



**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS DISCOVER THAT
SOMETHING BELIEVED TO BE TRUE IS ACTUALLY
FALSE.**

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Five Things We're Glad Are False

1. We were afraid we'd have a lot of trouble finding experienced writers, editors, and/or creative writing teachers who'd be willing to help us expand our pool of prize judges so our magazine would benefit from an even broader range of experiences and personal tastes. False! We found several people willing to help, and their opinions and reflections on our ten "finalist" stories were invaluable.
2. I was afraid my most recent fiction coach would be unwilling to donate one of his stories to our cause. False! Mark Konkell, who's worked with me for twelve weeks now (and helped my fiction immensely), was happy to be a guest writer and gave us a story called "Save One." (Mark is one of several trainers from www.allwriters.org/services.asp. If you're serious about writing but, like me, you don't want to enter a full-time MFA program, I think three or four months under their guidance could be the next best thing. They offer intense, long-term, one-on-one coaching.)
3. We were afraid a combination of illnesses and other personal crises were going to derail this issue's publication. False! OTP is a major priority in our lives, and we've just proven that even when the going gets tough, we can find a way. (It helps that we were smart enough to limit OTP to three issues a year...)
4. We were afraid we'd never get our super-experimental "guest writer training program" to produce results. After we failed with other candidates, we found a man with some great stories to tell, but who needed guidance in telling them effectively. He worked with us for more than nine months to (1) learn better overall fiction writing skills, and (2) shape up a story he originally submitted for a previous contest. That's why "Changeling" by Richard Blasi doesn't fit the "Revelation" premise. It fits the old "Disguise" premise from issue #3. We may, or may not, go to such efforts again. Depends on what you think of the results and the idea in general, so let us know.
5. Finally, on a personal note, Bethany and I are glad to find out we were wrong when we figured America would never elect anyone President who didn't look and sound just like all the other Presidents. Three believable candidates for the job, and only one of them was a white man. And the white man didn't win. I haven't been

this pleased about being wrong since I was convinced I'd never see the New England Patriots win a SuperBowl.

On the other hand, there were times when I was not *at all* happy about being wrong, and Erika Moen illustrated them for you just to humiliate me.

So for the first time ever, we have eight stories for you to read, in addition to the cartoons. Check out our offerings and let us know what you think at Feedback@OnThePremises.com.

Keep writing and keep reading,

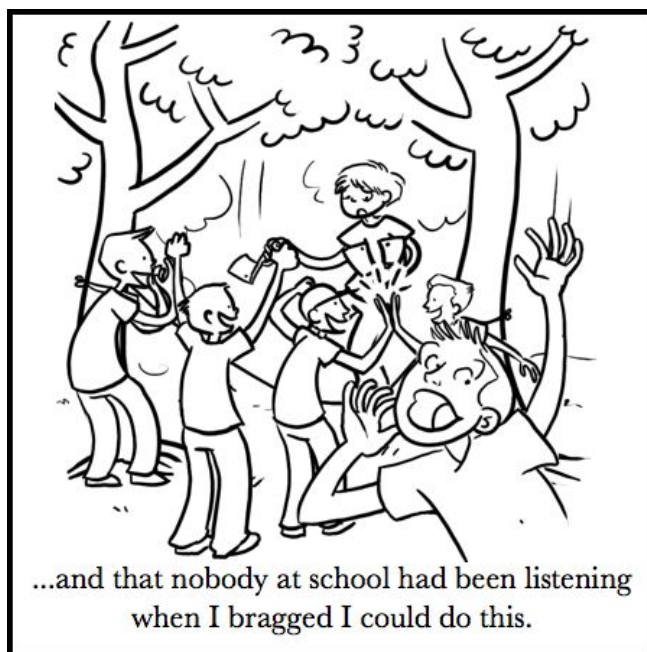
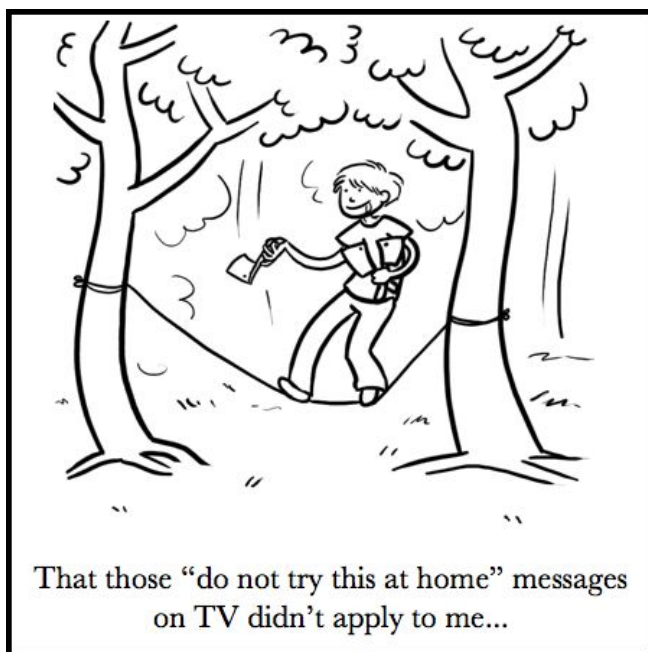
Tarl Roger Kudrick and/or Bethany Granger
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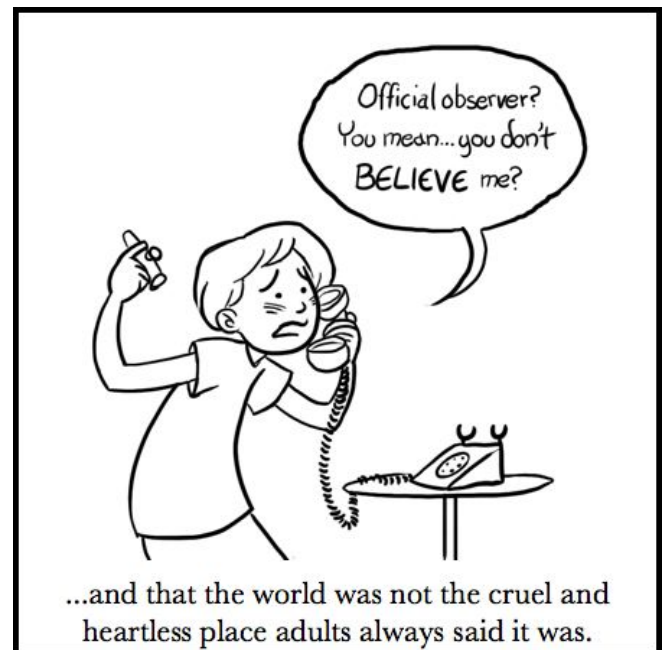
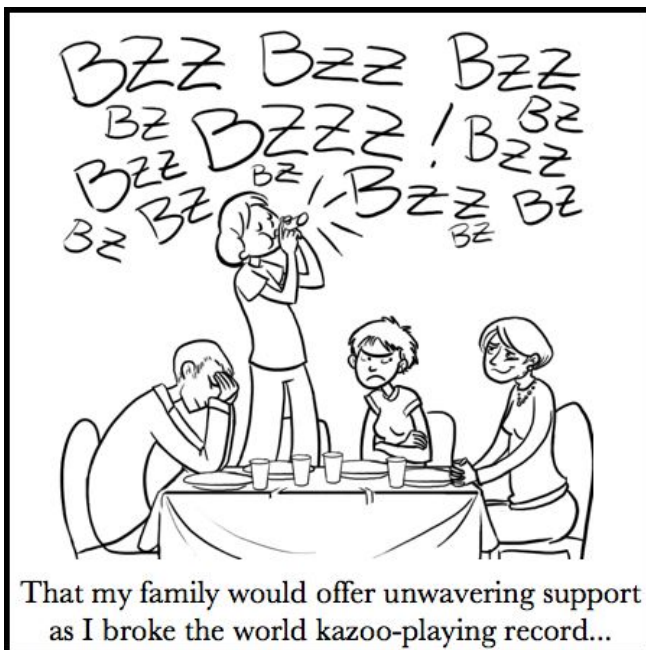
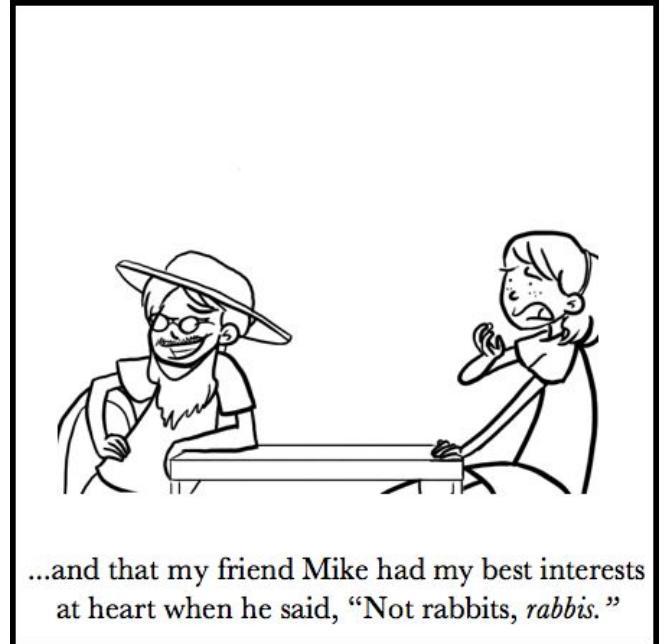
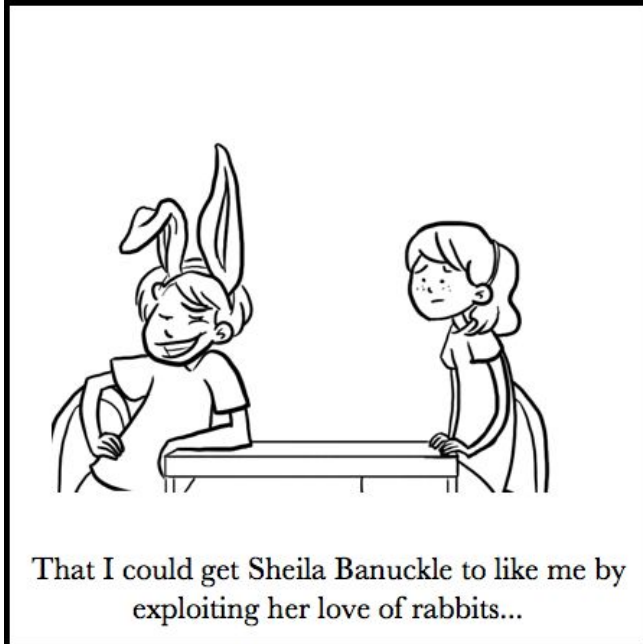
Cartoons!

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

As Bill Watterson once observed, most people are nostalgic about their childhoods because they don't remember what they were really like. I do. I shared some memories with super-cartoonist Erika Moen (check out her web site, <http://www.projectkooky.com/erika>) and she recreated them for me in all their horror. Please enjoy...

Things I Believed When I Was Young and Stupid





FIRST PRIZE

Please look for Carole Lanham's latest stories in the November issue of *Tales of Moreauvia* and the December issue of *Fantasy Magazine*. Come January, you should be able to find her bustling about on the web by looking for The Horror Housewife at horrorhousewife@live.com where she hopes to share some handy household tips on removing stubborn stains and advice on how to stir up a really good highball.

Maxwell Treat's Museum of Torture for Young Girls and Boys

by Carole Lanham

"If you turn the lever the wrong way, you'll hear a click and a pitchfork will swoop down and skewer your big dumb head like a meatball," Maxwell Treat said, pointing to the La-Z-Boy recliner cordoned off with hot-pink jump ropes in the back of the museum. Lumbar support aside, the machine was pure Spanish Inquisition. "You'll hear a click if you turn the lever the right way too, only the buckle will snap open and you'll get to go free."

"Which way is the right way?" Hayden asked. At the time, Maxwell only smiled. "Hop in and find out." That was two weeks ago.

Two weeks ago, Hayden Finch had no intention of putting Max's chair to the test. But sometimes things change. Sometimes a boy can't help but find himself with a pitch fork aimed at his big dumb head, and no way out but to make a choice.

*

It began with a railroad crossing, a flashing light, and a red and white gate. Hayden wondered if his father had looked at his mother to get her input on the matter. Did Mom stick up her thumb and say, “Go for it, Larry?” Or did she shake her head? Maybe Dad didn’t look at her at all. Maybe instead of looking at Mom, he’d looked at the 8:15 barreling toward them and made the decision all by himself. Hayden wished he knew so he could decide where to put the blame.

In any case, after the railroad crossing, he was sent to Bible, Iowa, to live on a turkey farm with his cousins in a house that smelled of pee, stale Oreos, and dirty socks. He was handed Power Ranger sheets and told to sleep where he liked. He was introduced to three boys with a hobby so peculiar that things could only lead to a rusted lever and a right or wrong click.

His first day started with a demonstration. “A good guillotine will dump the head in the basket for you,” Max said, pulling the release. The blade shot down and split a grapefruit in a spray of pink blood. A drip of juice hung off the tip of Max’s nose. It quivered when he breathed. “Want to try it?” he asked, the drip quivering fast and furious.

At fourteen, Max was the oldest and most obsessive of the brothers, but Merkle was no less inclined to split things open and anyway, his name was Merkle. *Merk*, they called him. Or Merky. It was a family name. Merk was thirteen like Hayden. The youngest was called Minor. Max, Merk, and Minor were building a torture museum in their garage. Hayden took one look at Maxwell’s guillotine and cursed his parents as he had never cursed them before.

When they weren’t tending turkeys, everyone had a job to do. Minor made signs that said things like TEN MORE MILES TO IOWA’S MOST TORTOROUS TORTURE MUSEUM or LAST CHANCE FOR TORTURE—TAKE EXIT 210 AND TURN RIGHT AT MCDONALDS. He tipped the signs so the red letters would run. Merkle was transforming the tomato patch into a parking lot. Max was in charge of the devices. Seeing how Hayden was the only torture novice in the group, he did duty with each of the brothers in order to learn the ropes.

“What’s Uncle Tommy say about you having a guillotine?” Hayden asked after the grapefruit execution. “Isn’t he worried you’ll hurt yourself?”

“Naw. Daddy thinks tourism would be good for Bible. Would you believe it, there ain’t a decent torture museum for a hundred miles around?”

Max was an enterprising boy, there was no disputing that. He’d set up a website asking people to donate their medieval torture devices to the cause. Hayden laughed at first but the packages kept coming.

“Now what is that one, dear?” Aunt Tawny would ask.

“In-step borer, Ma.”

The new in-step borer made Aunt Tawny giggle and bury her face in a dish towel. “You be careful with that, Maxwell.”

The brothers wanted the place to be a family museum with something for everyone. They had grand ideas. In the lobby, families would be able to dress in rags, climb in the stocks, and get a Polaroid for three bucks. For five bucks, the Treats would jeer at them and bounce cabbages off their skulls. There would be Hands-On exhibits for the little ones as well: a tongue-curb, a finger-straightener, a Spanish Tickler. Minor had created an educational Paint-by-Numbers for the bigger kids. Grown-ups would enjoy a pictorial history of the devices in action.

One day, Max suggested practicing his tour guide skills on Hayden, offering him *The Curious Boy’s Special* which included a Gatorade and a peek in the Off-Limits Room at the back of the museum. Max printed his spiel on a set of green index cards but tried not to look at them when he talked.

“First up we have something called Tucker’s Telephone donated by Mr. Herman Long of Cotter Arkansas. This phone might look like a plain old crank telephone but it’s been wired with two dry cell batteries and it will give you a shock if you crank it. Tucker’s Telephone was damaging organs as late as 1968 at the Tucker State Prison Farm.” Max checked his cards. “Care to make a call, little miss?” he said.

