



HOME. THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE IT. WE FIND IT, BUILD IT, BREAK IT, REDECORATE IT, LOSE IT, LEAVE IT, LEVEL IT, COME BACK TO IT, AND TAKE IT. WE MAKE HOME PLATES, HOME PAGES, HOME ROWS, AND HOME PLANETS. WHETHER WE LOVE IT, HATE IT, OR FEEL SOME OTHER WAY, WE'RE RARELY INDIFFERENT TO IT, BECAUSE HOME IS MEANINGFUL, WHEREVER OR WHATEVER IT IS.

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Seven Winners? This Once, Yes

Until now, we've always published the top three stories plus between one and three honorable mentions. You may have noticed that in this issue, we have four honorable mentions. Is that likely to happen again?

I don't think so. We have a surprisingly precise scoring system that we apply based on our prize judges' ratings of stories. It worked great for 15 issues. On the 16th issue, we ran into a situation we'd never seen before, and four stories qualified for the "honorable mention" prize.

So, we've modified our algorithm again. I think we can safely say that from now on, we'll be publishing between one and three honorable mentions as usual, plus an occasional guest writer or two.

If you have an opinion on any of this, let me know by writing to Feedback@OnThePremises.com. In the meantime, enjoy Issue #16 of *On The Premises*!

Keep writing and reading,

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

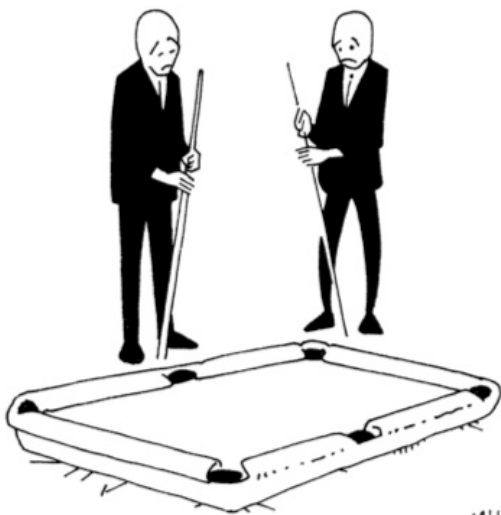
Cartoons!

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

Every one of us struggles, at one time or another, to answer questions of deep, personal importance to us. Most of you are probably smarter than I am, so you don't have to ask yourself *this* kind of question on a regular basis.

Tarl Kudrick (writer) and Matt Howarth (illustrator) combine Matt's skill and Tarl's ineptitude to bring you true tales of Tarl banging his head against the wall and asking himself:

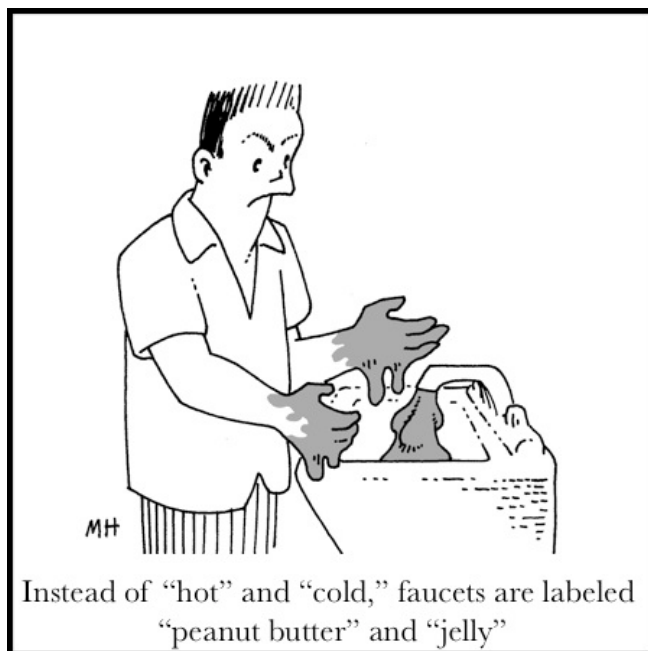
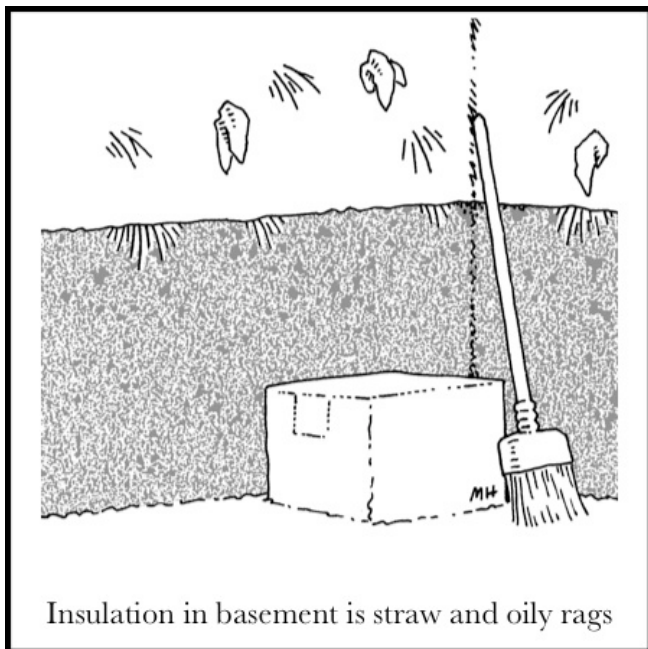
Six Problems My Home Inspector Failed to Notice



Small hole in floor where pool table goes



Backyard is federally protected preserve for new species of killer porcupine



FIRST PRIZE

Louise Beech writes to find out what happens, never knowing where words will take her. So far they've taken her to Africa, the ocean, the sex industry, a Flood Crisis Refuge, and her own memory. Her fiction has won the Glass Woman Prize and the Eric Hoffer Prose Award, and been published in UK magazines *The People's Friend* and *Prima*. Her first novel is currently with her new agent.

A League of Pity

by Louise Beech

Last year began with a funeral and ended with a donated Christmas tree covered in foil stars and somewhere in between those life interruptions I spent close to eighty pounds on teabags.

I'd never bought tea on a doorstep but the young man who pulled up in a mock-vintage van sported a cleft-lip that during his existence must have been semi-corrected by some sort of too-late surgery. The joined expanse between his nose and mouth resembled laces when I first tried to tie them, his lip like one part of the shoe's leather pulled tighter than the rest. Even his otherwise smooth face didn't divert from the gash. Repulsion, not politeness, sent my gaze instead to his Fine-Fayre condiments, to my half-open gate reflected in his silver van's edge, and then to the street where workmen leveled tar. Still, I saw in the uneven road and criss-crosses of his wicker basket that ill-formed mouth.

"I wondered if you'd enjoy tea delivered directly to your door." The Fine-Fayre guy's words surfaced squashed as though from beneath a mercy-killing pillow, every *t* muted by an *h*. In meetings I'd often bite my own lip to prevent phrases

like *Talk properly; this is an advertising agency not a school-yard for God's sake!* emerging. I'd tidy papers and endure machine-puked tea to suppress those thoughts and keep my job but with another sales guy at the door I'd nothing so crucial to lose.

"My tea is very competitively priced," he said, bravely avoiding a shorter adverb, and I imagined asking him to say *sesquipedalian* but said instead that if he needed to knock on my door for a sale things must be pretty bad.

Nine days had passed since the funeral. I'd been putting Keith's slacks in a box for a car boot sale and thought Martha from number four had knocked with yet another pity pie. When I saw the Fine-Fayre guy, I wondered if he knew Keith had died. Next-door-but-two neighbor Shirley purchases two bags of coffee and three packs of jam rings from Fine-Fayre every other week and tells everybody *everything*. She told me when Stacey opposite dislocated her shoulder after a night with the guy in the flat above the carpet shop whose name she couldn't be sure of and I said it wasn't any of my business, or hers, and she stopped telling me *everything* after that.

Shirley probably told him *the woman at number seven is a miserable bitch but she might appreciate some tea because her husband Keith died recently, just before Christmas, you'd think he'd have hung on, but who would with such a disagreeable creature as your wife?* I presumed sympathy had propelled the tea guy to my door with a deformed lip and boxes of coconut clusters, in which case I prepared to tell him that his league of pity and mine were entirely different.

But I said, "You're here because I'm a widow, aren't you."

He ignored the statement and asked if I'd ever contemplated purchasing my teabags from somewhere other than the supermarket. For a moment I really thought about it. I remember cold wind on my bare ankles as I wondered if I'd ever stood in the kitchen while preparing Keith's medication and looked at my forty-for-a-quid teabags and considered there might be some other place to get them? In truth, I had not.

"Might I ask how you drink your tea?" he wanted to know next.

“Hot and strong,” I snapped. “Hate weak crap.”

If my severity or preference surprised the Fine-Fayre guy he gave no clue. Keith liked tea weak and when it had cooled, always saying *let it stand a while* when I’d warmed the pot. He never drank the last one I made and I poured it away long after his slacks began gathering dust on the ironing pile.

“We have the perfect tea bag for you,” said Fine-Fayre and pulled from his fairytale basket a gold foil pack. “Strong tea lovers rave about these.” His weighted words floated once past his lips, as though carried by the January air. “This blend warms in a microwave and tastes as new and just-made as when it first was. It’s not cheap tea that when reheated quenches your thirst in a lazily-familiar-but-not-as-hot-way.”

“Can you stop talking now,” I said. “I’m not going to buy your bloody tea.”

“I’ll leave you a token sample and time to think about it.” He held out a tiny gold pack and when I merely stared at it and then him and finally his scar he put it on the step like a late Christmas gift. I said I didn’t need time and slammed the door. An hour later the pack had blown onto my dead rose bush, caught there on a spike. I took it inside.

When Fine-Fayre returned two weeks later I had thought about it. I’d tried not to but when I made morning’s customary drink in a china cup—stirring and stirring until the cheap bag bled, never as black as I craved—I compared it to the Fine-Fayre tea I’d drunk an hour after his departure. That circular bag, as perfect as his mouth was imperfect, had fit into my cup as though made for it and the leaves within freed a flavor that awakened my tongue. Keith would have hated it. I drank it all.

“How did you enjoy the tea?” Fine-Fayre hadn’t closed the gate and it swung back and forth with an impolite squeak. Near the recently laid tar a lone workman dug up grass verge and tiny buds sprouted from my rose plant, promising color some day not too far away.

“Suppose it wasn’t bad.” I eyed the gold packets lined up in his basket like a witch’s trick.

“They’re two pounds and nine pence for a hundred,” Fine-Fayre said, “and this week’s offer is a free bag of nut clusters when you spend five pounds.”

I argued that nut clusters weren’t free then since I’d to spend more than I intended to acquire them and he ignored the words as he had my *you’re here because I’m a widow aren’t you*. I wondered if he’d ignore me if I said his mouth looked sore and quite redder than last time and his eyes reminded me of Father Callahan’s, the priest who oversaw my Holy Communion, not green or blue, not happy or sad.

“I appreciate your time anyway,” Fine-Fayre said then and began down the path.

“What kind of bloody salesman are you?” I demanded.

Surprise knitted his smooth face — or it might have been winter’s pitiless light as he turned— when I expressed amazement that he’d sold a single item if he walked away so easily. Our negotiation then was smooth and word economical; I handed over two pounds and nine pence for my gold pack and told him to call in a fortnight.

Despite our verbal agreement—no contract ever got signed for tea—Fine-Fayre’s visits during February and March caught me unaware. Though I opened the door expecting Jehovah’s Witnesses selling love or a new Next catalogue I remembered as sharply as I’d forgotten when he said, “just one pack again?” and we fell quickly into routine, him telling me that week’s offer (ones I never purchased) and me insisting I just wanted tea before paying him and closing the door. Workmen finished the path at the beginning of March and bluebells poked through the patchy grass, heads hanging like they couldn’t face the day. I emptied Keith’s wardrobe and drawers and made Fine-Fayre tea and let it cool and when I reheated it the taste still remained, not slightly, not better, the same.

“You look like you might enjoy a pack of lemon crackles today,” said Fine-Fayre on perhaps his seventh visit. Someone had cut his auburn hair badly and one ear hid behind an overlooked inch, the other exposed fully. I mused idly that it had been an attempt to lessen the irregularity of his mouth, that adding to the ugliness would somehow detract from it too.

“Are you just being polite?” I’d begun to close the door. “You don’t even know my name.”

“Do I need your name to be courteous?” His voice’s nasality didn’t suppress the genuine curiosity of the question and I realized, perhaps for the first time, that despite his mouth’s disorderliness I seemed to understand what it said. “You seem—and excuse me for being presumptuous if I’m wrong—a little down today.”

I shrugged and found myself admitting that I had a work meeting I didn’t want to attend because I felt sure of my imminent dismissal and that I was scared I’d cough all night again.

Fine-Fayre said, “I have teabags that soothe the throat.”

I glared at the basket he always hung over his left arm and said tea was no remedy and he agreed, adding that the best cure for an aching throat is to release what’s stuck there.

“Fine-Fayre!” I called after him. “Bring me two packs next time, but I want a good price.”

He paused by the gate, his reflection in the silver van a polished twin. “Wouldn’t it be more sensible if you knew my name and you’d not have to shout *Fine-Fayre!* at me when you need something.”

I told him I didn’t want to know his bloody name and closed the door.

When he didn’t come I realized I’d begun expecting him. By the house my apple tree blossomed, a bed of soft pink yawning mouths open for the sun, and I put a bunch in a teacup on the windowsill. Keith always cursed me for killing plants by picking and displaying them. On the bedside table I placed a vase of cherry flowers and drank tea and wondered what I would do when it ran out. Next-door-but-two Shirley knocked with two gold packs at Easter; Fine-Fayre had called when I was at work and left the bags for her to pass on. “Such a shame he’s crippled,” she said and I reminded her not to tell me *everything*.

Its exhaust spitting grey curse words, the Fine-Fayre van pulled up outside my house again in the middle of May. When I was a kid and my father got home late I'd be so relieved I'd bury my anger at his making me wait and worry so. I'd lie and say I'd used the time learning to tie my shoelaces and show him the evidence, a beautifully neat bow. I think he always knew my mum had really done them for me.

"Did your neighbor pass on the tea bags?" asked Fine-Fayre. He'd closed the gate properly and the new road beyond had already begun to crack and I remember thinking that what was underneath should have been leveled first.

"I nearly bloody ran out of them," I snapped.

Fine-Fayre said I hadn't answered the door and his scar hardly moved when he spoke as though he'd learned to fit speech around its inconvenience and not the other way. I asked if his bosses knew he'd left a customer's wares with a neighbor because I doubted it was good protocol. I couldn't take my eyes off the rigid swelling that this week reminded me of scraped knees after a day of skipping in the school playground.

"I know you're looking at my mouth," Fine-Fayre said. "I don't mind. It bothers others more than it bothers me." I insisted it didn't bother me and he said gently, "I think it does."

