't sleep that night. He didn't do much of anything, besides try and think of ways he might convince Daphne to keep the baby. But he couldn't come

up with anything. She was scared. He had seen it in her eyes. And Vicki would interpret any encouragement, any promise, any offer he might make as a means to control her sister. There was nothing he could do.

That didn't stop him from trying. He tried to talk to her several times over the next few weeks, both on and off school property. He didn't need to convince her to join a political party, or even win an argument, he figured—with every attempt, the goal was always to put off her decision. He had little success. He wrote her a letter telling her he still loved her and would hold her hand through the procedure if she wanted him to. He slipped it into her locker during the morning bell.

But there was no response. She was always with someone—usually the two or three girls who had known since day one. And neither she nor they were ever interested in what he had to say. At least they weren't judging her the way everyone else would, Connor thought.

He hated the way she looked at him. Or maybe it was the way that she didn't. She seemed to swing back and forth between contempt and indifference, with a preference for indifference. With every day of silence he felt an increased gnawing on the inside—a thinning, a wasting away, like what he imagined starvation probably felt like. It soured most of the time he spent at school and robbed him of the pleasure that came in getting a paycheck.

It wasn't just the baby, either. He missed her. He missed the opportunity to tell her funny stories, and the way he could anticipate which kind of laughter would follow each one. He missed the fake bickering back and forth they would do in public sometimes, just to make other people uncomfortable. He missed the times she would call him out for doing something boyish and stupid, just to give him the opportunity to smile impudently and shrug his shoulders.

He would sojourn alone in places that were special to them. Sometimes they had gone on walks for hours along a creek trail running through a patch of woods. He would walk through it alone and throw pebbles in the creek, and try to imagine what it would be like taking his own kid there to throw pebbles. He imagined more, sometimes contradictory ideas of the child with every walk. A little boy.

Dark hair, big brown eyes. Like his dad's. Stumbling along in yellow rain boots, his head tilted upward everywhere he went, in the hopes that he might somehow unlock the mysteries of the adult world if he could just watch closely enough. Sometimes Connor would take a Sharpie and write baby names on the flatter, smoother stones, and then throw them in.

There was no life in those walks, he realized. But he felt like he was obligated to take them.

A month passed. Daphne stopped wearing makeup and started wearing hoodies. Connor wondered if she had done it by now. The times he saw her at school grew rarer. Sometimes he would go looking for her during lunch hour, but she wasn't with anyone else. She was even distant from the girls who had shunned him on her behalf. Sometimes he would pass her in the halls between classes, and he thought he would notice something like sorrow in her eyes, veiled to anyone who wasn't looking for it.

Connor and Blake reconnected, sort of. Connor hadn't expected it, hadn't really thought about Blake much after they had their argument. He hadn't had time. Blake had begun by asking if he would still play college ball if there was no baby. Connor hadn't answered. It seemed wrong to go; like if he went, it would prove he hadn't really wanted to keep the baby. Or maybe if he went, it would be skipping out on the penance he had decided to obligate himself to fulfill. But he didn't think Blake would understand that.

It was a month and a half after he and Daphne had broken up that Connor was down at the creek again, throwing pebbles. He had run out of good names, and the Sharpie was long gone, lost in his backpack somewhere. It had run out of ink.

After about an hour of throwing, he saw a figure walk into his periphery. Daphne was coming from the opposite end of the trail, wearing a black windbreaker and a thin scarf around her neck. Instead of throwing his next pebble he relaxed his arm and watched her approach. She stopped and stared at him. He stopped and stared back.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

A long silence. “I miss you,” she said finally.

“I miss you too,” he replied, nodding. Connor turned over the pebble in his hand.

They stood in silence there for a while, before she took a few steps closer and said, “I wish I hadn’t done it.”

Connor nodded and bit his lip in an attempt to restrain himself from asking why. “Me too,” he said.

She took a deep breath, and then asked, “Can things be okay?”

Connor nodded slowly, unsure of whether or not he meant it. He walked slowly towards her.

Presently she stood in front of him and whispered, “I want to get back together.”

Connor moved his hands towards her waist. He held her, and mourned for the baby he would never hold. Hot, streaming tears trickled out of his eyes. He let the unnamed pebble slip out of his hand.