“On your right, we have a genuine certified replica of a Brazen Bull, brainchild of the Tyrant of Agrigentum himself. Prisoners were put in the brass belly and roasted alive. So as to keep the mood fun during executions, the ox head was designed with

a system of tubes that converted the prisoners screams into sounds like those of a bellowing bull. As an added advantage, the victim's scorched bones shone like gems afterward and could be made into lovely bracelets..."

Hayden sipped grape Gatorade as thumbscrews crushed the bones of Virginia slaves and "Judas Chairs" reaped havoc on the bottoms of luckless Protestants. Max was a real showman, gesturing grandly and making pop-eyes at invisible patrons. "Last but not least, we come to the Off Limits Room. This, girls and boys, is a room that only very special individuals ever get to see."

"Yeah, those that cough up five big ones," Hayden laughed.

"Shhhh. You may think you've seen it all, folks, but I warn you, the devices in this room are far too horrid to be shown to the public. If anyone is having second thoughts, I advise you to turn back now." Max paused, his eyes sweeping from one side of the garage to the other. "Anyone?" Another pause. "Very well. Enter at your own risk."

Some of the hinges had been oiled but not the hinges on the Off Limits Room door. These hinges screamed like a woman forced to stick her hand in boiling water. Even though he might easily have flipped on the lights, Max carried a lantern for added suspense. The window was too grimy to ruin the effect and the kerosene glow left the corners suitably shrouded in darkness. A series of magic marker words led the way to a "Breaking Wheel," a "Coat of Shame," etc. The dismembered doll hanging from the ceiling seemed a nice touch, but by now Hayden had grown jaded. "It just feels like more of the same."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong, son. Would you judge the Lou-ver without first seeing the Mona Lisa? I think not! Well, here it is, ladies and gentlemen, the jewel of the museum: the dreaded *Fork in the Road*."

A giant pitchfork-shaped shadow climbed the far wall. "The *Fork in the Road* was discovered in the root cellar of ninety-two year old Bible native, Barton Moonie, after his death in 1989. Seven bodies and a diary were also unearthed. According to his notes, Moonie's victims were strapped into the seat and asked to choose their fate by turning a lever; one direction spelling freedom, the other a fork to the head.

In his diary, Moonie claimed the most essential part of the *Fork in the Road* was giving the victim time to labor over the decision. Four people died of fright before they ever touched the lever. Do you see these words here on the handle?”

“Yes.”

“*Fiat Voluntas Dei*. May God’s will be done.”

Hayden shivered.

“I only wish I could tell you the secret regarding the *Fork in the Road*. Alas, I’m bound by ethics to hold my tongue.”

“Secret?”

“Much like magic, there are tricks of the trade that one must never divulge. Anyway...” Max made a bow. “This concludes your tour of *The Maxwell Treat Museum of Torture for Young Girls and Boys*. Don’t forget to stop by our gift shop.”

At first, Hayden barely heard this part; he was so busy inspecting the jewel of the museum—a pitchfork suspended over a chair of torn plaid. Then it hit him. “Hey, don’t I get my name in there somewhere too?”

Max rearranged his index cards. “It was my idea. Without me, there’d be no museum.”

Hayden shrugged. He didn’t care anyway. “Are you really going to have a gift shop?”

“Yep. I’ve been making gallows out of toothpicks since I was four. I’ve got enough merchandise to fill a Wal-Mart.”

*

There was only one thing Hayden shared in common with his cousins and that was their interest in Minor’s speech therapist; a wiggly woman with long blonde hair, a bright blue angel tattoo, and the improbable name of Miss Butter. Miss Butter was delicious. She came every Wednesday at ten a.m., beeping her horn three times in

the drive to signal her arrival. If you ran to her car fast enough, you'd get to carry her picture cards and puppets, earning yourself a nice pat on the head. While the Treats excelled at talents like dragging out burps, growing mold, and retooling devices meant for destroying the soles of feet, Hayden had been the fastest runner in grade eight back in Pleasant Valley and this proved handy with Miss Butter. As a result, the boys had developed a new obsession: Beat Hayden to the car.

The first couple of weeks, Hayden won easily because he caught the Treats off guard. Once the Treats put their energy into out-smarting Hayden, however, running fast wasn't good enough. He realized what he was up against the morning he discovered his Sketchers nailed to the floorboards in the hall at nine fifty-five. "Heh-heh," Max said, as Miss Butter gave him a little pet.

Sad to say, carrying Miss Butter's puppets was the high point of Hayden's week. The following Wednesday, he waited on the roof and jumped in front of her bumper before she had chance to beep. "Heh-heh," he said to Max, who had been too busy setting fire to Hayden's shoes on the porch to get his hands on Miss Butter's puppets.

*

There were worse things in Hayden's life than guillotines and unrequited love. At night, he heard train whistles in his brain as he tossed on his couch bed. The house rattled with the approach of something he feared to see. In his head, his father turned to his mother time and time again, his dark face flashing. Mom's eyes followed the track to a white beam of light...

Did they forget he was waiting for them at home? Three spoons on the counter lined up and ready to dig into a tub of Cherry Garcia. The next movie on the list on the refrigerator, *Back to the Future*, already scratched off with a Sharpie. *Risk* laid out on the kitchen table, just in case *Back to the Future* turned out to be dumb. And he'd waited.

Each evening, tossing in that shadowy place between wakefulness and sleep, his father prepared to gun it and Hayden held his breath. Then he'd feel the cat hair

and Cheerio dust creeping out of the couch cushions to remind him of where he was, and he'd know they'd failed to think of him again.

Sometimes he stopped the train by thinking of Miss Butter's little blue angel. Other nights, Aunt Tawny would sink down beside him and pat his back. Together, they would listen to the sounds of clicking and snapping in the garage. "I wish I had their energy," she might say.

Then Uncle Tommy would drift in too, scratching his butt and yawning loudly. "Shoot. I wish I had their brains."

Weird as they were, Hayden couldn't imagine his aunt and uncle choosing a train over their boys.

*

"I have sad news, boys," Aunt Tawny said one morning over breakfast. "Miss Butter can't come on Wednesdays no more." Three forks clanked against three china plates hard enough to cause chips.

"Why?" Hayden said, his heart in his throat.

"Schedule conflict," she said. "Don't worry. We'll find another day for Miss Butter to come."

*

Later that week, they were throwing garbage around the stocks to make things look more Elizabethan when Merk said, "You sure do like that speech therapist, don't you, Hayden?"

"I knew better girls in California," Hayden lied.

"I bet she'd melt if you kissed her," Merk said. "Get it? Like butter."

"Forget Miss Butter," Max said. "We're onto something big here."

"People do love pain," Merk said.

Hayden snorted at this. "Not me."

"That's on account you ain't played the game yet," Max told him.

Hayden dumped apple cores around the kid-sized stocks. "What game?"

"The Execution Game." Merk said. "Max is the executioner. We get to be the condemned."

"I want to be an ax murderer," Minor said.

"You're always an ax murderer," Merk complained. "Why don't you be a Christian for once?"

Minor stuck out his lip. "No."

"You could be a saint," Merk coaxed. "I'm going to be St. Anthony the Abbot, the patron saint of skin diseases. Do you want to be a saint, Hayden?"

Max pulled on a black hood. "Hayden's gonna be Hannibal the Cannibal."

"Fffat's not fair," Minor said.

Max snapped a horse whip. "Silence! You will all be sentenced according to your sins. Minor Treat, please step forward." Minor leapt from the ranks. "You have been charged with murdering folks with an ax. As punishment, you are hereby ordered into the guillotine."

Max pushed Minor against the teeterboard and tilted him horizontal.

Hayden gulped. "That can't be safe."

"Quiet you, or I'll remove your tongue!"

"That guillotine is old," Hayden said.

Max swiped the air with a Swiss army knife, the fish-scaler open and glinting evilly.

Merkle laughed. "I'd like to see you lop off Hannibal's tongue."

“Grrrrrr,” Max said, thrusting the scaler first at Hayden, then at Merkle, warning them to hush up. “Do you have any last words?” he asked Minor.

Minor spat.

“Very well then, prepare to meet your maker.”

Max reached for the handle. Hayden shut his eyes and imagined Minor’s head squirting like a grapefruit.

Ching!

Hayden heard a gasp—a gurgle—a wooden thud. Something rolled against his foot. Merk let out a scream. Hayden kept his eyes shut tight. Each beat of his heart exploded like a cannon in his chest.

“Poor Minor,” Merk wailed. “He couldn’t even say his *th* sounds.”

Swallowing hard, Hayden opened his eyes. There it was, malformed and gooshy. Wrinkly and rotten. “Grapefruit?”

The brothers laughed their butts off. “You’re so easy, Hayden.”

“I’m leaving,” Hayden said.

Maxwell’s beefy fingers dug into his arm. “You ain’t going anywhere until I execute you, mister.”

Hayden had no intention of sticking his head in a guillotine.

“Hannibal Lecter, for the crime of eating things you ain’t supposed to eat , I sentence you to the... *Fork in the Road*.”

“But that’s my favorite,” Merk objected.

“I’m saving *The Gunner’s Daughter* for you, Merkle.”

Merkle grinned.

“To the fork!” Max shouted, leading the boys to the Off Limits Room. Merk fired up the lantern.

“Forget it,” Hayden said. “I’m not getting in that thing.”

Maxwell checked his watch. “Do you still want to know the secret behind the Fork?”

“I thought you had too much ethics to tell?”

“If you’ll get in the Fork, I’ll make an exception.”

Hayden examined the key hole-shaped buckle. He *was* a little curious.

Max checked his watch as if there was a time limit on his decision. “There are only three people alive who know the secret. After today, there could be four.”

Merk clucked like a chicken. Minor clucked too. Max dangled the buckle key in front of Hayden’s nose. “Well?”

Hayden flopped down on the sagging cushion. “God, it smells like dead cats.”

Max put the key in the keyhole. “Prepare to meet your fate!” With that, he gave the key a twist.

Just then, three loud beeps came from the drive. “Miss Butter!” they cried, dashing to the window.

Max dropped the key in his pocket and smiled. “Heh-heh.”

*

There was a clot of hair stuck to one of the tines. Hayden knew this because they were four inches from his face. He planned to throw up on Max when they let him out.

It was Monday, not Wednesday. The little rats must have learned Miss Butter’s new schedule and planned accordingly. He watched them disappear in the house from behind a dirty window.

An hour passed. Hayden sat still as death. He barely breathed. The boys burst out the front door, laughing and showing off. Miss Butter gave them each a pat and drove off.

The boys went back in the house.

“Hey!” Hayden yelled; wiggling so hard, a tine grazed his forehead. “Hey!”

The lantern worried him. Max said it added drama but what if they meant to leave him in the Fork all night? He thought of the rat droppings that pebbled the floor. “Hey!” he yelled.

Aunt Tawny wouldn’t stand for it. Hayden watched the front door hopefully. Any minute now, they’d fly outside, Aunt Tawny whipping their back sides with her chili pepper hot pad. Another fifteen minutes ticked by before Hayden remembered that Aunt Tawny had taken his uncle for a root canal.

“Let me outta here!” he hollered, but there was no one to hear. He was too restless to just sit still and worry. He rattled the machine in an effort to shake it apart. In his fury, Hayden kicked over the lantern.

*

At first it only sputtered and licked an oily rag. A nearby noose sizzled. Hayden pulled at the buckle and screamed. When no one came out of the house, his eyes fell on the lever.

No.

He didn’t want to choose! The tines bobbed before his face, their dull tips blackened with the gooey signs of wrong choices. “Help me!” Hayden screamed.

The fire was like a little orange squirrel jumping from branch to branch, only in this case it jumped from index card to index card, eating them as it went.

The machine was rickety as sin. Perhaps it didn’t even work? What if he chose correctly and the fork didn’t swoop but the lock didn’t open either?

Fiat Voluntas Dei. May God's will be done.

The wall was burning now. Black smoke curled around him. He looked at the lever. What if he chose wrong? What if the fork skewered him like a meatball but didn't kill him right off? It would hurt having it stuck in his face.

"Help!"

He tried holding his breath. His eyes hurt. He looked at the lever.

Much as he didn't want to do it, he relived his parents final moments once more as the time for his own decision drew closer. For the five hundredth time, the Nissan raced toward the crossing. The Blockbuster bag sat on Mom's lap. Cherry Garcia perspired on the floor. But this time, something seemed different. Dad looked at Mom, but his face didn't flash. Nothing whistled. The arm stayed up.

Could it be?

Could it be that there was no warning? No whistle? No decision? Maybe they'd hopped in and buckled up, unaware they were making any decision at all because they trusted things would be okay. God or fate or chance decided for them, whether there was a whistle or not.

God's will be done.

I was always going to come to Bible, Hayden thought. I was always going to sit in this chair. Out loud, he said, "The decision, in essence, has already been made."

He twisted the lever right. Right for his mom, the only right-handed person in the family. Right because a fork went on the left side of a plate. Right, because this seemed as good a choice as any.

Click.

The fork groaned. Hayden flinched. The buckle opened.

He crawled from the burning museum, blind and choking, five years' worth of toothpick gallows embedded in his palms. Under a sign that read YOU ARE HERE, the Treat boys descended. "Gosh, Hayden! Did you have to burn up all our stuff?"

Hayden blinked through the smoke. "This stupid secret of yours better be good, Maxwell Treat."

"Secret?" Max said. "Oh right. The secret is, the decision is the entire torture. That old machine sets the victims free either way. Of course, after that, Moonie would throw them down the *All's Well that Ends Well* well, but I couldn't get my hands on that." Max gave Hayden a punch. "I can't believe you torched my life's work."

A fire truck roared up and began putting out the flames.

"It's just lucky for you," Max said, "I've always been fascinated by cockroaches. Would you believe it, Hayden? There ain't a decent cockroach museum for a hundred miles around."

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SECOND PRIZE

Katy Darby's work has won various awards, been read on BBC Radio, and appeared in magazines and anthologies including *Stand*, *Mslexia*, *The London Magazine*, the *Arvon* anthology and online at *Pulp.net*, *Carvezine.com* and *Untitledbooks.com*, among others. Her story "Going Out" won the 2007 Happenstance Prize. She teaches Short Story Writing at City University in London, and co-runs the monthly live fiction event Liars' League (www.liarsleague.com).

The Beginning of the End of the World

by Katy Darby

Everybody's got their own story about End of the World Night, haven't they? Just like everyone can tell you where they were when Princess Diana died.

A lot of people went out and got drunk or high; some stayed in, alone or with friends, and did the same. Some watched it on TV, or hid in the cellar with panic-bought groceries, spare batteries and the kids in sleeping bags, muffled and waiting like pupae. Quite a few went to the Apocalypse in the Park gig, organized by the K foundation, that one where Amy Winehouse actually showed up and played alongside all those death-metal bands. It was shit, apparently.

Still more of us ignored the whole thing, of course, carried on as usual, assumed it was all a hoax or a prank, although given the nature of the invitations I was pretty sure our host, at least, was taking the forthcoming End of Days very seriously indeed. But I went along; I mean, why not? Tower Bridge was only a couple of stops away and it was a nice night for it. I had to work next morning—or perhaps, ha ha, I didn't – but I reckoned quite a few people would be chucking sickies tomorrow, and that they'd be so glad to have survived (assuming we did survive, that was) that the bollocking would be worth it.

Edgar and me and Raoul and Daisy had made a pact to go along together and get there early, so we'd have a good view of whatever went down (rains of fire, moon of blood, the Woman Clothed in the Sun riding a seven-headed beast, etc.) Ed packed matching insulated backpacks full of posh sandwiches, champagne and Belgian beer, plus a bottle of Talisker from Christmas which he planned to open only if the world did not end. We had a bit of a fight about that, actually; I maintained that we ought to drink the whisky just before zero hour—have a toast during the countdown, perhaps, so that if the apocalypse did actually happen, we'd at least have drunk it.

"But if it doesn't, we'll have nothing to celebrate with!" Ed objected.

"Yes we will," I said. "We've got three bottles of champagne, remember? Which I'm carrying."

"You know I don't like champagne," said Ed.

This was news to me. "You *drink* it."