"It doesn't," I said, and then "I don't need tea this week," before slamming the door.

In June the sell-by date on Keith's medication expired and I deleted his number from my mobile phone. I'd dialed it accidentally perhaps twice since his funeral, meaning to click on friend Lisa just below, and even with the sound of nothing found myself preparing a message to leave, listing the things that were now in order and the things that weren't. Fine-Fayre's offer that month heralded Father's Day, a free *I Love Dad* mug with every pack of percolated coffee purchased. I'd overslept and grunted that he surely knew I never bought coffee and he suggested they might allow him to gift the *I Love Dad* mug with tea bags instead but he'd have to bring it next time and I said not to bother, my father had died. He digested

these words as he had *you're here because I'm a widow, aren't you*—in silence. I filled it, asked if his mouth ever hurt.

Touching its corner he said, “Sometimes—they always said the wound would get flatter and whiter with time but my body keeps producing scar tissue so it's mostly red and often weeps. Gets messy. I've got Stickler syndrome.” He shifted the basket onto his right arm and then, as though aware of this indiscretion, moved it back to the usual nook of left elbow and asked if being a widow hurt.

“Sometimes,” I said. “People say crap like time heals but I ignore them.”

Next-door-but-two Shirley had been watching us from her front garden, trimming the hedge with a rusted pair of shears and peering over every so often, then disappearing like a wind-up toy with a failing battery. Now she came around the bush and stood in the path. “You'll have to move that van soon,” she told Fine-Fayre. “The bin men won't be able to get their truck down the street.”

He handed me two gold packs and I handed him three pounds and ninety-nine because he'd knocked off nineteen pence for my double purchase and I closed the door.

In July my roses drowned because I'd not sufficiently drained the soil after heavy rain and I lost my job. “It's a sign you need a fresh start,” said next-door-but-two Shirley and I was never sure if she meant my redundancy or the red petals now faded and hadn't my usual urge to remind her not to tell me *everything*. Fine-Fayre had no special offers. He left the gate open and I paid with exact money and he returned to the van.

“Why do you ignore my words sometimes?” I demanded.

He stopped, one hand on the gatepost. “I never ignore any words,” he said. “When I'm not following them up with a comment or remark I'm only listening more. My hearing's not so good. This syndrome affects it some so I just have to listen harder than most.” I didn't speak then and closed the door softly.

By late Summer I'd bought enough tea bags to qualify for entry into the annual prize draw and earned the chance to win a hamper full of tea-related goodies.

Fine-Fayre wore the thick jacket he had at the start of the year, brass buttons bold, gold trim above cuffs and shoulder, always neatly fastened. I realized that he'd only ever seen me in jogging bottoms and a vest top, clothes I wore when at home, only the color changing. That day I believe they were grey.

"Your mouth looks sore this morning," I snapped. "Why didn't you have surgery at birth?" I'd researched his condition, discovering that a feature of Stickler syndrome was a somewhat flattened facial appearance caused by underdeveloped bones, which often resulted in a cleft lip, hearing and sight difficulties, and pain in the joints. Website pictures showed time's great improvement when a child's cleft lip got corrected within weeks of birth; and the damage when it wasn't.

"I'll have to take your full name if you'd like to win the hamper," said Fine-Fayre, pulling from between the orange crunches and extra-dark Brazilian coffee an application form emblazoned with the words *The Perfect Gift or Treat!*

"Judging by the jaggedness they must've waited a while to sort you out," I insisted, touching my own smooth lip.

He held out the form and told me, "It's free to enter so really it'd be silly not to try."

"I only bought tea bags because I pitied you." I hadn't expected the words and wasn't even sure they were true. And I regretted them, knew that Fine-Fayre must have listened to them hard because he wordlessly put the application form back in the basket and handed over my two packs of tea. What could I have said to correct them? I thought of my mother darning socks, of how quickly and easily she re-joined my worn heels, and the feel of that raised welt rubbing my foot, chafing shoes with laces I'd badly tied.

On his way to the van Fine-Fayre put his basket on my wall and closed my gate carefully, securing the latch and then tugging on it to check it had caught. "I was in the care system a lot as a kid," he said. "Our mother had learning difficulties so my sister and I lived in all manner of places. I was ten before I had surgery and of course that's way too late." He picked up his basket and climbed into the van with the clumsiness of a much older man. I didn't close my door until the silver vehicle

had disappeared around the corner and the postman handed me a batch of junk mail.

September is my favorite month—everything fully ripe, the sun low and lazy, endings not far away. Our world winds down without any need for medication or tranquilizers. Last year I'd surrendered Keith to the bedroom, ignoring friends who suggested he go into one of those hospices where round-the-clock carers harvest your remaining days. Keith's autumn shone gold. A year on I began to keep the foil Fine-Fayre packs, liking the color. Fine-Fayre called visited twice. The first time I wished to apologize for my bluntness but wasn't sure how and the second time I asked if he suffered with abnormal heart rhythms, another symptom of his condition. Voice like an analogue radio station—not quite there and yet prominent—Fine-Fayre said the sound of a heart beating doesn't mean a thing, that machines can do that, just as the pulses in a brain don't mean we think, machines can mimic that too. He said he thought about this once in a waiting room where the woman opposite had hand-sewn daisies running up and down her collar and they reminded him of his sister making chains of them, and hearing this I thought of my shoelaces and how long it took to learn to tie them right. My father would patiently show me, crossing and un-crossing, again and again, but my fingers flopped and failed. In the end he gave up. "Having such machines operate life-saving procedures doesn't mean we're alive," said Fine-Fayre and I asked why the hell he was talking about machines when I'd asked about his heart. "My heart's fine," he said. "Don't pity it any more than my mouth."

Next-door-but-two Shirley called over the hedge, "Can I get another pack of coffee, we had relatives at the weekend and they bled me dry."

"I'll be right there, Mrs. Rooney." Fine-Fayre took my three ninety-nine.

"Do you ever get bored of selling tea?" I asked him.

"I won't be doing it for much longer," he said.

Shirley called for him to leave the coffee on the step because her phone was ringing and he disappeared beyond the hedge, only the rustle of condiments evidence of his having not yet gone.

October is my birthday but that year it only reminded me of the one before, of turning forty and counting Forty Sips bottles and waxy suppositories and my days left as a wife and swearing at the window cleaner for missing the bird shit on the patio door. Fine-Fayre knocked, a day sooner than he was due. Children had begun hanging ghostly Halloween banners and displaying over-sized vampire teeth in windows and I wondered how cruel kids must have been to him in school.

"You're early," I said. "I've no bloody money in the house today."

He ignored my complaint and took from his basket my two gold packs of tea.

"Maybe today I'll try the lemon crackles since I can pay next time," I said and he asked if I wanted a free sample first, to check I liked them. The cellophane tore away easily and I bit into crunchy biscuit and chewed. "It's my birthday," I said through sodden crumbs, despite having earlier decided to ignore the anniversary.

"Many happy returns of the day," he said. For a moment I imagined what it might be like to kiss his disfigured mouth, to rub mine against its pleats and ridges, to feel beneath my fingers his flat, smooth skin in contrast, to ask him if it hurt when he forgot himself. A fly buzzed in the hallway behind me, urgent yet distracting, and I wondered why it didn't escape when given a wide open door. "Have the tea and biscuits on me," Fine-Fayre said and patted the basket like he always did just before leaving, as though signaling for me to prepare.

"You've got a gob like a boxer, one who lost every bloody fight," I said.

"Only a good boxer would have a bruised mouth." He spoke gently, half-turned to depart. "Your pity for me was ill-placed, you know."

"Don't tell me what my pity was." Irritation flared at my inability to apologize.

"You got the pity mixed up," he said.

"So you *did* call on me because my husband had died," I cried. "I *knew* it!"

He shook his head so slightly I wondered if he had and said that he'd seen me a few times in the garden last year, gathering up flowers, mixing colors that shouldn't go together, shouting into the house at whoever was there that I hadn't

killed them, I was cherishing them in their final days. “It reminded me of my sister’s guilt at stripping the garden of daisies to make a chain,” he admitted softly, all the s’s in sister joined up. “I felt sure you’d keep the flowers until every petal had fallen. I just thought you’d like my tea.”

“I do like your tea,” I admitted.

“Then let me give you these and a pack of lemon crackles for your birthday.” He gave me two customary gold packs and a long carton of the yellow biscuits and opened and then closed the gate.

“I must pay you next time,” I insisted and he looked over his shoulder, perhaps to assure me that he was listening harder than most, perhaps to argue otherwise, but then wordlessly got into his mock-vintage van and drove away.

I waited two weeks and he didn’t come, another month and no sign. Winter consumed the leaves and my tea bags dwindled so I began using them twice and though when reheated they tasted the same, when reused they lost their flavor. Next-door-but-two Shirley brought a tiny Christmas tree over because she’d “noticed I didn’t have one” and told me Fine-Fayre had gone to university to study music production and I reminded her not to tell me bloody *everything*. But I did decorate the tree—I made gold stars from the foil packs I’d collected and lost my temper with those that wouldn’t stick and endured the remaining ones as they flickered against a backdrop of cheap lights and TV. I used my last tea bag on Christmas morning—once—and opened the lemon crackles. Whenever I taste lemon now I think of sitting by my loaned tree and the syrupy Fine-Fayre liquid easing my throat and Keith’s photograph on the mantelpiece needing a good dusting. Tea is no cure or remedy but it goes well with fruity biscuits and tears.

In January a hearty knock disturbed me dismantling the tree and I answered to a Fine-Fayre guy whose perfect teeth and precisely-cut-and-styled hair and voluptuous mouth and assurances that he sold the best tea in the world had me closing the door without a word.

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SECOND PRIZE

R A Martens lives in Scotland, and writes stories about ex-prime ministers, mazes, worms, high tea, dentists, glamorous toilets, bullets, amateur memorial holograms, brimstone psychotherapists, the flying trapeze, summoning flies, hell, vainglorious mansion blocks, monsters, power plants, delusional medics, lies, half-truths and ill communication. Sometimes more than one at a time.

Mr. Thinsfleet's Parliament

by R A Martens

Lucy Holt stood in front of the vile full-length mirror which had been propped by the front door years ago, on its way to somewhere else. She dug around in her hair, trying to isolate a wiry white strand.

"I can't find my pills," said Isabelle, trailing into the hallway. "Have you seen them?" She peered at her mother. "What are you doing?" There was a perpetual smell of burnt toast about the girl, which crept into Lucy's sinuses and irritated her beyond measure.

"Raging against the dying of the light," Lucy replied, her eyes fixed on the mirror. To outlive Mr. Thinsfleet, that was the thing—and his longevity was in defiance of all natural laws. She must take care of herself. With a satisfied wince, she plucked the hair, letting it fall from her fingers to the carpet. When she turned around, her daughter was gone. Good. Lucy took herself up the staircase, a hand lightly on the banister as she climbed around its curve, past the generations of successfully "dipped" Holts who looked down from the wall. The satisfaction of poking out her tongue at them had diminished over the years, and these days she went by with her head down, giving the illusion of acquiescence; of a woman beaten.

In her bedroom, she leaned her palms on the windowsill, and looked down at the drive. Isabelle's twin Marietta was due home today from her trip, but hadn't given a time. A neat way, Lucy thought to herself, to put the household in suspended animation. Lucy and Isabelle had shuttled around in a kind of lazy, ineffective fugue since breakfast, both repeatedly gravitating to any window that overlooked the drive, as though united in joyful anticipation.

Below, in front of the steps to the house, Lucy could see the puddle, lurking center-stage, its surface dark in the late-afternoon shadow of the house. And here was the damn bird, springing towards it. The rook paused at the edge, and turned its head to look up at Lucy's window. It cawed and leapt to the center of the puddle, splashing maniacally to taunt her. Lucy rubbed the blunted tip of her ring finger with her thumb, the other hand deep in her pocket, stroking the packet of pills there. "We'll see, Mr. Thinsfleet," she said. "We'll see about you." Mr. Thinsfleet turned towards her window again as though he had heard, and gleefully snapped his long beak at her.

*

Lucy and Mr. Thinsfleet had been at war for almost thirty years. It began on her very first day at Gorgelack, when she climbed out of Cyril's car. Cyril had stinted rather in his descriptions of the house, and she was not sure, looking at its glowering stone façade, that she was equal to the task of being its mistress. She turned the wedding band that Cyril had slipped onto her finger a few hours earlier, and tried to ignore the refrain that rang around her head, in her mother's voice. "Repent at leisure," it sang. "Repent, repent, repent."

Mr. Thinsfleet chose that moment to swoop for the ring. He failed, removing only the tip of her finger, but his declaration of intent was made. He flew up to the roof, and cawed there victoriously as Cyril squeezed a handkerchief about the wound. The bird became increasingly energized, hopping and flapping along the guttering, as Cyril sought to steer his new, bleeding wife through the puddle. She shook him off and staggered around it, wondering who on earth she had married.

Cyril understood completely (he explained to Lucy over the head of the doctor who was stitching her finger in their living room), that his method had been ill-judged.

There was, however, a firm tradition at Gorgelack, which had been honored for generations. One must pass through the pool on one's first arrival. It was, he repeated, as though it were all the explanation necessary, *tradition*.

"The pool?" Lucy asked. "That dirty great puddle, you mean?"

"The pool. Yes." Cyril sucked his teeth and huffed. "I had thought you might appreciate the ritual, but it appears I misjudged you."

Lucy regarded her husband. The throbbing of her mutilated finger seemed to pound through her whole body, and she felt a little dizzy.

"The current Mr. Thinsfleet seems rather to have taken against you." Cyril frowned at her. "You really ought to have gone through the pool. Well," he sighed, "there's nothing to be done about it now."

The murderous crow had a name, then. Cyril corrected her: not a crow, but a rook—and the Holts of Gorgelack were his parliament. She must make her peace with Mr. Thinsfleet, Cyril told her. He was as treasured at Gorgelack as the pool itself.

This was all most educational, thought Lucy. Most educational indeed. Something was stirring in her breast, but she would not yet have named it mutiny.

Later that night in the library, Cyril measured out port and told her the Gorgelack legend. One summer's afternoon, four hundred years ago, young Roland Holt was lounging in a field, thinking of the child his wife would shortly bear. Roland was an ambitious young man, keen to establish himself, and hoped aloud that the child might be the start of a great dynasty. No sooner had he uttered the words, than a water sprite appeared. It would be pleased to grant his wish, said the sprite. The Holt line would be endless. All Roland must do was to build his home on the spot where a pool now sprang up to mark the agreement. Family members need only enter the house for the first time with their feet wet by the pool, and succession would be assured. Roland duly built the house, dipped his own feet along with those of his wife and son, and all was well.

