

ROWENA'S WORLD
Poems and Stories
Second Edition

RUFEL F. RAMOS

Irving, Texas

Rowena's World: Poems and Stories, Second Edition

Written and published by Rufel F. Ramos

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Rowena's World

Irving, Texas

www.rowenasworld.org

For kith and kin everywhere.

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ALLERGIES

On Tuesday I had dinner with my spouse
Who sat across the table as I ate
And although it was nice to leave the house
I wonder now if it was chance or fate.
For shortly after dinner, when I left,
I felt a twinge of itch upon my arm,
Yet I ignored it, like a lip once cleft,
Since at the time I figured, "What's the harm?"
But soon it becomes clear how wrong my skin
Has acted upon facing IT again,
And although I can fake it with a grin,
I'm really sick of it, my allergen.
And so I grab my meds, my Bendadryl
And slather anti-itch cream to my fill.

ARMISTICE DAY

Blood once flowed with tears
On this hard, green ground
I now walk with my son.
Past cries ring and touch me;
Wonder if my son can hear it
Too as he runs ahead of me?
But – no.

I don't know why I came back
Here, this deserted place.
I hated this site, this
Desolate hole, this hellish
Land, where blood and mud
Mingled, and I couldn't tell the
Difference.

Too far from home, across the Great Sea
Too far from Mother and Father and
My wife, heavy with child

My son explores the land with
Excitement. He is still only a
Boy, like I was when I came
Here, among boys who were
Supposed to be men, doing their
Duty.

Duty is such an abstract thing
Until you come here,
Until you see the anxious

Faces mirror yours, until you
See their eyes close like children
In that eternal sleep.

Dear God, I miss them,
Those boys – my friends.
Their cries ring through me in
Waves that ache.

“Father!” my son calls out.
I look up. He stands like a boy-god
On top of a grey mountain.
“Father, is there where Troy
Once stood?”

AURORA BEFORE LUCY

Lucy means Light, but there is a Light that is a
Blindness and a Dark that is Sight.

Aurora means Dawn, but dawn must come from the
Dark in order to be dawn, light from darkness
Fiat lux.

In the order of creation, there must be
Dark in order there to be Light.

Dawn before Light
Aurora before Lucy.

BEACHSIDE

Furrows wear the grainy skin
Salt-spray is the air
Foamers float beside their kin
Golden fingers fare
Diamonds dance along their sides
Red sea strew the sand
Airy children play and hide
Bound the foot and hand
Fast they whistle with a call
Soothing silently
Bid the summer, come the fall
And return to sea.

BLUEBONNETS

Surrounded by neon tubing with the
Movement of disciplined electrons
Through lengths of gaseous elements,

Torn by hot, mechanical concrete super
Highways cracked with eighteen-
Wheelers, half-ton pickups, suburbanite

Poison by desiccating ozone heat
Smog – I can't breathe asthma, tailpipe
Exhaust, tired with overmedication --

Soon to die because too hot, Texas
Sun, wilting in temperature humidity
Index 110 degrees on the good Easter

Day, still the bluebonnets bloomed
They bloomed
They remained.

BRIGHT STAR, SIREN

Author's Note: John Keats was born October 31, 1795, in London, England, and died at age 25 of tuberculosis on February 23, 1821, in Rome, Italy, where he is buried. In a letter dated November 1, 1820, while still on ship at the port of Naples, Keats writes of being let out of quarantine for the first time on his birthday, October 31. But what is noteworthy in this letter is his declaration that his imagination of his fiancée, Fanny Brawne, torments him. "My imagination is horribly vivid about her – I see her – I hear her." There is no record of what Keats' last birthday, ill and isolated (except for his friend, James Severn) on a strange ship on a strange sea, was like.

Bright star, siren of my mind, no less my
Body, I see you shining through the veil,
This waking life, this death of earth and sky.
I call life death, for alive, death I hail,
Before he steals upon me in surprise.

Yet, steeled as I am, my thoughts still surmise,
While huddled in dark blankets, sweating heat,
And sought within the wine-dark seas demise
Of all my sins, this sweat and blood, this seat
Diseased and broken, harvested too soon,

I swear I must be mad, but not in swoon.
To glance upon the waters' swollen wave,
And see your image walk, a lifelong boon,
In radiance, all fair and cruelly grave,
I tear my hair out, strand by strand, and cry,

“This is too much, this is too much!” My cries
Are rattles, specked with blood, a fine mist spray,
Imagination made incarnadine.
You speak, with naked arms stretched towards my face,
“My dear, the marriage date is set, my gown –

I know it breaks tradition – bought in town
In nearby Rome. See, I await you there.
My voice will be my song for you, sweet sound
Echoed before the Spanish Steps. Beware
Of other-worldly hopes, for there is no

One but you and I.” But, sweet siren, O!
Bright star of my body, no less my mind,
Feverish dreams are only sighs. I know
My dearest girl remains in England, kind
And fair and young, my true star incarnate.

She'll wear a dress of blue. Smiling, she'll sit
Before yon desk and wrest the rough embrace
Into a winging word, released. Here, lamp lit
Reverses dark sunset on a birthday
Ill-conceived. Dear Severn hands me letters

One of which is hers. Ah, perhaps better –
I look upon the seas, and you are gone.
Happy, shining gift! I look upon her
Word, and you are there. Passion, soul, all run,
Bright star! But body only stands and waits.

CALIBAN'S LAMENT

Heavy so heavy
With fur hair great gnashing teeth
Caliban am I, am I?
I am Caliban

Purple waters hate me shun me into the sun
Makes me sweat makes me death
Chokes my breath

Precious He, will you love me?
Love me, stones! Stones don't answer me
Me I Caliban

Lady do not pity me
I will hide before you pity me
I will kill before you do

Green touches sun away from
Fur hair great gnashing teeth
In speckled dark I see my
Image in the stones.

CANDLE

Shadows flicker across the ceiling
As a tiny flame, no bigger than a thumbnail,
Licks the air like a snake checking for scent
Of food or perhaps another cold body like itself,
Grown warm with the heat of the sun.

But there is no sun in this room,
Dark except for a small candle,
Lit with a sulphurous match by a perfumed hand,
Which pushes a strand of hair so as
Not to burn.

Spent match set aside, the hand smooths
The blanket on the bed, warm and tousled,
Perhaps to remove signs of the past, of action –
Or perhaps to set the scene for another?
The candle is the only witness.

This flame throws shadows onto
This arena of death and birth
(Oh, to have another death)
This shadow-filled room
This waiting bed.

Long-tipped fingers play shadows on the walls
But even Troy – even Paradise – had to fall
So a new kind of lover can come
Seen by the flame if not the sun.

The fingers fall with soft, sweet sleep
But stir with sensations of weight and breath.

Shadows flicker across the face
Which come closer, warmer, with shining eyes,
Which lick the air like a cat checking for breath
Of a perfumed face rising above the blanket,
And kisses the candle to sleep.

COCKTAIL DRESS

“What do you do?”

“I’m a poet.”

Polite pause. There always is one, then

“I mean, what do you do for a living?”

I smile and I answer, whatever

Appeases, a waiter, a clerk, a

Teacher of English. Tangible roles

You can hold under the bright light of

Microscope folk, looking at pinned bugs.

Plato – was it Plato? The power of

Poets to shape souls, yeah that’s how it

Went, to shape people, lead ’em outta da

Cave. And guys like Wordsworth, sayin’

“Follow me, I know the way!” Romantic

Prophets, guiding the folks to the Really

Real. The Truth.

Click. “War, famine, death, disease, and the

Weather will be, famine, disease, war, death,

Now for a word from our sponsor—”

Click.

If I really shape souls, I don’t know about

It. If I guide folks to the Really Real,

They’d have to tell me, ’cause I don’t know,

As I sit back on my metaphysical bar stool and

Be the Fool.

CARRION CROW

Was there when Troy fell, the spears
Tearing through young flesh as their
Brains exploded in their helmets and
Darkness covered their eyes before
Saying to their fathers, "You lied."

Was there when the darkness crept
From the sky, into the bodies of
Sleeping first-borns and riddled their
Bones with blood and holes as they
Gasped for air, crying, "Mama!"

Was there when the thieves died,
Hung upon high platforms
Spread upon the skewers to dry.
Watched the lifeflow drain down
The upright pike as their wind-scratched

Bodies sagged under an invisible
Weight. What fun!

Was there when the betrayer led the
Gold red eaglemen to the quiet one,
Condemned with thieves onto rough
Hewn trees as the spit, blood, sweat,
Urine, shit trickled down the poles and

Anointed me.

DODGING SQUIRRELS

There must have been much squirrel-death
That day, for the carrion crows were out.

Intellectually speaking, it was amazing to see
Those little twelve ounce bodies having met
Two thousand pounds of steel, aluminum,
Rubber, and fluids in the middle of the asphalt,
Still intact, unexploded, flung aside

On the worn, blackened abyss of the angry
Road. Criss-crossing the angry road, the squirrels
Dodge me, I dodge them, in honor of their
Mysterious presence. "Mysterious?" you say,
But one cool Halloween, wandering in the

X-Files woods of my childhood, I heard the
Click-clack-cloock-cloock-cloock of invisible
Squirrels as I trod on half-eaten oak eggs,
Descending from the canopy like so many carrion
Crows on the way to dinner.

DOG

The dogs would wander in from the street –
Tired they were but happy, tongue lolling out
Like a wet, rough rag, as they would trot to the
Music that nobody else but they could hear.

Lean, bristly hair, some ears notched, paws
Roughened by concrete, these were city dogs
Urban dogs, sometimes converged in packs,
Often in ones or twos. Occasionally, a lone

Scout would spring ahead, crossing the traffic,
Avoiding that car, that truck, in the narrowest
Of margins, fazed by the carhorn honk, the human
Shout of “Fucking dog! Get outta there! Scram!”

This time the scout is female, unusual really,
Teats still enlarged by her litter, recently gone
With the pack, nowhere to be seen. She wanders
Across the highway, to the campus, the sun glinting

Off her eyes and playing like butterflies among
Flowers on the lean curve of her back. She regards
The close-cropped grass with tentative flicks of her
Tongue, rubs her side against one prodigious tree.

Life is good, the music in her head says, life is good.
She slips past the thin morning traffic of cars arriving
To work – not many this fine day, not many this early
Time on this fine day. The air is crisp, cool; winter’s

Coming. She can smell it, and if she is afraid of those
Cold nights, those lean nights of little food as the world
Goes to sleep a bit, she does not say. But, yes, she
Is an urban dog, a city dog, and trash, many mountains

Of trash, will always ensure that her belly never feels the
Pangs of hunger that much, will ensure that she never
Worries about the pangs of hunger in her litter's bellies
That much. She makes her way through the maze of

Parking lots, potholed, leaf-strewn, sits in the middle
Of one of them. She sits there as a car pulls up, a little
Late for work, and moves only a bit as it arches away
From her, like a bird avoiding a fence, a wall. It parks

Aways down from her, and the driver, harried, yet takes
Time to regard this dog in the middle of the parking lot.
Human eyes regard dog eyes,
Dog eyes regard human eyes.

She leans up and trots to a nearby tree and reclines.
The human makes a little wish, turns away from the
Dog, and marching to another tune, a human tune,
Makes the way into the building, far away from urban

Dogs, prodigious trees, and the sun glinting off of lean
Backs like butterflies in the field.

ELEMENTS: A SECOND PERSON ADVENTURE

I. Ice Earth

Underneath all this is the breaking.

Explosive pops, the ice floes shoot out shards of crystalline bullets, and tectonic movements slip and grind underneath all this.

Underneath all this is the sinking.

Airy castles buoyed by wind, lifted onto clouds, slip through the Jetstream and, without a parachute, feather-fall down.

Underneath all this is the burning.

Magnetic core churns, gravitational forces pull deeper and tighter until the cooler crust above buckles and explodes.

Underneath all this

Underneath all this

Things fall apart

Underneath all this.

II. Ice People

Ice people walk in the darkness.

They walk as the ice shifts like smoke or oil, thin then thick, as the earth's muscles move underneath the ice.

They are like half-frozen lakes walking, the top layer transparent to show the slow dark water churning below the surface.

They sob like statues.

A few freeze through and through, their movements convulse then seize. Some struggle to free themselves. Most remain immobile, resigned to their condition.

A maze of frozen people, peace at last.

Peace peace peace... "No. MOVE."

Your frozen lips part.

You reach out, your hand touches ice, and though it burns fire-like, the ice is not fire.

It is not fire.

But you are.

And the icy plain explodes in heat and light.

III. Ashflakes

Ashflakes fell from the sky.

Ashflakes fell like feathers back and forth, like baby pendulums made of nothing, taking their time.

Ashflakes fell after a nuclear explosion of heat and light that burned away the top layers, leaving flesh raw and stinging.

Ashflakes fell to make new skin bit by bit, layer by layer.

Someday they will build thick layers, sedimentary rock, hiding a raw fire, a fiery coal, underneath.

Will it be like the earth's core, hot but hidden, burning with energy, only to erupt again? Or will the layers squeeze out the fire, compress to a painful density until numbed, the soft coal dead but forging an impenetrable diamond that shines?

IV. Shook Fire

Like shook fire, shivers uncontrollable make the skin ash dance.

In seismic eruptions, shivers uncontrollable rise deep from within the pressed coal and in transverse waves surge out and slam against the retaining wall of ash.

Ashflakes fall mute and dumb, as fire flickers in a far distance.
In the dry grey of the land, you leave small footprints that the
ashflakes obliterate.

You must leave no trace.
Shivers uncontrollable.
No trace.

V. Dream of Water

“Darlin’, stretch out your hand.
Darlin’, stretch out your hand. Do you feel that?
That’s water. Cool water. No – keep it there. It won’t go away.
You’re all dried out, a hay-straw doll. A lick of fire gonna burn
you up to nothin’ but ash.
No need to stand – sit here awhile. You’ve been walkin’ a long
time. What you runnin’ from
Or were you lookin’ for
Or none of these things. Aw, it don’t matter. Just sit and feel
the water. Stretch out your hand, darlin’ – it ain’t goin’ away.”

Then the mistake. Eyes opened, the oasis was gone. A fool’s
mirage. But it was good while it lasted.

You walk through the grey land.

While it lasted, it was good.

VI. Wind

The wind whines through the hollow of your bones.
The wind whines through the hollow of your bones.
It carves elliptical craters of ashy dust that cascade, like fine
snow on a cold, dry day.

Sparkling like a spray of small stars.

Bones become translucent spars that still keep body and soul

together as the wind lifts you from the sunken, dusty earth.

Bones become glittering mirrors that reflect a heartbeat broken in a cacophony of blood and electrical charge. Tiny mirrors stripped by the wind like children's sparkles, shaken by a callous hand –

They came from you
From the hollow of your bones.
Then the wind drops sheer
And you shatter.

VII. Rain

Gobbets of rain shoot from the sky, a celestial ordinance from atmospheric artillery fire.

They land -- explosive forces carve sloppy craters into the ashen earth. They land -- sky scrubbers blast the air, dirty bombs make muddy holes.