"Yeah, of course. It's traditional, isn't it? But I don't really *like* it."

"Well, *I* don't really like whisky. Why can't you take Bailey's instead?"

He stared at me. "I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer."

"You just did." Ha. Score one to me.

"Oh, shut up." Ed stomped off to make the smoked salmon sandwiches. Those were his idea; I wanted to get fish and chips along the way, but Ed insisted. Anyone would have thought we were going to bloody Glyndebourne.

As we were sulking in separate rooms, the phone rang. I waited just long enough to hear Ed's exasperated sigh and the thud of water in the sink as he rinsed his salmony hands before I picked up the receiver next to me.

"Hello?"

"All right Faith? It's Raoul."

Raoul always introduces himself on the phone, even though we've known him and Daisy for four years and even though he's got about the most distinctive voice I've ever heard, like hot cloudy honey. Or maybe like sap flowing slowly from a maple tree when they tap them in Canada, in the spring snow.

Sometimes I have a little daydream that Ed and Daisy will go off on a business trip together and their plane will crash on a deserted island. They'll both be fine, naturally, and given how clever and resourceful and generally perfect both of them are, I expect they'll have built a luxury villa, organic jungle café and airstrip by the time they're rescued—but meanwhile (and this is the important bit) Raoul and I will be in shock, pole-axed by mutual, nearly inconsolable distress, mourning together nightly; comforting one another. We'd develop this weird, terrible bond that no one else could possibly share or understand, like in *Random Hearts*, and we'd spend long evenings staying up and talking about what had happened and how we felt. Raoul would probably write a lot of songs about it; maybe a whole album of those heartbreaking acoustic numbers he does so well, and I'd always be the first to hear them, and tell him they were beautiful, because they would be. And—

“Faith? Hello?”

“Hey Raoul, still here.”

“Thinking about the Apocalypse?” There was a grin in his honey-maple voice.

“Just watching the build-up coverage. They're really going for it.”

The Government and the police and all the usual suspects had initially issued blanket denials of the end of the world being in the offing, followed by denouncements of our host, whoever he was (Forensics still hadn't been able to track him down, even after a year of trying) as a hoaxer, a crook, a David Blaine-style attention-seeker, and my personal favorite, a “psychological terrorist”.

But when it began to look like everybody but them was taking it pretty seriously, they admitted defeat and started organizing crowd-control and extra police officers and so on. A bit like *Millennium Night*, except that this time everybody was hoping

rather than fearing that it would all cock up. Which, on reflection, made it a lot like Millennium Night.

“I was just calling to say that Daisy can’t make it tomorrow,” said Raoul. I felt a twinge of disappointment. Daisy is a bit of a robot, admittedly, with her seventy-hour weeks and offensively exquisite grooming and her ability to make imperfect human beings, i.e. everyone around her but Edgar, feel as though they have, in some final and indefinable way, failed at their lives. But she loosens up after a few drinks, and—well, she’s part of our foursome. Two couples minus one person equals couple-and-gooseberry. It’s like an atomic nucleus losing a proton; it makes the whole structure unstable. But I wasn’t really surprised. Daisy was always skipping things like this, and it was always for the same reason.

“Work?” I asked.

Raoul sighed. “Yeah, as usual. She’s got a huge presentation tomorrow morning and needs to work on it.”

I stared at the muted television. BBC News 24 was showing an invitation, like everyone in the country didn’t know what they looked like by now. “Have you mentioned that there might not be a work to go to tomorrow morning? Might not *be* a tomorrow?”

“Tried that,” said Raoul. “She said she wasn’t prepared to risk it.”

“You’re still coming though, aren’t you?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

I grimaced into the receiver. “Ba-dum-*tisssshhh!*”

“Sorry.”

“S’okay. What time are you coming round, then?”

“Well, sunset’s at, what, nine?”

“Nine-twenty,” I said.

“So I’ll come round straight after work, sixish, we’ll have a couple at yours and watch the coverage on TV, and then set off. Sound like a plan?”

“OK,” I said, feeling ridiculously happy. Ed wandered into the living-room and proffered a plate of tiny, crustless pink-and-white sandwiches.

“It’s Raoul,” I said. “Daisy can’t make it.” I popped a sandwich into my mouth.

Ed made a sympathy face. “Poor Daze,” he said, loud enough for Raoul at the other end to hear. “Work, I suppose?” He sounded almost envious. He and Daisy are the same age with the same degree, but she’s his line-manager, and although he’d never admit it to her, let alone me, this itches him like a mosquito-bite. It’s almost funny, how competitive he gets about staying late and coming in early. I know that look of envy on his face when he talks about the meetings he doesn’t get invited to.

“These are great,” I said, and smiled up at Ed, taking another sandwich. He looked pleased and grateful.

“What are?” asked Raoul in my ear.

“Have to wait and see, won’t you?” I said. “Ed sends his love to Daisy, by the way.”

“Cheers,” said Raoul. “I’ll pass it on. See you tonight.” And he hung up.

*

As it was such a beautiful evening, and as tradition dictates that on every national holiday or major event, the Underground will be buggered, we decided to walk from our place to Tower Hill, and maybe have a drink at a pub along the way. Ed objected to this idea on the grounds that a) we already had two bottles of champagne (we’d finished one before setting out) and b) we wouldn’t get a good spot on the bridge if we stopped off, but Raoul and I shouted him down.

“It’ll be harder to get a place in the pub than on the bridge,” Raoul argued. “I mean, where would *you* rather spend your last night on Earth?”

Ed considered. “You’ve got a point.”

We decided to break our journey at the first pub we saw after Tower Hill tube.

“That way we’ll be nearly there,” I said.

“Let’s get an outside table,” said Raoul.

I wasn’t too keen; after only fifteen minutes’ walking I was already unpleasantly sweaty and I knew my eyeliner was running in the heat. I’d tried to strike a balance between practical and glamorous when choosing my outfit, but my shirt was already sticking and the heavy backpack chafed my shoulders.

“No,” I said. “let’s look for a big pub with lots of full tables outside and then go *inside* and cool off.”

Ed looked a bit taken aback at my vehemence.

“All right,” he said, as though I’d just offered to fight him over it.

“Are you OK with that rucksack, Faith?” Raoul asked me. “Shall I take it for a bit?”

I smiled at him gratefully and shook my head.

*

The pubs, as I’d predicted, were heaving outside but half-empty inside. We chose the first one with air-conditioning and stood just inside the door, feeling the sweat chill on our skin as the AC whirred and sighed. Everyone else was out on the picnic tables, enjoying the longest day of the year, drunk on sun.

“They’d better soak it up,” said Raoul in an odd, portentous voice. “Might be the last time.”

Ed smiled and then frowned.

“Better get you a drink old son,” he said.

Raoul and I found a table while Ed went to the bar. Raoul was acting a bit strange, I remember; it seemed that the nearer we approached Tower Bridge, the more antsy he got, until he could hardly bear to sit still. His eyes were darting everywhere and

he looked sickly pale beneath his Mediterranean tan. I wondered if he'd done some coke or something when he'd nipped to the Gents. After all, if it was your final evening on Earth (and Raoul looked like he was beginning to believe that it was) then why the hell not? I imagined a lot of London's dealers were feeling like all their Christmases had come at once.

I was a little surprised to find so many pubs open along the way, actually—after all, even if you only half-thought that anything interesting, let alone the end of the world, was going to happen, surely you wouldn't want to work through it? Well, unless you were Daisy. Christmas and New Year were different (I used to be a barmaid and I'd work every overtime shift I could get my hands on over the festive season); they were an opportunity to choose long-term gain over short-term loss, money over time. But all the money in the world won't do you any good if time itself is suddenly running out.

"Are you OK?" I asked Raoul. He looked at me and smiled a sweet scared smile.

"S'pose so," he said. "I wish Daisy was here."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Daisy was so organized and sensible; I was pretty sure the world wouldn't dare to end, even a little bit, if she was around.

Ed returned with drinks.

"See they've got themed music," he said, smugly, and drank off the head of his beer, then licked his lips precisely. Raoul and I listened to the faint, piped notes seeping from the recessed speakers. When we recognized the song, I groaned and Raoul laughed. It was REM's *The End of the World As We Know It*.

"Wonder if that's on repeat?" I said.

"Which album's this off?" asked Raoul.

"*The Best End of the World Album ... Ever!*" I suggested.

"*Apocalypse Aid?*" said Ed.

"How many songs about that can there be, anyway?" I wondered.

“Oh, more than you’d think,” Raoul said instantly, and a look of concentration passed across his face. This was a music question, something he was good at. He looked relieved to have something else to think about; a trivial but absorbing task. I watched his face and slid into that daydream again.

What if the world ended and somehow Raoul and I survived, the last two people alive, wandering through the emptiness together? I wondered what our kids would look like. Awful, probably.

Raoul isn’t handsome. He’s got an odd-shaped, sulky-looking face with lush, childish lips, heavy cheeks, brown eyes and golden-tan skin. He wears his curly dark hair long and wild in classic rock-musician style. Daisy and I share a loathing for long hair on men (Ed has a short-back-and-sides), but I forgive it in Raoul: it suits him. When people see him and ice-blond, silk-and-cashmere Daisy together they’re always surprised. I’ve fielded a lot of glancing comments from Daisy’s girlfriends (they’re always girlfriends, never just friends) about slumming it and bits of rough. Ed told me once, drunk after the firm’s Christmas drinks last year, that Daisy was pregnant when she and Raoul got married; that Raoul wouldn’t have proposed otherwise. He sounded angry. Daisy lost the baby soon after the wedding, and went back to work the next day.

I love it when Raoul sings; he has a clear, solid, yearning voice which streaks bright across the music like paint on canvas. Beautiful white teeth, strong like a horse’s. The sort of physique that’s obviously never been given a thought, and looks infinitely better for it. He’s still got that adolescent leanness about him, with just enough muscle to take the edge off it. And, unlike most attractive men, he has no self-consciousness. He takes his shirt off when he’s playing gigs sometimes, when it gets hot like a boiler-room with all the sweat and steam rising off the audience, and I have to look, and then look away.

“*Until the End of the World*,” said Raoul.

Ed nodded wisely. “U2, right?”

Raoul had a glassy look in his eyes.

“How about that Carpenters song?” Ed said suddenly. “You know the one.”

Raoul's brow creased. "There's a few of them. How does it go?"

Ed took a breath. *Oh Lord*, I thought, *don't sing. Don't sing in the pub.*

"Why does my heart go on beating?
Why do these eyes of mine cry?
Don't they know it's the end of the world?
It ended when we said goodbye."

He was half-speaking, half-singing under his breath. Raoul glanced at me briefly, then looked down at the beer-rings on the table, a funny half-smile on his face. When Ed stopped I relaxed, unclenching my embarrassed fists. I knew the song from somewhere; an advert, maybe, or a TV theme tune. Ed grinned triumphantly at his feat.

"Well," I said, "I'm going to the loo."

*

I avoided my own stare in the mirror; I already knew that those swathes of skin which weren't cave-dweller white were pink from the unaccustomed sun, my shoulders just starting to blister from the frottage of my champagne-heavy backpack. I should have brought a jacket. And I also knew that if I looked, I'd then have to spend a lot of time and effort making myself up to look halfway-decent in the awful fluorescent toilet-light, and would resemble a dowdy drag-queen as soon as I went outdoors.

I washed my hands. My fingers were fat with the June heat and my left hand hurt when I made a fist, the wedding ring digging into the flesh of my third finger. On impulse, I slathered soap on and began sliding the ring up and down until it eased tightly over the knuckle and shot into my waiting palm. I dried my hands on a paper towel, pocketed the ring and refused to look myself in the glass as I walked out.

*

When I got back Raoul was scribbling something on a bar-napkin and Ed was lost in thought, a frown ruching his forehead. I realized wearily that this had, inevitably, become a competition for Ed, yet another forum for his constant need to prove himself.

“Whoops Apocalypse,” Ed said desperately, as I approached the table. “Oh no, that’s a film.”

“End of the World,” said Raoul. “The Cure.”

Ed frowned.

“Good one.”

“What are you writing, Raoul? A list?” I leaned over to see and he hid it from me with a crooked arm, like a clever kid in an exam.

“Nothing. A song, maybe.” He glanced up at me. Brown eyes, almost black; crinkled, shining, like his hair. “Got any paper?”

I rummaged through my handbag, dumping tissues, pens, make-up and receipts onto the table. In there too was a clean white card I’d forgotten I’d brought. Raoul reached hungrily for it, but I flipped it over.

“No,” I said, “not that.”

“Oh,” he said, and withdrew his hand.

“Why’d you bring your invitation?” asked Ed.

“Just in case,” I said.

“Why not?” said Raoul tightly. I realized then that he’d brought his too. Our borough was the first to get the cards in the whole of London, and Raoul and I were the first in our neighborhood. We’d met up, matched them, thought it was a joke at first. Well, everyone had. All those expensive stiff cards, gold-edged like wedding invitations, beautifully hand-lettered in black ink. A central London postmark, June 21st. I got it next day, the 22nd. A year ago exactly. It’s funny to think that if

Ed had come downstairs before me that morning, he'd have been the first person in the country to receive an invitation to the end of the world.

Raoul stroked the faded gold border on my card and tipped it up to the low pub light.

"You are cordially invited," he read, "to join your host in celebrating the Revelation of the Apocalypse at sundown (9.20pm GMT) on 21st June at Tower Bridge, London SE1. Dress: come as you are. All welcome."

He laid it gently flat again. Ed sucked on his pint.

"Millions of the bloody things," he mused. "What a nutter."

I watched Raoul: his stillness unnerved me. He was somewhere else entirely. I reached out and slid the card slowly from under his fingers. He didn't react.

"Penny for them?"

"Just thinking," he said.

"Obviously. About what?"

"What if it really does happen?" he said, and as he said it he looked right into my eyes, serious as a car crash, dead on. "What will we do?"

It was like staring into a bright light. I looked away. The truth was that I hadn't really thought about it. I hadn't ever taken it any more seriously than the Millennium, or the wars in Iraq, or the undeniable but easily forgettable fact that one day I, myself, would die.

There was an awkward silence.

"Cheer up mate," said Ed, who had the knack of saying exactly the wrong thing at moments such as these, "it might never happen."

Raoul didn't bother smiling. I thought about Daisy at home, face underlit by her laptop's glow, focused on the future.

“Another drink?” I said.

Ed checked his watch.

“Better press on,” he said. Raoul scribbled something else on the napkin, folded it and put it in the pocket of his leather jacket. Then he zipped the pocket.

“No peeking,” he told me. I shouldered my rucksack and we left the moody gloom of the pub and joined the evening stream of people flowing towards Tower Bridge.

It was almost half-eight by now, the sun low and lazy in the sky. Ed and Raoul walked quickly, drawing ahead of me; I struggled to keep up. Nearing the bridge, we could see the day-glo yellow of crowd-control, the human chain breaking; the panicky, shifting police-horses drawing slowly towards the pressure areas. My heart hiccupped in my chest, and I laughed nervously, pointlessly; they’d clearly abandoned any attempt to control the situation. There were far too many people, all heading in one direction like migrating animals; a slow stampede. Ed grabbed my hand and dragged me closer. The mob shuddered around us, yelling, waving, crushing us against one another like pulped fruit, close-packed as cattle trundling to slaughter. I looked around for Raoul but I couldn’t see him. Panic lanced my stomach.

“Ed!” I shouted. He was pulling me towards the southern tower of the bridge; the high arch of baroque orange brickwork looming above our heads. He didn’t react. I glanced behind us, sweeping the crowd, and caught a flash of brown curls and mustard-colored t-shirt (thank goodness he was conspicuous). Raoul was scanning the approach behind us, wide-eyed searching for Ed and me. I waved crazily. My watch said 9 p.m. The slanted sunset light drenched everyone in gold. The faces of the crowd glowed, their skin shone; their eyes were blind against the light like the blank eyes of statues. Raoul couldn’t see me. He looked beautiful. Sadness buckled my body, and I felt free and weak as water. I let my rucksack fall with a clank, startling Ed.