Two years later, Roland's wife was drowned on a sea-journey to visit her distant parents, and the sprite returned to see the grieving man. He should have known that sprites are never wholly bountiful, and this one was no different. The malicious creature announced an addendum to the covenant. There was a price to be paid for the endurance of the Holt name: occasional members of the family would be marked to die by water, the young man's wife having been the first of these. Young Roland sobbed and begged the creature to cancel their agreement. The sprite only laughed, and pointed to the roof, where a rook perched and observed them. Mr. Thinsfleet and his descendants, the sprite said, would stay to see that all new arrivals wet their feet in the pool. If they did not, the sprite would visit a yet greater curse on the family—and this time, there would be no blessing to accompany it.

Finishing the tale, Cyril oozed with familial pride. "You bear," he said to his wife, oblivious to the clenching of her fists; the knitting of her brow, "an uncanny resemblance to Catherine Holt. She drowned in 1786, off the coast of Devon."

Lucy contained herself. "Aren't you concerned that I wasn't 'dipped'?" she asked. "Isn't there a 'greater curse' on its way now?"

"My dear, I am not a savage, I am an enlightened man. I know the legend is just that—mere superstition. Aside from my parents, we haven't had a drowning in over eighty years. The dipping is simply a matter of family tradition. But you must understand that as the last remaining Holt, family tradition is very dear to me. I am a little despondent at your having broken it." He smiled, in a wounded kind of fashion. "I'm sure I will recover."

Lucy, who inwardly considered her claim on despondency to be rather more valid, cradled her hand and smiled weakly back. Being a practical woman, she could see that her marriage would do best if she resolved to keep her feelings to herself. Being a passionate woman, those feelings required an alternative outlet.

The next morning, she laid a trap for Mr. Thinsfleet. She pulled a clutch of his tail feathers and watched him fly drunkenly away, squawking maledictions. It was disappointing to see the feathers re-grown a short while later, but it meant at least that she could do it again.

*

Lucy rapped her ring hard on the window, and glared venomously at the bird, turning back into the room before he could respond. The war would be won, indeed it would, and if another Mr. Thinsfleet sprang up, then she would kill that one, too. A feathered corpse—*that* would bring Cyril out of his study, ha! It must be five years since she had seen her husband, though she knew he was still alive. The muttering from behind his door, along with dirtied plates in the kitchen each morning and the occasional flush of a toilet in the night, all testified to his continuing existence. A few weeks previously, Isabelle said, she had seen him one night when she was unable to sleep. He emerged, she told her mother, like a scurrying beast from its lair, foraging for food and retreating to safety. Isabelle had waited for Lucy to laugh when she said this, as though they might be friends. Lucy had smiled once her daughter was gone. Cyril the scurrying beast.

Perhaps there was time for a nap before tea. Lucy checked out of the window again for Marietta, but saw only the puddle and the empty drive; Thinsfleet gone about his rotten business elsewhere. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes, her hand still in her pocket, clutching the pills tightly. Her smile faded only when sleep slackened her face. As she slept, a car made its way towards the house, Mr. Thinsfleet flying overhead.

When the front door slammed, Lucy stirred only a little, before sinking back into an irresistible dream of the bird's death-agonies.

*

"Everything's ruined!" shouted Marietta, dumping her bags and thundering up the staircase. "Completely ruined!" As she crashed along the landing, she shouted over her shoulder: "I'm going to bed, don't bother me until tomorrow."

Isabelle was left in the hallway facing a blinking man with wet ankles.

"She's quite something, isn't she?" he said, his sodden trouser cuffs dripping onto the floor.

“Um...?” said Isabelle, looking at the pool forming around his feet and releasing an interesting fragrance from the carpet.

“I’m sorry, how rude of me.” He held out his hand. “Delighted to meet you. I’m Eliot Branch—er, well, Eliot Holt, actually, I shall need to get used to that. Marietta’s husband. And you must be Isabelle? You do look almost exactly like her. Just a little less...”

“Yes,” she said. “*Husband?*”

“Oh, it’s all terribly romantic and whirlwind,” he muttered. “I should wait and let Marietta tell you herself, though.” A door opened upstairs, and Marietta shouted down: “It’s all his fault, and he won’t leave!” Then the door slammed shut again.

Eliot coughed, and looked at the floor. “She appears to be rather upset. I’m not entirely sure what’s wrong.”

Isabelle found some newspapers for Eliot to leave his shoes on, and led him through to the kitchen. “I see you stepped in the puddle,” she said.

“Yes, I had a notion to carry my wife over the threshold of her own home, but she was somewhat resistant. I didn’t see the puddle until I was in it.”

“If you meet my father, he will probably tell you something about that. I suggest you ignore him.” She shook out some biscuits onto a plate.

“It’s a strange thing, that puddle. It doesn’t look as if it’s rained around here for a good while, but there it is. Must be fed by an underground spring.”

“Mm,” said Isabelle. “We could perhaps dry your socks?” He pulled them off and handed them to her. She wrung them out over the sink, then draped them over the handle of the stove, and passed him the biscuits.

“There’s something about your sister,” he mumbled, trying not to speak with his mouth full, “that results in me getting damp whenever I am around her. I shall have to invest in waterproofs.” The idea seemed to cheer him up immensely.

Isabelle set the plate by the sink. “I’m afraid I don’t know where Mother is at the moment, but I’m sure you’ll meet her soon. Maybe you would like to put your cases upstairs?”

“And your father? Marietta was very keen for me to meet him—to meet all of you, of course.” He smiled

“Of course.” Isabelle walked back into the hall. “This way.”

He followed her up the stairs, his feet beginning to turn blue away from the heat of the stove.

“Not *my* room,” howled Marietta as Isabelle opened the door. “He’s done enough damage already. Put him as far away as possible. How about down the well?”

Eliot’s face fell a little, then he rallied and called through the door: “I shall give you a little space to settle in, my darling. Just call when you need me.” Marietta seemed to growl in response, but her husband was already half way down the corridor with his suitcase.

Lucy listened to them pass by, then eased herself up and rubbed her face. She popped out the pills, and crushed them with a spoon in a saucer on the bedside table. A little treat for Mr. Thinsfleet. She tiptoed down the stairs and eased open the front door to see him perched on the hood of an unfamiliar car, preening his raggy feathers. He turned to look at her for a moment, and wagged a foot in her direction, miming the clawing of her eyes, before returning to his preening. “Stay right there, foul beast,” she said quietly, and went down the hall to the back door. In the garden, she tipped the crushed pills into his drinking font, murmuring “Chin chin, Mr. Thinsfleet,” and went back inside. She would warm herself with thoughts of the rook’s demise while she faced whatever Marietta had wrought this time. The girl was as sullen and troublesome as her sister was pale and pathetic, but at least she had some bite.

*

With Lucy’s pregnancy, the legend had raised its head again. Cyril announced his plans for a ‘pool-dipping ceremony’ for the child.

“But it’s nonsense,” she said. “The legend. The dipping.”

“Then why would you mind if we play along? You can think of it as a silly ritual. Indulge me.”

Lucy found herself inclined to indulge not her husband, but a sudden and powerful superstitious streak. Of course, the legend was nonsense. But if the baby was dipped, Lucy knew she would spend the rest of her life trying to keep the child away from water, afraid it might be one of those marked to drown. It was ridiculous, but there it was. She vetoed the dipping, and felt relieved, if more than a little embarrassed. Cyril sulked for months.

The baby arrived in a pair, and Cyril proudly carried Isabelle and Marietta from the car towards the house. Lucy cursed herself, later, for being fool enough to let him. As he neared the pool, he tripped and fell clumsily onto one knee. He clutched Marietta to his bosom, but Isabelle tumbled from his grasp and fell with a splash and a wail. Cyril apologized and swore it was an accident, but they both knew he was lying. Later, he simply said they had one child each: the dipped one was his, the other hers. Lucy stormed raging into the garden, where Mr. Thinsfleet befouled her from a great height, cackling merrily. He did the same to baby Marietta the following week, leaving her sister untouched.

*

Over dinner, Lucy sought to discover how this bloodless young man had found himself married to her daughter. He protested for some time, as he had to Isabelle, that he ought to allow Marietta to tell them herself; that it would be ungentlemanly to steal from her the pleasure of telling her family.

“I think perhaps,” said Isabelle gently, “that Marietta would rather *you* told us. She does seem reluctant to come down at the moment—perhaps she’s letting us get to know you.”

“Yes, you must tell us,” agreed Lucy. If Marietta did not emerge from her room for a week, it would not be the first time, and by Isabelle’s account of the newlyweds’ inauspicious entrance, it could be much longer.

“But, don’t you want to wait, at least, Mrs. Holt, until Mr. Holt is here?”

“Really, I must insist that you call me Lucy,” she said. The suspicion had been growing in her that this boy would be the type inclined in very short order to start calling his in-laws “Mother and Father”, and she was determined he should not. “And no, we shouldn’t wait for Cyril, as you must call him. Frankly, Isabelle and I may explode with impatience if the story is kept from us a moment longer.” She bared her teeth, encouragingly.

“Well, if you are sure...” said the young man, wriggling a little in his seat. “I was taking a cruise, after spending two months settling my father’s estate. My mother had died the year before,” he trailed off, and looked at the ceiling to compose himself. “So my father going so soon afterwards had all been a bit, ah, and I’d been told I needed a rest.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” said Isabelle, and reached out to give his arm a nervous little stroke.

“Yes, so sorry,” said Lucy. “Poor you.” An orphan, she thought. He will cling, and nothing will scrape him off.

“Life,” he continued, brightening, “had other plans for me. We weren’t an hour out of port when I heard shouts that someone had gone overboard. It’s the strangest thing: when I heard it was Marietta who had fallen, I found myself in the most terrible panic, like nothing I had felt before in my life. I had only briefly met her on boarding, so you might think me completely mad, but the only explanation that made any sense was that I must be in love.”

Lucy closed her eyes.

*

Until Isabelle was seven years old, Lucy had been tormented with fears for her safety, such that the child rarely left the house, and certainly never to venture near any body of water. Bath times were a rhapsody of tension. She knew it was completely irrational, and yet she was unable to stop herself. On the twins’

seventh birthday, Lucy stopped by the open door of the girls' bedroom to listen to Cyril reading them a story before bed.

"...and so," he said, "that is the Holt legend. And that is why the pool is very special, and so is Izzy here." He chuckled Isabelle under the chin, and she cuddled up to him. "You're a true Holt, my darling, and that is why Mr. Thinsfleet pecks at Marietta and not at you. Your picture will be up on the wall next to Daddy's one day," he said. "And when you marry, your husband will have to take *your* name, instead of the other way around."

Isabelle purred, while her sister sat stricken and mute. Lucy walked in and picked up Marietta without a word, then walked out and into a bedroom further down the hall, from which she would never return to the marital bed. She lay down and curled around her rejected daughter, hugging the child tight as she sniffed that her portrait would never be on the wall. She was unconsolated by Lucy's assertion that her portrait had pride of place in her mother's heart, where it really counted. Finally, Lucy said she was very happy Marietta had not dipped, because there was a chance that Isabelle, who had, might drown. The moment she said it, she found she did not believe it at all, and good sense came sweeping back into her body and her mind. The relief was so consuming that it wasn't until she woke the next morning that Lucy realized: her words, grasped at in desperation to console Marietta, had endorsed the legend. She peeled herself away from her daughter's sleeping tear-softened body, resolved to correct the error. She sought out her husband, but Cyril refused to retract anything he had said, heedless of the damage done to Marietta. He went to his study and shut the door. Lucy saw that not only had he been entirely serious when he said they had one child each, but that he cared very little for 'the other'.

She sat with the twins eating breakfast, and said: "Listen to me, girls. The story Daddy told you last night is not true, do you understand me?" Isabelle looked disappointed and defiant, and Marietta looked confused. "The *puddle* outside our door is just a puddle, and falling in it or not falling in it means absolutely nothing. No one is more special, and no one is going to drown." Her daughters both remained silent. Mr. Thinsfleet arrived at the window, tapping on the glass and *kaah*-ing joyfully, then pacing the sill and shaking out his feathers.

It was a week later that she heard the girls fighting over a bracelet they had found in the attic.

“You can’t have it, it should be mine, I’m a true Holt.” Isabelle’s voice had taken on a magisterial quality, and it twisted Lucy’s heart, in that moment, right out of love.

“Mummy says it’s not true,” whined Marietta, making a snatch for the bauble.

“Mummy would say that,” replied her icy twin. “Mummy didn’t get dipped, she’s not a true Holt either. She’s just jealous of Daddy and me.”

Lucy swept in, snatched the bracelet away from Isabelle and gave it to a stunned Marietta. Then she went into the kitchen and beat her fists against the table until her hands were numb. If Cyril was going to have favorite child, she resolved, then she must have one herself.

Marietta, however, was not interested in being her mother’s favorite. She grew morose, idolizing her father. And Isabelle? By the time she realized she had lost her mother, and her father was not the one she wanted; by the time she swore blind she would never marry; by the time she began to call the pool a stupid puddle; it was already too late, and her mother could not bear her.

Cyril retreated to his study, appearing less and less. Isabelle sought to become a shadow, inoffensive to her mother’s sight, while Marietta took work on cruise ships in the hope that she would drown, and satisfy her father. If she could not love one daughter, and the other would not love her, Lucy would make up for it in hating Mr. Thinsfleet.

*

“Yes, it was love. Once I realized how I felt,” Eliot continued, “I couldn’t wait for the lifeboat to be lowered. A life ring had been thrown to her, but she’d pushed it away as she thrashed. It didn’t look as though she knew how to swim, so I simply dived in. Maybe you already know this, but I didn’t—at least, not so practically as I do now: a person in the throes of drowning can become quite violent in their panic, lashing out when they mean to grasp. When I reached Marietta she gave me

a good few blows before I could get the ring around her. At the time, with the cold of the water numbing my brain, it almost seemed like she was determined *not* to be saved.”

Isabelle and her mother exchanged glances.

“I cherish the bruises,” he continued, a blissful expression lighting his face, “they are love tokens.” Eliot caught the dubious looks of the two women across the table, and smiled. “I know how I sound. I don’t care. Marietta’s attentions may yet tend more towards the lashing than the grasping, but it is only prolonged shock after her ordeal.”

“And the marriage?” ventured Lucy, barely wishing to know.

“I asked the captain a few days later if he would be willing to conduct the ceremony, and then I proposed.”

“And what did Marietta say?”

“She said yes.”

“Of course. But, what did she say... *exactly*?”

Eliot shuffled in his seat. “I don’t remember, *exactly*. I was suffused with love.” The women stared at him until he became sufficiently uncomfortable. “‘Fine.’ She said ‘fine.’”

“Eliot, I wonder whether you might have been a little...” Isabelle looked at her mother.

“So you are hoping,” Lucy tried to suppress her disbelief, “that Marietta will ‘come around’, as it were, once she is fully recovered from the shock?”

“Something like that,” replied Eliot, beginning to look completely miserable. “I love her. I do.”

“And in the meantime?” asked Lucy.