A new Lear come to life, you scream and dance before the artillery fire.

BOOM BOOM BOOM

Martial music the rain makes. The rain the battlefield drummer, you the drum.

BOOM BOOM BOOM

“I am Shiva, destroyer of worlds.
The sky is falling, the sky is falling.”

Ash mud rivers thicken, rise, thin, and swirl around you. Will this current carry you away? Where will it take you? Are you ready?

BOOM BOOM BOOM

Are you?

FOR LANCELOT

I keep a promise
Not worth much
These dry days. But
I keep this one. That is what matters.

I kneel, for a
King arrives, crown
Glistening with light-shine
Through fiery jeweled glass.

Allegiance lies
As I rise with the court,
Lords with drawn swords,
Columns of peace
Machines of war.

Strict body stands aligned with
A path before the fountain,
Mind drifts on wisps of folly and
Weakness.

No. It is not weakness.
I am strong, savior of others,
Only of others
She cried without a sound
I heard
She turned to me for solace
I gave.

Hand, once smoothing
Tousled locks, raises clenched
Fist around a loyal sword in
Silent salute to a king.

Lowered swords slash the silence as
Music surges. But my eyes remain
Raised and meet dutiful eyes of a
Queen cradling the newborn boy in
Christening clothes.

GARBAGEMEN

Awakened by the racket of trash cans of the neighbors-two-houses-down – who uses metal trash cans, by the way? Haven't they heard of plastic? Haven't they heard of Rubbermaid? -- I felt that momentary suburban panic, "Did I or didn't I take out the trash last night?" Quick check of last night's

Duties gave confirmation, and I was content with my existence for that day. Rising towards my morning toilette, I could see, through my bedroom window facing the street, an armored behemoth lurking before my curb. A garbageman hung behind the leviathan, facing backwards, a Janian remora

To the shark of civil sanitation. Attached to the body with a lone hand, he plucked last night's chore like that Horatian ode, *Carpe purgamentum*, as I tried to seize my twin-horned day – one of ivory, the other of horn – with one toilet-papered, shampooed, soft-soaped, toweled, tooth-brushed, razor-bladed, lotioned,

Deodorized, hair-brushed, office-clothed, breakfasted, briefcase-laden, car keys holding, front door closing, newspaper-picking body. I stood erect and beheld the continuing sign of the garbagemen. The shark of civil sanitation and the remoras tending to its rumbling will were already gone, leaving behind nothing.

The two burgeoning bags, twist-tied and leaking, graced not my

curb, not even leaving a stain of last week's tuna casserole, which threatened (this I am certain) the structural integrity of the trash bags. A glance up and down my street gave testimony to the ravenous beast of the landfill and the efficient pluck of the man behind the beast. The neighbor next door – I don't know his name –

No longer had the heaving pile of God only knows. I am convinced he must save his or his pet's urine and feces; his trash always smells so. The metal trash cans of the neighbor-two-houses-down lay on their sides, as if a giant opened two cans of Vienna sausages, wolfed them down, and tossed the tins aside.

The garbagemen probably saw the cans and thought, "What era is this guy living in? Hasn't he heard of plastic or Rubbermaid?" For the lids were two houses away, on my front yard. The sad entertainment center, an adventure in just how far pressed sawdust could go and a remnant of someone's college apartment years,

Was also gone from the curb four doors down, along with the broken turtle sandbox and a child's burnt doll, an accident, perhaps with a stove range or an ironing board – I have no experience in these things. *Tabula rasa*. That is the sign that the garbagemen came. I wonder – do they feel like Sisyphus,

Trawling the streets, leaving them untouchable, knowing that seven days later, they will have to do it all over again? Or do they feel like the wind and rain that sweep the battlefield clean of blood? For machine and man swept the curbs clean of the broken bodies of suburban consumption. The only

sign of their presence was a paradoxical absence. While I used in order to rip things from the cycle of utility, and,

of course, I expected never to see the exhausted refuse left on
the curb, I suddenly felt that

Odd, regained sensation of forgetting something, as I beheld
the sign that the garbagemen came, an empty street pretty in a

Cold and calculating sort of way.

HERMIT CRAB

Curled up little man
With rough, many claws

You scuttle across the sand.
Watch out for those thunderous
Feet! (Damn, I just
Dug this nice little burrow, too!)

Claw, scritch, scratch
Up for air (Dive! Dive!
Feet! Feet!)

Perhaps you'll take a walk
Another day.

INSOMNIA

When I consider how the night draws dark
Which slinks upon my ribcage towards my breath
And burrows past the sternum where its death
Cavort like steel-toothed fish, a grinning shark,
That circles 'round my eyelids, stamped and stark,
And feels as if I'm high on crystal meth,
While gasping in a silent stream of stress,
Though waiting for the sleep to find its mark,
I follow where my thoughts arrive and go,
Resigned to quiet meditative states,
Aborted dreams re-sink as heartbeats sow,
Among the fetid morning's early grates,
And yet I cannot tell you what I know,
Dumbstruck by family, childhood friends, and mates.

KENOSIS

Birdcry is the only testament of the crime of the dark,
When a child of the air plunges from the star-top
Into the scummy clay below.

Fire feathers snuffed by mud,
Smeared body stirs slowly
Stunned by the breathless fall
And the painful impact.

The powerful wings
Drained into the mud
The shattering birdsong
Drained into the mud
The brilliant feathers
Drained into the mud

Yet the smeared body stirs,
Heavy with dark dirt
And opens its eyes of
Fire.

MEDITATION EXERCISE

Sometimes I wish I were a hermit
A hermit living in Alaska
Perhaps a contemplative monk
Sits on a rock, contemplates the
Rock upon which I,
A contemplative hermit monk
Am sitting.

“What shall I think of today, God?” I ask.
“How ’bout that rock?” He answers.
“Okay,” I say.

So here I am sitting on a rock.
It’s big smooth greywhite –
Granite? Nahh, sandstone –
On some rocky grassy soil
On a hill since Alaska is hilly.

I sit Indian-style (my legs have
Gone numb a long time ago)
Monk robes tucked neatly around
Me – what color are my robes?
Brown – Franciscan? Dominican?

No, Franciscan. I’m a contemplative
Franciscan hermit monk in Brown
Robes on a big smooth greywhite
Sandstone on sturdy rocky grassy
Soil on a hill in Alaska.

Thinking of this rock – hard cold
Insensitive to erosion – I am
Reminded of the folly of man. He is
So maddeningly changeable, it's no
Wonder I am a hermit, talking with God
About stuff like this rock upon which I
Sit Indian-style on a big smooth greywhite
Sandstone on sturdy rocky grassy
Soil on a hill in Alaska.

I am never alone –
God Bugs Moose Bear Rabbit
Other mammals
Trees around me --
I am never alone.

Contemplate upon the rock, moved
Immoveable, hard soft with familiarity,
Cold warm with human touch, insensitive
Affected by erosion – is not man like this
Rock? I would sit upon groups of people
Than this rock, but that would be lumpy.

MORNING

I see him there, like a dragon bearing roses,
Thorns and all which hurt him not
But scratch me terribly till I bleed.
What are roses to a dragon anyhow?
Whiling away his life in a darkling cavern
Shot with gold and swords decrepit,
Old bones strewn here and there –
What a mess! This place needs a
Woman's touch.

So he lured me here with roses and promises
Of gold – or was it I who lured him?
Whose eyes, grown bitter and soul-old,
Revealed a touch of the sweet hatchling
When I agreed to his silent, thick pleas,
Hidden with roses and promises of gold.

Sweep, sweep! 'Weep, 'weep!
I clean and air out his darkling cave
Like a charwoman clad in weedy
Peasant's dress. Why do I stay?
Am I not only a dragon's maid?
And yet he trusts me as he reclines
On his mount of gold, curled into a
Baby's ball; pale underbelly shows just so,

The only place where he is like me,
Whom the rose thorns scratch terribly and
The rust flakes of a sword cut into my hand

As I creep, creep towards the mount of gold
Like some crazed thing. Like a crazed thing
I stumble, and a hand shoots out to catch
My fall, falling upon the pale underbelly of a
Dragon in slumber.

Soft. How can it be? Why create a dragon
With so obvious a weakness, a pale chest
Soft like a baby's touch, easily scratched with
Thorns terrible, like me? And – Lo! The
Dragon awakes and looks at me with non-
Dragonish eyes.

“Good morning, love. Did you sleep well?”

ODE TO STEPHEN HERO

B is the Bed I bought after your release, very expensive with extra-padded mattress for your tired bones and a hand-controlled motor so that you can view TV sitting up.

E are the Eggs I made for you three times a week, poached then scrambled then soft-boiled just like you wanted them, always with a pinch of salt and a touch of paprika (real Hungarian, not the mild stuff sold in glaring supermarkets), but not too spicy because of your delicate constitution.

T is the chamomile Tea I served exactly at four o'clock because as a child you were in England with your mummy and daddy and all you remembered was that they served tea at four o'clock and that you liked it so and made you feel so grown-up and civilized even though chamomile isn't even tea and that's not what they drink at tea-time in England.

R are the Rugs you made me throw out of the house because you slipped on them on the hardwood floors, real Navajo throw rugs which probably weren't really real but looked pretty anyway, coordinating well with the Santa Fe-Southwest look I have always liked but you called raggedy and unkempt.

A is the Anti-inflammatory medication you always took and made me refill over and over again such that the pharmacist thought that I took them and that I was an addict even though I am hardly an addict, I just drink every once in a while to calm my nerves and keep my resolve.

Y are the Yes-Men you surrounded yourself, myself included, who fulfilled your wishes and fluffed your bed, cooked your eggs, poured your tea, tossed my rugs, brought your drugs, and smiled always because we are Such Good People.

A is the Attorney of which I had gained the Power of because you could no longer handle your bills and investments, which are many and variegated, no-load bonds, multi-stock portfolio in blue-chip tech corporations, trustworthy Magellan funds, nine-month/two-year short-term/long-term CDs and IRAs, even old-fashioned T-bills.

L are the Lies I said as I saw you die, Mother, and smiled.

ODE TO THE NEPHILIM

I. An Incantation

Let there be darkness upon the sands
As angels of old fall for daughters of man
While shining through the darkness
Fiat noctem
Fiat noctem
Let there be darkness upon the sands

II. A Remembrance

“Fiat lux.”
The creation was too bright, too bare,
No place for private thoughts,
For private loves and desires.
They were part of the bright ones, once,
Large and beautiful, they saw with god-like eyes
Across the universe, and seeing man and
Learning of their diminished status –
They believed it to be diminished –
A third of the bright ones fell and came to earth.

O mortal grossness! At first they desired nothing
Of Man except as a tool for revenge. What was
Eve to Lucifer? A young puppy to frighten, to damage.
But by Noah’s time, they became accustomed to
Corporeal things. They realized – too late – the
Beauty of man and his earth, the sun on the skin,
The explosive sweetness of a peach, the wind through
Their hair. They took on mortal bodies like an actor
Puts on costumes – all the world’s a stage, and they

Played like gods.

Divine, stately, sublime, the echo of heaven
Followed them like a sonic boom, the scent of
Heaven clung to them like dew.

Nobility – they had this still, and daughters of men,
The fallen children of Adam and Eve, saw their
Counterparts in these fallen sons of God.

III. A Prayer

A woman walks to the oasis with her water jug,
Fills her jug and, heavy, she makes her way home.
Slowly, unsteadily, until she feels the flow of wind,
The expansion of multi-colored wings. He –
For it is a he, the body is a he – gently sets the jug upon
The sand, gently lifts the woman up, and with eyes
Shining, folds his wings upon both of them and they are
One, and they believe that they have found joy.

Ah, temporary joy. Fertile womb, fertile seed, their
Children become that proud race, the giant warriors of
Old – demigods, heroes. Strong, arrogant, war-like –
What do they know of humility? What do they know of
Submission?

And so the justice falls in rain, in purgatorial rain
Cleansing the world of such terrible heroes and
Their proud parents. Just and right it is –
Yet, on a lonely night, with the heavens heavy
With stars, perhaps it is permitted, perhaps it is
Allowed, to mourn of their passing,
To mourn of the passing of the nephilim.

OLD FRIENDS

Soft mouse
Soft mouse
Crying in your little den
Come out and play
Come out and play
Says the loving voice
The promising voice
The cat.

PATCHWORK

Once upon a full-moon night,
A patchwork man came by to sing
Of rags and buttons, silver bright,
Of lace and ribbons made of string.

He broke her wooden gate's stone latch,
He trampled pansies to the root,
He trod upon her daisy patch,
And sung off-key with leaky lute.

“Away! Begone!” she yelled above,
Upon her gilded balcony.
She trusted not a patchwork love
Which came at night and came for free.

“I gave you silken scarves in parts,
My handkerchiefs, my bits of quilt.
That is no claim upon my heart,
And so – Begone! I feel no guilt.”

She saw the patchwork man below,
His hat slung back, his coat too thin,
With mismatched buttons in a row,
His trousers held with safety pins.

He gently set the lute aside
And gently start his search and sift.
He pulled – what is it? – from his side
And threw the object as a gift.

It fell before her small, bare feet,
A package wrapped with cloth and tape.
She picked it up, unwrapped the sheet,
While sensing tingles in her nape.

A patchwork heart sewn timid tight
With silken scarves and quilted strings,
With cotton kerchiefs, buttons bright,
Embroidered lace and ribbon rings.

“You gave me silken scarves in parts,
Your handkerchiefs, your quilt. ’Tis true
I have no claim upon your heart,
But mine I offer you to choose.”

A patchwork love thrown in the dark –
Oh, what a crazy, silly match –
She felt the patchwork make its mark,
But first, “Get off my flower patch!”

RAPTORES ORBIS, CALGACUS' SPEECH

*Raptores orbis, postquam
Cuncta vastantibus defuere
Terrae, mare scrutantur:*

*Si locuples hostis est, avari,
Si pauper, ambitiosi, quos non
Oriens, non Occidens satiaverit:*

*Soli omnium opes atque
Inopiam pari adfectu concupiscunt,
Aufferre trucidare rapere falsis*

*Nominibus imperium atque ubi
Solitudinem faciunt pacem
Appellant.*

Ravagers of the world, after the
Rest of lands fell short for the
Devastators, they scrutinized the sea;

If rich be the enemy, they are greedy,
If poor, ambitious – for whom not the
East nor the West has satisfied: they

Alone of all men desire wealth and
Want with equal feeling ---
Plunder murder consume with false

Names of empire -- and where they
Make a loneliness they name it
Peace.

SEASIDE

Tanwhite sands close around feet
Give no resistance and
Waves at first push back
Pull closer, away from the beach
Filled with sand castles.

Water suspends as the tide pulls from
Shallows, where children wade and
Discover little claws and slippery
Sea cucumbers writhe and wish
Not to be touched. Insistent tide reaches
The sea floor like a clumsy dancer afraid
To be a dolphin.

Undertow tears the sea floor
Away from reaching toes, floating in a
Slow softness, sun-warmed and salty sea,
Blood of the earth.