“You go on,” I said. “I’ll get Raoul. Meet you on the bridge.”

I turned back towards Raoul. The amber light made him ageless, like something preserved, perfect and dead, since the last time the world ended.

He'd look like shit in ten years' time. So would I. And maybe we didn't even have that long; although that way at least we'd die pretty. They haunted his features even now; the ghost of the old man he'd become and the shadow of the child he'd been. I could see the mask of Raoul's middle-aged self settling over his face, sagging and roughening it, dragging it down. Ed, on the other hand, would age well. Time would make his face more manly, knock the edges off that feminine delicacy. The blond hair would turn silver-fox grey, but he'd still look young for his age. People would start mistaking me for his mother. I knew all this, the way that you walk outside and know it's going to rain, and I didn't care. Sooner or later we all fade and die. Bang or whimper, it doesn't matter: they both end in silence.

I caught Raoul's eye and he smiled delightedly, wading through the crush towards me. I turned to Ed but he had disappeared into the crowd.

It was almost a joke, this slow-motion coming together, by the time we finally reached each other. We were only a few feet apart but we couldn't quite touch, separated by a sturdy pair of hiker-types. I grabbed his warm hand at last and laughed with triumph, and he did the same. It was like a game we'd unexpectedly won.

And then the crowd surged forward a little, shivering its flanks, and pushed us together. His arms came around me tightly; I smelled the hot leather of his jacket and felt his mouth on my mouth, warm lips and stubble and sweat, and then we were kissing as though that was what it was all about, all it was ever about; as though we were lonely and afraid, because we were.

I didn't want to open my eyes. I hid my face in his hair, clinging to him like a baby monkey. I could hear everything, the murmuring bicker of the people around us, the far-flung braying of the stopped traffic, even the river's rush twenty feet below. His body was steady, like a stone in a stream, as he held us against the urging of the crowd, pushing under the arch and onto the bridge proper. He was shorter than Ed, slighter, but stronger than he looked. I felt his mouth soft on my cheek, in my hair.

"It's OK," he said. "Whatever happens."

I couldn't answer. My voice had lodged in my throat, like a nut. I sank my head into his chest. I wasn't shaking; it felt like the other side of cold, when your body stops shivering to keep warm and just relaxes into stillness, gives up. We were pressed against the scabby barrier on the eastern edge, nothing between the sunset and us except an ache of empty air and the dark water throbbing beneath us. I held on to the railings so hard my fingers went white and numb. Raoul held on to me.

"Nine-fifteen," somebody said behind me.

Everyone's faces turned towards the lowering sun as it blazed slowly towards the horizon. My eyes streamed and blurred; it looked like it was underwater as it trembled on the glimmering edge of the horizon, a sliver of fire still burning the river. I glanced up at Raoul, who was staring at the sky in the east through dark, slitted eyes. I looked back along his line of sight, but in that instant, the sun had gone. Vanishing light ebbed from the sunken clouds, tinted the ravishing colors of penny sweets and wild flowers; indigo and lavender, chartreuse and pink.

We waited: a minute.

Two.

We watched and yearned for something, anything. What people a thousand years ago might have called a sign. The crowd's silence was like a great held breath. But there was only darkness, spreading like ink in water. We strained our eyes searching in it.

Then someone, somewhere, popped a champagne-cork. The crowd-murmur began again, as people breathed out and started talking, laughing, embracing one another with a little too much relief. I don't know who first broke the silence with their bottle. Perhaps it was Ed, because when I turned around he was standing there, right behind us, a big smile on his face.

"So that's where you two got to," he said. "Keeping my wife warm, eh Raoul? Hope you had a better view than I did. Couldn't see a bloody thing."

Ed hadn't brought glasses so we had to drink from the bottle. I had champagne; Raoul and Ed passed the Talisker between them. The night had turned cold and I

hadn't brought a sweater. Ed offered me his but he only had a t-shirt on under it. I ended up wearing Raoul's jacket, draped stiffly around my shoulders, smelling of leather and him. We didn't say much on the way home; after a big non-event like that, there wasn't much to say.

*

I keep telling myself that I never really believed it anyway. All that nonsense with invitations and prophecies, what was I on? What were any of us on, those thousands of hopefuls on the bridge that night? What did we think we were waiting for, never mind our mysterious host? This is not the age of miracles, not any more.

But sometimes I wonder whether, somehow, it was true, and we just don't know it yet. Whether maybe the world *did* end that night; and that even though we keep walking around and talking and watching TV and going to the pub and working and reading the newspaper and having sex, these are just the reflexive twitches of a world that doesn't know it's dead yet. Like a headless chicken, I said one night to Raoul, as we stared through the bedroom window at a fight in the street outside, and he nodded.

Ed says I should sell my invite on eBay; one from early July went for three times the reserve price a few weeks ago, so God knows what mine would fetch. The invites being sold as souvenirs are getting harder and harder to find; people don't want to part with them. I certainly don't, not just yet. It sits there on the mantel and I take it down and look at it occasionally, like a crossword puzzle I can't quite complete, searching for clues. And just the other day, I found one.

I never noticed it before, but in the date section there's a day and a month, but no year. I keep wondering whether the first time was just a dry run, or whether something went wrong. Perhaps that was why nothing happened; why our host, whoever sent those millions of polite invitations, never showed up. They still haven't caught him, or her. Even now, nobody knows if it was some kind of Situationist prank, guerrilla marketing (but for what?), or the work of a religious obsessive.

But I don't think it's any of those.

I think that maybe, this time, not enough people believed that what was promised on the cards would or could come true. But I have an idea that if we turn up at Tower Bridge next June 21st, at around sunset, hundreds of thousands of us, all with our invitations, maybe millions this time, something worth witnessing might happen. Raoul thinks the same. Some nights it's all we talk about. Adultery and apocalypse make for a full evening. It's not hope, exactly; nor is it fear.

It's just a feeling.

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THIRD PRIZE

Ashley Armstrong is a student at the University of Florida, where she studies East Asian Languages and Literatures. She rooms with a collection of very strange people, all of whom like to write very strange things. She is currently working on an urban fantasy series that can best be described as “Werewolves, vampires, and faeries—oh, my!”

“Love Interest” represents her first published fiction.

Love Interest

by Ashley Armstrong

I learned how to read from wanted posters. There’s nothing more annoying than chasing down some drunk named Eric the Strange when you were supposed to be going after Eric the Strangler, just because Idiot #2 in the bar misunderstood the paper you had him read you. It’s also generally a good idea to figure out if that bad drawing is supposed to be of you without having to talk to someone else about it.

Right. Me. I should introduce me. My name is Karen, no last name because I’m poor like that. (I think my grandfather’s last name was Whoreson, but who wants to carry on that legacy?) I’m tall for a woman, short for a man. Brown eyes, brown hair, brown skin. I’m a jack of all trades: Mercenary, bounty hunter, you name it. I used to make most of my gold (read: copper) in rigged tournament fights. And I’m not usually as, well, *mushy* as I’m going to be for the next while. Trust me, you’re gonna see why.

So what do I have to do with Daniel Hunter, the Hero, Savior of All? The bearer of the Prophesied Weapon, the One Blade that can defeat the scourge of our world:

the creature? (No, no capitals for the creature. I think people just don't like it enough to give it a capital letter.)

Well, come on. Every hero, even Sword Guy (one of his titles; long story) needs a rough-and-tumble mercenary sidekick. If we're female, we get to be the love interest. And yeah, I got sucked into that role, too.

Apart from being a great story cliché, my main reason for knowing Daniel is those rigged tournament fights. He got involved with them, not knowing they were rigged, managed to mess up the whole bloody rigging system (I'm still not clear on how, but I'd bet money it had more to do with his Aura of Hero than any intentions on his part) and, well, my bosses thought we were in cahoots. Ended up on the run and then just stuck around him. Hey, when you're a part-time bounty hunter and you find someone high-stakes criminals slaver over, you stick with it.

And like I said. The love thing.

Fact is, when I was a little kid I had a huge crush on him. Heard rumors of him all my life, you know how it goes. Took a while to admit it, but he was my major motivator to get myself out of the slums. That didn't stop me from falling back into them, but that's not his fault.

As for falling in *love*, that didn't start until a couple months back. Just one day out of the blue, I started seeing him in a new way. I didn't really know why at the time, but for some reason stuff like offering me his sleeping blanket started seeming sweet instead of perverted. His Heroic Acts started seeming noble instead of idiotic.

I got to this point where I confessed my feelings to him. Got them off my chest, tried to see if he wanted to be with me. I was nervous as anything, fingers quivering, palms shaking, and this was his Heroic response:

"Look, I'm not... I don't think of you that way. Okay?"

He found me an hour later. "Karen, are you crying?"

I shook my head and held my knees to my chest. Of course I wasn't crying. I never cry. The fact that my face was soaking wet with tears and my body hurt from sobs didn't change that. Really.

He knelt down and wiped at my tears with his hand, his face uncertain and pained. He leaned forward just enough and I caught his lips with mine, desperate for just one kiss. After that I would leave, or stay with him and pretend I didn't love him.

He didn't pull away.

*

After that first night we tried to slow things down. We were still new to seeing each other in a romantic way. Not only that, but Daniel had this strange reluctance sometimes. He would touch the side of my face and look deep into my eyes with this hesitating look.

"You really love me?" he'd ask.

"Yeah," I'd say. Just simple like that. And he'd kiss me and I'd kiss him and soon enough we were comfortable again. It was a nice way to be.

*

Two months after my stumbled confession and our first kiss, I was lying in bed, watching Daniel get ready for the fight. We had stuck together, and the creature was on its way. I should be getting ready, too, but I wanted to watch him. To see the way he moved, the way his muscles rippled and stretched as he buckled and tied the pieces of his custom-made armor. It fit him like a second skin, a shimmering creation of living metal. I've never been rich enough to have armor made of living metal. Neither was he, but he was the Hero, the prophesied savior of the world. The specially made armor had been a gift scraped from the pockets of those who knew the prophecy.

It brought out his eyes. Those passionate grey eyes that drew me in, that made me want—no, *need* – to be close to him.

I rose from the bed. We kissed, briefly, and I could see fear in his eyes. Soon the creature would come, and we might be separated forever. I rested my hand in his for just a brief moment, knowing he felt my rough fingers entangled in his own, knowing he could draw reassurance from that touch.

But today he didn't. I tried for an encouraging smile but it fell short, because I understood his fear. Maybe I'd die and leave him forever. Or maybe he'd die and leave me forever. Either option was unbearable. I wanted to nestle into the curve of his armored body, but I held back. Something in my touch was making him more afraid. More afraid of losing me, perhaps? But either way, I didn't want to spark any more fear in his gaze. I took my hand from his and turned away to put on my own equipment.

A leather brigandine for my chest, which I'd actually bought. Bracers stolen off a dead archer for my arms. I had some leg guards which fit me poorly, gapping and poking in all the wrong places. They would reduce my ability to move easily. They might also save my legs from sudden amputation. I made myself put them on, but knew I'd regret it.

I hated having next to nothing for my head, but helmets were expensive. A reinforced headband was all I'd ever been able to afford. I put it on with little hope in its utility.

Sword in sheath, knife in sheath, other knife in sheath, dagger in sheath, and I made sure not to forget that unusually large needle I'd picked up somewhere or another. I once had a bow, also stolen off that dead archer, but I sold it and its too-fancy arrows for the leg plates. Worst purchase decision ever. I should have just learned how to use the bloody thing. Now instead of something reasonably deadly for distance I had a pouchful of stones and a sling I could barely use. (I tend to give up on the sling about a minute into any fight that needs it and just start throwing the rocks at my opponents barehanded. I've gotten very good at hitting eyes that way, if I get close enough.)

A pair of good boots, which I would have started the equipping with if I hadn't been so distracted by worries about Daniel. Those on and I was ready. Not a moment too soon.

Our wooden door had begun, ever so subtly, to crack. Daniel was staring at it already, and I stood beside him, watching. The material around the cracks turned black, then grey, crumbling to dust in a spiderweb pattern that spread out and out until the entire door just disappeared in a puff of smoke.

The creature behind it looked human, yet not. Its unnaturalness was subtle. Eyes a little too wide. Pupils a little too small. Its hair never seemed to be exactly the color I'd assumed it was at first glance. The fingers were strangely short, the palms strangely long. I noticed something watching those hands, waiting for them to go for a weapon, to grow claws, to try to kill us. It had no fingernails. It looked like it had never been made to have fingernails. That little detail put a chill in my stomach.

Pain tightened curling fingers along my rib cage, as if someone were holding their hands around each and every bone, pressing against the skin from the inside. I could feel the flesh bubbling over my ribs and I almost tore off my brigandine to look. I felt something caress the inside of my throat and gagged. I felt a slimy finger rub against the very back of my tongue and almost vomited.

I felt it touch my heart.

Daniel had noticed what was happening to me. But he didn't move. I don't think he could. It's part of the nature of the creature.

It didn't feel right, where that invisible hand squeezed. I felt a sharp pinch and heard a tear deep inside of me. I coughed in reflex and tasted metal. Blood. It had torn off a piece of my lung.

The rules. Remember the rules. I brought myself out of the agonizing horror of what it was doing to me, made myself focus despite the invisible fingers snaking through my body. It was after me because I was in love with Daniel. As long as I was alive and in love with him, it could and would only attack me. In exchange, I was the only one who could attack it.

I cut its head off.

The head smiled at me from the ground, and its nailless fingers made a clawing motion. I felt it in the lining of my stomach. I stabbed through its heart this time but it didn't do a thing. It just kept smiling. I felt like there was a hole in my stomach now, like it was squeezing its fingers through, like...

"Karen, listen to me." It was Daniel speaking. Maybe his last words to me. "Listen to me. You drank a potion."

And that's when the spell broke.

I collapsed backwards, gasping for air. I coughed again and again, but while there was blood the first time, after that there was nothing but phlegm. I felt the urge to throw up but didn't. Suddenly my stomach didn't hurt anymore; suddenly everything felt fine.

Daniel had said the magic words and killed the effects of the potion I'd taken two months ago. Getting rid of my magically induced "love" for him had broken the creature's power over me and freed Daniel to kill the creature. Now I could remember everything I'd forgotten. Including taking the bloody thing and the truth about my and Daniel's lovey-dovey relationship.

Daniel stabbed the creature with his sword. And since *his* sword was the Holy Sword of the Neverending, it actually did something. The creature screamed and he chopped and in about five minutes the job was done. The creature, the last obstacle to the revival of the world, was dead.

He turned to me and let down a hand to help me up. I knocked it away and helped myself up. And then I started yelling.

"You told me you wouldn't *sleep* with me!"

"I told you I wouldn't kill you to defend myself! You were perfectly willing!"

"I was under a spell, you slimewort! A spell *you* put on me!"

"You volunteered!"

“I volunteered *with conditions!*”

*

Two months ago, Daniel and I had a conversation. It went like this:

“I’m not in love with you.” That was me talking. The real me, not that hopelessly besotted idiot I’ve been narrating for the past while.

“Right.”

“But I need to be, for this mission.” You’re seeing where this is going, maybe.

“Right.”

I sighed, staring at the potion in my hand. I had accepted this already, a hundred times in my head. The creature would go after whoever was in love with Daniel, and I was the only one who stood a chance of not dying within five seconds of meeting it. Plus, once Daniel said something to me about the potion, then it could wear off and *he* could kill the creature, which meant that I would serve as great bait. Yeah. You heard me. Bait. I volunteered to be bait. Not the first time, but definitely the first time with mind-altering chemicals. The best I could hope was that it wouldn’t make me a wimp. The love potion did not create “true” love, but it was close enough.

I wondered at the time if he would have tried slipping it into my drink if I refused, but I knew better. Or rather, I knew that he knew better. I was careful about what I ate and drank—it was half the reason he’d openly asked me to take the potion in the first place. Hero doesn’t mean “not sneaky.” Repeat after me.