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GUEST WRITER

Melinda grew up in Oregon where her family has lived for 100 years. Always the one to “do something different,” she married a sailor and has been moving ever since. Self-proclaimed professional mover and chauffeur of her two kids, Melinda writes wherever, whenever she can (often times while sitting in the car). As a freelance writer she’s had articles published online and published a short story, “My Dad’s Delivery” in *They Lied! True Tales of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Breastfeeding!*

Best Interests

by Melinda Jones

I have been married to the Navy for 15 years. In that time, my husband has been on numerous deployments ranging from a couple of weeks to 7 months. When he proposed, he warned me that it would be hard. He pointed out how I would be left to raise the kids for months on end, living in places I had no desire to live in, thousands of miles from my family while he’d be out doing what he loved. He was up front and honest but, I was young and naïve and said yes. At 22, I honestly believed that it would be easier to say goodbye every few months than it would be to sever the ties completely and just walk away. Little did I know that I would become so blasé to saying goodbye over and over that eventually his leaving would be just another date on the calendar. How could I go from not being able to imagine living my life without this man to basically doing just that? I had learned to adjust.

A military family constantly adjusts: we adjust to new places, new friends, we adjust after our sailor leaves when the bed feels too big, the house too empty, when someone has to give something up because mom can’t be in two places at

once. I adjust when a quiet loneliness settles around me like a favorite soft blanket on a cold, wet day. The kids and I adapt to his absences, sliding into our “Dad’s on deployment” mode where I become full time disciplinarian, cook, counselor, chauffeur, cheerleader, task master, house keeper-upper. I missed him when he was gone, but then he would return and we would adjust yet again. The kids have to get used to having another adult in the house. I would have to get used to running things by him; it’s like going back to a partnership after months of dictatorship. We’d argue over the kids’ schedules, which home improvement project is more pressing, the changes I made when he was gone, the things I didn’t consult with him on; the things I’ve been allowing the kids to do when he isn’t home. It’s tiring. It’s hard to take his opinion into consideration after going so long without it, and it’s hard for him to accept what I’ve done when he was gone and to assimilate back into the role of dad and husband as opposed to that of an officer where, onboard the ship, his word is final. I’ll admit it; I like things done my way. I have probably lost my ability to compromise.

When we moved to Washington State, we bought our first house. My husband was coming to the end of his naval career and we knew that we wanted to retire in the Pacific Northwest. Our daughter was starting middle school. We were gambling on the slim possibility that my husband would be able to get a follow on shore duty at the same base—he’d finish out his career and we wouldn’t have to move anymore. Of course, it didn’t work out that way. We watched the jobs that were opening up, holding our breath. When it came time for him to get placed, there was nothing for him anywhere near us.

I thought we’d been through it all. I thought we’d survived it all. I was wrong.

“You got orders for *where*?” I asked, turning from the kitchen sink, suds dripping from my hands, splatting on the floor.

My husband was sitting at the table, pulling his boots off. “Nebraska. Strategic Command.” He didn’t even look up; he knew I’d be pissed.

“But... they knew you wanted to stay here right? I mean you explained that we just bought a house? That our daughter flat out refuses to move?”

“Honey,” he said sternly. “Of course I did, but it all comes down to—”

“The needs of the Navy.” If I had a dime for every time I was fed that line of bullshit, we wouldn’t have to wait two more years for Lee to retire; we could do it now. “Screw the Navy.” I threw a spoon down in the sink only to get splashed with dishwater. “Damn it.”

Lee came over, handed me a dish towel and turned me around by my waist so that I was facing him. “Nebraska isn’t bad. I’ve talked to a lot of guys that’ve been there. It has good schools for the kids... the College World Series is there.” He smiled, trying to get me to do the same. I couldn’t, and wouldn’t let him off that easily.

“So, that’s it? You have actual, written orders?”

“They’re writing them up now.”

“So there’s still a small chance we could stay here?”

“Until the official orders come in yes, there’s a chance. But, it’s not going to happen, Babe. Not in this case.”

“Omaha?” I asked flatly.

“Yep. StratCom... Omaha has the College World Series...”

“You already said that.” I sat down at the table. “What the hell are we going to do? We can’t sell the house, we just friggin’ bought it.”

“We could rent it out. Find a property manager to take care of things.”