“I have no ties or duties aside from her. I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

Repent at leisure, thought Lucy, in her mother’s voice. She found herself quietly impressed that Marietta was capable of viewing marriage as an act of revenge. It appeared she intended to make the boy suffer for saving her. It was wrong, of course, but it did show an incredible force of will. Perhaps Marietta had absorbed all of her sister’s will, as well as her own. Lucy looked over at Isabelle, sitting as she always did in a kind of apology to the chair, and sighed. How do I get this boy out of here? she thought. How do I make this stop? She went out to see if Mr. Thinsfleet was yet writhing in agony, and was further disheartened to hear him flapping through the trees in full voice.

After dinner, while Eliot sipped port and looked at the books in the library, Lucy whispered fiercely at Isabelle in the kitchen. “Go and tell your sister to come and release this mooncalf of hers. She must send him away before he is ruined.”

Isabelle didn’t attempt to argue, but went up to Marietta’s room, carrying a plate of food and a glass of water on a tray. Isabelle never argued. She was waiting for her mother’s grudge to crumble. Maybe if Isabelle had relinquished her hopes of forgiveness (and if she had not spent her formative years learning to be terrified of the world), she would finally have left Gorgelack. Instead she remained, her twenty-eighth birthday on the horizon, to continue a penance which dispersed like thistledown in the wind of her mother’s years-long rage.

*

Marietta came down the next day, and paced outside her father’s study door, waiting for him to come out or grant her access. Eventually, she called: “Daddy, I nearly drowned.” There was no response. “I got married,” she said, but still no reply came. She waited for a long minute, and then said, quietly, “He dipped. He’s a true Holt.”

The door opened immediately, and Cyril burst into the hallway, his clothes stained, his hair wild and his beard a disgrace. “Where is he?” he asked, looking over his daughter’s head.

Lucy observed from down the hallway. Of course Marietta would not let the boy go—he was a gift for the scurrying beast. A small tame animal to lay at the entrance to his lair, and tempt him out. It would not serve her at all. Lucy watched Marietta trail hopelessly after her father, who had eyes only for her lovelorn husband. And she and Isabelle standing here at the edge: all the members of Mr. Thinsfleet’s grievous parliament. She looked over at her daughter. Limp, neurotic Isabelle would remain here until the last drip of her evaporated, but Lucy did not have to. If nothing was to change, then *she* would change. She was a vigorous woman, well-preserved and still attractive, and capable of anything she wished, in the wide and generous world beyond Gorgelack. She would resign her seat, and go.

It was evening, but light enough that she could walk to the station without losing her way. She packed a small case, and descended the stairs quietly, head raised and face set only on the exit. She opened the door slowly to avoid its creaking, and stood on the porch. There was the puddle. She would never think of it again. On the other side of it, she could see Mr. Thinsfleet, his eyes glittering, bobbing and singing to himself with strange little clicks and wheezes.

“Not dead yet, you mangy crow?” She came down the steps towards him, and he hopped a little in her direction. Something about him seemed slower, heavier. She walked right up to the puddle and lashed out a foot, catching him a glancing blow. He staggered forward and gouged her ankle half-heartedly. Lucy’s heart fluttered: he had taken his medicine!

“Mother, wait!”

Lucy turned to see Isabelle on the steps, hauling a case.

“I’m coming with you, wait!”

Startled out of herself, Lucy watched Isabelle lurch across the gravel towards her. There was a sudden flurry of movement, and Mr. Thinsfleet flew straight at the girl’s face. She screamed, blood leaking furiously between the fingers of the hand she held to her eye. Mr. Thinsfleet had fallen at her feet, the round white prize rolling from his beak. Lucy ran towards her daughter, pulling the scarf from

around her neck, and holding it to Isabelle's face, where it turned deep red in seconds.

"Marietta! Cyril! Eliot! Someone call an ambulance!"

There was a commotion at the door and everyone gathered around, Eliot running to the telephone. Lucy wondered what it was that she felt at this moment. Horror, certainly, and panic. She searched around for love. Maybe it was lying underneath them, but she knew, really, that when horror and panic drained away, they would leave her nothing more than pity.

It would have to do. She guided Isabelle back through the front door; someone would bring in the suitcases later.

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THIRD PRIZE

Evelyn Krieger divides her time among writing, entering competitions, homeschooling, teaching adult ballet, doing PR for her daughter's business, and working as an educational consultant. Her stories and essays have won numerous awards. Evelyn's writing credits include *Lilith*, *Writer's Digest*, *Gemini*, and *Memoirs, Ink*. Evelyn's debut YA novel, *One Is Not A Lonely Number*, was a 2011 Honor Book from the Association of Jewish Libraries and a Next Generation 2011 Indie Finalist for children's fiction. Her website is www.evelynkrieger.net.

Fire Drill

by Evelyn Krieger

My teacher wants to know where I learned so much about fire safety. I am standing beside her wooden desk. The classroom is empty, its silence coiling around my stomach.

I shrug. *Doesn't everyone know?*

"Well, Sophie," she says, tapping her pencil. "You certainly impressed your classmates." She smiles. "When you get home today, be sure to tell your mother that you are the third grade fire expert."

Relief washes over me. "Thanks. I will."

As I walk the gravel path to my house, I repeat my teacher's words aloud, so I may deliver them, like a perfect gift, to my mother. This is a message she will appreciate. More than a one hundred percent on my multiplication test.

I open the porch door and hear the television playing Mom's soap opera. She is in the den, ironing a white sheet. The room smells of familiar spray starch and steam. Mom's green eyes brighten when she sees me and I know this is a sign of a good mood. She turns off the television and unplugs the iron. Then I tell her about the fireman and the coloring book and all the questions I answered.

"That makes my day!" Her hug surprises me. Then her eyes narrow. "You know, parents need a class like that." She looks through me. "Maybe... I ought to suggest it to the PTA."

My gut tells me that this wouldn't be a good idea, but of course I don't say anything. "Can I have a snack?"

"Just like some people don't bother making a will or buying life insurance," Mom continues. "They think it's just not going to happen to them." She points her finger. "ABP. Always be prepared. That's my motto."

"I know, Mom. I told them."

What I actually told my classmates this morning was how you're supposed to check the alarms each month and change batteries every October. We have fourteen smoke alarms in our three-bedroom colonial, the only home I remember. Until recently it had been thirteen alarms, but Mom didn't like the number and put up another one in the basement for good measure. Dad said that was it; he wasn't buying anymore. What I didn't mention to the class was the rope ladder under my bed.

*

Bethany Miller invites me to sleep over Friday night. My Dad says, "Fine with me." My mother has never let me sleep at anyone else's house, but now that I've turned nine I feel hopeful. I wait until I've seen her smile at least twice to pop the question.

She twists a strand of her copper hair. "I don't know her family that well..."

“Mrs. Miller went on the farm trip with us. Remember? Bethany’s my reading partner.” I start pleading. “Please Mom. We’re going to work on our book project.”

I watch the decision form in her face.

“I suppose. Just be good. And *careful*.”

*

I ride the school bus home with Bethany. Her mom helps us make homemade pizza and chocolate chip cookies. I notice that Mrs. Miller smiles a lot. Her calm body moves effortlessly through the tiny kitchen. She lets me stir the pan of melting chocolate on the stovetop. Later, I call my mom to say good night. I do not tell her about my baking. She reminds me to review the house exits before I go to bed.

When Mom arrives the next morning, Mrs. Miller invites her in for a cup of coffee. Bethany and I sit on the living room rug and dress our Barbie dolls. As my mother enters the house, her eyes dart around the living room, then toward the ceiling. I feel the back of my neck grow warm. I follow my mother and Mrs. Miller into the kitchen. I try to think of something to say. “Bethany is learning to sew,” I blurt. “She’s making some doll clothes.”

My mother nods. Her eyes are blinking. She sits down at the kitchen table, while Mrs. Miller pours coffee. I keep a close watch on both of them.

“So the girls got along?” Mom asks, eyeing the kitchen.

Bethany’s mother looks surprised. “Oh yes, certainly. Your daughter is welcome anytime. We really enjoyed her.”

I like Mrs. Miller’s buttery voice. I believe she means what she says.

My mother sips the coffee from an orange mug. “You have a lovely home.”

“Thank you. We’re actually thinking of having the kitchen redone.”

Bethany taps my arm, and whispers. “Come on, let’s play.”

“You know...” my mother says, “I couldn’t help noticing that you don’t have a smoke detector in the living room.” She gestures to the kitchen ceiling. “Or in here.”

My stomach somersaults. I can feel the air in the room change. I look at my shoes to avoid seeing Mrs. Miller’s face. Bethany doesn’t seem to notice and again tugs me back to our dolls. Mrs. Miller looks at me. I’m sure she sees my red cheeks. Her bright eyes seem to be sending me a message. Then she says, “Katie, why don’t you pack up your things?”

*

In the car, I stare out the window. I let my silence slice the space between us. Mom drives slowly and questions me about Bethany’s family and the details of her home. I answer in monosyllables.

“What’s the matter with you?” she asks.

“Why did you have to *say* that? About the smoke alarms?”

She hits her hand on the steering wheel. “*Why?* Why did I have to say that? Because my daughter was sleeping in their home and they weren’t protected from fire. That’s why!”

“They had them upstairs, Mom.”

“You know very well that a fire can be raging downstairs before the upstairs alarm goes off. And, if they’re careless enough not to have smoke alarms downstairs, then what else does that say about them?”

“It was only for one night anyway.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them. I close my eyes. The car jerks as Mom pulls over to the curb and stops. She turns toward the back seat. Her voice comes out in a hoarse whisper.

“Just one night? Is that what you said?”

I know what’s coming.

“That’s all it took to kill your Uncle Kenny. One night at a friend’s house whose parents thought it was okay to sleep in a basement with no exit, in a house with no working smoke detectors!”

I feel like blocking my ears because I don’t want to hear this story again.

“Can you understand me? My only brother...” Her voice cracks. “My twin...”

I nod.

“It’s my job to protect you, Sophie.” She shakes her head. “I just don’t understand how people can be so careless.”

“Sorry, Mom.”

It has been a while since she mentioned Uncle Kenny. He died at fourteen, and although I never knew him, his ghost has lived with our family, hovering like a storm cloud, for as long as I can remember. Sometimes, alone in my bed at night, I allow myself to think about Uncle Kenny strangling in the thick smoke, his lungs burning. Then I thank God that my mother was spared, though I know a different fire still burns inside her. Even now, my palms get sweaty when I think about Mom holding my hand to the oven door. I must have been about three. *Hot!* She would repeat this warning until she believed that I knew it in my bones. *Don’t play with fire. Fire hurts.*

*

The days grow shorter and colder. My mother’s smile fades, as if she is holding her breath. I know that winter, in her mind, brings its own danger—space heaters, chimneys, fireplaces, and frozen shut windows. Then, the unthinkable happens. Right in our own town, near the organic farm. A fire sweeps through a home, killing three children. Sisters, with flower names: Violet, Lily, and Rose. I am glad I did not know them. The firefighters found the girls under a bed. While the church ladies bring food and start a collection, my mother drives my brother and me by the charred remains of the house. She stops in front of it, the car windows still frosty. My brother and I look past the blackened snow.

I think I can smell the smoke. I beg her to leave.

She turns toward Trevor and me in the back seat. I see her breath in the frigid air.
“This is the power of fire. Never underestimate it.”

“Can we go?” Trevor says, shivering.

*

In the weeks that follow, our town slowly slips from sadness back into the routine of life. My mother stays on her island of silence. I know she read every news story about the fire. I know she must be thinking about Uncle Kenny. When she finds out that the wiring inside the walls caused the fire, she puts her head down on our kitchen table and cries.

I hesitantly lay my hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay, Mom.”

She lifts her head, and wipes the tears from her face. “It’s the hardest kind of fire to prevent. You just never know. And with the high winds that night...it moved so fast...”

A few days later, my mother has Firefighter Dave come to our house, the same man who had visited my class. He checks the smoke alarms, the outlets, the wires to our lamps and television and toaster and washing machine. My mother twists her hair as Firefighter Dave delivers the report.

“Everything looks just fine to me. Exits are clear. Smoke alarms in order.”

“What about the wires?” Mom asks.

“No problems. Nothing frayed. You aren’t using extensions. Of course, if you’ve got concerns about blinking lights or shorting, you might want to call an electrician.”

I am hoping that Firefighter Dave’s good news will bring back my mother’s smile. Instead, that night, from my bed, I hear my mom softly crying. My father’s voice seems to be comforting her, but after a while it grows louder.

“This is getting out of hand, Claire. It’s been over two months. I know how much it upset you, but your kids are *alive*. Your house is still here! Why are *you* grieving?”

I strain my ears to hear my mother’s reply. “It’s following me. Like a curse.”

“What more do you want? We’ve taken every precaution in the book!”

“I want the electrician. Like he recommended.”

“I told you I’m not paying for an electrician. We had a fire inspection and I know myself that the circuits work just fine. Claire, think about it. Their house was 75 years old. Our home is new, all up to code. Safe.”

I’m mad at my father for not giving my mother what she wants. Who cares if it’s a waste of money? As long as she comes back to us.

*

On Sunday evening my mother calls a family meeting. Trevor and I sit in the beanbag chairs around the coffee table. Mom and Dad sit near us on the rug.

“It’s time to review fire safety,” my mother announces as if we were about to play a game. “Having a plan means being prepared. And being prepared means you can make wise choices when there is no time to lose.” She places two papers on the coffee table. “I’ve made a floor map of our house. This one is the upstairs, and this one is the downstairs.”

Trevor leans over to study the maps. “There’s my bedroom.”

Mom nods and from her sweater pocket pulls out a tiny boy figurine and places it in Trevor’s room. “And here you are.” She hands me a girl figure, which I place in the outline of my room. Then, as Trevor identifies each area of our house map, Mom writes down the name with a black felt pen. My job is to identify the exits, which she marks with a red X.

Mom looks disappointed. “You forgot some important exits, Sophie.”

Trevor jumps in. “I know. The windows!”

My mother explains how thick smoke or fire might prevent us from escaping downstairs. We need to know how to open our windows and yell for help. “And don’t forget about the fire ladders under your bed.”

We follow her upstairs. We take turns opening our cold bedroom windows. We study the instruction pictures on the rope ladder. We review ‘Stop, drop, and roll.’ We practice crawling out of our room and down the stairs. My father stands by, watching silently, his arms folded.

Later that week, Dad flies to Washington for business. Mom begged him to cancel the trip. He didn’t. My mother’s fears seem to grow, until I think I might catch them if I stand too close. After she tucks me in at night, she turns off my bedside lamp then pulls the plug from the wall. She sits next to me in the dark and lets out a sigh.

“I’m so tired. I can’t decide whether or not to leave the lights on downstairs. It’s a good way to discourage intruders. On the other hand, it could be a fire hazard.”

“Everything will be okay, Mom.”

She pats my hand. “Sleep well, sweetie.”

When I hear my mother’s voice again it comes as if in a dream. *Fire!* I hear my door burst open. Her hand yanks my arm. “Sophie! *Fire!*”

I spring up from my bed, my eyes widening. I hear the window shade snap, then Trevor whimpering.