He could never have managed to get it in me secretly, let’s put it that way. That, and I would have killed him whenever he slipped up and told me about it, or it wore off, either one. Not saying I wouldn’t do it now, considering that *he slept with me*, but still. He would have had to keep me “in love” with him for the rest of my life. And besides, even if we weren’t in love, I would like to think he respected me more than that. Yeah, what a joke.

I lifted the vial up to the light. It looked like someone had bottled mud. “If I try to rape you under the influence of this thing, defend yourself, will you?”

See? I asked nicely! And what does he do? Totally ignore what I said.

“How do you know I won’t go willingly?” he asked.

“Defend yourself, or I’ll kill you later.”

“Hey, I’m just saying, I’m not going to die to keep from having sex with you.”

I glared. This was only one of the many, many reasons I had to take the potion, rather than simply being able to fall for the guy.

Then I sighed. “For the sake of the world.”

“For the sake of the world.”

“Cheers.” I uncorked the vial, lifted it to the sky, prayed I wouldn’t do anything I’d regret in the next few months (I lasted a week. *A week.*), and drank it down.

*

Saving the world got a lot of applause. Lots of love from various villagers and city people and government higher-ups, even for me. After all, I was with The Hero. I was The Hero’s love interest, right? (Though I still didn’t get any capitals.)

So I dropped the real tale to some bards I knew. They may or may not have owed me a little money. Soon enough the taverns were singing of the great Hero who can only get any if he’s got a potion on hand. The songs weren’t too kind to me, but I didn’t give a crap. My work was done. And sometimes people would pay me to tell it personally, and that was always a hoot, because I have no qualms about exaggerating. The looks on their faces when I’m done... Trust me, it’s worth it.

Daniel isn’t too happy with me, but he also has a very vague sense of heroic honor (which is usually busy drowning deep in the depths of his personality). He leaves me alone and lets me spread my rumors. They make him more famous, anyway.

Oh, and I'm guessing you want to hear one more thing about me, right? That big, burning question. Everyone always asks it when I finish my tale, if they're not too busy laughing. And they never believe my answer, because everyone's a romantic.

Am I still in love with him? Does some deep inner part of me remember our relationship, remember how I felt about him, and still feel that way?

My usual answer is "No." But I think I'll extend it a little bit, so you can get a true sense of my personal inner feelings.

No. Are you kidding me?

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HONORABLE MENTION

Tim Lieder lives in Manhattan with his three cats. He operates the small publishing house Dybbuk Press whose titles include *Teddy Bear Cannibal Massacre*, *God Laughs When You Die* and *The Big Bow Mystery*. His first novel, *Dragon Claw Apocalypse*, will be out in early 2009.

Family Reunion

by Tim Leider

Step through the bar. The men upstairs aren't invited. Pub crawlers prefer the dim light. They've spent many long nights with reassignments. Everything is classified. It's good for the war effort. Come along. Step this way.

Hear the party halfway down the steps. Great Uncle Johann passes you on the stairwell. Say hello to your Great Uncle Johann. He's going to the bathroom upstairs because there's a long line downstairs. Great Uncle Johann barely makes it to the top. True drinker that one. He has a business fixing bicycles outside of Austria.

Everyone is happy. It's a big rented room; much brighter, much warmer. Yes, you see sad faces because of Alois, but Alois will be home soon. He's having a great time at camp. He writes every month to say how much he regrets ever helping Communists. Don't dwell too much on Alois. It's a party. Unemployment is down. Economy is up. We all have jobs.

Look. Aunt Helen is just rushing around the room. She's been working on this party for weeks. When she calms down, ask her about the boy who tried to steal apples from her back yard.

“He was unashamed,” she’ll say, “he really thought that my back yard was his personal garden. I would have given him anything, but he took the apples.”

You will hear clicking tongues. Aunt Patricia will say that the boy was probably a gypsy or a Jew. We try to stop Aunt Patricia from being so blunt. Aunt Helen will say no, he wasn’t Jewish; he was a good Aryan boy and his uncle is a member of the Polizei. Officially nothing happened but the officer was ready to put his nephew on the Western Front. The boy never stole apples again.

The story varies depending on Helen’s mood. She talks about the new police force, so much nicer than the old group. A government that pays for law and order gets law and order. Second or third cousin Claudius claims that the story only means that Aunt Helen is just bitter and old.

That’s Claudius’s brother, Augustus, on the Eastern wall trying to get everyone to sing an old drinking song. They aren’t singing. Augustus has a Roman nose to go with his Roman name. Their sister Julia is named after Julius Ceasar. See her? She’s at the snack table devouring bratwurst and sauerkraut. She’s pregnant and eats for twelve. Tears of joy run down her face and ruin her make-up. Sometimes her eyes get so puffy from crying that she wears sunglasses.

Wind your way through these relatives and friends of relatives. How is your mother? That’s great. Here’s Adolph. He’s sitting a little ways off. He doesn’t hear too good but he’s sharp. Talk just a little loud. He’s our birthday boy. 930 years old today. What? Yes, just kidding. It’s a little joke and sorry Adolph. I didn’t mean to joke about your...he can’t hear too well.

Don’t stare. I know he’s shaking like he’s already in the next world. You see the glassy eyes and it’s hard to remember how he used to scare everyone. Anna says that when she was a young girl - sometime after the ice age—he used to yell at her for stealing apples. I think it was the same apple tree in Helen’s back yard.

He lied when he went into the army. He was only 17 but it was the happiest time of his life. He warned us that if we ate left-handed they wouldn’t let us in. Imagine living in the Golden Age from Faust to the Autobahn.

We found his diaries when he was courting Eva—that's our great great great great—I forget—grandmother; he would say that she was made for him. He called her his soul mate and he meant it. It sounds almost beautiful.

You wouldn't know it to look at him with his thick glasses, his yellow sweater and his hands trembling over a gold watch. Life changed him. Eva died in 1935. They were inseparable. He never resented her for opening his eyes to the world. I think it still makes him sad to lose his old family, but he chose Eva. He lived well.

We signed a non-aggression pact. It's temporary. Communism will fall. Adolph should be happy. He's not even looking at the blue paper "Happy Birthday Adolph" on the western wall. Grandpa Adolph is an unhappy man. We love him but I think he knows that we're saying goodbye.

See the great fat man with the long white hair and the burn mark on his forehead. That's your great great uncle Dane. He's going to sit next to Adolph with his wife taking a picture. Dane is Adolph's oldest son. It doesn't seem fair. Adolph is slumped over with shrinking bones; Dane is growing fatter and fatter. See that scar on his forehead? He's had it since he was a teenager. He was riding along with Abbot and they both fell off the side of the road. Abbot broke his neck. Dane loved Abbot. Look at him in his silk suit and his party pin. Isn't he just bursting with the exuberance?

Look. It's Patty. Patricia. I'm sorry. Don't call her Patty. She hates it. That's Rudolph next to her. He looks so tall and handsome in his uniform? Just like Laurence Olivier. He's the youngest man in our village to join the SS. He's personally disinfected several districts in Europe. And he's going to marry Patty. Rudolph hasn't asked yet but it's only a matter of time. If we're lucky, Officer Schmidt will be putting in an appearance.

Don't worry about Alois. He was always a bad kid. He once tied a cat to a light post and threw rocks at it. If he's having a bad time, he deserves it.

Aunt Patricia is talking to cousin Gottlieb. Yes. Gottlieb gives one the impression that he's floating off the ground. His eyes are so blue. Patricia is bragging. She

negotiated a great deal on the house because Jews once lived in it. Gottlieb is nodding.

See Roger, Patricia's father, in the South corner at the poker game? He's the hairy one. He's trying to get Rudolph to join. Looks like...see he's sitting down, right next to Uncle Francis and Aunt Jasmine. I hope they aren't too hard on him. Roger shouldn't rob his future son-in-law. Roger is already attaining so many new government contracts from Rudolph's influence.

Johann just moved to the radio. That's why you hear the horse race. I'd hate you to think that the entire family gambles. We drink too much. We smoke but no one in this family has lost his house on a poker game to a Jewish gangster. You won't find us running numbers with negroes like they do in New York City. Johann, get away from the radio. I don't care how... ok he lost. He's turning it off. Johann is a child at heart. He's a weapons manufacturer and he can't think of anywhere to spend his money beyond betting on horses. His family would eat oysters from silver plates if he never gambled.

No. George get away. Don't look at George. George is drunk. He's almost as fat as Dane. His sons are just as dirty. Stand away and you might not smell him. See that one over there? Hal. George's son. That's a recessive gene on his mother's side. George is pure Aryan.

Just between you and me I think that George is trying to emulate The Brothers Karamazov. Only he's that crazy servant. Alois was the Ivan, the know-it-all, but George has always been standing in Alois's shadow. We could respect Alois because he knew what he was talking about. George only spews profanity and attitude. George thinks we're all stupid. Look at him. He's munching on chips, wiping his nose on his sleeve and he says we're savages. He's always combing those three strands of hair over his pointy bald head. His children and his half-gypsy wife are no better. No, I don't know that she's really half-gypsy. If I did, I'd arrest her. That woman steals things.

Just between you and me, George may not be around much longer.

Hello! Guten Tag! Guten Abend! Stand up. Salute. It's Officer Schmidt. If Rudolph is falling off his chair to salute, you better stand. Officer Schmidt is such an old fashioned gentleman when he picks up Rudolph's cards and pats him on the head.

"Best hand I've had all night, Sir," says Rudolph with only the trace of a smile. Rudolph is a very disciplined lad. He'll go far. See the way his hair doesn't move. Not a trace of a wrinkle on his uniform.

"Reminds me of the time..." says Officer Schmidt. He tells a story about three polacks that came running at his squadron. They soiled themselves when they saw the uniforms. Five of his men received medals just for accepting the surrender. The Polish front was filled with action—poker action, cribbage action, blackjack every night. They captured laundry lines and confiscated footballs.

Don't worry about great aunt Helen. You can't help it when she makes everyone sing Deutschland Uber Alles. You saw her blue dress? Yes. The newspapers reported that the Fuhrer's favorite color was blue. Of course she's embarrassing Officer Schmidt. He's a gentleman. Oh no. George is coming up to Officer Schmidt. Elaine puts her hand on his arm, but she can't stop him. It's like that time last September when he threw bread crumbs in the Rhine. No one could stop him then either.

"I always hated that song, Officer Schmidt," George says. He's all chummy. He's got his greasy hand on Officer Schmidt's uniform. "I hate all patriotic songs. I watched tanks roll by for four hours to celebrate the Fuhrer's birthday or bowel movement and I don't know how you can stand it all the time."

That's our George. Poor Rudolph looks stricken. Roger is holding his chest but he's not showing his cards. Don't worry. Might just be the sausage and the wine. Even poor Adolph is distressed. Look at him shaking and trembling. I bet he's expecting Eva to come down the stairs.

Yet Officer Schmidt just smiles and says that George doesn't have to sing. He even laughs generously. A good German should internalize his pride without the songs, but the songs help the Fatherland. A true gentleman can give rebuke without anger

or spite. George looks embarrassed. Helen is stammering out an apology even as Officer Schmidt retreats to the dessert table.

Johann is talking to another cousin talking about split atoms. Yes. It's a decadent Jewish idea but not without merit. Claudius is preaching to strange cousins. They are laughing about a girl that would never fornicate until marriage, but drowned five months before her wedding.

Augustus has drafted three of the children—I think they are Julia's kids—to sing tunes from *The Flying Dutchman*. Augustus' own son is spinning around five times with a beer stein balanced on his head. It keeps falling but he catches it every time. The child wears lederhosen.

Gottlieb puts his hand on Adolph's shoulder. He has tears in his eyes. George is sitting on the other side of Adolph. George is leaning into him as if he's delivering confidential information but everyone can hear him.

"I hate this family. I hate you. You fucked us all into existence, Grampa. Look at us now. Aren't you proud? Augustus is a suicide waiting to happen. Patty is engaged to an SS shit because she's pregnant and he's gay. Did you know that your precious Helen was in with the bohemians in the 1890s? She still has the pictures. Now she's racial purity and fake morality. Johann can win more money and piss in everyone's face. Helen kills apple thieves. War is coming and we're going to make money."

Damnation and hellfire, I'm sorry. George doesn't know what he's saying. Why is Gottlieb crying? Adolph turns to George with a sad, scared look. His hands are trembling.

"Who are you?" he says. George doesn't answer. He just stumbles away. If you watch him long enough he's going to fall. Adolph is shaking. Damn George. Grampa Adolph has heard enough. Tomorrow we'll pretend that nothing happened. George always ruins everything. Have you seen his wife? She's a fat swollen whore.

Dane is leaning on Officer Schmidt. George has wandered back to Adolph. No wait, he is standing with his hand on George's arm. He's telling George something.

“Hello George. Did Adolph kick you out?”

“No,” says George. “He just gave me an address of an old friend and told me to survive.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ask Gottlieb. I think he knows.”

“Where is Gottlieb?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think it’s wise?”

“I don’t think,” says George. George grabs his sons and his wife and they leave. Hal is yelling at George. I don’t know why they were rushing off. Don’t ask them. They might stay.

Hello Helen. Beautiful party. Don’t strain yourself. See those worry lines around Helen’s mouth. She thinks that she’s going to have a heart attack. Officer Schmidt thinks you’re beautiful. Relax. You’re dazzling him. She’s persecuting him; don’t tell her. Aunt Helen is very sensitive.

Julia is spitting on her husband. She even throws off her sunglasses. Ludwig is too drunk to fight back but he laughs. He knows how to treat a lady and he knows how to treat a whore. I wish they wouldn’t fight. Julia’s child will be the strength of Germany. Julia could have been a great concert pianist. Now Brahms and Mozart are distant memories. Ludwig stomps away. He always shows restraint when Julia gets in her mood.

Dane is laughing with Officer Schmidt. Good things will emerge. He’s talking about black sheep. I wish he wouldn’t speak so openly to outsiders. Adolph is walking to them. He’s leaning heavily on his cane but he’s walking. His hand reaches out and grabs Dane’s arm for balance. He’s gasping.

“I... I remember,” says Adolph, looking Officer Schmidt directly in the eyes.

Officer Schmidt puts his hand on Adolph to hold him up. Officer Schmidt treats him like Grampa was his own grandfather. Adolph's speech comes out between gasps and wheezing but he sounds clear.

"I remember I left my family. Eva wanted me to leave the Yeshiva. I couldn't refuse her. I needed her. My friends wondered what would happen. We were such idealists. Some of us really believed that Rashi, Gemara and Maimonides belonged in the past. We'd be the new Jews of Goethe and Voltaire. We were German citizens with Jewish religion. We were enlightened and you enlightened us. You burned the building down."

Adolph stands around looking at the family. He smiles in his skull. Officer Schmidt is still smiling but less warmly. Helen looks around to see if anyone can prevent his outburst. Not all of us have tainted blood. You can't blame us for our ancestors.

"We had all of these dreams. I don't know where to look for us now. You aren't going to murder us. We're hiding in America, in Russia and Palestine. We'll build our own thousand-year empire. The Zionists are crazy. You made them sane. Dane knows. He's a good paper pusher and I know what he does. Everyone in this room contaminates your Empire."

Adolph smiles. His eyes are wide. Rudolph is choking an excuse. Grampa collapses on Officer Schmidt and everything comes out of him. He's pissing on Officer Schmidt's uniform. Patricia is crying.

"You can't leave," she screams to Rudolph. Rudolph is trying to restrain Officer Schmidt. Hapsturmfuhrer Winston Schmidt just says that he trusts Rudolph will perform his duties with honor. He leaves a minute before Rudolph punches Patty in the face. There's no joy in his action. Johann turns off the radio and goes to the telephone. Augustus stands stiller than time. Dane walks out the door.

"Jews," says Rudolph with a shudder. "Jews."

Go home. The party's over. No one checks Adolph. Helen should be leading him back to the home, but she's too livid to speak. Everyone can wait for the knock on the door. There's always a knock on the door.