“We just put in new carpets! You know that’s not what I meant. What about the kids? Christine has moved seven times already. She’s been in school in four different states. Good Lord! Do you not remember what we went through with her when we moved here?” I shuddered at the memory of our daughter, who was 11 at the time of our last move. I had never seen a child so utterly unhappy; her grades had plummeted, she sulked for months. It had taken almost a full year before she came around again. “She’s getting ready for high school. If we move

to Nebraska now, she's going to be moving again at the beginning of her junior year. Do you know how much that would suck for her? Nine moves in 16 years? Moving in the middle of high school? It's a bit much isn't it?"

"Yes, I know," he said.

I wasn't about to let up. "And Joe has his little group of friends down the road. If we move and then come back in two years, it'll be totally different for him. Their friends aren't going to wait for them. It's different now, for both of them, they're both older and..."

Lee held up his hand. "Honey, I know. Trust me. I don't want to move the kids again either, but what's the alternative? There just aren't any openings for me here."

I saw a spot of dried spaghetti sauce on a placemat and started picking at it. When it wouldn't come off, I got up, picked the placemat up and threw it in the laundry room. I headed back to the sink of dirty dishes. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my husband shake his head, lean down to pick up his boots and head upstairs. I turned the water on and waited for it to get hot. Looking out the window I noticed the garden, that I had planted that spring, needed to be weeded. The bird feeder needed to be filled. The shrubs that I had moved away from the dog's yard in an attempt to keep him from peeing on them were slowly dying. I need to replace those, I thought absently. Steam wafted up from the sink and I turned the water off, the faux lemon scent of the dish soap tickling my nose.

We didn't talk about the orders for the rest of the day. The kids came home from school and Joe threw his backpack inside, yelled "hello" and disappeared down the street to play with his friends. I took Christine to swim practice. It was business as usual. Several days passed before we spoke of Omaha again. I had looked on the internet half-heartedly at Omaha and was unimpressed. I was used to seeing snow-capped mountains and tall cedar trees. Omaha looked empty. Like a drawing that someone got bored of before they finished. I decided I don't like uninterrupted horizons.

*

On Friday, Lee came home from work while I was cooking dinner. He sat down at the table to take his boots off and then poured me a glass of wine. Taking me by the hand, he led me to the table and set my overflowing merlot down in front of me.

“I have to take Christine to practice,” I said pushing the glass away a few inches.

“I’ll take her.” He didn’t say anything else.

“What Lee?” I asked, exasperated. “Don’t do this.” I gestured to the tableau in front of me: the wine, the two of us sitting at the table, him offering to do the car pool, as if we didn’t have a large elephant in the room. “Just tell me.”

“I got the official orders today.”

“For...?” Despite knowing better, I clung stubbornly to my thin thread of hope.

“StratCom.”

“Well, it’s not like we weren’t expecting to get screwed by the Navy. Again.”

“Honey. Nothing’s a guarantee, we knew that.” Lee gives me room to complain, but having been in the Navy since he was 18, he would only take so much of my Navy bashing. My Good Navy Wife persona was cracking. I tried to appear stoic, but the tears sliding down my face gave me away. I didn’t bother with a napkin, just wiped them away with the collar of my shirt and took a deep breath.

“So, what are we going to do?” I asked sincerely.

“Well, I guess we have some decisions to make. Do we want to move, as a family? Do we sell the house? Rent it out? Do I move and you all stay here?”

I tapped my fingers on the stem of the wine glass, watched the red ripples. “You know, I realized that by marrying a sailor, you would be going out to sea. Obviously I knew there would be times when we would be separated. But, I always assumed it would be because of a deployment. I never imagined us

choosing to live in two separate states.” Lee moved to give me a hug, but I kept him at arm’s length and shook my head knowing that I’d lose it if I let my guard down. “When are you supposed to report?”

“I would have to leave after the first of the year.”

“So, one month. We’d have to move in one month.”

“I could move and you and the kids could come out in June, after school’s out.”

“Lee, I just can’t imagine moving Christine again... and then moving her in two years in the middle of high school? I just think it would... I don’t know, I just think it would be too much for her. She’s done.”

“What about you?”

While Omaha didn’t instill any excitement in me, it’s funny how quickly I had become used to moving every couple of years, to the point where if we were in one place for too long, I got a bit antsy. But that was me. “You know, at this point it’s not about what I want, or what you want. We have to do what’s best for the kids.”

Lee leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms against his chest. “And possibly living without their dad is the best thing for them?”