“Out the window, quick!”

No sounds escape my dry throat. My heart pounds me awake. My body takes over. I reach under my bed for the rope ladder. Mom grabs it, hooks it to my window, and lets it fall.

“Sophie, Trevor, out! Now!”

I am coughing. I need water. I feel my mother pushing me. The freezing night air hits my face then travels through my nightgown. She hoists me to the window.

“No, I’ll fall. I can’t—”

“Hurry! You can do it!”

I move down the front of our house, into the night, my hands clenching the rungs. I’m shivering, but I know we’ll escape the fire. When I reach the last rung, I jump to the snow-covered ground. Only then do I realize my feet are bare. The porch light illuminates my mother and Trevor as they inch their way down.

My brother screams. “I’m scared! Help, help!”

I fear the flames might catch them and I search outside my house for the fire. I can’t see the flames or the smoke. I stand beside the maple tree, shivering. Firefighter Dave will be here any second. I listen for the fire truck, but the night stays still. Mom holds Trevor as she jumps from the end of the ladder into the snow. I run to hug her and she pulls us close to her warm body.

“Oh, my God. My babies.” She is breathless. “We did it. I think that was just over two minutes.” Trevor is crying. She rubs his head. “We can go back inside now, sweeties. You did great.”

✱

It seems to take all night and the next day for my body to warm up after our fire drill. In school, I sit in my desk while Mrs. Green points to a big map of the United States. She talks about the Erie Canal, but my mind drifts backwards and I hear my mother yelling fire. I wonder if any of my classmates have to climb out their windows in the middle of the night. When I think about that fire ladder my stomach churns. My toes still hurt.

When Dad hears about our climbing out the window, he tells me not to worry. There will be no more middle-of-the night fire drills, he says. Even with this assurance, bedtime brings a rising panic in my heart. I wake in the middle of the night, certain that smoke is creeping into my nose. I try to call out, but my voice has vanished.

By the time spring arrives, I have pushed the memory from my mind. Mom busies herself with renewing the backyard garden. One Saturday, she opens all the windows, and declares a spring-cleaning day. She promises Trevor and me ice cream cones if we get our chores done. Mom starts by stripping the beds. Trevor sweeps the back porch, while I'm in charge of dusting the china cabinet. I climb the stepladder to reach the very top. I notice a small cupboard and I wonder if Mom has hidden some candy in there, so I take a peek. I find nothing but fancy teacups, and a small blue and red box that I pull out. The bottom of the box slides open, revealing a bunch of long matches. So this is where she keeps them. I have never been allowed to light a match. I hold one between my fingers and study the red tip. Here lies my mother's biggest fear.

Holding the matchbox, I step down the ladder. I glance over my shoulder to make sure Mom's nowhere in sight. Then I open the box, take a match and slide it along the side of the box. *Magic*. I can't take my eyes off the growing flame. It is beautiful. The heat touches my fingertips, startling me. I let the match drop. I see it fall to the rug beneath me, then watch, amazed, as it springs to life.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Edison Penn is the pseudonym of a writer and surgeon in the upper Midwest. He operates by day and often writes well into the wee hours of the night, when his muse is wide awake and kicking. Most of his stories put ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, and he is a keen purveyor of the supernatural. He rarely sets his stories in the medical world, though medical elements sometimes appear.

Dead Man Breathing

by Edison Penn

*If oonuh ent kno weh oonuh dah gwine,
oonuh should kno weh oonuh come fum.*

(If you don't know where you're going,
you should know where you come from.)

—An old Gullah proverb—

I. Understanding

Sam Kelder finally understands.

At sixty-eight, Sam is an old man. Much older than the calendar suggests, as if his body has withered, rather than lived, all those years. His dark skin hides a dusky pallor, and the blood within flows like molasses; the pump is all but worn out. His once-straight spine is stooped: a length of bamboo twisted crazy by the years. His

once strong muscles are nothing more than thin lumps of fat under flesh, barely able to lift his own weight.

I nees a smoke, he thinks in his low speech, a mix of Gullah and English. As if rolling a phantom cigarette, his yellow stained fingers twitch back and forth constantly. He took his first pull as a young boy at the boot of his *tata*; for over sixty years Sam has rolled his own, and the smell of the harsh tobacco lingers in his nose like an old friend who never wears out a welcome. His lips constantly smack. Even now he feels the tip of a smoke against his tongue, can almost taste it, but only almost.

He sees his wife at the foot of his bed from time to time. She is always standing, always wearing one of her fine Sunday hats. Eulalee is her name, and *she duh prietest ooman on dis heih islan*. That would be John's Island, off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina, and in his curious low speak, the sentiment is meant to imply both past and present. Eulalee and Sam were once a hot item on John's Island, and he can still smell her *hiar* and taste her *leps*. He knows it's her *trabblin speerit* what comes to visit from time to time; her *hebben-goin' speerit* is long in the *sure dead*.

Eulalee is a large woman, coal black and big boned. Her face shows a large nose with big flaring nostrils; her left eyelid droops and lends her a sheepish appearance, as if she is always in the midst of a wink. She has thick, ebony black hair, wears deep red lipstick, and is *sure enough sure a God fearin' ooman*. He usually refers to her as *ooman*, seldom as Eula or Eulalee (except maybe in church, which he attends every Sunday—the only time he ever wears a tie). Though she's been gone near fifteen years, he can spend hours *cracking teet'* and speaking with her most anywhere. She is never *was*, is always *is*.

For thirty-three years the pair lived in a broken down two bedroom shack, sharecropping a small piece of swampy, bug-infested land that barely allowed Sam the dignity of a man feeding his family. *Onpossible tuh get straight wood fum crooked timber*, Sam liked to say about that land. Sam and Eulalee kept one bedroom, their nine *childin* kept the other. Sam smiles and wonders if they would have had more or less *childin* if he'd have spent more time at home. He thinks of Eulalee again. She wasn't a complaining woman. She was, is, a *gud ooman*.

Baking in the hot, unforgiving South Carolina sun, Sam worked the meager fields and picked cotton from sun up til sun down—*promisin' talk don' cook rice* is his philosophy about life and work. At the end of each tortured day, his bruised and blistered fingers looked more like they belonged on a meat wagon than his hand. It was a living that paid wages in blood and dividends in misery. Who could blame a man then, for playing as hard as he worked, spending so many of his nights in the numerous unnamed *joop* joints dotting the backwoods of Charleston County? His friends, mostly in the sure dead themselves now, were all from those haunts—Preacher Man, Buds, Butcher Prosper, Uncle Joey, John the Devine. Just names now, but oh how the memories dance.

Sam chuckles and his back hurts. Not as bad as a day in the fields perhaps—that kind of suffering is peculiar to the fields thank you Jesus—but it hurts nonetheless. *I bees sick*. Suddenly his throat is a parched desert, and it seems he has to have a whiskey or die. But the hot, dry taste of whiskey on his tongue is a thing of the past. In fact, all of this is a thing of the past and Sam will miss it, he thinks. It is his world after all, the one he was born into and the only one he has ever known. His entire life—from his *mama's teet* to the plot waiting for him in the sure dead—has played out within fifty miles of this spot. The sum total of that life has brought him to this time and place and there is nothing he can do to change that now.

Sam understands.

Sam's chest rises stiffly, though he doesn't consciously take a breath. When he chooses to breathe these days, he must consciously inhale. Only rarely does he choose to breathe however; the pain is too much, the effort required too great. He lets the bedside machine breathe for him. He doesn't know the details, but somehow the machine knows when he needs to breathe. He can feel it pushing air into him, inflating the bellows within his chest. He can hear it too, a mournful, mechanical, almost otherworldly back and forth tune...

Swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish...

Sam thinks of this as the sound of death.

He has been relieved of the burden of breathing, the special province of every land-ranging animal on earth. It is unnatural he thinks, *I should be in duh sure dead*. Instead, as if mimicking the dead in every crucial way save one, he lies here. His life, such as it is, is a cruel taunt. It is a lesson that has been drummed into him with every breath over the last three weeks and he has learned the lesson well.

Swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish...

This cadence will be with him for the rest of his life. Sam realizes this with ever increasing hope that whatever time is left, it will be brief. Quite possibly, quite likely he decides, this will be the last sound he ever hears.

Sam's mind flutters and his sanity blurs a little more each day. One moment he is in the here and now, the next he is already gone and crossing the *shadowlands*. It is as if he winks out periodically. These winks are his only remaining escape and it isn't his fault, though to be certain he would just as soon be in those *shadowlands*. His mind leaves for longer and longer periods, at times assisted by the drugs. He comes to think of the drugs as his salvation. He waits for, almost longs for, the moment when his mind fractures completely.

Through it all, with a clarity only possible in the dying, he understands.

He cannot rest in this place. The ICU, to use his words, *is duh wrongest place in duh world when you nees tuh rest*. He is something of an expert on this subject after three weeks of interruptions so constant it seems more of an interruption not to be interrupted. Needles gather more blood for more useless tests (*duh sicker I gets, duh more blood dey wants*). He is fed constantly through a tube in his nose (dying is hard work—nobody knows this better than Sam—and requires a well fed body). They turn him constantly (better for his lungs they say, though he suspects the days when better for his lungs really mattered are behind him). They are always taking x-rays of this or that and he wonders, *what is dey lookin fuh?* The question always goes unanswered. In fact, all his questions go unanswered. Nobody ever talks to him. Even as they turn and poke and prod him, it is as if he is not there, as if he is but a fly on the wall as these strangers go about their daily lives oblivious to his presence.

Except that they are not strangers, he knows them well, certainly knows the minutiae of their lives better than they his. Sam's night nurse, her name is Alice, would blush if she knew that he hears the sweet nothings she whispers to her husband on the phone at 3:00 a.m. He knows the specifics of Alice's children, that little Tommy is not doing well in school and that his older sister Tammy has boy trouble and is getting an abortion come the end of the week. He knows the housekeeper who cleans his room, an elderly black woman named Gracie, has bad arthritis and only feigns mopping because of it. Peter, the aide who bathes him, is a closet homosexual who banters back and forth every night with the homophobic respiratory therapist Steve. In the wee hours of the morning, Sam Kelder has overheard them all. In short, their lives have crossed his, but his life has not crossed theirs. It is his death that has crossed—or perhaps better, interfered—with their lives.

They know Sam only as a dead man breathing.

Sam Kelder's chest is an agony of constriction. A tumor, its fingers coursing everywhere and squeezing everything, encases his lungs. The push and pull of the ventilator—*swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish...*—might as well be the tide of life ebbing in and out, more out than in with each passing day. For Sam though, the tide cannot move out fast enough.

This is Sam Kelder: a skeletally thin, ancient black man seemingly lost amidst the vast white ocean that is the sheet beneath him in his ICU bed. Catheters and IVs spiral out from him like lines mooring a ship to the pier, lifelines anchoring a dying man to life. In the three weeks of his confinement, he has apparently shrunk. His skin hangs loosely from his old and tortured bones, yet every nook and cranny of those bones is visible. His arms are bruised from the constant needle sticks; his stained fingers quiver at his sides. Coarse stubble roughens his face and a white crust has formed across his mouth. The stench that fills the room comes at least partially from this, partially from the ever present brown ooze beneath his scrawny ass, and partially from the accumulated sweat and filth of a prolonged stay in the ICU. That accumulation clings to his body the way white clings to rice—it ain't coming off no matter how hard you scrub.

Swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish...

Sam Kelder wants to go home, wants to die. He has watched his many family members come and go for days, each stopping to cry or wail at the sight of him. He says nothing to them, nothing beyond what can be conveyed with his eyes. This is much actually, but his family cannot—or will not—look him in the eyes, so the message goes unheeded day after suffering day.

Swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish...

Sam Kelder wants to go home, wants to die. Sam Kelder needs to die.

He finally understands that some things are worse than death.

II. His Eye Is On The Sparrow

When Sam opens his eyes, the room has taken on a dim, yellowish hue. The natural light of day has been replaced by the fluorescent and artificial glow of nighttime in the intensive care unit. There is a faint and regular beep, beep, beep off in the distance. Louder is the hum of a vacuum cleaner, or maybe it is a floor polisher; Sam doesn't know or care which. A phone is ringing endlessly, pauses a moment, then starts up again. Somewhere a TV set is on and he can hear the dialogue, the tiny pop pop pop of gunshots. It is an old time western.

A woman's voice, humming at first, then singing, Sam realizes. He would smile, if it didn't hurt so much. If the damn breathing tube in his mouth hadn't distorted things so.

*I sing because I'm happy,
I sing because I'm free;
For His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me.*

The words are soft, coming to his ears as if carried on wings of cotton. He tries to turn his head, tries to find their source, but his neck does not respond, not even when a hand briefly squeezes his own. The touch is not just hot, but exquisite in its hotness. This is so because the intensity behind the touch is not ambivalent,

but caring; not inanimate, but teeming with the stuff of life; not painful but loving. It is the first time in weeks Sam has felt a connection to something more animated than the bellows cycling up and down at his bedside. A tear nobody else sees graces his cheek. In the background, the faint, rhythmic beep of his heart trace skips a note or two, then recovers.

“I see you in here every night,” a young voice says. “I’m sorry.”

Sorry for what? Sam wants to ask this, but he has no words, indeed no way to say anything at all. The moment begins to pass and he feels the isolation of a tired old man on a long, solitary journey to a faraway land. Another squeeze of his hand, a sense of something moist on his cheek, and the moment does pass. The voice begins to sing anew:

*Whenever I am tempted,
Whenever clouds arise,
When song gives place to singing,
When hope within me dies,
I draw the closer...*

The woman’s soft and soothing voice goes out of earshot, but not out of mind; Sam’s own mind fills in the gap:

*...to Him
From care He sets me free;
His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me.*

Like a precious gift from Heaven above, the words sustain him for a day, then a second, then a third...

III. Listening

First voice: “I know how hard this must be for all of you. I’m afraid,” a pause, “Mr. Kelder is dying.”

Sobbing, a second voice, “How can you be sure?”

They talk about him as if he is not here, as if he is already dead and the body on the ventilator is a mere formality that will pass with time. As usual, they are standing just outside his room. The sliding glass partition is closed, but Sam has long since discovered it is not much of a sound barrier. So I’m dying, he thinks, no news in that.

The second voice, Sam recognizes this one as the voice of his eldest daughter, Karla, says “You don’t know that for sure.” He can hear the strain in her voice, almost feels sorry for her. Almost.

The first voice again: “Without the machine... I’m very sorry.” Sam knows this voice to be his doctor, a man he has seen only in brief glimpses outlined against the fluorescent ceiling lights. “The tumor has advanced to the point of very nearly encasing his lungs. Further treatment would be futile, might even be—” The voice stops abruptly.

“Might be what?” Karla asks after a moment.

“I was going to say... might be cruel.”