*

Later that evening, Helen drives Adolph home. He hobbles in slowly but she leaves before his third step. The radio plays broadcasts. Outside, the children play in the street and chant “Kill the Dirty Jews.” She goes home and turns on her own radio. “Deutschland Uber Alles” follows “The Ride of the Valkyries.” She bakes her husband a cupcake. It’s filled with cyanide. She eats half.

*

In a place near Bonn at the end of street known for prostitutes, a man named Wolfgang Wagner lives comfortably and alone. His father’s uncle was Richard Wagner, or so he claims. He loves the Ring Trilogy. His blond hair has turned white. He shaves every morning. He goes to the barber every month. If you look into his steel blue eyes you’ll know that he is Nietzsche’s fantasy made flesh.

Wolfgang Wagner is a watchmaker and jeweler. He repairs timepieces—a craftsman in an age of factory imitation. Everyone loves him. He never says an unkind word; many customers have never paid for his services. He trusts that they will honor their debt.

He has been a Nazi since 1933. He even campaigned for an SA office in the town hall well before it became mandatory. The Communists threw fire on his shop but he put it out and the Nazis helped him rebuild. They even helped him build the secret part of the house—the small room on the other side of his closet. George lives in that room with his wife and three sons. They fight in hisses and whispers and glares.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Phyllis Humphrey is the author of a few short stories to print magazines as well as articles. Her non-fiction book was published by John Wiley & Sons, and she has sold seven romance novels, and one mainstream novel to various publishers. She likes to add touches of humor as well as mystery to her work. You can find out more on her website, www.phyllishumphrey.com.

Weegee and the Bachelor

by Phyllis Humphrey

I'm not as good-looking as Clooney or Brosnan. I admit that. But I have my assets: dark wavy hair, blue eyes, a good build. One look at me and you'd say, "Here's a swinging New York bachelor, somebody who weekends in the Hamptons, knows all the 'in' spots, and would rather be caught jogging naked down Fifth Avenue than visiting his mother once a month." Right?

Wrong.

It wasn't always this way. I was as neglectful a son as you'd ever hope to meet. Guilt drove me up to see Mom four, maybe five, times a year. Then one Sunday my mother, the high priestess of guilt, said something that changed my life.

"Maurice," she said.

In the city I go by my middle name, Eric.

"Maurice, so when will I come to your wedding? It's not natural you should live alone in an apartment the size of a closet I don't care if it is Manhattan."

This she says every time I visit. And I counter with some variation of “Ma, I’m not even seeing anyone seriously right now,” and she wails, “So what’s wrong with my news reporter son he can’t even get a date?”

“Ma, let’s change the subject. I don’t want to talk about my love life.”

“So what did you come for then?”

“Your cheesecake, of course. You make the best cherry cheesecake in the country. Lindy’s should make it so good.”

“So, why can’t you bring a wife? I’ll teach her how.”

“But then I wouldn’t come to see you so often.”

She gave me a skeptical look. “So often? Four, five, times a year. I’ll take a chance.” Shaking her head, she went into the kitchen and returned with a piece of cheesecake for me.

“Okay, when I get a wife, you can teach her. Just remember I warned you.”

So here comes the line that changed my life.

“I know,” my mother said, “we’ll ask Ouija.”

“Weegee who? What?”

She patted her blue-rinsed hair and settled her weight more comfortably in the wicker porch chair, which accepted this abuse with more than the usual creak indigenous to wicker. “The Ouija Board!” She moved a pile of magazines on the glass table top in front of us. “Mabel Feldstein dropped by earlier. She wanted to know if her Sam would take her on a cruise this year. Fat chance, he hasn’t taken her even to Coney Island.”

No offense, but Sam couldn’t find his way around his backyard without a map.

I glanced down at the table and there sat a large box marked “Ouija Tells All.” She opened it and set out a square wooden board whose corners had been rounded off,

with letters of the alphabet arranged along the perimeter, and a small wooden block that tapered to a point at either end and rested on little feet.

Her fingers on the board, she said, "It's got letters of the alphabet around the sides, so it can talk to us." She held up the little thing with the feet. "This is the pointer. See, one end is pointed and it points to 'Yes' and 'No' and the letters of the alphabet."

"Where did you get this thing?"

"In the attic. As a child you loved to play with it."

"Me?" I said through a mouthful of cherry cheesecake. "It must have been one of Aunt Sara's kids. Joe, probably. Call him, he'll come over and play it with you."

"Joe I don't need. He's married already *twice* with four children. With you I want to find out if it's going to happen even once."

I wanted no part of this. "The setting is wrong. You should wait for a stormy night during a power blackout instead of a summer afternoon on the porch."

"You won't be here then. You're here now."

"Ma, these things can't tell the future."

"That's how much you know. Mabel Feldstein left almost in tears."

So I humored her. I hitched my chair closer to the table. "What do I have to do?"

"We each put our fingertips on the sides of the block and it will move around the letters in the circle."

Yeah, right.

But we each put our fingertips on the block and waited for it to move.

"Give me a sign that my son, the single news reporter, won't be so picky all his life," my mother said, closing her eyes momentarily and tilting her head upward.

Ouija went into a deep coma instead.

I began to doze at about the same time my fingers went numb. So I barely felt the little block finally take off and sail to the letter “A” like a teen-ager’s skateboard. My mother, to whom patience is the eighth cardinal sin, no doubt had given it a nudge.

My accusation brought shock to her blue eyes. “What do I know from ‘A’ I should push it?”

“Okay. Okay. It finally woke up.”

When it decided we had absorbed the first letter into our consciousness, it took a lengthy pilgrimage all the way to “R” and stopped again.

“R,” we said in unison.

The miniature skateboard next skittered over to “G.”

After at least an hour (or maybe two minutes), it wandered to the middle of the board and stopped and nothing would get it started again. The experiment had been a disaster and I said so.

My mother naturally had other ideas. “It knows something,” she said.

“ARG? What is that? If the last letter had been ‘F’, I’d say it thinks it’s a dog.”

I got up, kissed her on the cheek and phoned for a cab, blaming Amtrak and an early rising time for my hasty departure.

She insisted the silly thing was onto something, however, and by the time I got to the door, she had it figured out. “It’s the initials of your future bride!”

“It’s the *what* of my *who*?”

She slapped her forehead, but gently, with the palm of her hand. “No wonder you haven’t married yet. You haven’t met the right initials. The Ouija Board has given you a clue so now you’ll know when you meet her.”

“Except I’m not looking for a wife yet. Yes—” I headed her off. “—I’m thirty-two, but I’m usually broke. And why should Weegee decide to tell me who my wife will be anyway?”

“Because I asked for a sign and your wedding—God forbid you should stay single another year—was on my mind. I have a very strong psychic sense. Mabel always tells me this.”

“Have you thought that maybe it’s telling you the initials of your next husband?”

“Marriage I had once to a prince, it was enough. You know I’ll never marry again.”

“But you admit you’re lonely.”

“Not for husbands, Maurice. Grandchildren. Grandchildren.”

The word followed me down the walk to the waiting cab.

*

ARG didn’t enter my mind again until the next morning when I had to cover a story at the New York Stock Exchange. The interviewee turned out to be Melissa Louise Berman, a tall, leggy blonde stockbroker with a cute upturned nose and a smile that made me want to stock up on shares (no pun intended) as if they were beer for a SuperBowl party. At the end of the interview I asked her to open an account for me so I could get in on the market, which she had just told me was a bargain.

When she asked which stock I had in mind, I drew a blank, and then my eyes shifted to the electronic ticker-tape that flashed symbols across the wall at ceiling height. ARG leaped out at me.

Coincidence, you say? I thought so too, but I bought a hundred shares of this mysterious ARG anyway. It was cheap.

I promptly forgot my transaction because of getting assigned to a Presidential hopeful and spending a lot of time in Washington, but eventually I went back to Yonkers and my mother.

“No luck?” she asked.

“Of what kind?” I returned.

“Finding the RIGHT WOMAN.” (It sounded to me as if she capitalized it.) “Miss A.R.G.”

“Oh, *that* right woman. I haven’t met her yet, no.” I was on the verge of saying I had bought a stock with those initials, but she whisked out the Ouija box and insisted we try again.

“A’s are not popular nowadays,” she said. “Young ladies are no longer named Anne or Alice—they’re Chelsea or Tiffany.”

“There’s Ashley,” I offered.

“No, that’s a man’s name. You remember Ashley Bilko from *Gone With the Wind*.”

“Of course, Ashley Bilko. How could I have forgotten?”

Melissa Louise Berman popped into my mind, neatly corroborating Mother’s theory, but if you think I’m one to throw dynamite into a fire—

“If you haven’t met an ‘A’ yet,” she continued, “you probably never will.”

So saying, she produced the board. While waiting for Weegee’s next pronouncement, I thought of M.L.B., the stockbroker, with more than casual interest. Why had I almost forgotten her as easily as Allied What’s-its-name?

The skateboard/marker didn’t take the scenic route this time. As if in a hurry to get this nonsense over with, it flipped around the board, pausing only for micro-seconds at “G,” “C” and “M,” and then went back to the middle to hibernate for the rest of the millennium.

G? Who could that be, Gwendolyn?

Undaunted, my mother, who couldn’t wait to add “in-law” to her title, promptly gave me twenty-five good reasons why I should try to find such a girl.

“Give it a week. What could it hurt?”

I told her I thought Weegee was being very fickle, but the next day I skipped lunch and went to the brokerage. Melissa Louise smiled when she saw me and I conned myself into believing she didn’t smile quite that nicely for anyone else.

We talked business at first and she told me my ARG had gone up to fifteen. *Fifteen?* My God, the thing had practically doubled. I told her to sell it quick before it realized what it had done and got scared of the height. Just for fun I asked if she had a stock with the symbol GCM.

She did.

Okay, so you caught on already. Then I’ll make this part snappy. I bought GCM and, like the other, it went up as if it were a jet clearing the Rockies. And the next time I visited my mother, I was the one who dragged Weegee out of his box and made him dance around the alphabet. He pirouetted at STG, and I sold GCM the next day—at a profit that suggested at least the down payment on a Porsche—and bought the new one.

And then I made a mistake.

“Maurice, I mean Eric. You’re back again so soon. I didn’t make a cheesecake this week.”

“That doesn’t matter. I just need to talk to Weegee.”

“All the time lately, you want to play with the Ouija Board. First you hated him, now you love him. And he never gives us more than three letters.”

“But they’re important letters.”

“So are you meeting ladies with these initials? Are you dating dozens of beautiful girls instead of settling down with one? This is not what I had in mind.”

“No, Ma, I’m not dating lots of beautiful girls. Look, I’m going to be honest with you. I’m using the letters as tips on the stock market.”

Her eyebrows headed for her hairline. “I think you are pulling my leg.”

“No, Ma, I mean it. I don’t know why it happens, but when I buy a stock with the initials Weegee gives us, I make money. And the next time I get initials from Weegee, I sell the old stock and buy the new one, and that one makes money too.”

“You are a few sandwiches short of a picnic.”

“Believe me, Ma. I can show you my receipts.”

“All right, you’re getting rich. Rich men can always find a wife. Why don’t you concentrate on that for a while?”

“Because I’m a good son and I want to make you rich too.”

“Rich I don’t need. I get along on what your father left me.”

“But I could turn it into so much more. Do you have some investments?”

“A little AT&T, a little ConEd—that’s it. They pay dividends I use when I lose at Mahjong.”

“I can double your money, triple it, and throw in a mink coat besides. Just let me buy some stock for you when I buy mine. Trust me—you’ll thank me later.”

“All right, already. If it makes you happy.”

So I bought some stock for her when I bought mine and for the next six months everything went down!

She suggested I get out of the stock market and go back to looking for a prospective wife, because judging by my investing acumen, I desperately needed someone to take care of me. She went back to her original theory about the initials being a clue to my future wife who would switch my capital from stocks and bonds to carpets and drapes. To say nothing of nursery furniture.

My mother is a very persuasive woman and on the off chance that she was also a jinx, I stopped investing. Fiancées I didn't need, because I now spent every Friday and Saturday night with Melissa Louise, with whom I had fallen in love.

One Sunday, Weegee headed straight for "M." Was he going to spell Melissa?

Oh no he wasn't. My mother's psychic suggestions made no impression on Weegee. He opted for "S," then "V."

There was a stock on the Exchange with those letters for its symbol and I was back in the game again. And winning again. And this time I didn't tell my mother, because Mother was definitely a jinx. With her subconscious trying to turn stock symbols into women's initials, how could it be otherwise? The only problem was I couldn't think of a way to break the news to her that I was thinking of getting married, or she would immediately, upon meeting the lovely M.L.B., put Ouija away forever.

So, swinging bachelor I'm not. I work hard Monday through Friday, see Melissa Louise two nights a week, and once a month I visit my mother in Yonkers where we put Weegee through his paces. Then I sell last month's stock and buy the latest one. And, crazy as it sounds—even to me—I always make a profit and the money is piling up.

So what's the problem, you ask?

Every time I buy a new suit, my mother asks me how I can afford it, and I'm running out of creative ways of explaining how I save out of my income. I can't show up in a Porsche or BMW, I can't travel abroad, I can't give her an expensive Mother's Day gift.

But pretty soon I guess I'll have to tell her of the impending nuptials, because smiling New York girls are hard to find and I can't let my mother go to her grave without a grandchild.

But not for another year at least. Have you seen the price of nursery furniture lately?

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HONORABLE MENTION

Clare Kirwan lives near Liverpool, England and has had poems and stories published widely, including: *Aberrant Dreams*, *Dark Tales*, *Orbis*, *Contrary*, *Electric Spec* and various anthologies. She is currently traveling in SE Asia en route to Australia where she has some poetry gigs lined up.

One Last Encounter with Avrahami Semititski

by Clare Kirwan

I am in town on an ordinary weekday morning, dragging all my years around as if they make me heavier. I walk more carefully these days, like they told me. And I'm not really part of the crowd—I was taught to keep my distance, taught how precious the space around you can be. I don't chat like other women to their neighbors and I try not to look people in the eye. But today, I look up for a second at the pedestrian crossing—right into the eyes of Avrahami Semititski.

I feel a great lurch of recognition that is so welcome, it's almost like love and I have to hold on to the railings. Avrahami is there across the road, large as life, and he sees me looking at him but he doesn't smile.

Of course! He doesn't recognize me. I was just a girl then, after all. But I'd know him anywhere—that gangling frame, those thick spectacles, the red sweater he always used to wear. And when the "walk" sign lights up, he strides towards me with the same loping walk and my heart is thumping so loud I can't hear anything else. It takes me leaping back to our small flat and the smell of old books and sound

of voices in another language. But of course he wouldn't recognize me here, now, with my grey hair, my shopping trolley, and my walking stick.

He's coming straight towards me but I'm as invisible to him as I am to everyone else. To make him stop, I have to place myself right in front of him and speak quickly: "Avrahami Semititski. I'd know you anywhere!"

The man looks at me funny, just like he would have in the old days. I waited for him to smile slowly and come out with something charming—a riddle or quote.

Instead, he says: "You what?" And he doesn't sound like Avrahami at all. His voice is much less nasal. And there's no accent. Well there is—a sort of Scouse indignation—but not the accent I was expecting, despite knowing in my heart that Avrahami has never been and never would be shopping in Liverpool.

It's not even as though I was especially fond of Avrahami Semititski. There was always something creepy about him, but it is oddly comforting to find him again like this and now that I have, I don't want to let him go.

"Avrahami? It's me—Clara. Don't you remember?"

"You've got me wrong, love. You've got me confused with someone."

He wants to walk away but I've taken a hold of his sleeve and I'm stronger than I look. He pulls his arm uncomfortably but there's nothing he can do.