I realized that what I was going to say could be misconstrued. I didn’t want to come out and say that the kids would be fine without him home, even though I knew that would be true. I didn’t want him to think that just because we *could* function without him, we *wanted* to. “Honey, you being gone is not something new to them. You’ve been in and out for their entire lives. *If* we decide to stay here, as long as they get to see you every few months, I think they’d be okay with it.” Lee wordlessly reached for my wine glass and took a long sip. “I’m sorry,” I said, putting my hand on his knee. “I’m not saying this to hurt you, I’m just being honest.”

“I know.” He swirled the wine around the glass. “Doesn’t make it any easier to hear.” The kitchen clock ticked away, seemingly growing louder in the silence

between us. “So, what you’re saying is that you would rather stay here with the kids.”

I swallowed my frustration and my first impulse, which was to become sarcastic and sadistic at his inability to see that *I* was not the one who put our family in this position to begin with, that I was just trying to make the best of a shitty situation. “No, I’m not saying ‘I would rather.’ I’m saying that I think it’s what’s best for the kids.”

“God, I know Anne. I’m sorry, this sucks. I’m done. I’m done with the Navy. I’m done moving. I’m done missing out on my kids growing up.” His voice shook. He looked to me as if he expected me to say something to make it all go away, to come up with the ideal resolution. I knew there wasn’t one. There was nothing I could do or say to make this better, or to make it go away; there was no silver lining. I got up and started drying the dishes.

“Well, there’s two years left on your contract, so we just have to suck it up and get through this.”

Lee pulled himself together. “So, that’s it then? I move to Nebraska and you all stay here?”

“I think it’s best.”

“When do you want to tell the kids?”

I put the glass bowl in the cupboard, hung the towel over my shoulder and leaned against the cabinets. “I need a couple of days to process this. Can we tell them on Friday when they get home from school? That gives them the weekend to deal with it.”

“Ok.” Lee came over and held me in his arms. I put my head on his chest. Through his stiff uniform, I could hear his heart beating. As much as I wanted to deny it, as much as I wanted to believe I didn’t feel it, as much as I wanted to fight it, to rally against it, as much as I wanted to prove to myself that I didn’t need him, I couldn’t. I found the rhythmic beating undeniably soothing and I gave in to it, closing my eyes, inhaling him, clinging to him. *Would I be able to*

live without this for two years? His absence would be worse than it is when he's deployed because at least then we have a few months of him being home in between. If we do this, we'll see each other for a few weeks here and there; he'll be a visitor in his own home...

*

The kids had known that the possibility of yet another move was looming. They knew the “new job, new duty station” drill by now. When they came home on Friday, Lee and I sat them down.

“All right, you guys know that daddy’s job on the boat is done right?” The kids nodded waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop. “Well, he got orders for Strategic Command in Nebraska—”

Christine stood up, indignant. “I am NOT moving to Nebraska!” Her body fixed in a flight or fight stance, fists clenched at her sides, her shoulders rising and falling with her quick, short breaths. Joe sat in his gaming chair, tears welling up in his brown eyes.

“I don’t want to move either,” Joe said to no one in particular

“Christine, sit down,” Lee said calmly. “We’re not done.”

She didn’t move. She just watched her father through narrowed eyes. I saw her chin rise ever so slightly. I knew Lee well enough to know he was analyzing the situation, trying to decide which reaction would be the best. For the moment however, they were locked in a Battle of the Wills. Christine crossed her arms, her fingers digging into her biceps, dimpling the skin, her knuckles turning white. Christine’s inability to understand all of the intricacies that went into this decision was... just so frustrating. She stood her ground and I felt my patience evaporating.

“Here’s the deal,” I said, figuring it was best to just rip this Band-Aid off in one good yank. “Daddy’s going to move. We’re going to stay here. That way you don’t have to change schools, you don’t have to leave your friends and you don’t have to leave your teams.”

I watched the kids process the information. They would not make good poker players; Joe looked momentarily pleased, Christine looked smug. With an ever so slight upturn of her mouth, her shoulders visibly relaxed as she wiped the tears from her face. Taking a hair tie off of her wrist, she put her hair back with quick, practiced movements. I could see angry red streaks on her arms punctuated by four little crescent shapes. She sat down and leaned back in the chair. Stretching her legs out, she crossed her arms loosely against her chest. For her, obviously, the discussion was over.

“Christine!” I said sharply.