A host of voices now, how many Sam cannot say. Perhaps all of his daughters have gathered on this night. There are murmurs of shock, a few tears he imagines, a litany of Amens, “Lawd this...” and “Lawd that...”

“Is he suffering?” The questioning voice is a soft one and Sam knows immediately she is back, the voice from three days ago, the singer in the night. His pulse quickens, but only a little.

“Who’s to say? But, no, I doubt it. I doubt he is feeling much of anything.”

“You doubt?” a voice that sounds very much like Karla says. It is her younger sister, Tanya. “That doesn’t sound very convincing.” A glimmer of hope arises in Sam’s mind. Perhaps he has underestimated his daughters.

“There’s no way of knowing of course, but in all likelihood, Mr. Kelder is beyond feeling anything in this world.” Wrong, Sam thinks, just flat out wrong.

“Doctor, you speak of him as if he is already gone. That’s my father in there. And as you can see, he’s still breathing.” Sam feels the hope in Karla’s voice, intuiting her lack of understanding at the same time. Of course, he realizes for the tenth or twentieth time, none of them understand. How could they? Sam himself didn’t understand fifteen years ago when Eulalee was the one lying in a bed very much like this one and he was the one standing in the hallway outside her room. He is suddenly overcome—how much did she hear? How much did she suffer in the five weeks building to her death? He begins to sob quietly, mostly internally. The ceiling above becomes a blur, lost in the wash of big tears that silently fill his eyes and then slide down his cheeks. He closes his eyes and of a sudden the breathing machine sounds louder than ever—

SWOOSH... SWISH... SWOOSH... SWISH... SWOOSH... SWISH...

The sound reverberates back and forth in his head. Sam can do nothing to stop it, nothing to quell the image of Eulalee on her death bed, trying to die but suffering through the ignorance of those that would not let her depart this world for the better one beyond.

Sam screams.

His jaw slides sideways in a rictus, distorting his face into an uneven mump, and the tape holding his breathing tube pulls taut at his cheek. His tongue lolls in the space between his teeth. It is a horrible few seconds of utter silence—six, seven, eight—before Sam recalls there is a tube pushed down his throat and no sound can come. There will be no screams tonight—at least not the audible kind. *Oh Gawd*, Sam thinks, *oh Gawd in hebbin*.

His pulse skyrockets.

At the nursing station, the gentle beep... beep... beep of Sam’s heart trace suddenly races into a much more urgent beep beep beep beep beep beep beep. “Doctor, Mr. Kelder’s tachy, 135, 140!”

The doctor steps forward and slides open the door to Sam’s room.

At that exact moment the beeps tracing Sam’s heart stop.

IV. In the *Shadowlands*

For a moment, Sam thinks he's dying, truly thump out the Bible and say a few quick words over the body kind of dying.

One second he's laying in bed staring up at the all too familiar ceiling, it's the only landscape he has seen for weeks, then suddenly it's as if he's on that ceiling and looking down upon the room *below* him. It happens so quick, no warning whatsoever, that Sam is momentarily stunned and doesn't at first realize the old man on the bed—concentration camp thin, a shriveled veil of skin draped over a pile a bones—is him. The room is full of people and the emaciated man seems to be the center of their attention, a first in Sam's all too vivid memory.

A woman dressed in white rushes in and injects something into the plastic IV tubing. The middle-aged man Sam recognizes as his doctor shines something into his eyes. Apparently he doesn't like what he sees because he starts hollering all sorts of orders then, a confusion of words that Sam, even in his heightened state, can't keep up with. Somebody lifts the old man's torso up and a board is quickly slid under him. A young man kneels on the bed and pushes against the frail chest there, squeezing the old heart between the breastbone and spine. The young man relaxes, then presses again. There is an odd, almost otherworldly popping sound—and Sam has an idea it's his own old and brittle ribs fracturing under the strain of the compressions.

Teetering above all of this, Sam doesn't feel his ribs breaking. He is vaguely aware he has left his physical body behind and has entered the *shadowlands*, a realm where the near dead—the not quite departed—wait before making the transition to the *sure dead*. He is also aware, only vaguely at first, of another presence here.

An *ooman*. His *ooman*. His Eulalee.

Her *trabblin speerit* surrounds him and fills him with a sense of love he has not felt since the last time they were truly together fifteen years ago. Sam begins to relax, begins to welcome death. He has waited weeks for this moment and is not only ready to die, he needs to die.

He is ready to go home.

“Four hundred!” someone shouts.

“Four hundred!” comes the reply.

There is a loud report, like a gunshot has gone off in the ICU, and Sam’s body jumps. His chest lifts off the bed and his back arches impossibly. Four hundred joules of electricity courses through Sam’s emaciated frame in the instant.

On the heart monitor over the bed, there is first one blip, then another. The doctor watches and listens as the heart rate speeds up, becomes normal.

Sam, feeling as if a sledgehammer has slammed his chest, spirals down from his vantage point on the ceiling. He will not die on this shift, not on this day. Apparently, those in the room don’t share Sam’s rather unique viewpoint on death. They certainly don’t share his insight—not yet anyway.

V. Promisin’ Talk Don’ Cook Rice

Another day, another time. Life clings to Sam like an unwanted intruder. With every push of the ventilator, every breath, his chest aches and he is reminded of how close he had once come to ending this misery.

Swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish...

Sam hates that noise. If suffering has a sound, this is it.

*I sing because I’m happy,
I sing because I’m free;
For His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me.*

The soft voice of the woman moves into the room only slowly, accompanied Sam now realizes, by a faint hint of perfume. He is sure he knows the scent, but can’t place it. His mind is not what it used to be after all.

“Hello,” she says. “I’m so sorry.”

Sorry again? Why? Again Sam cannot voice the words. The bedside machine continues to cycle air into his lungs, as if it has a mind of its own, as if it speaks for him. It doesn’t, of course.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Loss? Of course, his continued presence in this world. He had come so close to crossing the *shadowlands*, to entering the *sure dead*. He realizes this woman, whoever she is, must understand.

“Promisin’ talk don’ cook rice,” she says.

What?

“You knows weh youse gwine. Git a move on wit it.”

The low speak. Gullah and English, the words and their sentiment can only be meant for him.

The woman bends to kiss him, then ambles out humming the same gospel tune as before.

The press of her lips against his cheek lingers only briefly, and before long Sam wonders if she was ever there at all. A trick of the mind perhaps, or maybe Eulalee sent her. He smiles at this thought, then closes his eyes and concentrates. His heart rate begins to climb, first to 100, then 110, then 130...

It isn’t long before Sam is once again the center of attention.

VI. Communicating

Sam’s heart rate levels out at 152. Beside him, the ventilator continues on its assigned mission to keep him alive.

Swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish... swoosh... swish...

Sam's doctor glares down at him. As he does so, the beeping on the heart monitor becomes less urgent. The doctor doesn't fail to notice this, and cranes his neck to take a look.

130... 120... 100. It levels at 84.

"Um... Not sure what that was about," the man says to the several folks assembled in Sam's room. As they start to disperse Sam hears a new voice.

"What happened?" Karla says.

"We almost had to shock him."

"Like before?"

"Yes, like before."

"Oh God." Karla's voice echoes Sam's sentiments, then she adds "Please do whatever you have to."

"But I thought—"

"My father wants to live."

"He's a strong man, but his heart can't take the strain. It's going to stop again." Sam can hear the pain in the doctor's voice.

"And when it does you do what you have to do."

Sam is horrified.

"This could go on for awhile."

"He'll go home when the good Lord calls him. Until then though, you keep trying." Her voice is firm, resolute. Apparently, she doesn't consider what has come already, a 'call.'

Sam has had enough.

And so has his doctor. As the man turns to leave, Sam's heart rate suddenly jumps to 140. Turning back to the bed, the doctor is about to call for assistance when Sam's heart rate abruptly drops to 80.

"What the hell?"

"What's going on?" Karla asks. "Why is he doing that?"

"I don't know," the doctor answers. "Never seen the likes of it." He takes a few steps toward the door again and the rate jumps back to 140. He steps back to Sam's bedside, Sam hears the footsteps as he is concentrating, and the rate falls immediately to 84.

"Jesus God in Heaven."

"What?" Karla asks, "what is it?"

"Move toward the door," the doctor almost demands.

"What—"

"Just do it!"

She does and Sam's heart rate bounces upward, comes to rest at 125.

"I'll be a sonofabitch."

"What is it?" Karla asks.

"Move away from the door, back to the bed," the doctor says.

She does, and Sam allows his heart rate to fall to the mid 80s once again.

"He knows we're here." Sam thinks there is the sound of incredulity in the doctor's voice.

"But you said—"

"Never mind what I said. He's controlling his heart rate." Definite incredulity.

“Is that possible?” Her voice sounds slightly off-center now, Sam thinks, as if she is no longer so resolute in her thinking.

“Apparently, but don’t ask me how.”

“But why would he do that?” Karla asks.

“I don’t know,” the doctor says. “He seems to speed up the rate when we try to leave, like he wants us here for some reason.”

“What?”

“Or he’s trying to tell us something.”

Finally, Sam can sense understanding on the horizon.

“Let me see if I got this straight, doctor. You believe my father, who’s been more or less unresponsive for weeks, is suddenly able to control his heart rate? And that he’s trying to tell us something with it?”

“That’s sort of the gist, yeah. It seems to me he’s asking for our help.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Karla asks, as she watches the heart monitor descend to the mid-fifties. “How low can that go?”

“Maybe forty-five before his heart begins to fail. Below that—”

“He’ll die,” Karla says, finally getting the idea.

“I think he believes it’s his time,” the doctor says.

“Is there nothing to be gained by further treatment? Isn’t there anything you can do?” The sound of reluctant resignation creeps into her voice and Sam begins to see the bright and shining light of hope before him.

“We can pray,” the doctor says. “And we can help him to go with dignity.”

“I can’t kill him,” Karla says, her voice choking in her throat.

“We can deliver him home. Truth is, he’s going home either way.” Another pause.
“It seems to me you love your father very much?”

“Yes, very much.”

“Then I think you already know what needs to be done.”

“Do you really think he wants this?”

It is the moment Sam has waited for, with a more or less forced patience, for weeks. With all his limited strength, Sam lifts his right hand off the bed and the pointer finger gradually separates away from the others, until it alone points upward.

“I guess, that would be your answer,” the doctor says. “Look.”

A gasp, then Sam hears a chair dragging across the floor, the sound of cloth rustling as Karla sits down. Sam’s heart rate falls to thirty, then twenty-five. The doctor walks around the bed and takes Karla’s hand. There are no words as the two of them stare at Sam’s chest moving up and down, ignoring the heart monitor and its declining numbers.

An alarm sounds just as the doctor reaches over and, with a nod from Karla, shuts down the breathing machine.

Swoosh... swish... swo.

Silence. Though it only lasts a moment, Sam hears it and manages a smile. The door opens and Sam’s nurse enters. “Doctor—”

Her words are cut short by the soft voice of a young woman. As Karla sings, it is music once again borne on wings of cotton to Sam’s ears. In the last moment before he enters the *shadowlands*, his final conscious thought is that he was wrong about the last sound he would hear in this world.

*I sing because I’m happy,
I sing because I’m free;
For His eye is on the sparrow...*

Somewhere on the other side, somewhere well beyond where even the *shadowlands* extend, there is a land known as the *sure dead*. Sam is standing there, holding Eulalee's hand, when the last verse of the gospel sung by Karla comes to him.

And I know He watches me.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Joyce Finn spent more than twenty years in Australia, South Africa, and Bermuda. She runs an Internet writers group for women and has organized four international writing conferences—the first featured in *Poets & Writers Magazine*. She finds joy in playing with words.

Harry's Chicken

by Joyce Finn

Harry Barrows kept a six-foot plastic chicken named Myrtle in the left corner of his front porch.

One early April morning, a quickening breeze brought the first stirrings of warmth after another deep-frozen winter. Harry unfastened the chinstrap of his old ice-fishing hat and eased the earflaps from Myrtle's head when a window next door creaked open and a curtain fluttered. Harry stepped out from behind the chicken and shook his fist in the air. The window snapped shut. He unbuttoned Myrtle's army coat and unclipped the neon blue suspenders. Bracing himself, he lifted Myrtle out of her newspaper-stuffed Wellington boots. A backdoor slammed. Soon a grey head bobbed along the top of the solid wood fence separating Harry from his neighbor. When the grey dome was level with him, a ladder grated across concrete, scraped the wood fence, and feet clanged up the metal rungs.

Betty Fowler's head popped over the fence. "You getting rid of that eyesore?"

"Not likely," said Harry.

Betty put both hands on the top of the fence and hoisted herself up another step. "What'd you say?"

Harry ambled over to the other side of his porch, leaned over the rail, and bellowed. "Myrtle's better company than some I know. SHE'D never call the cops." He stomped back to Myrtle, hesitated, and swiveled around to face Betty, "I'm undressing her. Give you fair warning to grab your broomstick and fly back inside to holler for the cops. Again." He took off his glasses, wiped the lenses with a shirttail and put them back on. Then he peered at her through the thin hair curtaining his eyes. "Thought it was time for her summer outfit. Whaddya' think?"

"Don't you dare!" She wagged a finger at him but the ladder shifted and she clasped the fence top.

"The judge said she had to be covered. He didn't say how or with what."

"It's public indecency!"

"It's a plastic chicken." He shook his head and walked back to Myrtle.

"They should've locked you up when they had you."

He spun toward her. "It's plastic! How offensive can a plastic chicken be?" He flung the suspenders on top of the rest of the winter gear on the nearby wicker chair, picked them up again, and made an impromptu slingshot and aimed at Betty's head. "Fine weather for target practice. Makes me feel like a kid again."

She ducked. "You glued breasts on it."

Harry patted Myrtle's beak. "Her name's Myrtle. She's got feelings, you know. I've always said if you're gonna do something, do it right." He reached down by the chicken's feet for a small brown bag.

"You used real implants!" Betty roared.

"Yep, sure did. Superglued them on. You jealous? Want a pair?"

"And you put those, those... thingies on them."

With a deep sigh, he walked back to the porch railing. In a voice exasperated teachers use on dim-bulbed students, he said, "Those 'thingies' have a name.

They're called pasties. They give Myrtle a certain jauntiness. Yep, jauntiness." He looked over at his big-breasted chicken. "Never did manage to get them pointing in the same direction. You didn't give me much time with your speed-dialing the cops." Harry pulled off Myrtle's XXL flannel underwear. "Cold as a witch's tits these last few months." He shot her a look. "You'd know all about that," and grinned when his neighbor gasped.

He stooped down for Myrtle's Wellingtons before looking up to see if Betty's face had gone red. Now where was that thong? He rummaged through to the bottom of the bag and found it under a child's umbrella and slicker that Myrtle wore on rainy days.

Betty hauled herself up another rung. Now she was a good head higher than both Harry and Myrtle. "The judge gave you a warning. He said next time, next time..." The threat hung between them. "Pervert!"