I warn myself to go easy here, not to get carried away, because they're everywhere, of course—people who look like other people. The number of times I've been walking through town and stopped short at the sight of some old friend from another country, many years dead. It happens a lot. It feels, as I get older, that there are fewer people around that I do know, but more and more who look like people I used to know. I've seen Bella on Seaview Road with grandchildren in tow, and Reuven in the day centre. I hear familiar voices too, but less so. It's very disorientating. I forget where I am sometimes. But I like to see them—it makes me feel as though they're sending messages, remembering me, or wanting me to remember them.

A few years ago I saw someone who looked so like Mosheleh that my heart nearly stopped. I followed him all afternoon at a distance, not wanting to break the spell—just drinking in the look of him. But now I have hold of Avrahami's sleeve and I'm still not letting go.

"But I'd know you anywhere!" I continue. I probably should stop there, but I don't. "You have the same hair, and that sweater, and your glasses are... well, not exactly the same—but it's been a long time—and you walk the same way."

"Are you taking the piss?" he says. And the closer I look at him, the more I see that he is not quite as I remember. He is shorter, his chin is more pronounced and he isn't smiling at all. He has planted himself squarely, feet apart, as though bracing himself for action or flight. He is looking at me the way people look at traffic accidents and now I am afraid to ask if he has any tattoos, and I know that if I tug his sleeve up his arm, there will be no numbers written underneath, and he looks like Avrahami looked all those years ago, when I looked like a child.

"No." I sigh. "You look just like someone I used to know. It's just—you know... he lived across the hall from me and we... we went on a journey together."

I feel the need to explain to him how we were crowded onto the trains and suddenly so intimately close to our neighbors. But you can't talk about it. Nobody wants to know how things were then. They get embarrassed. And anyway, it's ancient history now. Soon we'll all be gone and no one will have to think about it any more. The man is waiting for me to come to the point.—What is the point?

"His wife was very tall and quite beautiful," I say, remembering how she hollowed out to nothing, how we all did. "She ran the library and there used to be so many books I didn't know how to choose just one. There were so many and I just couldn't choose. But anyway they burned them. They burned them all. You know?"

The man clearly doesn't know at all, and he's looking less like Avrahami by the minute.

“Where is this going, love?” he says, not unkindly.

And I can’t answer him. It goes everywhere I go.

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GUEST WRITER

Mark Konkel earned his MFA at Vermont College in the summer of 2006, and has appeared or will appear in *Faraway Journal*, *Read This Magazine*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Abacot Journal*, *Cause & Effect Magazine*, *River Oak Review*, *Sinister Tales*, *Timber Creek Review*, and several other places. "Save One" is a stand-alone excerpt from his unpublished novel.

Save One

by Mark Konkel

The voice from Woodson's room grabs my attention because it's the voice of a man, a middle-aged man, and not a relative. Relatives' voices tend to have that happy tone, like—*Well! What are you lying in bed for all 'forenoon?—or—This is a nice place they got you in, a real nice place. Isn't this a nice place?*

But this voice isn't like that, so I stop to listen. Please don't think I spend a lot of time eavesdropping on the residents; it's just that I'm curious about who would talk to Woodson in such serious and muted tones.

At one hundred and four years old, Woodson was elevated to the position of Oldest Resident after her roommate, the one hundred and six year old Lillian Folsom, died. Folsom's name plate is still on the door and her bed is perfectly made with its orange woven cover even though she's been dead two days already. The second bed, Woodson's bed, is hidden behind the pulled curtain. I can't see her, or the source of the strange voice, but I can two legs of a folding chair and a solitary wingtip shoe.

“Well, I’d have a different opinion, Mrs. Woodson,” the unknown voice says, “if we were dealing with a different situation.” The shoe slides backward and the ankle wraps itself around the chair leg.

“I pray to God every day,” Woodson says. Her voice is grindingly old, like a wood chipper jammed on railroad spikes. But though it’s her speaking, somehow her voice is different. I know Woodson, I know her voice, and this isn’t it.

I’ve taken care of her for the last six months. She’s a sensitive and perceptive woman; someone who can sample the rhythm of the universe by holding out her fingers like they were phonographic needles. After the first week, she insisted I call her by her first name, Elna—as she put it, Call me Elna-not-Ellen-not-Eleanor, and I’ll call you Max Factor. Max Factor? I complained. What sort of a name is that? It’s yours, she insisted. And what sort of a name is Elna? It’s Russian, she explained, or Iranian, insisting that she was so old she couldn’t remember which.

Old? You? That made her laugh. She said, seriously, I don’t know what I’d do without you, Max Factor. If only I were a few years younger. What if I were a few years older, I asked, which made her hoot, in her croaky way. Older? Oh, no, she said. I like you just the way you are. I got enough broken parts; I don’t need any old man with a bunch more.

“Prayer is good,” the unknown voice says, flipping me ahead to the present.

One thing about this nursing home is that there’s always activity someplace, aides dropping off laundry, residents sitting in wheelchairs or pulling themselves along by the wall railing, kitchen workers going past to pick up their paychecks. But not right now. The hallway from the Nurse’s Station to the Dining room is completely empty and silent. It’s as if I’ve been isolated for the special purpose of overhearing this conversation. Which doesn’t set too well with me, because my biggest desire in life is just to go through it unnoticed. When you’re singled out, it’s usually because someone wants something from you. Here, I’ve been singled out. “I think God finally has answered my prayers,” Woodson continues.

The ankle uncurls itself from the chair leg. “Well, Mrs. Woodson, considering the situation and the multiplicity of conditions, uh, if we were discussing someone in

their eighties, ambulatory, or with family, or stable health, it'd be something we'd have to discuss for a very long time and come to a consensus about."

Okay, so the wingtip probably belongs to her doctor.

"I've had seven children total and outlived them all and two husbands too," Woodson says.

"Yes, I was very sorry to hear about Stanley—"

"Save one child, still living."

"Yes, save one."

"Child." She laughs. "A man now. An old man. They say a parent should never live to see one of their children die, but I have. I've seen them all."

The wingtip lifts its heel and begins to bounce up and down like a jackhammer. The chair legs start to shift a bit, quietly. The voice says, "Uh-huh."

"All die. Save one."

"Save one."

"But they don't know what they're saying."

The heel stops vibrating and slides forward out of my view. "But the way things are, Mrs. Woodson, we'll just agree, you and I—"

"They just don't know what they're talking about. When they say that."

"—just agree to this just among ourselves here. I don't want you to be in pain anymore -"

"Because the only way you can *guarantee* that you won't see your kids die is to die yourself during childbirth."

The ankle slides back and the heel raises, then pauses, as if expecting something. But it's quiet, so the voice continues, "And the prospects, well, we've discussed them—"

Now she starts talking again but he doesn't stop, then they both raise their voices and the overlapping conversation fills the room like a complete collapse of the ceiling tiles. My knees are locked and I release them a bit. Then he stops and I can understand her voice again.

"—never did I wonder about that. I just prayed for God to call me home."

"As I said," the voice continues, "considering everything, your age, the stage of malignancy, your support system, or lack thereof, it's appropriate."

"Call. Me. Home." Each word is a separate sentence. Her voice is clearer than I've ever heard.

"I'll change your orders immediately, as soon as I get back to the Nurses' Station, Mrs. Woodson, and everything will be all set."

The legs of the chair slide quickly backward with a self important noise, loud and grinding, and the foot steps out of my view. The curtain begins to sing its opening song, clips sliding along the aluminum track, and an arm exposes itself beyond the half open door. I walk quickly away from the door, back from where I came. I need to turn around and head to the time clock, but I keep on going until no one could suspect I was eavesdropping.

About halfway to the Dining Room, I turn around. A dark-haired man in a charcoal suit with his back to me stands at the Nurses' Station. He has to be the doctor; he wears the wingtips and talks to the charge nurse in the same cadence I heard while standing outside the door. I walk past the Nurse's Station, then turn to see his face. He is soft and tanned, with a strong and cleft chin, square cheeks and a broad forehead. Good looking. His eyes are sunken a bit too much for a man of his age, though, and his hair is thinning. His shirt is white, beneath a paisley red tie bound into a Windsor knot. Elna's chart is open in front of him. He writes with his silver pen while I try to translate the motions into words. *Look at me! Look at me!* I think, but he doesn't. I am just an aide, so there's no reason he should. Then he clicks the

pen, slips it into his suit pocket and turns the chart around so the charge nurse can read the order. Though I plant myself no more than eighteen inches away from both of them, they act as if I'm not there; as if they were characters in a play and I am in a front row seat. She recites her line, "Very good, Doctor," then slips the chart back into its place in the cabinet. The doctor picks up his briefcase, so there's just one last chance for me to attack him and save Elna. My mouth opens, and the rest of me tensely waits for the shrewd, visionary comeback that would make the doctor turn around and reverse the decision of the last few minutes. But his shoulder merely bumps mine when he walks past me, and so my powerful entreaty, my utterly convincing plea, was limited to two words: "Excuse me." As if I was the one who bumped into him.

Excuse me? Excuse me? That is all I could muster? I should have been able to razzle up something—*anything*—to say to him, some turn of brilliance, some sweetness of genius. But there is nothing. That's me, though. There never is insight during an event, just clever quips and comments later, when it's too late. *How about I get you a shotgun, Doc, so you can do a clean job on her? How about you put a hook in the ceiling, Doc, then twist her sheets into a noose?*

But my eyes drift over to Elna's room, and it was clear to me. I can't picture her face, but I can hear her say, "Call. Me. Home." She did say it. It isn't right to say anything to him. Because it's her idea, her desire, her *wishes*. It's her, not him. He's no more than the shotgun. He's no more than the noose, the poison. He's a tool. You could see that in the way she talked to him.

By the time I look back, the doctor's gone. So I walk to the time clock, grab my card and punch out.

A week later, as I am getting to work, Elna dies. By that time, Folsom's name plate is gone, but Elna's is still there. I think about taking it, but it would be too much like uprooting a tombstone, so I don't.

Elna looks relaxed, but unnatural; head leaning back, mouth gaping open, arms and fingers extended as if reaching for something. Whoever made her bed used a puke green cover and didn't tuck in the corners. I should remake it with her personal yellow, but I don't. I should wash her and put her teeth in and glasses on

and rearrange her limbs before the family comes to view her body, but I don't. I should feel happy for her because she got what she wanted, but I don't. I should think about what else I can do with my life except this dead-end job, but I don't. I used to think people live for those who love them, but now I don't.

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GUEST WRITER

SPECIAL NOTE TO READERS:

This story uses the premise from Contest #3, "Disguise."
See this issue's "Note from the Publisher."

Richard Blasi lives in an "exclusive, gated community" in Louisville, Kentucky. He won a place in that community by being convicted of Class-D non-violent drug-related charges and receiving a ten-year sentence. He says prison gave him two opportunities: become a better criminal, or a better person. He chose the latter. He has just been transferred to a "community custody" facility so he can attend community college, where he currently carries a 4.0 GPA.

"Changeling" is his first published fiction piece.

Richard would like to thank Dr. Marc Wessels and Ms. Sherri Grissinger, who are the prison's chaplain and chapel secretary, for helping him stay in touch with Tarl and Bethany at "On The Premises."

Changeling

by Richard Blasi

The first nine sessions of psychiatric aftercare with the lovely Dr. Candice Rhodes went as well as could be expected. I got some things off my chest, and cleaned out and sorted through a lot of old baggage, plus she was quite attractive. As far as I was concerned, the only real benefit of these sessions was that Dr. Rhodes truly presented something pleasant to behold.

I don't mind admitting that more than once as I stared at the gentle curve of her calf, elongated by the stiletto heels she wore during each session, my mind

wandered into a state of impure-thought as she sat cross-legged opposite me, scribbling notes on her yellow legal pad.

However, our short-lived relationship, which had only lasted for one hour a day, once a week, for nine weeks, would soon be over.

As I nosed my '71 Pontiac Firebird towards her office at Ninth and Broadway, I felt anxious. Anxious to get this over with and move on to whatever the future held for Old Dick Blaze, unencumbered by anything other than my monthly reports to probation and parole. Notwithstanding this would be the first weekend my daughters would spend with their recently paroled, clean and sober father. I'd put them through so much with my addiction. I wanted so badly to prove to them that I had changed for the better, and would from now on be the kind of father they could be proud to have.

After parking the car and traversing the seemingly endless parking lot, I entered the building and hopped onto the elevator that would whisk me skyward towards her fifth floor office. I exited the elevator and rapidly covered the hundred or so feet of lime-green institutional tile that led to her office door. I entered office 501, sat down snatching up what would most likely be a three-month-old copy of the first magazine I saw and waited patiently.

It wasn't long before I went into Rhode's office and took my place on the couch across from my lovely counselor's chair. She came out from behind her desk, walked over to her chair, ran her hand across her little round bottom smoothing her skirt as she sat down, then crossed her legs exposing that calf I spoke of earlier, and once again my mind began to wander. *Just what did she look like under those clothes?* However, before I was carried away mentally undressing my psychiatrist, I politely asked, "How are you doing today, Dr. Rhodes?" She responded, "Just fine, Mr. Blaze, how about you?" I said, "Fine," then asked if it would be possible for her to dismiss the formal tone and address yours truly by my first name for this, our final episode.

Her reply came very prim and proper, "That's fine Dick; however, for professional purposes please don't be offended if I ask you to continue addressing me as Dr. Rhodes."

So with the pleasantries as well as the formalities out of the way, she went on to ask her usual questions:

“Did anything special happen this week?”

“How are you dealing with the world?”

“Did you think about anything we discussed last week?”

My answers came quick without thought or emotion:

“No.”

“Fine.”

And, “Not really.”

Now just when I thought I would escape this final session unscathed, she popped one on me from way out in left field. She said, “Well Dick, the final question I ask everyone at the end of these sessions is, after going through the Substance Abuse Program, being released from prison and spending your first nine weeks on the streets in five years, is there anything about your physical appearance, mental attitude, or behavior that you want to, or think you should change?”

I was not ready for that question. I took a deep breath and thought to myself, *what does she mean asking me if I think I need to change? I would think we'd already touched enough on that subject over the last nine sessions. I've told her about my addiction. How I have tried to give back what I've received. All that AA and NA stuff. I guess she needs the extended version.* I exhaled that breath and took another. “Well Dr. Rhodes, do I think I need to change? Let me first say that we don't have enough time to discuss Dick Blaze and change. That is a can of worms best not opened. An hour is nowhere near the time necessary to review in depth the changes I've been through during my life. Change has been good to me as well as bad. I guess I'm no different than anyone else in this ever-changing world; however, all I can say right now is that if you truly want me to be honest and keep it 100% real, you'd better clear your calendar for the day.”

She stood up and gently smoothed the wrinkles from her skirt then went over to her desk and called her secretary via the desk intercom. The secretary's voice entered the room. "Yes Dr. Rhodes, can I help you?"

"Mr. Blaze and I have moved into a territory that may take more than his one hour appointment to cover, would you please cancel my next appointment, as well as the one after that if necessary. Do not disturb Mr. Blaze and myself until further notice for anything short of a death in either of our immediate families." She then turned back to face me, grinned just a little and said, "I believe that will supply sufficient time for us to traverse the epic boundaries of Dick and change. Please go right ahead sir."

I metaphorically picked my jaw up off the floor and tried to find a place to start. She had clearly called my bluff, but at the same time, my amazement went beyond her simply clearing her calendar for the day. There was something in her eyes as she made that last comment, a flirtatious glimmer I had not noticed before but now became as clear as fresh mountain spring water. Had she developed a slight infatuation with the Old Dickster? Why not? I wasn't so bad to look at. I'd broken many a heart in my day and still had that rather rough handsome look that many actors carried into middle age. Besides, over the last two months she had gotten to know the me that, back in the day, good girls like her found irresistible.

I grinned with my newfound insight, decided this was my chance to give her the extended version, and started as close to the beginning as possible.

"You see as a young boy I was extremely sheltered by an over protective mother. Being the only child of a single mom, you tend to feel the full brunt of all her emotional attachments.