“What?” she asked with teenage attitude. I gestured to her father, not taking my eyes off of her, silently willing her to realize the full weight of her words and actions. After what seemed like an eternity, she looked at her dad. He was watching her, his lips pinched so tightly together his chin was furrowed. Lee nodded slowly.

Christine, finally, had the good grace to drop her gaze. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “I just don’t want to move again.”

“Yeah, I picked up on that,” Lee said flatly. Dear God, these two. I shook my head and was trying to think of something to say to smooth things over when Joe piped up.

“I don’t want Daddy to move,” Joe said, his voice cracking.

“Do you want to move to Nebraska?” I asked pointedly.

“No.”

“Well then, this is the best we can come up with.”

Christine said, “Well, it sucks.”

“Thank you, Christine, that’s very helpful,” I snapped. “Okay look, things didn’t work out the way we hoped. You guys don’t want to move, your father and I don’t want to move you. None of us want Dad to move but unfortunately, that’s

the way it has to be. He'll be able to fly home every few months. It'll be like when he's on deployment only we get to Skype and talk to him every day... okay?"

Joe walked over to Lee, squeezed onto his lap, and leaned into him.

"When do you have to leave?" Christine asked.

*

One month later, we packed him up and said our goodbyes. He reminded the kids he'd see them in two and a half months. The kids cried, hugging their father like they have so many times before. When they came home from school, Joe went down the street to play with his friends and Christine went to swim practice. It was routine, it was their norm.

I wish I could say the same for Lee. His timing always seemed to be off when he called us; we were always running out the door to one or another practice when my phone rang. I bristled when he'd grill me on things that I needed to do around the house, or should do, or didn't do. He was trying so hard to be a part of our daily lives. Unfortunately, he wasn't playing by the rules. Normally when he'd leave for deployment, and virtually all communication was succinctly cut off, I'd email him every couple of days to let him know what was going on. Now he was calling two to three times a day and I was finding it difficult to find things to talk about. I was so used to not worrying him about every failed test, about every bad day that, out of habit, I found myself continuing to withhold information. I didn't want him to worry so I didn't tell him how I cried myself to sleep, how I stared out the window for hours. How I didn't shower... yet again.

This is not what I pictured a marriage to be like. This is not how I pictured even a military marriage to be like.

Let's face it, this was no marriage. Some couples complain about having become roommates. We weren't even roommates anymore. I remember talking to one of Lee's friends who had grown up as a Navy Brat, his dad having been a career Navy man. This friend of ours was telling me about a trip to Ireland his mom was taking and how she was so excited about it. I asked if his dad was looking forward to it. My friend said "oh, he's not going." He said it so matter-of factly,

so nonchalantly, as if there was nothing odd about a wife taking a huge trip and her husband choosing not going with her. Why wouldn't they want to go together? Why would she want to experience something like that without her husband? Like I said, once upon a time, I was a young, naïve Navy wife. It's not that we don't want our husbands around, we just get too used to them not being there. We adjust.

When my husband called me one night, I could hear his voice shaking with effort; he sounded strained, muffled.

"Lee? Lee, are you crying?" I heard wet sniffing over the phone. "Honey," I said softly. "I hate to say this, but you can't do that. I can't have you crying on the phone to me." My God, I'm a cold hearted monster. "I can't..." With my free hand I pinched the bridge of my nose. I squeezed my eyes shut. "I'm doing my damndest to hold it together here." I took a deep breath. "I need you to be strong for me. If you lose it, I'm going to lose it. We have to suck it up and get through this. What's done is done, and now we have to live with it. I love you... I love you, but please, don't do this..."

I heard him take a deep breath and blow it out hard. "I'm good. I'm sorry. I didn't realize..."

I rubbed my face and brushed my bangs out of my eyes. "I don't know what you thought when you left. Did you think that our lives would just go on without you here? Did you not think I would miss you too?"

"I just assumed you and the kids... I just figured it all went on, like usual."

"It *does* go on. It *has* to go on. But, there's no 'usual' about it." There was so much I wanted to—*needed* to say, but I couldn't bring myself to give a voice to my devil's advocate. We've been through separations before; we've been through more than our share. We've adapted, adjusted and overcome. But this?

This was different, and weighs on me. How do you stay close to someone, how do you sustain a marriage, when you're 1,000 miles apart? Seeing each other for one maybe two weeks every three months? Did we make the right decision?

For the kids? Yes. For us? For our marriage? I don't know. I just don't know.

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