"I'm just trying to make my porch look nice for summer."

"I'm warning you, I'll call the cops if you drape anything indecent on that disgusting toy of yours."

"Myrtle is ART. You're the one with the potty-mind." He dropped the slicker over the back of the chair. "Didn't you notice all those people coming around at Christmas taking pictures of Myrtle and her rotating halos?" He pulled out the thong and swung high in the air.

"You're disgusting! What would your old students think?"

"If I choose to adorn my home with installation art, that's nobody's business but mine. I'm retired, I don't give a damn what anyone thinks. Next month, I just might get me a second one to keep Myrtle company. Should I get a large Rhode Island Red rooster next time?"

"You do, and I'll make sure you're back in court."

Harry turned back to Myrtle and reached for the fire poker lying on the ground by her webbed feet. Brandishing the poker, he turned back to Betty who glared down

from her ladder. "It's your fault." He grabbed an apple and speared it onto the poker. He had this image of Myrtle, the Stripper, a veil on her head and holding a magic wand of apples. Their sweet aroma percolating through the front rooms of the house would be an added bonus.

Betty wobbled before steadying herself. "The public humiliation you got from displaying that absurd chicken is yours alone. Weirdo." She caught her breath. "A tarted up sex toy is what you've got. Ruth would've tossed it out at first sight." Her face crimsoned and she sputtered to a stop.

"I lost the Best Rose in Class at the fair last August because of you."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Betty tilted sideways.

"You and your fence killed my rosebushes. It's your yard that's the neighborhood blight. Can hardly see the grass under that herd of leprechauns you've got out front. Them and their evil eyes hexing me and poor Myrtle here." Harry stroked the chicken's head. Her beak drooped.

"You have a nerve, you... ooophhff. Ohhhh!" Betty disappeared. The ladder clattered to the ground. "Argggghhhhh."

Harry rushed to the edge of his porch. "Betty?" No answer. He leaned as far as he dared over the railing. When he spoke again, his voice came out like a bark. "Don't go playing games with me, Betty Fowler. You've fooled me plenty in the past; you're not gonna fool me now."

The railing creaked and shifted. He waited, straining to hear. "BETTY?"

A faint groan came from behind the high fence. Harry dropped the thong and pasties and scuttled across the lawn, and around the fence. Betty lay with one leg protruding from the ladder. He slid through the mud where the ladder had been anchored and knelt next to her on the wet ground. "Ohmigod, ohmigod. Are you all right?" He took off his jacket and cushioned it under her head.

"I th-th-think so." She moved her fingers in slow jerky movements.

“You sure as hell are more trouble than you’re worth.” He lifted the ladder off her. “Try your legs now. Can you move them?”

“I think my leg’s broken.” Tears slid down her face. She gulped twice and dropped her chin.

“Hang on. I’ll be right back.” He didn’t wait for her reply. When he returned from calling 911, he sat next to her on the cold mud. “I only dressed Myrtle as a joke but I couldn’t get a word in edgewise once you called the cops. Everyone peed themselves laughing about Myrtle and her implants. Then up goes this abomination.” He elbowed the fence behind him.

Betty wiped her sleeve across her face. She shook her good leg and flexed her knee to make sure it functioned before continuing. “Where’d you get them?”

“Get what?”

“The implants? They weren’t real, were they?”

“Sure. A friend said they fell off the back of a truck.” He winked at her and deepened his voice. “They’re from a time when men were men.” He paused. “And chickens got nervous.”

She looked puzzled, her eyes widened, then hooted with laughter before wincing from the pain. “What were you thinking?”

Harry shook his boot and mud splattered to the ground. “Me? I was thinking summer and silly bikinis like the ones you and Ruth used to wear. And a bit of revenge for your herd of leprechauns making the neighborhood look like a damned carnival fairway.” He stole a glance at the woman beside him. “I figured I’d put Myrtle on the porch and you’d see how silly she looked and you’d chuck your circus freaks. But you didn’t. You put up this atrocious fence instead.” He brushed some twigs off his trousers. “When I tied the bikini top on Myrtle, it drooped like a dirty rag. So I thought, well damn, I’ll just fill them out a bit. Putting those implants on her was a stroke of genius.” He pulled off a clump of muddied dead leaves stuck to the ladder’s side and ran a groove through it with his fingernail.

“Funny how winter’s all barrenness and regrets. If only Ruth were still alive...” He flicked away the mud.

“You think you’re the only one missing Ruth? We were close long before you came on the scene.” Betty massaged her arm where a bruise was darkening.

“If she was still with us, your leprechauns would’ve been long gone.”

“Ruth would’ve chain-sawed the legs off that chicken while you were still dragging it out of the car.”

“I only got Myrtle to show you how ugly your malignant elves looked.” A distant siren wailed. “They’re not even well painted. Look at that one there, the one with the topsy hat. He’s got an ear the size of a dog’s bowl right where his nose should be. Call that attractive?”

She followed his gaze. “It’s interpretive.”

“Bet they scare the hell out of kids on Halloween.” Harry formed a ball with the soft mud and flattened it with his fist. “You wouldn’t listen to me when I complained about your leprechauns.” He leaned against the fence. “Maybe I wasn’t thinking straight.”

Betty tilted her head and gazed at the leprechaun he had just pointed out, “From this angle it does look a bit grotesque, doesn’t it?” Before he could comment she held up a finger to shush him. “I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll move mine behind the house if you get rid of your cross-dressing chicken. That’s my bargain. Take it or leave it.”

“No deal. Myrtle goes when yours go. Not a moment sooner.” The siren echoed off the buildings in a nearby street.

“I inherited them from a great aunt; they’ve got sentimental value. They can’t go.” She smoothed her shirt and sat straighter as the ambulance lurched to a stop. An EMT jumped out bearing a stretcher.

“I hear strange things happen to lawn gnomes when they’ve been deserted. Sometimes their luck plum runs out.” He snapped his fingers as two men lifted her onto the stretcher. “Quick like that.”

“Touch them and die, old man.” The small procession neared the ambulance when Harry called out to her, “Even swap. The leprechauns for the chicken?”

Betty waved the EMTs on and hollered over her shoulder, “We’ll talk when I get back. Not a moment sooner.” The doors closed behind her. After the ambulance drove off, Harry turned toward home. If he could find a new roost for Myrtle before Betty returned he might also wheedle her into removing her rose-crushing fence. He did a little dance step up the walk, patted Myrtle’s beak, and bounced into the house. Perhaps Chick Delight could use a new mascot.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Erica Satifka lives in Baltimore, MD. Her short fiction has been published in *Clarkesworld Magazine*, *Ideomancer*, and *Electric Spec*. When not writing fiction, she involves herself with bicycle advocacy, knitting, zines, and taking care of her three cats. You can find her online at her blogs <http://www.erikasatifka.com> and speedingpedalcycle.blogspot.com.

The Hand of God

by Erica Satifka

From the roof of his house, Andrew can see everything in the town of Pandora. Right below is his yard of wispy yellow grass that breaks at the touch. A little ways down is the dead creek, a stinking, mucky place. And above him, always, is the hand of God. Briefly, he trains his flashlight on the underside of the hand, studying the lined, grayish flesh. Then he stares back toward the outskirts of town, peering through his binoculars at the mushroom farmer's trailer.

The farmer makes a drug. Andrew's not supposed to know about the drug, and he certainly isn't supposed to take it. But the farmer's daughter goes to school with all the other kids, so word gets around. He must have mixed a new batch. The townspeople are lined up all the way back to the old Sunoco station, their headlamps making a broken ant trail in the ever-present dusk.

Stupid addicts, Andrew thinks. He's never going to wait in that line. As soon as he grows up, he's going to get out from under here. He reaches a hand under his tee shirt and feels at his ribs. Nice and scrawny. *That's the way you get out.*

"Andrew! Dinner!" He pockets his binoculars and climbs down the rope ladder to his bedroom window, and goes down to the dining room.

Andrew's father glowers at him over a seven-year-old newspaper borrowed from the town library. "You weren't up on that roof again, were you?"

"You know I was." He isn't scared of his father.

"Oh, leave him alone," his mom says, dishing out a bowl of stew. Potatoes and mushrooms again. The family doesn't make enough to afford hydroponics. "He's safe."

Nobody dies under the hand of God. Nobody's born, either.

He'll leave someday. He eats enough to make his mom happy, then goes off to his room to do his homework. By candlelight, he poses in front of his bedroom mirror, stretching out so thin and lithe. He imagines himself slipping through the finger cracks, or maybe under the hand itself. People like his parents say there aren't any cracks in the hand, that it's as solid and perfect as God himself, but Andrew knows the cracks are there. Maybe he'll send help, maybe he won't. He wonders what it's like out there. Do they eat nothing but roots and fungus, too?

*

During the day, enough sunlight gets through the minute spaces between God's fingers so you don't need your flashlight all the time. Andrew pedals his bike to school, dodging the cracks in the pavement. Even if the people of Pandora wanted to fix the roads, there isn't enough concrete for it. Oh well, Andrew doesn't mind.

At school, most of the girls and some of the boys are crowded around Delia, the mushroom farmer's daughter. Delia wears the best clothes of anyone in town, and always has enough to eat. She even eats meat that comes from a tin. Meat! Andrew doesn't know what that is, really, but it sounds fancy.

"My daddy let me stay up all last night," Delia says. "*I* had to take care of all *your* parents when they came to our house to get high. They might hurt themselves."

The kids don't say anything. They're all just waiting for an invitation to nibble on Delia's sandwich. Its tangy, unusual odor is unlike any food Andrew's ever eaten. He wonders if it's made out of meat.

Delia points to a tiny girl in the front row. "You may brush my hair, if you want to." Delia's hair is as red as a brick under a full flashlight beam. The kids don't really care about brushing it, but they do care about her lunch, and her house. The tiny girl takes Delia's comb and eagerly begins working.

Andrew turns and goes into the school. He doesn't care about Delia or her demands. *His* parents don't take the drug, never have. It's none of his business.

"Hey, you there!" It's her.

He turns. "What?"

"Do you want to come by my house later?"

Andrew freezes. Of course he does. Everyone wants to go to the mushroom farmer's house. When the hand of God first descended upon the village of Pandora, he'd leapt into action, hoarding the best supplies for himself. And the people of Pandora need the farmer's mushrooms to survive, so nobody dares cross him. But Andrew's parents wouldn't like it. He hopes Delia is confusing him with someone else. "Uh."

She laughs, a sharp ugly sound. "*Uh.*" She motions for the other kids to join in, and they do. "Tonight after school, we'll go together."

Andrew doesn't tell his head to nod, but it does anyway. "Okay. After school."

Delia stands up suddenly, causing the tiny girl who was brushing her hair to tumble backwards. The wave of resentment branching from the other kids is almost visible in the grayish daylight. "We should all get to class now."

The bell rings.

*

All through the school day, Andrew thinks about Delia's house. What did it look like? What would they eat? The few times he had walked or ridden his bike past the mushroom farmer's trailer, he had been overpowered by the stench of mushrooms. Nobody lived as close to the hand as the mushroom farmer's family.

Everyone else regarded it as dangerous, or at the very least, bad luck. But the mushroom farmer had openly flouted the superstition: painting a mural on God's hand, hanging up a sign advertising his wares on God's hand, even once donning a pair of spiked shoes—where he had scavenged *those*, Andrew had no clue—and climbing up, up, up, almost to the center.

In school, the kids learn practical things like hydroponic farming, weaving, sewing, and construction. Even though the adults expect the hand to lift sooner or later, they had to be prepared if it didn't. Andrew stares out the window. The school sits just under God's ring finger, near the edge of town, and in the dim daylight Andrew can see the curves and dips of the fingerprint.

Andrew was three when the hand descended. It is his sky.

*

After school, Andrew follows Delia to the mushroom farmer's house. The outside of the trailer is painted a glossy red, like Delia's hair. They lean their bikes against the porch and go inside. Delia leads him into the kitchen, dimly lit by a row of candles.

"Are we going to eat now?" Andrew asks.

But Delia isn't interested in food. She instead makes a beeline for a porcelain jar on the counter. It's in the shape of a cat holding a fish. "You want to see something neat?"

"I guess."

Delia reaches into the jar and withdraws a small plastic baggie. "My daddy makes this. You can have some, he'll never notice."

Andrew's never seen it in person, but he knows it's the drug. "Are you crazy? I don't want that junk. I'm not a loser."

Delia laughs. "Everyone in this town is a loser."

Andrew's flesh is burning. He doesn't want to be here anymore. "I want to go now."

"Nobody goes until I say they can go," Delia says. She puts the baggie back into the porcelain cat and re-screws the lid. "You can go."

"What does that stuff do, anyway? Besides make people sick." Andrew shakes his head. "I still don't want it."

Delia smiles slyly. "It takes you outside the hand. So you can see what it's like out there. Then you come back."

"I don't need that stuff to leave. I can leave anytime I want without it."

"Sure you can, skinny boy. That's why so many people have done it already." She walks him toward the back door.

"I can do it," he responds lamely. "It's a lot better than using drugs. It's healthier."

Delia sighs. "Why are you so dumb, Andrew?"

But he can't answer. Delia's already slammed the door in his face.

*

Over the next week, Andrew tries his best to avoid Delia. He doesn't want her father's stupid drug, or even any of her meat. He concentrates on his studies of first aid techniques and root biology, and comes straight home. He doesn't even go up on the roof anymore. Curiosity leads to trouble, that's what his parents say.

But still, he can't stop thinking. He read an old book once by someone named Bester, about teleportation: going from place to place in the blink of an eye. Is that what the drug does? And do you have to come back? Andrew won't come back when he goes out there, not if he can help it.

Delia's full of it. She doesn't know what it does. But he still can't get it out of his mind, and every day, he's getting bigger and bigger.

That Friday night, Andrew tosses and turns in his bed. He needs a drink of water. As he comes back from the bathroom, he catches his mother slinking into the master bedroom with a guilty frown on his face. She's shaking. All of a sudden, she catches Andrew's eye.

"Go to bed, son. Just... go away."

He's wearing his boots. "Were you outside? What's going on outside?"

"There's nothing outside. There's nothing anywhere. Go to bed."

Andrew usually listens to his parents. But he's going to break their rules. On Monday he's going to talk to Delia.

*

At recess, he pulls Delia aside and hunkers down with her under the jungle gym. "I need to go back to your house. I want to take that drug."

"I thought you were a good kid who didn't take drugs." She grins toothily, like she's enjoying dragging this out. "I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"Will you give it to me or not? I don't have any money."

"First one's free. After that, you have to pay."

"Oh, I won't need more than one. I'm not coming back."

Delia giggles. "One-way trip, coming up. Yeah, we'll go to my house. And you don't have to be so secretive. All of these kids have already tried it."

Andrew's eyes go wide. "What? All of them?"

"Well, some of them." She rolls out from under the jungle gym. "I'll meet you here after school."