"The first time I changed anything about my physical appearance was between the fifth and eighth grade. I started getting hassled by the older boys because my overbearing mother forced me to wear an undershirt year round. You weren't cool wearing an undershirt in the early summer months. You had to be able to show off your chest hairs; both of them. To make things worse, I've been cursed since childhood with a single eyebrow and once the hashing over the undershirt started it wasn't long before I started getting shit over the uni-brow too. I decided I could

fix everything with two simple changes. I'd shave between my eyebrows, and would take my undershirt off at the bus stop and hide it in my lunch bag. The first day I sat down on the bus with my changes made, some little bastard noticed immediately my shirt unbuttoned and the absence of an undershirt. Tony Malloy, I think it was. That little fist-fucker got his a year later when he was caught masturbating in the girls' locker room by four cheerleaders that were coming in from practice to shower, who later told the entire school. Ain't karma a bitch?

"Anyway, he started in on me. 'Did Momma finally let her baby boy leave his undershirt at home?' After ten minutes of that, he noticed my shaved eyebrows and that was the beginning of the end that day. The entire bus ended up laughing repeatedly at me the whole way home and eventually that rat bastard guessed where my undershirt was. Taking my lunch bag away and revealing its contents was all it took to leave me a crushed, crying, eleven-year old boy who just wanted to fit in.

"That sums up my first attempt at change. The next came in high school where I grew my hair long, started smoking pot, drinking, and consuming any mind altering substance necessary to gain acceptance from what I considered the 'In Crowd'. The only thing set into motion by these changes was a life long addiction to escape by whatever means available. I almost instantly became the kind of addict whose drug of choice was more of whatever happened to be on hand.

"I did okay in this character for awhile. However, soon after dropping out of high school I evolved into what I like to refer to as a changeling. Sara Frayes invited me to go to Berkeley California to see the Grateful Dead and after a four-day road trip, I found myself right in the middle of the inter-state LSD trafficking trade. Within a year I had at least five separate wardrobes for the sole purpose of fitting into any environment necessary to mule LSD nationwide. At a Dead show, I would be your typical post-70's mod hippie, selling LSD by the hit or by the hundred like a peddler selling balloons. On an airplane, I became a hip young business executive, flying wherever to deliver a briefcase, complete with a false bottom, filled with thousands of hits of LSD.

"Now the best of and hands down, first place winner of any drastic change of appearance story is the story of how I assumed the identity of One-Eyed Walter.

While living in San Francisco in the late 80's, the Haight-Ashbury District and the panhandle of Golden Gate Park became the only unexhausted topography in the entire Bay Area we had left to peddle our wares. Berkeley, People's Park, and the surrounding Telegraph Avenue area now crawled daily with narcs. We, the group that lived at 707 Filmore, were fairly well known by the San Francisco drug task force and needed a cover; a way to sell out in the open undetected. I refused to let the house on Filmore become another casualty of our on going pursuit for financial gain from illicit entrepreneurial endeavors. If we started to use the house to sell out of, it would only be a month at the most before the police kicked the door in and I for one really liked the house as well as its location.

"One night after dipping twenty thousand hits of LSD with no rubber gloves to keep it from being absorbed directly through the pores, in a haze of LSD induced clarity, I had an idea of such elaborate proportion, it was as if it spawned straight from some lost chapter of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

"It would involve everyone living at the house: Allie, Rommie, Floyd, and me, not to mention the transient hippie girls that hung out at the house year round. Aside from this colorful cast of characters the only other things necessary were twenty dollars or so worth of clothing available at the local DAV or Army Surplus stores, plus a large assortment of *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler* magazines. The plan went like this: I would assume the identity of One-Eyed Walter, a perverted derelict dressed in khaki cargo pants, a dirty red and green striped sweater, army issue combat boots without laces, and a ratty old London Fog trench coat. Along with this Walter wore an eye patch over his right eye, had matted long hair, a nappy long beard and carried in every pocket old warped, water soaked and wrinkled, pages-stuck-together copies of the aforementioned adult magazines.

"Now, you might be thinking, what the hell does an one-eyed derelict have to do with selling LSD in the Haight-Ashbury? That my dear Dr. Rhodes, is the genius of the entire plan. In order to become incognito as our wares were sold, the plan was to first water soak the magazines, then dry them, and somewhere near the middle pages, glue fifteen or so pages together. Then a nine-inch by five-inch rectangle would be cut in the center of these pages creating a cavity large enough to hold a twenty hit by fifty hit sheet of twelve-gauge cotton fiber blotter paper soaked in grain alcohol and the best Sandos, pharmaceutical grade, triple separated LSD 25 in

the Bay Area. A page glued in front of and behind this cavity concealed the contraband. A new twist on the old western trick of dressing as a preacher, hiding a gun in a craved out Bible, and saving your partner from the gallows. Periodically throughout the rest of the—peer-e-odd-ik-al— other pages were glued together to give the magazine the appearance of a, pardon my graphically crude description here, cum-soaked pages-stuck-together jack book, owned by one low-life transient pervert named One-Eyed Walter.

“The entire premise was to have Walter as a bagman, for lack of a better term, and everyone else as legmen. The remaining cast of characters would solicit the avenue looking for potential customers. Meanwhile Walter carried all the product. When a pre-paid customer was instructed to approach him and the proper hand signals were given by one of the leg men to indicate a green-light and the amount of product to distribute, he would engage the customer in a conversation, pretend to sell them a dirty book for a dollar to get a beer. When the magazine switched hands so did the LSD. And the transaction took place right out in the open under everyone’s noses, undetected. As unlikely as it might seem, this method worked flawlessly for nearly a year. The only reason we stopped was Jerry, our connection for the LSD went south on us, literally to Mexico to escape prosecution on felony distribution charges, and we no longer had product to sell. Thus, we lost the house on Filmore and all went our separate ways. The funniest part of this entire story took place the day Walter made his debut on Haight Street during what we called a “dry run.” The magazines were prepared exactly as if they concealed LSD, but only had old Polaroid photographs in the secret compartments just in case something went awry.

“The first time Walter went out we spent the entire morning getting ready. The girls matted up my hair and the guys dirtied up my clothes. The main objective for the day was to coerce the police into searching Walter; to see if they would find the secret compartments. As we left the house Allie decided it would make things interesting if we took this maiden voyage tripping. So the entire crew, me included, ate five hits of acid apiece and headed towards Haight Street and the panhandle of Golden Gate Park.

“After sneaking down the back steps and out the back gate, I walked while the rest took the bus. On my seven-block walk the acid really kicked in and by the time I

reached The Full Moon Saloon, the place we all agreed would be best for Walter to stake his 'transient claim' the initial rush from the acid had passed and I had settled into a heavy visual and mental trip.

"I really got into character, hanging out on the corner, sitting on the curb, panhandling change and offering to sell Walter's magazines to passersby for just enough money to get a beer or something to eat. After an hour or so I finally managed to attract the attention of a pair of beat cops patrolling on foot. They were a fine pair; an older veteran about forty and a young snot-nosed rookie about twenty or so just out of the academy. The young one took a long look over his right shoulder at me and my first thought was, *It's Show Time!* So I turned it up a notch and started harassing the public in hard-core fashion in an attempt to insure the confrontation I was after.

"Within a couple of minutes the two cops were heading straight for yours truly. As they approached the young one asked, 'How you doing, Big Guy?' I replied with, 'Better if I had a beer,' then asked the older one, 'Do you want to buy a dirty book,' and held out one of the magazines.

"Now this was the mid-80's and police weren't quite in the practice of carrying rubber surgical gloves all the time and he said, shooing me and my magazines away with both hands up in front of himself, 'Hoo...ooo...old on there, just sit what you got there down right here,' pointing to a paper box next to a garbage can. The two of them guided me to the paper box and I laid the magazine down on the box. The older one continued, saying, "Sit the rest of those magazines you got right here with this one and take a step back." I did as he requested and was then advised by young cop to grab some wall. As I moved towards the wall to assume the position I watched over my shoulder as the old cop preceded to examine the magazines with the pen he had removed from his pocket moments before. He used the pen to slowly turn each page grimacing at the stuck together pages as he came to each of them. I could tell our plan was working precisely as we expected. He would never touch those magazines, let alone examine them thoroughly enough to find the hidden compartments.

"Now Young Cop had patted me down, checked my back and jacket pockets, and asked me to turn around. As he reached forward and patted my front pockets he

asked, ‘Got anything in those pockets?’ The shit was now approaching the proverbial fan; whether it would hit at full speed was the question. Remember I’m high as hell, tripping my balls off, and right then I saw what was about to transpire as clear as if it was happening already. I could not get an answer to his question out for love or money; I could hardly keep for laughing hysterically in his face. If I’d have managed even a word, it might not have gone down like it did, but in hindsight I’m glad it did. His next words were, ‘Oh, cat got your tongue, Big Guy? We’ll just see what you are hiding in there!’

“Again, remember that I’m playing a perverted derelict. Earlier, while laughing with the girls, I cut the bottom off both front pockets saying that a pervert can play pocket pool better with the pockets cut out of his pants. We all laughed our asses off at that. I really wasn’t sure who was going to be laughing now because not only were my pockets cut off, I was after all a hippie playing a pervert, and not wearing any underwear.

“The look on that young cop’s face was something to see. When he went into my front pocket, expecting to find God knows what, he got a big handful of Dick. When his bare palm brushed my pig-in-a-blanket, minus the blanket, the look on his face was priceless. It would have made the most fucked up, sick and sadistic *Master Card* commercial of all time. I can see it now:

One pair of khaki cargo pants\$35.00

One pair of scissors.....\$8.00

The look on a young cop’s face when he goes in your cut off pocket and grabs your swipe PRICELESS!

“He freaked out! If the older one had not been so amused by what happened I surely would have went straight to jail. He knew exactly what happened by the depth the young cop’s hand went into my pocket and like myself had to conceal his laughter.

“LSD causes you to laugh uncontrollably at things that aren’t funny in the first place and I was having a hell of a time not visibly cracking up at the events that had transpired. Inside I was convulsing with laughter but outside I remained the derelict/pervert Walter.

“As the young cop handcuffed me, the older one shoved the magazines into the trash can and our question was answered. As for me, they walked me down the street to their car, loaded me up, and proceeded to take me straight to jail. Somewhere along the way the older cop convinced the young one that what happened was in fact pretty funny and to arrest me would be a real waste of time. Besides what would the charge be? Criminal possession of a cut-off pocket? Or maybe, attempt to conceal a swollen object? Anyway, somewhere over on Mission Street they pulled the car over and after making me promise to behave if I ever returned to the Haight, they let me go. I walked back to the house on Filmore, laughing the entire way.”

So my account of the legend of One-Eyed Walter came to an end and the lovely, composed, prim and proper Dr. Candice Rhodes was still attempting to get her self under control. Her defenses had fallen away at the point where Young Cop went into the cut off pocket. But when I did the *Master Card* bit, she laughed so hard that my little proper lady snorted twice as she cracked up hysterically.

She straightened her skirt, wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes, and with a pair of rosy blushed cheeks began to speak, “Well Dick, that is quite a tale. You’ve definitely led a colorful life, to say the least. But, with all that said and done, seriously, you really don’t want to change anything about yourself?”

As I looked into her eyes I could see the genuine concern in them and made the decision to really open up, playtime was over, this time I spoke from the heart—“real talk”.

“The real change, the real character that comes out of a man when he gets everything stripped away by incarceration is the one that really counts.

“After all the California and Grateful Dead shit, I settled back in Louisville, met my ex-wife, got married, and had two beautiful daughters. Five-years into our marriage

we both started using crack, a fight ensued one night, and she ended up with a broken jaw. She left me, taking both my daughters, and the Commonwealth of Kentucky gave me a one-year prison sentence.

“When I came out of prison the first time I had become a much better criminal. The time in there had groomed me into a more manipulative bastard. On the street, I ended up a transient crack addict who would lie, cheat, or steal to get high and although I spent time with my daughters, I never proved to be a good dad. I always let them down.

“Over all those years I ran so many games and so many scams, playing so many characters I lost myself. I did not know who Dick was anymore. When arrested in 2002 and given a ten-year prison sentence, my daughters cut all ties with me. They decided no dad was better than one that let them down time and time again. When your children stop wanting to have anything to do with you, your babies who looked up to you and always forgave you are finally through with your bullshit, you’ve hit a rock bottom like no other.

“When I first looked at myself in the mirror after coming through the ‘fish tank’ for orientation and processing into the Kentucky State Prison System, I looked at the old man in the mirror and could not even remember what I looked like before they cut my hair. Was it long? Was it short? How much gray was showing? I didn’t have any idea. I truly did not know the man I’d become.

“Prison stripped away all the facades of my past and started me off with a clean slate. I mean you’re fucked as a convicted felon, but you have a choice to go on like I did the first time in prison and become a better criminal, or to use the facility to your benefit and try to become a better person.

“The decision came for me my first month back. In the chow hall, one evening, I accidentally bumped this young cat. He turned to me and before I could say, ‘I’m sorry,’ he was off on some old tuff guy shit saying, ‘Bump into me again you old mother fucker and I’ll mop this floor with your ass.’ I took a deep breath and looked down at my tray. Back in the day, Dick would have cleaved a groove in the punk’s skull with that tray just for the old MF comment, let alone the threat. However, I decided right then to be a better person. I’d already been a good convict and look

where it kept getting me. I figured it was time to try something new. I walked to the table, sat down and ate my dinner, then got up and left. Now, it wasn't easy at all. Halfway back to the dorm I literally had a bad taste in my mouth from swallowing my pride, and I almost turned around, went back, and whipped his ass; for nothing more than my foolish pride.

"But I didn't and each following incident became easier and easier. I took college courses, worked at the metal shop, and even completed the Substance Abuse Program. I worked whole-heartedly at being a better man. Eventually, as you know, I made parole and although my daughters and I have not had a complete reconciliation, I'm confident if I continue on my present course, we will.

"I am the sum of all the parts and characters I just described and many more omitted. The hair, the appearance, and my present personality I'm comfortable with and I haven't been able to say that in a long time.

"So, would I change anything?" I asked. "No, I think I've gone through enough change. What do you think?"

She sat there a moment then smiled and said, "With all that said and done, I believe I'll agree with you." I rose to shake her hand and be on my way.

I told her that I was sorry for taking all afternoon and hoped she would not have too much trouble rescheduling her missed appointments. She smiled again, this time with an air of sheepish arrogance and said, "Dick, I'll let you in on a little secret. I always schedule these final sessions on Friday after lunch. I had no other appointments today. It's a trick to get you guys to open up and with you, it appears to have worked."

The smile on my face now resembled the one from the car earlier and as I stood there grinning, I couldn't help thinking how much more appealing she seemed now. Then in a somewhat playful manner she said, "What are you thinking when you smile like that Mr. Blaze?" I just continued to smile, reached up, took her chin in my hand, and gently rubbed my thumb back and forth on the smooth, soft skin of her cheek and said, "Wondering...Just wondering if under different circumstances you would have acted on what I saw in your eyes an hour ago".

She blushed even more, let her eyes slowly fall towards the floor, and softly said, "Probably. No, most definitely."

I then let her know how good it made an old convict like myself feel knowing a sweet, young lady like her could find me at least a little appealing. She let me down easy with that age old line, "In another place, at another time, and under different circumstances things could have been different." Nonetheless, she had that same look in her eyes I'd seen earlier. I knew there was some truth to it and it left me with a feeling of pride that I'd have long after I left her office. She then completed her statement with, "If you truly meant everything you just said, then it is my professional opinion that you will be just fine."

I gave her a proper shake of the hand but couldn't resist pulling her in for a gentlemanly hug and a peck on the cheek. Then I said, "Good-bye," and walked for the last time out of Dr. Candice Rhodes' office.

My steps to the elevator were heavier now than when I traveled this same hallway in the opposite direction, yet I felt a burden had lifted for good. As I awaited the elevator a sadness over what could have been but would never be hit me. I recovered quickly knowing that someday I would meet the right woman. A good one like my ex-wife and maybe even one like Dr. Rhodes. This time I'll treat her right.

Dr. Candice Rhodes was correct. I will be just fine.

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