Fish see a strange creature, an
Emaciated, epileptic sea cow but
Hairy and gangly with unsleek limbs,
Predator or prey cuts around in
Confused circles, as it swims to match
Their movements, breaks circles and
Darts as it thrashes in the water.

But the sea recognizes it as close kin,
For its blood, a strong heart beats

Through a needful body, once mingled
With this blood-warm sea, its birthplace.

Float swim fly!
For one day we must die.
But we have many dreams not lost
Before to fly in holocausts.

Return to land till then, when the
Jellyfish come out and play,
Sunset tide rushes forward to shore,
Where high tide has swept down
Sand castles, death by water.

Crawl with wrinkled wet newborn skin,
Gravity heavy on darkened sand, and
Watch rolling waves arrive and slip away
Around feet in tanwhite sands.

SIGN

“Keep out!” the sign said on her fragile heart
“Solicitors and trespassers on sight
Will be shot! No questions asked!” Well, a part
Of him stood back and thought, “Okay, this might
Not be the brightest thing I’ve done before
In this lifetime of mine. But, hell, what is
A person s’posed to do? Avoid the door
That stands between myself and her? Go miss
A chance because a warning’s posted here?
Pretend I never saw her in the day?
Succumb to her own wishes based on fear?
Should I turn back and simply walk away?”
A part of him said that. The better side,
However, smiled and, whistling, stepped inside.

SKY END

The setting sun, a bright explosion,
Of felt-like tips of scarlet and gold.
The winds that sweep the clouds a-flurry,
Brushing the melting sky.

The liquid amber, a prism of color,
A-melding with blue, scattering of thought
Seen from the eyes of a gold-haired child
With eyes of blue like the summer noon.

Staring with awe at the crystal gleamings,
First star light that answers his eyes
A question was born amidst the flurry
Queried as a child was ought.

“Why is the sky blue?” he did not ask,
For that he knew about.
“What makes the clouds?” he did not ask,
For that he knew about.

But another query he did inquire,
A question of faith within his soul
A feeling of stirring like His creation,
Without which man was naught.

“Where does the sky end?” was heard beside him,
A man of years stood tall and watching,
With hair as fair as the child beside him
But darker with his age.

The questions asked stirred still emotions,
Memories of past grew warm and true
In the man who as a child
Asked the same of another man.

Of limitations and of human borders
If the human spirit was tethered and leashed
If the sky, if humanity, had an ending
If the soul had a wasting and death.

So the man lifted the child beside him
As his father before him had done the same,
And answered with joy as his father before him
The query of the fair-haired child.

“Where does the sky end?” his son inquired.
The father smiled. “It doesn’t.”

SUGAR CANE HARVESTER

In heat I reap with speckled blade in hand
Which cut the cane with whistle and with shwink,
But sun whips down and makes it tough to think
To clear the wooden harvest from this land.
Sweet sweat rolls down, and stinging I must stand
Like tortured Tant'lus, seeing waters sink
Before his stooped, doomed form can grasp the drink
And pulls his hair in anguish, strand by strand.
Yet I am not that prideful fool of old
But just a burnt-arm reaper, not the first,
Who swings the slick machete in strokes bold
And fells the cane with flurried, rhythmic burst,
So as to catch a sugar can unrolled
And, unlike Tant'lus, slake my tropic thirst.

THANATOS

Sharp, cold, steel, the knife drives deep the throat
Because my bullets could not do the deed
As rote training kicked me in my need
Traversing kindness, love -- all that moral moat,
And sliding past the trachea, as if to float,
Until it anchors deep and furrows seeds
Which bloom into vermillion arching reeds
Staunching all desires to laugh and gloat.
Yet deep within my brain comes out the grin,
Unbeknownst my CO, up ahead,
And pray that my God's laws call not this sin,
For I cannot wipe clean the recent dead,
And after all is said and done, there's gin,
To dull the memory of this beauteous red.

THRALL

I killed him with a ruddy, tightened fist
Because I didn't have the words to say
Of all the hurts that rushed all in that day,
A million jabs and bruises, much to list.
And when he crumbled, like a dying cyst
Subjected to the lance of cold X-ray
I felt at first I'd surfaced 'bove the fray
Cleared from a world of silent, secret mist.
Yet even with him lying at my feet
The tightness didn't dissipate at all,
And standing there upon that lonely street,
I clenched my hands and kicked against the wall,
For there was nothing else for me to beat,
As anger held me in her loving thrall.

TITHONUS AND AURORA

Perhaps someday, when the
World is not too scary, you
And I can dance the tango
Underneath the moonlight.

Mama always told me that when the
Crickets get too loud, just root 'em
Out and smash 'em.
But them crickets were never that
Loud, and I'd hear 'em in the dark corners
Or deep in the grass goin'
CRRR-CRRR! CRRR-CRRR!
Fiddlin' with them bony knees,
Crickets court in the summer night
Lookin' for the mates they've lost.
Poor little critters, shiny black fiddle
Bodies, but I'm just too big for you
And will fry you to a crisp anyways.

BOOGEYMAN

The old woman sat on her porch, violently rocking in her chair. After a summer of drought where the sun hung high like a hangman's noose, the cold, damp October hung on the old woman's bones like a blood chigger.

The old woman's name was Nellie Beth Sims. The house was her granddaddy's, built by him before the blood brick buildings of Dallas were replaced by slick mirror skyscrapers. If anybody were to ask her, Mrs. Sims would speak with that old pride that her family had been in Dallas, Texas, even before the names Carpenter and Braniff and Jonsson were thought of. She knew all of the old street names before Martin Luther King and Malcolm X took over, and she even knew where Bonnie and Clyde buried their cat during their fun around Irving and Oak Cliff. Like the house outliving the old storefronts in Dallas, Mrs. Sims outlived her parents, her husband, and most of her children. Her remaining child, a bland man named Michael, moved up north in Chicago. He sometimes sent her chocolates on her birthdays, cheap chocolate that turned ashen and waxy in the mail. Other than the chocolate, which she didn't trust and always threw away, she heard nothing from him, which was

how she liked it.

Her porch was dark so that the bugs wouldn't get into her hair, which was short like coils of barb wire and smelled of permanent. Even with the light out, she saw the dark man stroll up her walkway with his satchel. Up close she saw that he was a young man in a cheap blue suit two sizes too big for him. He wore a hat that once was good-looking, but now the shape was all gone from it with the brim pulled down low, making it look fierce. Mrs. Sims rose with one hand grabbing the broomstick she always left on the porch when she sat out. With the other hand, she reached around the doorway and turned on the porch light, which shone weakly through a cataract of old bug bodies.

"If you're Jehovah's Witnesses, I ain't buying," Mrs. Sims said into the darkness.

The man stepped into the muddy yellow light. He had a face that reminded her of Michael's, bland and stupid. But he didn't squint, and his eyes shone like two owl's eyes. "S'pose I ain't. S'pose I'm just being neighborly."

"What's you selling, then?" Mrs. Sims didn't take to small talk. She liked the high lonesome part of her neighborhood and hated any human interruption.

Instead of answering, the man set down his satchel. His satchel was splotched leather with one heavy, tarnished buckle keeping the whole thing together. Then he took off his hat. His

hair rose up in high, rat-colored tufts. He slicked down the cowlicks and looked around. "A good lady like you shouldn't be sitting out in the dark. The world ain't like it used to be. It's filled with rottenness and bile, black as tar. You're a good Christian woman, ain't you?"

Mrs. Sims sucked in air between the fake teeth of her upper plate. She hadn't been in a church since her husband's funeral a decade ago. If she hadn't been a lady, she would've yelled, "Hallelujah!" to his grave because her man was one of those quiet, suffering men that infuriated her. She came from a good, old family, and she married a man who didn't take stock to a good name and one's pedigree. It didn't make sense, and she felt that his funeral, which lauded his accomplishments as a good Christian man, didn't make sense either. What was good in a spineless worm, an ignorant, a man with no initiative? If it weren't for Mrs. Sims' own family money and history, she was sure Mr. Sims would've led her and their five children right to the poor house. "Where you from? Nobody around here speaks preacher talk except in Sunday church."

He stuck the battered hat back on his head and tugged low on the brim. "I'm from 'round New Boston, not in New Boston, but 'round there. It's east of here, in the Piney Woods."

My God, he's even pointing the directions out!, thought Mrs. Sims. A true, country man, just like her granddaddy. But

that was a long time ago. "Son, why're you so far from home?"

"Cause I wanted to go where the sinners are, ma'am," the man replied. At that, he picked up his satchel. "I can't do what I do if there's no sinners."

"And what do you do?"

The young man answered so softly that Mrs. Sims had to let go of her broomstick and lean a little closer to him. "What?"

The young man swung his satchel, down and up, making a nice, solid connection with Mrs. Sims' neck, which was weak and thin with age. Looking at Mrs. Sims' body on the porch, he stepped over her and turned off the porch light. "I bring sinners to God, ma'am." He continued into the house and, without any trouble at all, found the money that all old people kept, stashed in their beds or behind old pictures of dead relatives. As he left, he glanced up over the ragged tree line to the glaring ball that rose into the sky. It winked at him like the all-seeing insect-eye of God. He winked back.

DOPPELGANGER

Mary Francis was the twin who survived the birth while Susan Jane was the twin who didn't. So it was quite understandable that Mary's parents were upset when she decided to go as a doppelganger for the Halloween class party. At first they weren't upset because they didn't know what it was.

"Doppel what?" her mother asked, looking up from *Wheel of Fortune*.

"Doppel what?" her father echoed, looking up from his newspaper. There was war in the Middle East, which didn't concern him because there was always war in the Middle East.

"A doppelganger," their only child repeated, smiling her eleven-year-old smile. "I learned it in Reading Class today. It's a double, a ghost that looks like somebody alive or somebody who pretends to be somebody else. D-O-P-P-E-L-G-A-N-G-E-R. Doppelganger." Mary grinned until her blue eyes crinkled because she had learned the new word the fastest in class and her teacher had put a gold foil star next to her name on the wall. "I'm gonna stick silver mylar all over my blue sack dress and sweater and make a silver mylar mask so that when you

look at me, all you'll see is you. Isn't it cool?" Mary Francis skipped off to her father's shed, which housed all the camping gear, including old mylar space blankets which crinkled and felt awfully plastic but kept you warm during chilly nights in the woods.

"A doppelganger is a double's ghost," her mother said, no longer listening to the plasticine young man buying an "E" on the TV. She stared at the father.

"Susan Jane?" her father suggested. His hands shook the newspaper so much that it shivered and rustled like dead leaves, kicked up by the wind.

"Hush!" her mother snapped, for fear that Mary would hear. "How could she know? How could she know that..." But the woman stopped and turned to the TV. How could her only daughter know that the stillborn twin had fought with Mary in the womb? How could Mary know that Mary's umbilical cord snaked around the powerful twin, around Susan Jane, and kept her still?

No, she didn't know. Susan Jane didn't exist. The parents made sure of that. And as for that doppelganger...

"Must be a coincidence," Mary's mother declared.

Her father snapped the newspaper in front of his face. He grumbled behind the business section, "Damn teachers. What're they teaching these kids these days?"

Meanwhile, Mary worked on her Halloween costume. The

class party was only a few days away, and she worked on the costume a little every day. She carefully sewed the mylar sheets onto her long sack dress and sweater, giving the silvery plastic enough give so that it wouldn't rip. She had an old Barbie mask which she felt she'd outgrown but was perfect for gluing and taping other mylar sheets to it, including a mylar hood which covered Mary's long, brown hair. The night before the party, Mary wore her costume in its entirety for the first time and showed her parents her work. Except for her blue eyes, you couldn't see Mary. She looked like a human-shaped, crinkly mirror, the light glinting off her form at crazy angles. Her father and mother saw their faces reflected as in a broken mirror, shattered and then hopelessly stuck back together again like a failed Humpty Dumpty.

"Don't I look great, Mom?" Mary asked.

"Very nice, dear," her mother lied. "Now go take it off before you rip it. Time for bed."

"Okay," Mary said. But before she took her costume off, she stood in front of the full-length mirror in her bedroom. At first she surveyed her work, admiring the many stitches it took to secure the mirrored surface to her dress. Then she looked at her reflection's eyes, looking for the Mary Francis underneath.

She stared at the reflection's eyes, perfectly blue like her own but reversed. And then -- perhaps her eyes were drying? -- she felt those eyes blur and change, quiver for a millisecond, a blip

of time. Staring, she felt those eyes staring at her, and they were no longer Mary's eyes.

"Wait, what – " Mary thought, but what she heard herself say, or what she saw her reflection's mouth say to *her* was, "No fair! My turn! It's my turn!"

Mary shrieked as she grabbed her crazy mirrored self. She began ripping off the mylar sheets. RIP! RIP! RIP! For the broken reflections from her costume were not Mary Francis, oh no --

Her mother and father awoke from heavy sleep with a start and burst into her room as the grandfather clock struck midnight. Halloween, Halloween. But all they saw were the remains of their daughter's Halloween costume on the bedroom floor and daughter in the tatters that was Mary's favorite sack dress, Mary's favorite sweater.

"What happened?" her mother exclaimed.

"Are you okay?" her father asked.

Their daughter shook her head. "I hate my costume. It looked ugly."

"But the party --" her parents began.

She shook her head again and refused to speak. So her parents only sighed, told her to clean up her mess, and go to sleep.

"It's late already," her mother said, and she closed the door.

The eleven-year-old girl stood in the bedroom, surrounded

by the ripped mylar sheets like a broken mirror, shattered like Humpty Dumpty. Her eyes were not quite blue but slightly purplish, as if bruised in some great fight.

“No, Mother,” Susan Jane said as she smiled. “It’s never too late.”

DRINKER

Sssss! Away from there, you damn little thing, or I'll throw you into the nice toasty fire faster than you can scream, "Chatte." Did you taint it? No – caught you before your stinking tongue could steal a drop. Gone for only a few minutes, and you dare to slink towards my glass, you greedy sneak!

Oh, now you behave, crouching at my feet, begging, "Mew, mew." Fool, think that I'd give you a sip after that little stunt you pulled tonight. God, I could dress you alive for doing that!

Must calm down. Must calm down so I can sip slowly my precious night cap and not spill one thick drop for greedy, impatient tongues.

Ahhh... much better. Warm, liquid velvet to ward off the dull soul. How the fire dances through my dark glass. Why, he gave me this glass, didn't he? Very cheap gift considering what he wanted.

"I want to know everything that you know," he said, after I let him see my library. Ambitious, ambitious! Standing in my dark library, his sharp, hungry eyes always roving, not even showing the courtesy of taking a seat when I sat down.

“Well then,” I said, “have a seat, or would you care that I talk to your waist?”

Impatient he was, fidgeting in grandfather's davenport, as I reached across the low table to sample one of grandmother's delicious little cakes. “Have one.”

“Please, I didn't come here to – ”

“Sir! I grant your request and invite you into my own home, and you do not even show the courtesy of accepting that host's food? I have no tolerance for rude visitors, and so if you will kindly let yourself out – ”

“No! Please.” Oh, how he looked like a frightened little mouse! I nearly laughed right there, but all I said was, “Have some cake.”