In the kitchen, she goes straight for the porcelain cat, and takes out a fingertip-sized quantity of the drug, a small brown ball like a clod of dirt. "Hold on, I need to put it in water." The water that comes from Pandora's cisterns is almost as brown

as the dirt clod. She plops it in the glass, and hands the glass to Andrew. “Bottoms up!”

Andrew almost spills it in his haste. He pours the concoction down his throat before he can think too hard about it. He doesn’t want to wimp out. Then he falls into a plastic kitchen chair.

“It takes a minute,” Delia says, making as if to check an invisible watch.

It doesn’t take a minute. It only takes forty-three seconds.

*

Andrew clamps his hands over his eyes and screams. The light is so bright, as bright as a case of flashlights. Slowly, he opens his left eye a crack. *This is going to take some getting used to.*

He looks at the ground. The grass bends rather than breaks under the pressure of his soles, and he sits down, dazed. Never has he imagined that the world outside the hand of God was so beautiful.

The hand! He looks back, wondering what it looks like from the outside, but he must have teleported far away, because there’s no mighty wrist plunging from the skies, no cracked gray flesh cupping the valley. They’ll be just fine under there, until he can get some help.

Picking through the tall grass, Andrew searches for a road or a house. The buzz of insects—he’s never seen so many of them—drowns his thoughts until he can barely concentrate. Shielding his eyes with a hand, he looks up at what he now knows to be the sun.

Below his feet sounds a crack. He snaps his attention to the ground, to a white stick. Sharp where he’s broken it, the stick looks funny. It’s not plastic or wood. And then he knows.

Andrew drops the stick.

Suddenly, a scream echoes over the vast field of green grass. It's a woman's scream, followed closely by a man's. Andrew hunches down so that they can't find him. Over the tops of the grass, he can see their raw, bloody faces, their sharpened teeth, the smooth expanse of flesh where noses should be. They are not human, or at least not anymore.

I want to go back, he thinks, hands clasped in a prayer. And he does.

Delia sits in a kitchen chair, spooning strange-smelling food from a can marked "Spam." She puts the can down. "So, what did you think?"

Andrew feels his face contort. His breath goes rapid. "What is that? That's what outside looks like?!"

"Oh, the monsters? Yeah, that's what it looks like now. We lost a war, or maybe we won one, and I don't know if those things are human or not. I've never been there myself. I don't know why anyone would want to go there. It *sucks*."

Andrew cries. He can't help it. "You tricked me."

Delia just smiles and picks up the Spam can.

Andrew runs. He runs out of the mushroom farmer's house, climbs back on his bike, and pedals back to his home. When he gets there, he finds his parents crowded together on the sofa, sharing an old paperback. He tries to go upstairs without being seen, but when he gets to his door, a hand falls on his shoulder. He jumps, remembering the creatures, remembering the bone.

"Andrew?" It's his mother. He just looks back speechless, his mouth hanging open. "You were there." His mother heaves a loud sigh.

"How did you know?" He's started crying again, involuntarily.

"You'll have to keep going back, you know. I hoped it wouldn't come to this. You'll need a weapon." Andrew's mom slips him a long, flat metal tube. When he pushes a button, a thin blade slips out. "Don't tell your father."

"Can we beat them?"

She shakes her head. “No, I don’t think so. Unless there are other towns... but I don’t know if there are. But we can try. Every Friday night, we try. It was a *very bad idea* to go alone.” She shakes Andrew hard when she says this, to underline her point. “Now go to bed. You’ve had a long day.” She releases Andrew’s arm.

Friday night, Andrew thinks. *Then we’ll beat them*. He flicks his pocketknife in and out, and slips it in his pocket.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Michael McGovern lives in the wild Northwoods of Tomahawk, Wisconsin with his wife and two rambunctious children. He's on the air six days a week on WJJQ radio, where he plays requests and provides the occasionally accurate weather forecast. He is hard at work on a novel, and his flash fiction will be published in the upcoming issue of *Boston Literary Magazine*.

"Splinters" represents his first fiction sale.

Splinters

by Michael McGovern

After the house killed three tenants in less than a decade, its price plummeted low enough for the Widow Vandervoort to afford it. The home stood on the edge of the ancient forest from which it was hewn, and the previous owner—the gin-soaked, quick-tempered Mr. Grothman—had perished in a fall when the mahogany banister had inexplicably given way. At his funeral, his pale-haired twin boys wore ill-fitting wool suits, fading black eyes and smiles they made no attempt to hide.

On moving day, The Widow Vandervoort's great-niece Henrietta had been slow in hauling the Widow's collection of solid-lead door-stops, so to spur her on, the Widow seized her late husband's thick leather and brass belt (which always seemed nearby) and lashed out, swatting Henrietta's behind with a lion tamer's precision. The ingot fell, nails popped and the other end of the floorboard rocketed up into the Widow's nethers, her already-bulging eyes widening until you could almost see the optic nerve. The rest of the move proceeded uneventfully, but the Widow was put on her guard against her new house.

Little Henrietta, on the other hand, adored the place, especially the oval, stained-glass attic window. When the Widow wasn't hectoring her into performing her legion of chores, Henrietta stole quiet moments away, rising floor-by-floor like a lost and battered balloon, coming to rest in front of the dazzling, rainbow, surely magical stained glass. The girl was just old enough to comprehend the concept of sin, and when she ascended to the attic and the winter sun's light was transmuted into soothing hues, she felt it wash over and cleanse her tiny soul of all her young misdeeds (general tardiness, keeping that frog she found in a box and forgetting to feed it, for which she really was terribly sorry, and stomping feet—not her own).

In the following weeks, a pattern emerged. Henrietta accidentally chipped a tea saucer in the sink, the Widow cuffed her ear, and ten minutes later the old woman's closet shelf collapsed, burying the Widow in an avalanche of rags and mothballs. The girl shoveled, then began to dawdle and daydream—whispering to the enormous live-oak in the front yard as if it were her Prince-fiancée and hugging it with the love and abandon of an Arbor Day fetishist—so the Widow stormed out, spewing wild insults and horrid threats, and when she slapped the porch railing to illustrate her indignation she received no less than twenty-four deep splinters. Finally, during an unfortunate and humiliating bed-wetting incident, the just-awoken and incensed Widow Vandervoort hurled a cheap vase at the shivering girl, then went to flick on the light so as to improve her aim with the next shot and was flooded with one hundred-twenty, synapse-blasting, hair-singing volts.

Then came the reckoning.

The love of sparkling things was all the Widow had in common with her great-niece; the old woman's only pleasure was to run her withered hands over her splendid collection of ruby jewelry. She had secured her prized jewelry box under her sagging, fetid mattress, the hidden treasures withdrawn every evening to be examined and polished. She would not allow Henrietta entry to her room when the jewels were in view, but like most young girls (and all wives) she could sense by some feminine radar that there were glittering and valuable trinkets nearby. One windless February afternoon their allure grew too powerful for her to ignore.

Her great-aunt lapsed into a rare, jittery, snarling nap downstairs on the living room settee, and Henrietta—drawn inexorably like a cartoon pig by the aroma from a freshly-baked pie—floated into the bedroom and descended down to the floor next to the concealed case. She lay there, eyes wide, listening for many minutes, breathing in the house’s natural aromas of sandalwood and pine, her good sense in an epic battle with her primal little-girl need to touch sparkly things and giggle.

Then she was draped in rubies, with a tiara perched atop her curls. The heavy teardrop necklace inflicted a wonderful strain on her neck, and each finger on her quivering fists was adorned with clinking rings. She held the earrings up next to the lobes, prancing about on her tip-toes and grinning so hard her cheeks cramped. Through it all, she somehow resisted squealing with celebratory glee; Henrietta was happier than she had been in her whole life.

And then: the Widow. She stood in the doorway, fingernails digging into the wall to steady herself, her fulvous, wide eyes twitching in their sockets like long-dried hard-boiled eggs in cracked and crusted egg cups. Blood flooded her cheeks for the first time in a decade, and she hissed like a broken steam pipe, too overwhelmed by hate to speak. Henrietta had the presence of mind to murmur apologies, begin stripping off the jewelry and replace it in its red felt cradle, but her great-aunt fell upon her, ripping the tiara (along with an alarming amount of hair) from her head, pawing at the rings and swatting the earrings from her grasp. In moments the crone’s treasure was back inside the box, and she moved to secure it once more under the bed before realizing that she would never again feel it was safe there.

“You’ll never have it. Even after I’m gone, you’ll never wear them again!” The Widow Vandervoort sidled into the bathroom, reached up and perched the jewelry box at the top of the vanity next to the sink. Henrietta’s stomach fell as she realized that it would be years before she grew tall enough to consider reaching so high, and knew that her great-aunt was right. Her only wish then was that if she couldn’t possess them, neither would the Widow.

But it was not enough merely to deny the girl the pleasures of the jewels—the old woman picked up the belt.

Henrietta shrank back against the bed, cringing and covering her head. The Widow advanced upon her, smacking the thick, hard leather on her palm to test it, then pivoted around in an odd pirouette to be certain there was no wardrobe that could fall on her or light fixture that could disengage from its moorings and shatter her skull. Satisfied, she licked her pale, thin lips and reared back to strike at the whimpering girl when they heard a creaking sound from the bathroom.

The left side of the vanity had tilted almost imperceptibly downward, and as the Widow stood and pondered whether it had in fact moved at all, it lurched to the side, one of the screws popping loose from the tile wall. The jewelry box slid from the top of the vanity, banged off the side of the bathroom mirror and caromed off the edge of the sink, plopping its entire jangling contents into the toilet's opened maw. This alone—while it would have called for a disgusted and prolonged scrubbing and polishing session—would not have been overly alarming, had it not been for the heavy, ruby necklace, whose chain fell draped atop the chrome toilet lever, pulling it downward.

The Widow Vandervoort could only scream in impotent horror as the toilet's "fwoosh" sucked away the prized ornaments forever. Lastly, the grandest piece of them all, the ruby necklace, dropped off the lever and disappeared down the drain at the final instant.

Henrietta's preservation instinct kicked in, and she scrambled to her feet and sprinted for the door. Unfortunately, the Widow's predatory instincts were more powerful, and before the girl could maneuver around her, a bony hand shot out and snagged the meaty portion of her arm, latching on with shocking, savage vigor. The hag raised the belt, preparing to strike, then paused.

"No, no, my dear. Not here—not in the house. Come!" The Widow dragged the girl out of the bedroom, into the hallway and down the staircase, keeping well clear of the treacherous banister. On the final step, the wooden stair broke and gave way under the Widow's foot, but she was ready and sprang from the trap, her reptilian reflexes saving her from a broken ankle or worse. She flew through the front doorway just as the foyer's dusty crystal chandelier crashed down, the hinges on the heavy wooden door tore free and the nails on the porch juttied up, searching for a hem to snag and catch. The Widow navigated her way through, keeping low,

scurrying like an iguana—growling and cursing while never loosening her grip on the jostled, punch-drunk little girl.

Finally the two of them stood panting across the front yard, well away from the house that creaked and groaned behind them. While Henrietta shivered in the snow next to her, the old woman eyed the structure, appraising the situation, her perverted will bent only on revenge. She pondered, turning an idea around in her mind, then grinned, exposing yellow and brown teeth.

The Widow Vandervoort spoke, her voice a grating croak. “The chimney.”

Henrietta looked up at her great-aunt, perplexed.

This time she shouted, addressing the house. “The chimney! Bring it down!”

There was silence, and then the belt arced down, twice, drawing agonized yelps from the girl. Henrietta rubbed her rear-end with her free hand and tried not to cry.

“Do it! The chimney!” The Widow raised the belt once more, and then they heard a series of cracking noises and bricks tumbled down the shingled roof, bashing the lilac bushes below.

The Widow’s grin split her face, exposing molars that hadn’t seen daylight since they first sprouted from their gums. Henrietta stared on, mouth agape, too stunned to even consider escape.

“Now...” the Widow hissed, the single-syllable word containing universes of malevolent intent. “Now: the window.”

Henrietta’s eyes flew up to the stained-glass high atop the house and she cried out. “No! Please, not that! It’s—”

The belt lashed out, the girl bit her tongue and all was quiet once more, waiting.

No movement.

The Widow turned the belt around so that when she struck next, it would be the heavy brass buckle that impacted the young girl's tender flesh. Henrietta flinched, all pretense of resistance gone, and the Widow looked up at the house one last time before raising her hand high.

Like the eye of a weary traveler shutting a final time before laying down to die, the oval window frame began to close, the wood warping and shattering the glorious stained glass window into a thousand shards which tinkled across the front walk in a shower of rainbow tears.

Henrietta cried out and struggled to break free, but her great-aunt held fast, her bony knuckles white. Then the Widow looped the belt through the buckle, and with one deft move threw it over the girl's head and around her neck like a leash, yanking it taut.

"All of it. Bring it all down! Every beam and brick, all the windows and doors... until only a heap of rubble remains! Down to the ground!" The Widow hopped from one foot to another, too delighted to remain still, while she tugged on the belt, tightening the hard leather around the girl's throat.

While Henrietta sobbed, reached out and struggled to draw breath, they began to hear a rumble from deep underground. The house began to shake—soon the walls quivered and the roof trembled, and the side-windows by the dining room imploded with the sound of a thousand, tiny bells. The girl begged her aunt to relent, pleading as she never had before, but the old woman ignored her, reveling at the sight of the house tearing itself to pieces.

Then, somewhere on the edge of their perception, they began to hear whispering—not with their ears, exactly, but with some other long-dormant sense. The two of them strained, listening, forgetting all else for the moment, and heard: *please. Please, please, please hear me. Please, please, oh, please. Please. For her. Oh, please.*

The Widow Vandervoort, construing that the message was for her, cackled long and loud; She howled and guffawed and prepared a withering refusal, but then little Henrietta, seeing her great-aunt distracted, elected to indulge in one of her young, small sins: she stomped a foot—not her own.

The Widow howled and dropped the belt, holding her injured foot as she hopped through the snow. Henrietta dashed for the house, slipping and skidding across the icy walk, and upon seeing her hostage escaping, the Widow swore and reached out for her with a yellowed hand.

But from high above, there was a long, astonishingly loud and deep cracking sound, as though a mighty galleon long-imprisoned in pack ice broke free. The Widow Vandervoort raised her eyes to see an immense branch—a full-third of the live-oak she was standing under—split off and fall, and she didn't even have time to raise her arms or cry out before it crashed down, flattening her.

Henrietta tore the belt from her neck, fell to her knees on the porch and clung to the railing. From somewhere she heard that voice again, and knew that it was not addressing her: *thank you. Thank you. Thank you, thank you. Thank you for hearing. Thank you.*

In response, the uppermost branches of the live-oak, Henrietta's Prince-fiancée, swayed to the left, and then to the right, and then were still once more on the windless, February day.

The girl sat amid the resplendent aura of the shattered stained-glass all around her and hugged the porch railing with all her trembling might. There she rubbed her tender cheek against the grain of the ancient wood, and never received a single splinter.

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