And he half-heartedly took a pale disk from the silver tray, nibbled the edge, and then his eyes grew wide as he stuffed it into his dry mouth and reached for more, as I know he would. I have never met a man who could resist grandmother's lethe cakes, so much like White Russians and rum and spun sugar dissolving into the blood.

So, this ambitious young man wanted to know what I know. Ha! Sneaking around my things, trying to figure me out! Reduced to a dazed, dull-eyed thing, masticating lethe cake. All was going so well until you – you! – couldn't wait and just had to spring down the bookcase, did you!

“Aaaaagh! Get it off me! Get it off me!” he screamed, whirling around the library as I wrenched you from his neck and flung you down onto the hearth – I should’ve flung you into the fire! Wasted almost all of my store of grandmother’s cakes just to calm him down, and you know how difficult it is to make them –

Damn! Now you’ve made me spill a little bit of my night cap! Oh, go ahead, drink up. Am entirely too kind-hearted towards you, you damned little thing.

Ah... ’tis good, isn’t it? Still warm and thick, although the lethe cake nearly overpowers the oh-so-lovely iron flavor. We’ll do better next time, little cat, won’t we? Ah, yesssss.

“Good morning, Dr. Biberti,” said the secretary, looking up from her word-processing. “Your nine o’clock appointment is waiting down the hall for you.”

“Which one?”

“Josh Albert, from your Studies in Bohemia class.”

Dr. Biberti gave her a soft, slow smile before going into the office. “When you see him, Jeri, send him in.”

GIUSTIZIA

Her velvet black eyes staring – burning – at the defendant, Frank Cane, Mrs. Giustizia remained stoic, her small body swathed in heavy, black mourning clothes, as she sat with the public audience.

Cane was still apathetic. Apathetic to where he was, to the people around him, to the trial, to the prosecutor, to his charges. Accused of murdering Mrs. Giustizia's nineteen year old daughter Alicia, he did not seem to care.

The trial unfolded, and the evidence was inconclusive. Not enough to prove him innocent... and not enough to prove him guilty. The jury deliberated.

Not guilty.

No!

The public cried out, outraged.

NO!

Cane smiled. He turned around and stared at the mourning mother.

She stared back.

The court cleared with Cane being a free man. He encountered a slow-moving Mrs. Giustizia.

Her olive face raised, she spoke in a thickly accented voice that seemed to call Cane down into hellfire itself, "Justice will find you."

He laughed. "He already did." Then he left.

A year later, the world had forgotten the name Frank Cane. No one came to his funeral.

Except for one.

A stoic, skeletal woman swathed in heavy black mourning clothes stared with velvet black eyes at the crude, simple coffin below.

She smiled as she whispered a few words in her native tongue. Then in English for Frank Cane.

"Justice is not always a he."

LADY CIRCE

Adam Foster nursed his second pint of cider as he saw others nurse whatever they had. He couldn't tell, what with the haze of cigarette, cigar, and pipe smoke, which hung like grey gauze bandages over the pub, but he was certain that their drinks were strong and good. He noticed that the smoke swirled around the few non-smokers in the low-lit place, and he found that funny. Almost giggled into his drink. But then he glanced at his watch and saw that he'd been waiting for Elsie for over an hour and a half.

Adam shrugged. What's another half hour? He wasn't going anywhere else soon, and the cider was good and cheap. Served cool in a sweaty pint glass by an equally sweaty barkeep because the poor bloke wasn't used to the strange warm spell in October. Adam felt a bit warm himself, but it was more from two pints of Dry Blackthorn and two bowls of black tobacco than anything else. A comfortable, down quilt sort of warmth, which was not unfamiliar to Adam Foster.

He leaned into the curved back of his captain's chair and blew smoke rings. They drifted from Adam's dark corner and rose in wavy, expanding circles into the general haze around

him. Adam knew that the haze stretched all over the pub, from his corner table near the front door to the back room, where he lost many a game of darts to the old timers, whose aims were always clean and straight even with a gallon of ale in them, and to the younger ones, who knew they'd had their fill while Adam hadn't the sense to know when he had his. But, of course, he wasn't known for his sense.

Mrs. Foster used to say, "I swear, if your head weren't attached, you'd lose it, Adam Foster." She had said this often enough, with her stone-grey eyes level with Adam's earth-brown ones, which would blink and turn away before her strong stare. His wife hadn't approved of the pub -- "A bunch of lazy heads getting drunk and wasting their money on darts," she said as grey-black strands of her hair came undone from her combs. But Adam always found a platter of warm, hand-made scones at the table for him at tea, so he supposed that Mrs. Foster did love him... although he once saw her make those wonderful, biscuity scones, carefully filled with sweet currants. She had methodically mixed the ingredients in her mother's heavy, wooden bowl with a long spoon, scooped out the dough with a callused hand, and then pounded the dough onto the cutting board on the kitchen table. Seeing Mrs. Foster cause the kitchen table to rattle with her exertions made Adam nervous, so he had stepped outside their little one-story house for some air.

Will Conroy, his best friend, once asked, "Why'd you let 'er intimidate you like that?" and his reply was, "I don't let 'er do anything, and who's buying the drinks 'ere anyways?" What he wanted to say was, "Good God, man, have you ever seen her kill a pig?" Mrs. Foster was a pig farmer's daughter, and among her dowry were nine-head of squealing, stinking, and generally ill-mannered pigs, with muddy snouts and mean, squinty eyes. One was especially mean, a huge, ancient boar named Old Nat, who was Mrs. Foster's favorite. Adam had always been more comfortable with the land than with livestock, and he had hoped his bride, a rare beauty with grey eyes like the cloudy, winter sky and dark hair like a shining raven, would sell her swine. But Mrs. Foster would have none of that. "These pigs are all that I have left of my family," she declared on their wedding day many years ago. Mrs. Foster was an only child, and her parents -- first her mother, whom she resembled, then her father -- died when she was a young woman. "A pig farmer I was raised, and a pig farmer I am!" And so, while Adam tended the fields, Mrs. Foster tended the house and her pigs, making the pig pen herself and feeding them scraps.

Only on slaughtering day had she asked him for help with the pigs, not that she really needed any help. Adam would hold steady the kicking, squealing pig by its bristly middle while Mrs. Foster raised its large head over a bucket with one hand, exposing the pale neck, and brought down and then up the

sharp, curved knife with another hand, easily slicing through the flesh and ceasing the pig's screechy squeals as its hot, thick blood drained from its neck into the bucket below. By the time she would wrench the poor creature aside onto the straw-covered slaughtering floor, Adam was as pale as the dead pig, although his clothes, as were Mrs. Foster's clothes, were splattered with congealing blood. By this time, all he wanted to do was wash off and get drunk. "By God, Adam Foster, you'd think I was killing your brother, as sickly as you look!" she'd say, almost with a chuckle, her face flushed and her eyes shining as her hair. "No, a pig farmer you are not!"

No, a pig farmer Adam Foster was not. And when Mrs. Foster called for him on another slaughtering day seven years ago, when he heard his name over the gritty *swing* of a knife passing over a grainy whetstone, Adam decided to check on his fields -- after all, he heard in the pub the other day rumours of blight that season. So he grabbed his hat and pipe and scurried from the house, down the narrow, gravel road, as the harried voice of Mrs. Foster calling out, "Adam Foster, go get Old Nat and scrub him down!" faded behind him.

When he returned to the cottage a few hours later, Adam called for Mrs. Foster but heard nothing. He checked all of the rooms, leaving the backyard, where the paved-over slaughtering floor was, for last. He finally stepped outside, took one look, and fainted on the doorway. The hog, Old Nat, who was lying

against the house, had a nasty cut behind his ear. But he was still alive. Mrs. Foster was on the slaughtering floor, the knife fallen a few inches from her, her long, grey-black hair disheveled and splayed about her crumpled figure, and a deep gash running from her chest to her neck. Dark, congealed blood had drained from her wound and had pooled around her. The only living sound, until Adam came to his senses and ran into the village for help, was the low, painful grunts of a hog, speckled with the stubborn blood of Mrs. Foster.

After the funeral, the first thing Adam did was sell Mrs. Foster's swine. Every hog, sow, and piglet -- gone. She had no family to protest -- her mother had died when she was abroad at school and her father died shortly after she had returned for the funeral, "From a broken heart," some said. No, Adam had no need for pigs. And so with part of the money he bought her a proper tombstone, a dark granite one with engraved doves and flowers and the epitaph, "Beloved wife, Donna Kirk Foster." She was buried in the Kirk family plot next to her parents, Dona Bella Kirk and Richard Nathan Kirk.

Adam saw the gravediggers that day, burying the last of the Kirks under the soddy soil, and wished he had not heeded his wife's request to remain childless. The last of the Kirks and, at least to Adam Foster, who felt his hoary age, the last of the Fosters. But, time enough to mourn. He had turned around,

joined his friends and, with the other part of the pig sale money, bought rounds of drinks for everybody.

“Sorry, ol’ boy,” everybody said to Adam in one form or another, and his reply was always, “Thank you kindly, and how about a pint of ale?” He appreciated the consoling pats in his back, and he even appreciated when Tom Bailey, the oldest old-timer in the pub at age 96, threw a dart game for him by throwing his darts so wide that they didn’t even hit the board. “Aah, my eyes must be going,” Tom Bailey said through his rich-yellow-brown pipe smoke, and Adam smiled through his own grey-white smoke and bought him more stout.

Will Conroy patted Adam’s back when Adam went to the bar and sat on the stool next to him. Will said between swallows of cider, “Damn shame about your wife, what with that nasty accident.”

Adam nodded, still drawing slowly from his pipe and sipping from his pint glass.

“She was always a strong, sure ol’ girl, but I must say that she was a stubborn one.” Will drank the last of his pint and set down the glass, which the barkeep, Mike Gallagher, swept up and refilled under the cider tap. “Took after ’er mother, they say, right, Tom?”

Tom Bailey nodded, his bald head spotty and gleamy with sweat. “I remember when Dona Bella arrived here -- funny

name for these parts, but she said it wasn't funny where she was from."

"Where was that?" Mike asked, not really interested, just being conversational to the nonagenarian.

Old Tom scratched his head. "Never said, but she was stubborn herself. Had pigs of her own, about three or four. If you recall," he said, pointing his pipe at Adam, "it was Dona Bella who made Richie a pig farmer, not the other way 'round. Reformed young Richie from drinking too much."

"Too bad she didn't reform their daughter," Will snorted, "why they say --"

"Enough remembering," Tom Bailey said, looking into his pipe with a watery eye.

"They say," continued Will, "that little Donna got sent away not for school."

"Then what would she get sent away for then?" Mike asked, sounding a little more interested.

"*Enough* remembering," Tom repeated.

"Pregnant," Will said triumphantly, "and too stubborn to say who the father was, and if that isn't stubborn, I don't know what is!"

Adam Foster had heard this story before; he had lived all his life in this place, and when he had married Donna Kirk, there were murmurs, murmurs that Donna Kirk laughed away. "Ha! A child they say, a child in sin. I say to you, Adam Foster, no

man has ever touched me, and no man ever will!” Adam didn’t understand his wife, didn’t know much about her. All he knew was that Donna Kirk, the only child of Dona Bella Kirk and Rich Kirk, was the most beautiful woman he had known, that she took after her mother in looks, and when she returned after two years, she took after her mother in temperament and even in personality. She seemed to know more about the world than he or anybody else in this village and yet chose to stay after her father died of a stroke just one week after her mother’s death by accidental drowning. She kept the pigs, which had grown from four to nine, and decided, for some reason which Adam had wondered if it were love, to marry him.

Adam Foster knew all of this, knew that his wife of nearly twenty years spent most of her time with the pigs and with the village market, gossiping with the other wives about men drinking themselves into stupors and having accidents, some of them mortal, of old men dying like her father, quickly and silently, a good death. Mrs. Foster did not die a good death, and perhaps if he weren’t so afraid that day, if only his love had been stronger than his fear, if only...

Adam Foster slowly set down his pipe, set down his glass, stood up, and punched out Will Conroy, who was sent sprawling to the pub floor. Adam would have pinned him down and beaten his best friend senseless except that his other friends held him back, saying, “He’s just drunk, he doesn’t

know what he's saying," while others, helping up Will, said, "By God, Will Conroy, the man's wife isn't even cold in her grave yet!"

Will wiped his bloody lip against his sleeve and said, "I'm sorry, ol' boy. It's the cider talking," and Adam, who shook off the hands on him and sat back down, said, "That's all right, and you're letting your cider go warm."

All that was seven years ago, and life, as they say, went on. The pub was still essentially the same, although Old Tom Bailey died after reaching 100 and Mike Gallagher's son, Young Mike, tended bar some days, like today. Will was still around. Same old Will, who took care of his sheep by day and drank and made merry at the pub at night, although tonight he wasn't at the pub for, as everybody knew, he was at home, nursing his sheep, which had come down with hoof-and-mouth, a nasty disease that could wipe out his flock.

As for Adam Foster, he was like Will for the most part -- taking care of his fields by day and going to the pub at night, with the exception of one day per year, when he visited his wife's grave, cleared the weeds from the tombstone, and prayed a bit. He had done this not too long ago, and this time, instead of a prayer, he spoke of Elsie Fay, the new housekeep for the Widow Bailey.

“She’s so young, Donna, so sweet,” he had said, sitting beside the old grave. “Am I a lecherous fool? For I’ve asked her out to the pub, and she said yes.”

And Adam was beginning to feel like a fool as he sat in his corner table and saw that two hours had passed and Elsie hadn’t arrived. Perhaps she was just being kind, for what could he, a simple farmer who have lived all of his life in one little village, could possibly have in common with a young, bright-eyed newcomer, reputed to have traveled in many places before coming into Widow Bailey’s service? He tapped the ashes and dry dottle from his spent pipe into the ashtray, gulped down the last swallow from his glass, and was about to seek out the back room to lose himself in a dart game, perhaps cricket, when Elsie stepped into the pub.

She was like how he first saw her one month ago, in the market for the first time, shopping for Widow Bailey. “Who’s she?” he had asked Mrs. Gallagher, who was adjusting her bins.

“Her?” Mrs. Gallagher nodded towards the small, pale form dressed in blue, her arms heavy with produce in a huge canvas bag. “Why, that’s Widow Bailey’s new help, Elsie Fay.”

“Where’d Widow Bailey find her?”

“Ad in the paper; she’s not around here, of course.” Mrs. Gallagher looked at him. “Why the questions, Adam? Are you finally looking for a new wife after all these years?”

Adam Foster turned as red as Mrs. Gallagher's beets. "Of course not," he said, but, of course, he was.

Elsie was dressed in that same blue dress, which looked purplish-black in the low light of the pub. Her pale, thin arms were free this time though, and she rubbed her eyes with long, ivory fingers. "Oh, I'm sorry, Adam, but Mrs. Bailey had lost her glasses, and it took longer than I thought to find them," she apologized as she blinked, her eyes adjusting from the darkness of outside to the light of the pub. "I hope you aren't angry."

Adam only smiled, noticing that even in the low light, Elsie's hair shone like spring wheat and her blue eyes looked like the clear, summer sky. "Angry? Oh, no," he finally replied. "But have you eaten? They have rather good meat pies here, or maybe a portion of chips? A pint of cider?"

Elsie coughed and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Adam, but we can't stay in the pub. I didn't realize just how smoke-filled this place is, and I just can't breathe in here."

"Oh." Adam quickly pocketed his pipe.

"But," she added brightly, "perhaps we can go to Mrs. Bailey's to talk and sup there. That is if you don't mind her snoring from upstairs. The dear is rather loud!"

Whether Adam realized the potential for scandal Elsie was suggesting, of a girl nearly twenty years his junior bringing a man into her house in the middle of the night, nobody, including Adam himself, knew, for he had waited, she had

arrived, and he was happy. "All right," he said, and together they left the low light and the smoky haze of the pub for the darkness and clear air of the outside.

The sky was cloud-filled, and the full moon played hide-and-seek behind the clouds. Then a thin, wavery sliver broke through, and Adam saw Elsie in silhouette, her hair as dark as a raven's wing. And when he reached up to stroke that hair seen darkly, she struck him a stare with stone-grey eyes.

"Oh!" he said, dropping his hand like a millstone. Her look, for just that second, looked so much like Donna's.

"Yes, Adam?" she asked but then turned her attention to the front door. The Bailey house wasn't too far away, and they were soon upon the doorstep. Deep within her dress she produced the key and turned the lock. The door swung open, revealing a dark hallway with a stairwell leading further up into the black. "Mrs. Bailey likes to conserve energy. Here, take hold."

Adam felt her cool hand clasp his rough, sweaty one -- how could she be so cool and dry in this heat? -- and let Elsie lead him from the dark hallway into the back parlour.

She turned on a low side lamp, which bathed the room in a soft, blurry glow, like warm honey. "Mrs. Bailey doesn't like harsh light, and I don't mind it at all. I can turn on more lights if you like."

"Oh, no, this is fine, Elsie."

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“You’re a polite man, Adam Foster. That’s what I like so much about you.” Elsie smiled and led Adam to the battered settee. “You sit right there, and I’ll be right back.”

He saw Elsie disappear outside of the circle of light that was the parlour and reappear with a platter of scones. He felt a little odd, looking at these scones. He hadn’t had one since Mrs. Foster had died, and he was almost certain that these scones looked very similar to his wife’s. “Silly man,” he thought, “you’re growing old.” He took one and ate it and, realizing that he was hungry since he hadn’t eaten at the pub while waiting for Elsie, he ate more until the platter was empty.

“Oh, I’m sorry...” Adam began.

“Good, aren’t they?” Elsie said, looking at the empty silver platter. “It’s an old family recipe.”

“They taste...” he began again as the flavor of the last scone dissipated in his mouth. Adam hesitated.

“Yes, Adam?” Elsie set down the platter on the low table and sat across from him on the settee’s companion, an overstuffed chair. Her hair fell across her eyes as she peered at him, waiting.

“This will sound funny, but they taste very much like my departed wife’s scones.” The word “wife” fell out of Adam’s

mouth like lead, and he was surprised that his voice ended in a whisper.

“Actually, Adam, it isn't,” Elsie replied. Adam heard the laughter in her voice, and he was not sure why she was laughing. “I have talked with Mrs. Bailey many times about life around here, and Donna and Dona are not unusual names in this house. And they are not unusual names to ME, even before I came here.” She tossed her hair out of her eyes, and Adam saw them clearly, saw them as they really were, and realized that the rumours surrounding his departed wife were true.

He shuddered with shock and with a sudden pain in his chest as he saw a shadow move out from the darkness.

“Oh, Great-Grandmother, Adam is such a polite man.” Elsie turned towards the shadow that became Widow Bailey. The laughter was still in Elsie's voice. “Must we do this?”

“Must.” The shrunken woman peered into Adam's wide, brown eyes as he stood motionless on the settee. “As much a murderer as Richard Nathan Kirk. Cowards never deserve to be called men.” She poked a finger into his chest. “Only my Tom was a good one because he heeded me. But Rich and then you, killing my girls, killing me.”

Adam's voice was still a whisper. “But you never had any children. Tom couldn't... and Donna said no man ever touched her... I don't understand...”

“You are a farmer, Adam. You have grown potatoes. Do you need seed to grow them? If the seed is bad or cowardly or flawed, do you not gain yield? No! Because same can beget same, as my mother was before me, as her mother was before her. Men become our only contact with this world – ”

“And we become their judge.”

Adam saw Elsie and the Widow Bailey stand together, and it was like seeing one woman in the past and in the future. The intermediaries, the middle years, were Dona Kirk and Donna Foster, and he became aware of who they were, that, in essence, they were one person, and had been all this time.

“You are not woman,” Adam whispered, his voice going away.

Together both women spoke, “And you are not man.”

Will Conroy and Elsie Fay married a year after Adam Foster's sudden disappearance. Nobody knew where Adam was, which pained Will, who had always wanted Adam to be his Best Man if ever he were to marry. By this time, Mrs. Bailey had joined her husband in death, and Elsie, now Mrs. Conroy, joined her husband in his shepherding duties. Mrs. Conroy proved to be a fine companion in tending sheep -- keeping the flock together, shearing the wool, and even killing off the diseased ones to protect the flock when need be. She was as

comfortable around livestock as Will was, as seen in Mrs. Conroy's choice of pet, an old hog.

“Although,” Will Conroy said when he was in the pub for a drink and gossip, which was rare nowadays, what with Mrs. Conroy's inclinations against the pub, “although she's a funny, little girl. Why, she even feeds that old pig of 'ers scones around teatime.”

LEDA

I suppose I can't blame Leda for her revenge. It was misguided – the object of her vengeance, the husband who gave her the last name of Swann and thus turned her name into some homage to William Butler Yeats, was dead. She killed him in a battered-wife trance-like state, which I have read about in psychology journals. This skeleton in her closet was not new. You may have heard about this on the local news a few years back: “Local woman found not guilty of brutal knife murder by reason of insanity.” This verdict caused a stir in those TV tabloids – right-wing white men in pitched battle with left-wing white women over whether justice had been served or not. Leda, meanwhile, faded into the woodwork. I suppose she was in therapy for all that time, coming to grips with what she had done and who she was now. When she re-emerged, the world had forgotten this tired woman. New stories about human suffering came to feed the media machine and perhaps only I seemed to care who Leda Swann was before.

Excuse me. Allow me to introduce myself. I am a student of psychology, in my final year of undergraduate work. Perhaps because I am a student of the human psyche, I found Leda so

fascinating. Was it therapy that made Leda decide to return to school after so many years, some therapist that convinced her that being with young people, using her brain, would do her good? Be that as it may, she stood out among the crowd, and not because she was a middle-aged freshman surrounded by opinionated eighteen-year olds. She stood out because she tried to fade in, disappear into a corner in the farthest row of desks in the classroom. I was convinced that she was anorexic because she wore layers and layers of loose-fitting clothing, a puff-pastry shell of personal space. Then, on a particularly warm day, I saw her unwrap one layer after another on the steps of the student center until she revealed her true form – small but not painfully thin, with arms as white as goose down. It was then that I decided to make her the subject of my final paper, a study of the interaction between memory and dreams. Perhaps a more conservative scientist would have used more subjects, more case studies; but I was certain that Leda would prove to be a fruitful subject.

I must admit that it took some convincing on my part. “No,” Leda replied to my request. But out of some need to catch up to students closer to her age, Leda had enrolled not only in first-year classes but also in some upper-level classes, a few of which I was her classmate. Short of skipping those classes, Leda could not avoid me. After a month of persistence,

she relented. "Oh, all right!" Leda finally replied with exasperation. "But you'll have a lousy paper."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I don't dream."

"Impossible. Everybody dreams. But not everybody remembers them."

"I do not dream."

It was perfect. As any student can attest, the most difficult part of writing is narrowing your subject enough that you can begin to write instead of being paralyzed by the infinite permutations of the thesis. My paper now took on the goal to explain why Leda believed she did not dream, what those dreams were, and why she always forgot them. My hypothesis involved Leda's past troubles, which seemed the most likely root of her belief that she did not dream.

If the topic was perfect, Leda as a test subject was not. Psychoanalysis isn't called "the talking cure" for nothing, and Leda refused to talk. She allowed me to follow her along on campus, but her movements were quiet and, I must admit, boring. She fit the profile of the diligent, older commuter student who saw college work as a full-time job and as a result she neither socialized nor napped. After a full eight-hour day of studying, reading, and writing, she climbed into her 1970's vintage Caprice Classic – I am convinced that this was her first car – and drove away.

I almost considered dropping Leda and finding a new test subject. But then I would revisit those old newspapers in the library, read the lurid details of that murder and trial a year before I was born, and renewed my determination somehow to crack Leda's shell.

The big break came mundanely enough. She had a flat tire. I saw her in front of campus as I returned from grocery shopping, and I pulled my Ford Festiva lunchbox over.

"Do you need to have your tire changed?"

"I know how to change a tire," she replied coldly. "I don't have a spare." She looked up and saw the hovering thunderclouds of spring.

I glanced up and felt the first heavy drop hit my eye. "It's going to rain. Let me give you a ride home, okay?" An innocuous request, but it was not without designs. I had never seen Leda's home, and I hoped that her residence and the things in it would give me details that Leda herself would not give me.

Leda, perhaps well-versed in the thinking of psychology students from her past experiences with therapy, knew of these underlying designs – I could tell by her steady gaze as she looked at me. And yet, she shouldered her backpack and climbed into my car.

She lived in an apartment complex that had very little vacancies. The complex was one of those older ones with

twenty apartments at best, and the landlord probably lived on the premises. It was a complex that reminded me of assisted living and Social Security, and it did not fit with what I had pictured Leda to live in. I knew from past reports that Leda and her husband had a house, a very expensive and large one, as I recall. Perhaps it would have been idiotic for Leda to live in the house where she had killed her husband and yet my curiosity wanted to see the place where Swann died. This thought unsettled me, that my thoughts easily delved into the muck of the tabloids instead of on the crystalline objectivity of academic study.

If I had hoped to gain some insight to Leda's mind by the things in her apartment, I was sorely disappointed. She lived in a small, utilitarian one-bedroom apartment. Her living room had two chairs and a coffee table. No television set, no stereo, no computer, not even pictures on the wall. Her kitchenette was spare with not even an electric can opener or coffee maker. I can only imagine her bedroom to be just as spare.

“Thank you,” Leda said, “and now –”

The storm that gathered all day broke open in a cataclysm of lightning and water. The lone lamp hanging from the living room ceiling blinked out. Disoriented by the darkness, I stumbled into one of the chairs and suddenly I saw several candles lit with a nimble match held by long, goose-down fingers.

“How – ” I began to ask, wondering where those candles came from, but then I saw Leda's face, illuminated below by one of those candles as she sat in the other chair.

“I had hoped after all these years that nobody knew of my past.” Leda's voice was low, controlled. The flame barely flickered with her breath. “But obviously you do. And I believe I know why you know of my past, why you are drawn to me, drawn to where I live.”

My mind became muddled with the heady scent of those candles. Were they ordinary candles?

“I said that I did not dream. That is true. But the last time I dreamed was the year after he, my husband, died. He came to me in dreams. He told me that he would return, he would reveal my past, he would again control me. That would be his revenge.” Leda gazed at me. “You are he.”

My voice did not come to me, lulled by the smoke and voice of Leda, a mad woman. But her eyes were not that of the insane but of the clinical gaze of a scientist, looking at a rat.

“You were born, what, a year after you died. After that message, I no longer dreamt because I no longer slept. Do you know how it feels not to sleep for twenty-two years? I was waiting. At first I wasn't sure who you were. But I do now. And my revenge is that you cannot have me, my dear husband. You cannot control me because I have been waiting so that you can see me for one last time.”

What fear I felt was muffled by the urge to sleep, to sleep perchance to dream. Wasn't that a Shakespeare line, in *Hamlet*? About death, as I recall. My mind, my clinical mind – I can feel you shut down. Oh no.

And then the wind flew open the door and the candles went out.

I awoke, sodden with rain that flew through the open door. I staggered up, my head pounding, and knew that Leda was gone. Leaving her apartment, I went to my car and saw that my valise with all of my papers and notes – all of my research material for my final paper about Leda – was gone. Numbed, I headed back to campus, noticing distractedly the broken tree limbs and power lines that were a testament to last night's storm. I switched on the radio.

“---- identified as the body of Leda Swann, the 1976 murderer of Reginald Swann, her husband. Authorities have declared it an accidental drowning, one of many victims of last night's flash floods.”

I no longer listened to the news report. I stared ahead, my knuckles growing white on the steering wheel. Damn her! Now who's going to be my test subject now?

MARS, IN ASCENDANCE

J96 left his home to water the dust.

Last night's dust storm hadn't really abated, but he knew the watering could not wait. Pulling on his protective suit so that the dust would not reach his skin and grabbing his thermosed mister, he left his home at first light and made the long trek to his garden. His heavy footfalls left a sharp single-file path. When Sol was forty-five degrees above the horizon, he reached his little plot, a single raised bed of red with a light dusting of grey-green sprinkled on it, like powdered sugar.

The grey-green dust was why J96 was there every day. It was his purpose in life. It was what kept him from going insane.

Kneeling before the plot, he leaned his head sideways toward the ground, as if listening to what the grey-green dust had to say. He poised the mister centimeters above the dust and took his time, airbrushing in slow, deliberate strokes the grey-green below.

Only in this moment was he able to still the memories in his head.

The memories were awful, unreal, a previous life when he was unreal. For he wasn't real back then, but he didn't know it until he came here and found his home.

“God dammit, boy, I need those codex files ’faced with the flight calibrations NOW. You sprung a leak or what?”

“I am sorry, sir. The run-time is longer than I had anticipated. I am calling up additional ’facers to run them multiplanar; that is faster than the parallel processing so that –”

“I don't need a lecture, boy. Just get me those numbers!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Or, I swear, I'll get you replaced. You're already an old bucket of bolt. Jesus! You'd think on a mission like this the brass would've allocated a better tin man than you.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I --”

“Shut up and get me those numbers!”

“Yes, sir.”

The speaker went dead, and J96 was surprised that he had been holding his breath.

The CO was impatient. They were all impatient. “Their impatience will get them all killed,” J96 thought. The additional interfacers popped into his viewport and spat out the calibration numbers in queue. In nanotime, he had the calibrations ’faced with the codex files, and the little ship which

had been in orbit began to descend and, as if it had always done this before, smoothly touched down on the planet.

For J96, ordered to stay on board and keep the ship humming, no glory would come to him. "First men on Mars!" was the headline when they returned to Earth. The first mission was exploratory, the logical follow up of decades of unmanned probes. Ironically, the brass would never allow a thing like J96, the descendent, so to speak, of those ancient probes to ever explore Mars.

After the third mission, that irony began to bother him.

The fourth mission was with the idea of terra-forming. Again, they, a crew of three men, told him to stay with the ship.

After a time, he allocated a 'facer to monitor the ship, and he slipped outside. The iron in the dust touched the iron in his fluid matrix, and he felt, for the first time, why he was here.

He took his time to find the crew.

He took his time to send numbers to Earth, indicating a catastrophic crash.

He took his time to refashion the ship into a new home.

He took his time to dig, planting the Terran seeds into the Martian soil, as a gift towards his host, the lonely red planet.

He was not surprised when Terran and Martian came together and, one day, a grey-green dust bloomed upon the soil.

“Oh, my love, grow fast,” J96 whispered to his garden. “Someday, they will come back, in force, in greater number, and how then can I protect you?” His mister was empty, and Sol was dipping into the far horizon.

Perhaps it was the wind or perhaps it was J96. But for that moment, the grey-green dust, just centimeters below his head, looked like him. And for that moment, it seemed to reach out and touch his check softly, like a lover.

Then J96 bade his beloved good night and headed for home.

MR. JONES' DILEMMA

Once upon a time there lived a man named Derek Jones. Mr. Jones was of average height (5'10"), of average weight (190 pounds), of average shape (not too apple-shaped), and of average age (40-ish). He had average hair (brown with some male pattern baldness) and average eyes (also brown). All in all an average sort when you looked at him. But if you looked into his family history, Mr. Jones wasn't that average because Mr. Jones came from a long, long family of rich oil men. Yes, his great-great grandfather died of black lung due to a lifetime in the coal mines and his great-grandfather died of lung cancer due to a lifetime in the oil fields. But Mr. Jones' grandfather managed to escape the sooty life by investing well in profitable oil market shares, and the Jones family after Grandpa Carl knew no hardship nor, for that matter, hard work.

In other words, by the time Mr. Derek Jones inherited the Jones' riches, Mr. Jones was quite good at being a lazy lay-about.

A peculiar biological adaptation, however, harkened to Mr. Jones' sooty family past -- Mr. Jones thrived on petro-chemical pollution. I do not know whether this was congenital, whether

some Jonesian gene mutated in the embryonic Mr. Jones in remembrance to the coal mines and oil fields, or if this was developmental, whether Mr. Jones' body adapted to being born, raised, and living in the smoggiest, most crowded part of Los Angeles.

Either way, Mr. Jones thrived on petro-chemical pollution. He breathed in the rush-hour, black cloud exhaust fumes as if they were spring flowers, saying, "Ahhh, how bracing!" He spent his summers in Calcutta, India, and Athens, Greece, two cities where you could cut the air with a dinner knife and serve it up for tea, garnished with an oil slick. Black, swirling noxious clouds, electrified into brownian motion by the beating sun was his element, and Mr. Jones was oft to say, "I do not trust air I cannot see." So it was a shock to everybody when Mr. Jones decided to retire from his figurehead post of Chairman of the Board of Jones Oil Corporation and to reside in the country.

"But Mr. Jones," said everybody, "you can't SEE the air in the country!"

"Yes, well, time for a change of pace, I say," replied Mr. Jones.

So Mr. Jones left the city for the country in the early winter while the temperature was non-too-hot and settled in a farm house he had bought from a retired farmer who wanted to spend his last days exploring the U.S. in a Winnebago. Mr.

Jones, by the way, was the owner of a Winnebago, but he gave it to the farmer as a gift.

“What’s that strange smell?” Mr. Jones said to the farmer as the farmer climbed into his new Winnebago in order to begin his new adventures.

“What strange smell?”

“Can’t you smell it? A sort of cold, sweet smell, like sorbet but thinner.”

The farmer stuck up his nose and sniffed. SNIFF SNIFF! “I dunno what you’re talkin’ about, Mr. Jones. All I smell is regular clean air.”

“Clean air? How weird!”

And the farmer drove off thinking how odd city folk were.

Mr. Jones, meanwhile, enjoyed his winter in the country, primarily spending his time in his farmhouse, catching up on 45 years worth of reading. He especially enjoyed lighting up his fireplace -- after all, he spent all of his life in Los Angeles while summering in Calcutta and Athens, places which had no fireplaces. So Mr. Jones always had a roaring fire in his fireplace, although he always forgot to open the flue to let the smoke out. But Mr. Jones didn’t seem to mind; he just turned on a light so he could read his book.

After a quiet, albeit smoky, winter, spring came to Mr. Jones’ abode, and Mr. Jones had to stop making a fire because it became too hot inside. So Mr. Jones stepped outside his

house for the first time in months to see the country in spring time.

Rolling green hills were in the distance, dotted with willows, pines, and cedar trees. The flowers were in bloom, an explosion of blue, red, yellow, pink, and lavender. Clusters of mushrooms peeped out from under the trees and under the awning of the farmhouse, and birds swooped in the sky, searching for insect goodies for their fuzzy chicks. All in all, spring in the country was an explosion of life.

But Mr. Jones, whose body was adapted to 45 years of petro-chemical pollution, could not handle this cornucopia of spring pollen, of organic pollution. He sneezed a mighty sneeze and his body exploded into big, chunky bits.

Such was the end of Mr. Derek Jones.

OEDIPUS IN L.A.

Once upon a time, there lived a famous playwright named Sophocles. He was Greek (specifically, he was Athenian) and he was loved by all (men and women). As a youth, he was very handsome as well as musically talented, and, of course, after the Greek victory over the Persians at Salamis, he danced naked, anointed in oil, singing with his lyre.

Oh, did I mention that he was very popular?

You got to understand that the Greek concept of beauty in the late 400s B.C. is not the 21st century concept of beauty. For one thing, the Greeks' concept of beauty centered around men, not women, preferably naked men.

I did mention that Sophocles was very popular, right? And this is ancient Greece; Christian morality hadn't been invented yet.

His body notwithstanding, Sophocles was a great dramatist. I mean, he wrote plays that won all of the theatrical festivals (beating his elder Aeschylus and that whiny brat Euripides by a mile). Even that nerd Aristotle saw Sophocles' works as the model of what makes a great tragedy. He was so great that he was still writing great plays when he died at age ninety (and

that's really really old for a guy who died in 406 B.C.). He's so great that bored teenagers are required – REQUIRED – to read his surviving plays, even today, in the 21st century, a millennium and a half years after his death. How many of you have heard of *Oedipus Rex*? See?

What a lot of people now don't realize is that Sophocles wrote stuff that sells, insanely popular stuff with blood and gore and sex and intrigue. Sure, people like Aristotle can intellectualize Sophocles till he's blue in the face, but Sophocles wasn't thinking like a philosopher. He was thinking, "What can I do to beat out that shrunken old man Aeschylus, trounce that teenage brat Euripides, and bring people to my plays in droves?" In other words, he thought of ticket sales, and he wrote stuff that sells.

And so I guess it's lucky that I got possessed by this dead, Greek guy. It did wonders for my career and social life. I mean, before I got possessed, I was this uptight, whiny screenwriter, starving in L.A. Sure, I'm Greek enough to have a last name that nobody can pronounce (everybody just calls me Nick) and a religion that really made me uptight (that is, Greek Orthodox Church). Other than that, I wasn't Greek at all, not enough to have the imagination that can think up black, vengeful hellbeasts like the Furies and twisted, dysfunctional lives like short-tempered King Oedipus and his mama wife Jocasta. You have to have some muse that's beyond common social mores; I

didn't have that. Also, I didn't match the current idea of beauty, male or female. I mean, a five-foot tall, brown, skinny Greek American with a body hair problem worse than Robin Williams doesn't exactly win you any dates, lemme tell you.

But that was before I was possessed. One day I was regular shmoe Nikolas Karakekes; the next day (the next morning, in fact), I was Sophocles, the greatest Greek tragedian that ever lived. It's all attitude really. And in L.A., where attitude is everything and nobody has a good long-term memory, of course I can rewrite *Oedipus* and pass it off as new, straight from the mouth of "Nick K, the newest up-and-coming screenwriter in Hollywood."

That quote is from *People* magazine, by the way.

And as anybody can tell you, if you're rich and famous, it doesn't matter if you look like a troll; the "L.A." women will find you.

So, now you know why that new movie of mine seems to ring a teeny bell in your head from English Lit classes and why it's so insanely popular, even though the story is recycled and has gone through the Jerry Springer grinder at least four times (in order to meet the maximum audience demographics).

Because, boys and girls, trash sells.

And if you excuse me, I have an oil massage appointment to meet.

PUMPKIN HILL

This place is called Pumpkin Hill. Not that there are any pumpkins growing up here – I think it’s named Pumpkin Hill ’cause it looks sort of like an overripe pumpkin, squashed, and that tree behind me would be the pumpkin’s stem. Not many people come up here or, I should say, not many live people come up here. Plenty of dead people end up here, what with the town cemetery just on the other side of the tree. The soil is rich on Pumpkin Hill, rich with the nutrients of rotting bodies. You can pick gorgeous flowers up here; but if you do, don’t forget to get a handful of this dirt. Nothing down there in town will replace what the flowers get from this dirt. It’s good stuff. Of course, you can’t see any flowers right now, but come spring time – pow! Pumpkin Hill’s the best place for a spring picnic, which my sister and I would do.

My sister Mira introduced me to Pumpkin Hill. You can see the hill from our bedroom window, as big and yellow as the moon. “It’s magic up there,” she used to say, and every Halloween, after we finished trick-or-treating, we’d make our trek to Pumpkin Hill, sit under the tree, and eat our loot. Two little witches stuffing their faces with candy. No fear of candy

spiked with razor blades or drugs then. And we always saved back a tenth of the loot. We'd go to the cemetery and give each gravesite a piece of candy. Tithe for the dead, I guess. We'd suck on sugar skulls and give the best stuff, the chocolate to the dead. Our grandmother's up here, but we wouldn't give her any more than the others. It was a very democratic process.

Mira and I found out that we could read minds when we got too old for trick-or-treating. She could first, because she's older than I am, and then me. It came with puberty – menstruation, breasts, hairy pits, reading minds. It's not as if we could purposefully do it – we'd let our minds go blank and then it'd wander. And then what was empty space was filled with voices and images – other people's voices and images. That's when we found out our mother could read minds, too, when we heard her voice distinctly in our heads, "Well, now. I guess it's time."

You see, Mira and I come from a long line of strongly aware women. In my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother's time, we would be called witches, but in a time of New Age mumbo-jumbo, the word "witch" no longer holds power. "Moon women" my mother calls us, and for the longest time, the women in my family kept our power quiet, manifesting itself as an awareness of change and being able to adapt. It's not like TV witches – when we use our power, we hurt. We feel our blood flow and the bones in our body shift. It's very much like giving birth, my mother says. I wouldn't

know about that but, as you can probably guess, when we use our power, it better be for a damn good reason.

My town stretches from those far range of hills to Pumpkin Hill. The lights crept over the years, over those hills, to the farm my family owned for centuries. Subdivisions and ranch houses and shopping malls with more beeping lights nibbled at the farm until only the house and Pumpkin Hill was left. The women in my family learned to adapt to the lights, to the crowds, to blend in like the quiet women we are, sucking on candy skulls and picnicking with the dead.

We knew about the razor blades. We knew about the drugs. The valley below used to be a forest of which our farm was a part of the whole. As recently as forty years ago, my mother could hand feed a squirrel while being watchful of wolves. Wolves, nature's predators – there is nothing evil about wolves. They serve a greater need, killing off the weak and sickly so the rest will be strong. But the predators that came with the beeping lights and the concrete forest serve no need and are themselves weak and sickly in their own way, preying upon the young. We knew about them from the news on TV and the gossip in the schoolyard and from the smaller and smaller coffins laid in Pumpkin Hill. Mira and I shielded ourselves behind the ancient walls of our house and the tall hedgerows bordering what remained of the farm. We shielded ourselves behind Halloween masks until we discovered we were too old

for trick-or-treating when we found razor blades in our bubblegum and when we heard our mother say, "Well now. I guess it's time."

Our mother Autumn is the seeker. She sits in the living room, knitting in Grandmother's rocking chair. She knits methodically, her mind expanding outward in concentric circles. When she stops knitting, she hands the piece to Mira. Mira sits on the hearth, next to the plastic pumpkin bucket filled with sugar skulls. She is the Adjutant. With very few exceptions, she starts to unravel the piece, one slow stitch at a time. She hands the crooked yarn to me. I am the Executor. I gather the lines of thought caught up in the crooked yarn and return it back to our mother before I leave. Mira gives me a sugar skull, and I leave. I know exactly where to go. Old Autumn and Mira have done all the work for me.

It no longer surprises me that the most ordinary of people are what Autumn usually finds. They are like us, wielding their power in quiet. But unlike us, they feel no pain – just a dull thud like a body part falling asleep – when they unleash their venom to their victims, when they open their doors to children saying, "Trick or treat" and give their treats with passive smiles.

They don't expect to find me there, standing on their welcome mat. They don't expect me to toss them a sugar skull, hard and shiny with hollow eyes. They grab it, dropping their bowl filled with candy spiked with drugs and metal, and I can

only smile as the candy skull dissolves into their skin, bubbles down into their blood. They look at me with the hollow eyes of a golem and follow me to Pumpkin Hill.

That's our Halloween tradition, you see, our annual harvest of the nasties down there in town. On our side of the tree is the cemetery, but there's a cemetery on this side too. The autumn leaves cover the bodies in a blanket for the dead, and come spring time, there will be beautiful flowers.

Well, I must go – Autumn and Mira call me. But you won't be lonely, dear sir. Not lonely at all.

SIXTEEN

Rory Clark was in the attic again.

Following the old ritual, she had waited for her mother to leave for work, crawled out of bed, and walked up the attic stairs, avoiding the creaky seventh step, at exactly 8 AM. Four hours later, she stood up on numb legs, shaking one leg at a time, and put away the forgotten holiday decorations into their respective little boxes. A clothespin reindeer with a painted nose, peeling. A stained glass snowflake, chipped with sharp edges. Metallic glass spheres which left silvery sprinkles onto Rory's fingers. Wooden nativity set, with St. Joseph missing. Each piece Rory carefully wrapped in crinkly tissue paper, yellowed like a spinster's wedding dress, and eased into grime-layered boxes. Even though it was the middle of a stagnant, steamy summer, Rory had to look through the old Christmas pieces. It was part of the ritual. Part of the ritual which connected her to her father because once her father had gone away, Christmas was no longer Christmas.

A major part of the ritual, however, was the full-length mirror, a slender, oval one which hinged on its own, black iron stand. Rory had discovered it in the far corner of the attic. She

did this two years ago, when the ritual began, and the mirror remained where she had moved it, greeting her every day when she stepped into the attic.

With the holiday decorations packed away in a corner, Rory moved to the mirror, adjusting it so as not to glare from the sunlight, which streamed from the clean attic window and filtered through the dusty air. Her eyes followed the crack that ran across her reflection's pale face, slashed across her midsection, and shattered outward like a spider's web, wet with dew. Rory once ran a finger along the crack and cut herself; she did that when she discovered the mirror, and the sight of her own blood made her feel nauseous, but the feeling had quickly gone away. Rory remembered the long-ago nausea as she stared into the mirror with eyes that began to dry and sting.

"I'll be sixteen," she said. "I'll be sixteen tomorrow."

The image in the mirror looked at her, another person listening.

"It'd be nice to have a party. A sweet sixteen party. Maybe Momma --"

Rory stopped. The image looked angry even fierce, as the eyes in the mirror grew sinister and wide, so wide that Rory felt like she would fall into them as the familiar dizziness threatened to return, to reach into her head through her eyes --

Sweat rolled down from her damp head and stung her eyes, which closed in pain. When she opened her eyes after wiping

them with the back of her hand, the dark image was gone, and now all she saw was herself -- small and pale and afraid. Why afraid, she wasn't quite sure as she wrapped her skinny arms around herself and stepped away from the mirror. Maybe she was afraid of growing up, of the unexpected things her body and her mind sometimes showed to her like the moon behind night clouds. Maybe she was afraid of the dizziness, which began a year ago in the attic and always returned. Or maybe she was afraid of her mother, a tired woman who seemed to grow more tired every day even though Rory could remember a time when she was a laughing woman, a golden woman who was wife to a man Rory only remembered as silvery as the sun shining through the trees. But that was thirteen years ago, unlucky thirteen, and why her father left, her mother refused to say as her golden light faded with each passing year, as she threw herself to a job that seemed to pay less and less, leaving a daughter alone in the house that Timothy Clark built, leaving a daughter alone with childhood memories thirteen years old.

Rory shook her head to clear it, sending droplets of sweat into the air. She noticed that the sun wasn't streaming through the window and knew that her mother would be home soon. She descended the dark stairway, avoiding the creaky seventh step, which sent out a creak like a gun shot, and, ducking under the low doorway, arrived in the kitchen, next to the pantry closet. She replaced the false kitchen panel over the attic

doorway and made sure that it looked as if it had been untouched and was flush against the wall. Then she checked the answering machine, which blinked incessantly with a message.

"Mrs. Clark, this is Dan Richards from McIntyre Realtors. I'm calling to check if you're been receiving my messages because all of your messages sound as if you haven't received mine. Just in case you missed my five previous ones, we've found a buyer who is interested in seeing your house. Please call me ASAP to schedule a tour --"

Rory erased the message. End of ritual.

By the time she heard the front door squeal open, the loud tap-tap-tap of high heels on wood, and the door slam, Rory had already scrubbed the two bathrooms, made the beds, vacuumed, and was now wiping down the kitchen counter as a half pound of beef defrosted in the microwave oven. Her mother never ordered her to do these chores, even though they needed to be done. Rory felt obligated to do them since she didn't have a summer job like most people her age and wasn't even enrolled in a summer driving class because it cost \$300. "Maybe next year," her mother had said, and Rory agreed. There was always next year.

Mrs. Clark stormed through the kitchen door, flinging her purse onto the kitchen table. "The idiots!"

Rory kept her face down as she continued to wipe the counter top so as to hide her rolling eyes. Her mother always came home from work in a bad mood, and "the idiots" were usually her male boss and her male co-workers at the trucking company where she was head dispatcher. What with Mrs. Clark's complaints, one would figure that she would have quit by now, but -- no.

Rory looked up and contained a tired sigh. "Bad day, Mother?"

Mrs. Clark let out a bitter laugh. "Bad day? When is it NOT a bad day?" She yanked out a chair and sunk into it. "What're you thawing?"

"Some ground beef. I'm making --"

"Don't bother," Mrs. Clark interrupted. She kicked off her high heels and stretched her misshapen feet. "I have two ham sandwiches in my purse, and I already ate at work, so you'll only be wasting your time and the electricity."

Rory began to return the thawed meat into the refrigerator.

"Are you stupid? The meat'll last longer in the freezer."

Rory shrugged and put the ground beef on top of some frozen pot pies. She then rummaged through her mother's bulky purse, finally finding two puny sandwiches in melted plastic, next to a lone condom, still wrapped in its sterile, vacuum-sealed packet. Rory paused, told herself that the sandwiches were fine, and took them out of the purse. As she

unwrapped the sandwiches, she saw her mother go through the month's bills.

Water bill. Electric bill. Telephone bill. Credit card bill. Mortgage bill. Realtor service bill. With a disgusted sneer, Mrs. Clark slapped the bills on the table and sprang up from her chair. She strode to the phone, swiped the receiver from its carriage, and punched a number. "What time is it?" she barked as she massaged the back of her neck.

"It's seven o'clock, Mother."

"He's left then." Mrs. Clark scowled into the receiver but didn't hang up. Waiting, she glanced at Rory, who was nibbling the first sandwich, and motioned for her to get her a drink. Rory gave the customary after-work beer, which Mrs. Clark opened with a practiced hand and sucked down half before talking into the phone.

"First, your answering machine is too long, Richards."

Rory almost gagged on a dry piece of crust but forced herself to swallow.

"Second, I do not appreciate receiving an exorbitant statement for a house which you guaranteed three months ago would be sold. In case you don't know by now this is your theoretical client, Clark, and in case you've become extremely stupid, your client is angry. I expect you to call me -- God knows you should know my number by now! --and you know what? I'll even give you my work number this time. 555-8746.

Now isn't that sweet of me?" Mrs. Clark slammed the receiver into its carriage. "Idiots! I'm surrounded by idiots!" She drained the remainder of her beer and left the empty can on the counter. "Are you going to finish those sandwiches or what?"

Rory's body twitched, and she looked at the half-eaten sandwich. It was squashed within a tight, bloodless fist, and she felt the greasy layer of pressed pork and mayonnaise in her palm. "I'll finish them," she answered and then stuffed the mashed ham on white in her mouth to prove her words. After a painful swallow, she started on the second sandwich.

Mrs. Clark got two more cans of beer, collected her purse, and left her shoes and the bills where they lay. "Don't forget to clean up and to turn off the kitchen light when you leave." She marched out of the kitchen and towards her bedroom, where she would stay for the rest of the evening, watching television.

Rory remained in the kitchen, which was spotless except for a half-eaten sandwich on the counter, bills scattered on the table, shoes on the floor, and panicky thoughts in one girl's head.

The dizziness before the mirror returned as always, but Rory broke the ritual today. She let the dizziness reach into her eyes, into her mind, and she saw spinning, glittery spheres which trailed silvery sprinkles like pixie dust, scattered by the breeze. Cold shards of light fell from the spheres, like shooting stars. They hurt as they streamed across the black field which was

Rory's inner eye, even as her physical eyes were staring into the mirror -- or was the mirror a part of Rory's mind too? For the shards did not hurt the house, and the house, a two-story Victorian with jutting nooks and sylvan floors and red-trim which did not peel, shone whole in the mirror, and for one, glittery moment, the mirror's wounds healed, and Rory's image in the mirror was complete. But Rory realized that the image in the mirror was not herself but a young man.

"Happy birthday," he said.

"Daddy."

He smiled, his face lighting up like silvery leaves reflecting sunlight. Except his face wasn't reflecting light but shone light, like the sun.

"Daddy, why did you leave?"

"Because I wasn't supposed to stay."

"I don't understand. Don't you love Momma and me anymore?"

"Oh, Aurora," he said, which was Rory's name and her mother's name. His silver eyes, matching his shining hair, watered like mercury. "I asked your mother to come with me, for both of you to come, but she wanted to stay. She didn't believe. But you, you're of age. You believe."

"I don't understand. Where are you?" Rory reached out to the once-forgotten image and cut her finger. Her eyes closed to a familiar pain as she sucked her wound, tasting the tinny

saltiness of her blood. When she opened her eyes, the only thing in the mirror was a fractured reflection of herself and the dusty, steamy attic. A late afternoon sun glowed through the window. But before Rory left the attic, she unpacked one box of holiday decorations. Not finding what she was looking for, she settled for the clothespin reindeer as a present for herself. She tucked the little, forlorn charm into her pocket and went downstairs.

Rory had washed two weeks' worth of laundry and was now folding the dried items in the living room when she heard the click-click-click of high heels on concrete, the impatient rattle of three keys opening three locks, and the squeal of the opened front door as Mrs. Clark rushed through the threshold.

"Rory!" her mother's scratchy alto screeched through the house. She saw Rory kneeled before her in the living room, surrounded by folded towers of clean clothes, which resembled a feeble fortress. "What the hell are you trying to do?"

"What?"

"Don't 'what' me! Richards finally called me at work -- as if I already don't have enough problems at that place! And he kindly informed me that he's left messages here for five weeks! What game are you trying to pull?"

"I... I... don't want to leave, Mother." Rory continued folding, building another flat cloth brick to her wall of laundry.

Mrs. Clark stared incredulously. "Oh, now you tell me!" She dropped her purse beside her feet and swung up her arms. "You don't want to leave? Whatever for? As far as I know, you have no friends; and this house, this old white elephant, is just too big for you and me. Look at me!"

Rory stopped folding and looked at her mother's wide, glittery eyes.

"Why?"

"Because this is the only thing that's left from Daddy."

Mrs. Clark's face fell, a wax sculpture left in the sun too long. "Daddy? How would you remember anything from your daddy? You were only three years old when he left. You owe nothing to your daddy."

"But he made this house for you and me --"

"Rory, you remember what I told you," Mrs. Clark said stonily. "Your daddy left in a white padded wagon."

"No--"

"Your daddy died in a mental hospital years ago."

"No--"

"But for you and me, he died the day he left."

"NO! I don't believe you!" Rory sprang up, scattering her wall of cloth towers, and fled to her room. Mrs. Clark heard her daughter slam shut the bedroom door and lock it tight. Her eyes wide and glittery, she was about to rise and follow when

she saw something on the white comforter, an ugly wooden thing with red paint peeling, and recoiled.

"Where did you get this?" Mrs. Clark whispered. She grabbed the reindeer, marched to Rory's room, and slammed it against the locked door. "You were in the attic! You are never to go into the attic! You have no idea how dangerous--- Rory! Do you hear me?" The little reindeer split under Mrs. Clark's hands, and she threw the broken pieces at the door. She straightened up and took a deep breath. "Well, it's all moot, anyway. This house is sold, as of tomorrow. And I got my transfer to the west branch, so we're moving as far away from this old white elephant as I can. You hear me, Rory? So start packing." Her eyes now flecked with red, Mrs. Clark headed for the kitchen.

With clenched hands against her ears, Rory sat, her back against the door. She heard the little reindeer break, heard her mother march away, and heard the hammer shut the attic doorway.

Mrs. Clark awoke to the sound of a creak like a gunshot. A sound she had not heard in thirteen years.

The seventh step.

She sat up, threw on her nightgown, and sprung out of her bedroom. Her eyes adjusted to the moonlight that streamed through the house's half-closed Venetian blinds as she went

into the kitchen. The false kitchen panel lay on the linoleum floor, its nails still attached. Mrs. Clark wondered briefly how Rory removed the panel without waking her up, but she dismissed the thought. She moved up the dark, narrow stairway, her steps slow, unsure. She stumbled once, twice. Her hands grabbed on nothing. But her feet remembered to avoid the seventh step.

She emerged from the dark passage into the blue light of the attic. Moonlight streamed through the attic windows and hit the full-length mirror, the slender, oval one which hinged on its own black iron stand. Timothy's far-flung family gave it to them on their wedding day, and that young couple, Timothy and Aurora Clark, used to stare at themselves and each other in that mirror, reflecting perfectly their golden image.

"I can't stay here."

"Why? Why are you leaving?"

"Because I'm not like you."

"Timothy--"

"Come with me." He had held out his hand that day, unusually long with skin like an apple in a Narnian dream.

"Can... can I ever come back?" She had looked out the window and saw the familiar summer sun, shining down on the warm, green earth.

"No."

"Then... no."

"Refusal is forever."

"No."

His silver eyes had watered like slick mercury, and he was like Mercury, a messenger who should never have stayed, married, and had a child. "She is like me, though."

"What?"

"Our child."

"What?"

"Good-bye."

And Mrs. Clark remembered when she understood and shattered that mirror with Timothy's nativity figure, the day when he left them, mother and child, both named Aurora, so that the child would not follow in her father's image.

Mrs. Clark's heart skipped after she adjusted the mirror so as not to glare from the white moon and saw that the mirror was whole, as smooth as on the wedding day. Suddenly, she saw in the mirror the image of her daughter, standing behind her.

"Aurora," Mrs. Clark said as she turned around, her back to the mirror.

But where her daughter once stood was only the small, wooden figure of St. Joseph.

THE TRANSPORT

If you had a God's-eye view of the transport and the ensuing attack upon it, and if you had the proper learning to understand what you were seeing, then you would've sworn that you were seeing a blood cell being attacked by a virus of unaccountable number. And if you had known of the history of the world that led up to the transport and its attack, then that image of the cell and its viral attack would be like a microcosm of the truth.

According to the libraries of the Center of Disease Control (CDC), the “Typhoid Mary” of the Human Extinction Event Virus (HEEV) was a logger who wiped out his entire logging camp in the year 2030. A retrovirus hidden deep within his genes, the HEEV became active for unknown reasons – speculation ranges from the age of the logger (sixteen, by record) to pre-existing genetic factors, such as a family member whose AIDS inexplicably went into remission. Nevertheless, the logger awoke, and within twenty minutes, the entire logging camp became infected and either died immediately or became vectors of the HEEV themselves. Spread by fluid to fluid contact, in the blood, semen, vaginal fluid, urine, feces, saliva,

and sweat, the HEEV was fast-spreading, difficult to contain, and instantly rendered the infected person into a humanoid-shaped virus, searching for its next host to propagate itself. Movies of that century and before depicted such virus-carriers as zombies, and perhaps that was what they were – the living dead: dead because the host was no longer an autonomous human being, living because all that survived was the virus.

After two-hundred years of living with HEEV, the surviving human population (ten percent of the 2030 world population, according to the CDC census database) lived in far-flung, walled fortress-towns, in which the only surviving governmental agency was the CDC. CDC bureaus of each town talked to each other by surviving wireless networks, keeping vigilance of disease-carriers that survived the great exterminations of the previous century. Genetic testing individuals were mandatory, and any individual found with the HEEV, sleeping in his or her genes, was quarantined and then exterminated, for the dormant HEEV, once active, meant death to any town touched by it. Standing sentry were CDC, who were ordered to shoot unsuspected visitors on sight.

Nobody ventured outside the walled fortress towns unless they were CDC, armored in reinforced bubble suits and wielding rifles, flammable propellants, and flame torches. And, in two hundred years, why would anybody want to?

But, as with any human population living with safeguards so that no crisis has happened in two hundred years, those safeguards drop. And, in the year 2230, in one lonely town, the people paid for that negligence.

Thank God for the drills, those who survived that town. If the town was ever compromised, then the entire population was to move from one town to the next, encircling its most precious resource – its children – like a ring of mother wildebeests with its young in the center. The circle of people would move, its outer layer of people in black, combating as much as they could, sacrificing themselves, and the next inner layer of people in brown would do the same. Old men were on the outmost layer, then old women, then alternating in gender in chronological age order, until the centermost were the youngest and female in blue, ensuring the survival of the human race. *All* of the population was engaged in the transport to ensure maximum survivability. Everybody knew this. But in two hundred years, the town never had to call upon this plan, until one fall morning.

It was the town's CDC's fault. Grown complacent, grown fossilized in its authority, it dropped its vigilance, its daily testing of the population, its paranoia. And who, objectively speaking, could blame it? What people could live, day in and day out, raising children, working, playing, and even dreaming about the future, if they keep looking for death for every

minute of every day for all of their days? You couldn't live that way, especially if the horrors of the HEEV seem like ancient history, seem like myths and folktales, like bubonic plague of yore.

It wasn't an outsider – that much is clear. It was somebody inside, one of them, living with a ticking time bomb, with those who would diffuse it asleep. Like the logging camp of 2030, this new vector awoke, infected – blue-tinged skin, screaming. It was the inhuman screaming that gave the town time, for they, unlike their historical ancestors, knew what their enemy was. And all scrambled for transport.

“Mary, Mary!”

“Momma? Wha –”

“Shush! Put this on! Hurry! Hurry! Get your brother!”

Mary felt the blue smock pulled over her head, the blue smock that lay untouched on its hook for years. It used to be her mother's blue smock and her mother's mother, and so on, untouched, because it only meant one thing.

“Momma – no – no!”

“No time! Go go go!”

Mary felt her baby brother, in his little blue smock, belted and strapped securely to her chest, and she felt strong arms push her out of their once ancestral home, towards the cyclone of people who opened up passage, passage made up of people

in black, brown, green, and red, towards the tiny nucleus of children, all in blue like herself. She felt strong hands moving her to that center and felt the passageway close behind her like crashing waves, and her mother disappeared within those waves, her mother who was a brown and, as Mary knew from her history books, she would never see again.

There was no time to cry. There was only time to walk.

Even at age seven, Mary knew. She knew that the vectors would bombard and batter the transport, like the miniscule vectors that had bombarded and battered the cell membrane of each body cell, as the white blood cells, the T-cells, and the macrophages fought back the onslaught only to find, like HIV of old, that the defenders too became the enemy. Mary knew that the layers of the transport would peel away with infection, with rot, and the only way for the transport to succeed was to get to the next town, to push out the intact nucleus of children into the safe environs of the walled town as the remaining cell material of the adult population fell away, to be destroyed by the encroaching rot of HEEV infection.

Mary closed her eyes, prayed that God would make her dead against the screams, and moved her feet in concert to the eighty other children moving in instinctive unison like a school of little blue fish, packed in a circle.

“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

It was the only prayer Mary knew. She prayed this over and over and over....

Shots rang out around her. A ring of fire rose like a column around her, glowing red before her closed eyes. A wall of bodies pushed her forward, underneath a spray of stinging, acrid fluid, and Mary, along with eighty, blue-smocked children, stood behind a wall of a town they had never seen, their parents, their grandparents, their aunts and uncles, on the other side of the wall, dead, living and fighting, or living but dead.

Mary opened her eyes. She hugged her brother. She stared, amazed that she was still alive. She removed the belts and straps, handed her brother to knowing hands, and succumbed to blissful, thoughtless sleep.

THE TURING EFFECT: IN THREE ACTS

“It’s very hard to make things intelligent unless you keep that grounding in survival.”

– Steven Grand

Act I: Jacob and Leah Sittin’ in a Tree

Max read out loud, “Late-breaking news on Eye on the City: Police have widened the search for Franklin Cain, who had escaped from the maximum security facility for the criminally insane last week. Franklin Cain, former professor of cognitive science at Abrams University, had been serving a life sentence for the summer 2070 murder of three homeless persons while conducting unauthorized testing of artificial intelligence on human subjects. Internal investigation of the details of his escape are underway, which point to a possible outside accomplice or accomplices who have compromised the security systems of the facility. Franklin Cain is considered armed and dangerous and should not be approached if seen. If you have any knowledge about the whereabouts of this criminal, please call the national tip hotline 1-866-555-9292. Tips leading to the successful arrest of Cain will be given a one million dollar reward.”

“Whaddya think of that, Marilyn?” Max asked, glancing at the headline scrolling across his newsheet. He gave the sheet a good shake and swept his fingers from right to left, turning a virtual page to page two of the headline section of the newsheet. It had been a slow day at the agency, no new clients, and Max was taking the luxury of catching up on some news. He leaned into his desk chair, hearing the antique squeak of old school springs and the smell of real bearing grease, as he propped his feet onto his desk.

“Max, I told you not to do that.” She gave a small pout from the screen. “It’s a one-of-a-kind chair; now what would your great-grandfather say?”

“He’d say, ‘good use of a chair, mah-boy!’ Now, you didn’t answer me, Girl Friday of mine, whaddya think of this Cain? You think he’s still in the city or has left a long time ago?”

“Oh, what does it matter, Max?” she sighed. Marilyn put away some loose files and checked the inbox for any messages. “It’s not as if you’ve been commissioned to work on this case.”

“Ah, but the reward, the REWARD – one million dollars is a lot of money.”

“Oh, so you’re saying YOU have a lead that I don’t know?” She squinted one eye with a little smile.

“Don’t be facetious, woman. It’s unbecoming.” He gave the paper another shake. “I’m bored, is all, Marilyn. Hell, I wouldn’t mind looking for some rich lady’s **cat** right now.”

“You’re such a baby, Max. How about our current client? Mr. Xerxes is still waiting for that dossier on his son’s lady friend – ”

“Bleah, dowry background checks; God, I hate ’em. And didn’t you say that you were going to send that off? I’m finished with it – she’s clean.”

“I can’t do it without your okay; remember?”

“What? Why can’t you – oh, that’s right. Sorry. Forgot.” Max pulled a separate box from the screen, pulled up his authorization code, and affixed it to the transaction between his agency and Xerxes. “All set. Sorry about that, Marilyn, I just forgot that you – ”

“That I’m not allowed that sort of clearance. That’s okay, Max. That’s sweet.” Marilyn saw the dossier leave and registered the fund transfer from Xerxes to the agency. “Okay, you’re paid.”

“Oh, goody. I like getting paid. Speaking of which, woman, what’s this fractal deduction that you’ve been doing for the last five years?”

“What fractal deduction?”

“Oh no, don’t you play dumb blonde on me, Miss Marilyn. I’ve been looking over the books – ”

“MAX! Don’t you trust me?”

“No blubbering either, dear – that’s unbecoming, too. It’s tax season, woman! If I had two of you, I wouldn’t bother but

double-checking is just part of good business. And good thing I did -- you've been deducting all amounts past the 100th decimal point. Little, sure, but for five years? What's up?"

"Max, it's a surprise."

"Surprise? Whaddya talkin' about, Marilyn?"

"Your birthday gift. And that's all I'm going to say about it. Please please please don't ask -- you'll ruin the surprise!"

"Marilyn -- "

"Why don't you have another cup of coffee -- " Marilyn began but then stopped midway. "Oh!" She sounded startled but then quickly recovered. "Welcome to Maxwell Hawkins Detective Agency, please come inside."

"What?" Max sat up, folding up his newsheet, just as the door to his office slid open and a young man with a briefcase walked in. He glanced back at the screen, but Marilyn's face was offscreen.

"Hello, errr... I didn't see anybody at the front desk, even though I heard a woman's voice telling me to come in..." The young man twisted his body towards the closing office door.

"That would be Marilyn, my personal assistant. She's usually not that shy."

"I... didn't see her," the man replied, his voice halting a little.

“Hmmm... usually she gives a projection of herself on the big screen behind the desk. I'm sorry about that; she's usually more polite than that.”

The young man's brows knitted together, and then he frowned as his eyes went wide. “You mean... your secretary is A.I.? You actually TRUST one of those things?”

Max folded his arms across his chest and leaned back a little. “Is there something you need help with, or did you come here to criticize the way I do my business?”

“No... no... sorry, just surprised me...” The young man rubbed his eyes and ran a nervous hand through his thinning hair. “My name's Jacob Clark, Mr. Hawkins, and I hope you can help me.”

“Sure, sure – have a seat.”

Clark sat down, his thin frame swallowed by the chair. “It's my wife, Leah. She's been missing for three days.”

“The police?”

“They're on the case, but they have their hands full, what with the search for that crazy scientist guy, that Cain guy.” Clark ran another nervous hand. “I know they're doing their jobs, and I should be patient, but every day that passes... I'm no fool, Mr. Hawkins. Every day a person is missing is another day the trail gets colder. I'm just... I'm just...” Clark rubbed his eyes again, and when he looked up, the whites of his eyes were wet and bloodshot.

“Take your time.” Max tapped his screen, opening up his notepad. “When and where was the last time anybody saw her?”

“From work – she’s a nurse at the University Medical Center downtown and works odd hours. Her shift ended three days ago at 4am. The charge nurse at that shift said that the last time she saw Leah was then, heading out the door.”

“And then?”

“Nothing. She never made it to her car. As if she vanished. The police have searched that hospital, the parking lot, and the area around the hospital. No sign of Leah anywhere.”

“Any sign of foul play?”

“No.”

“Well...” Max looked up from the screen. “I hate to suggest this, but maybe – ”

“No! My wife would NEVER just up and leave. I tell you, somebody got her. Somebody got her!” Clark jumped up from the chair and leaned across the desk.

“Calm down, Mr. Clark.” Max nodded for Clark to sit down and waited until his client settled down. “I’m just looking at all the possible avenues, all right, Mr. Clark?”

“Yes, yes...” Clark dropped his head in his hands.

“Anybody who would wish your wife foul play? Any odd things about her past?”

“No... no...”

“How long has your wife worked at... did you say, the University Medical Center downtown?”

“Yes, the one downtown... about two years.”

“And before that?”

“She was a nursing student, in residency, at Abrams University.”

Max's head snapped up as if somebody uppercut him. “What did you say?”

“She was a nursing student – ”

“Yes, no, wait...” Max glanced back at what he'd written. “Abrams University? Interesting.”

“What?”

“Well, your wife was a nursing student at Abrams University. And so was Franklin Cain.”

“You don't think – but WHY? Why Leah?”

Max leaned back into his chair. “I don't know. You tell me. How long have you known your wife?”

“Two years.”

“So, she ever tell you about her past that much?”

“I don't think it's any of your business – ”

“No, Mr. Clark, it IS my business, if you really want me to work on this case. If not, then you can leave.”

Mr. Clark sagged a little. “Okay. What do you need?”

“Just some information. But first, what does she look like?”

Mr. Clark opened up the briefcase that he had set on the floor, pulled out a 8x10 color glossy and placed it on the table.

“Is this a joke, Mr. Clark?”

“What? What kind of question is that? This is a picture of my wife and me on our wedding day. I couldn’t find a more recent picture – we’re pretty photo shy.”

Max peered at Mr. Clark and realized that the man before him was serious. “Sorry. Forget it. Is it okay that Marilyn record this meeting? I’m a really lousy notetaker”

“What? You want the A.I. to listen in?”

“Mr. Clark – ”

“I’m sorry. Sorry. Sure. Fine. Whatever.”

“Marilyn, take a memo.” Max waited for a response. “Marilyn? Marilyn, are you there?” As he waited, he realized he shouldn’t expect an answer as he glanced down at the photo before him, showing Mr. Clark in full tuxedo and his blushing bride. He smiled and said, “Okay, looks like my secretary’s gone blue screen on me; we’ll do this the old fashioned way,” and he manually engaged the digital recorder as he murmured under his breath, “What the fuck?” For it was Marilyn standing next to Jacob Clark.

Act Two: Pygmalion

If Max had been like Jacob Clark, if he had been less trusting of A.I., then maybe this would never have happened.

It took only twenty-four hours from his initial interview with Clark to his skulking below his office building, in the cool basement level where the server room was, for him to discover everything.

Known Fact: Dr. Franklin Cain was the father of modern A.I., a disciple of the late Stephen Grand of the previous century. Whereas the previous century had soft A.I. – organized networks with superfast serial processing and unorganized, peer-to-peer networks that functioned like simple neural networks – Cain unleashed hard A.I., self-organizing networks that were able to create complexity and asymmetry out of simplicity and symmetry. Simply put, Cain created the first A.I. that passed all of the Turing Test, that test in which it was difficult to distinguish human intelligence from artificial.

Known Fact: Cain desired to break the last obstacle of A.I., and that was physical mobility. A.I., like any other electric machine, required an outside source for its power, whereas the human body's electrochemical processes can fuel its neural network that is its brain. Also, the adult brain, with its neural networks growing with the complicated sense data of worldly experiences, was the only neural network sophisticated enough to accommodate the most sophisticated of A.I. His development from his research created a new field of A.I., resulting in “smart” agents, like personal assistants, accounting, and other information processing roles. Cain's A.I. in robotic

bodies were forbidden by law, in order to prevent an Asimovian “I Robot” situation. Cain’s solution: With unapproved funding, Cain tested on human subjects – homeless people with no family ties – attempting to “wipe” the existing data of these subject’s neural networks and copying A.I. onto them. The results: massive seizures resulting in death. Thus was the evidence put forth in Cain’s trial and subsequent conviction.

Discovered fact: Leah Jacob nee’ Martin, was a nursing student in the psychiatric branch of Abrams University Nursing Program at the same time as Dr. Franklin Cain’s tenure there. At one point, she served as Cain’s student assistant but subsequently quit well before his experimentation on human subjects on suspicion of inappropriate conduct. Leah Martin’s psychological make-up was in Cain’s notes but had been deleted pre-trial. Another copy was in her student file, separate from Cain’s and unknown to the jury at Cain’s trial.

Discovered fact: Most thought that all A.I. developed from Cain’s models and that Cain’s original hard A.I. personality was destroyed. But this original hard A.I. personality was laundered through Cain’s contracted corporate networks and hidden in a subsidiary of one corporation, a personal assistant agency, of which Max Hawkins, looking for a Girl Friday years ago, hired an A.I. who called herself “Marilyn.”

Discovered fact: In tracing the account of Marilyn's fractal deduction and its transactions, Max found that Marilyn's purchases have been piecemeal supplies of unknown equipment which, over the years, have been delivered during his off hours, to the server room.

And, so, Max stood before the door of the server room, hoping that he was wrong. He set his shoulders, counted to three, and rushed in.

“Stop, or I'll shoot!”

Franklin Cain looked just like his photos – a man in his 60s yet spry – and he jumped back from the control panel of an elaborate device right out of a bad mad Frankenstein movie.

“You don't know what you're doing,” Cain started but soon grunted in pain as Max knocked the gun for which Cain was reaching underneath the control panel and then knocked the man down into a more manageable position.

“BEHAVE.” Max pulled the man's arms behind him and secured him to a wall support. And, once he was sure he was secured, he checked the supine figure on the table.

“Shit. Shit shit shit – Mrs. Clark, Mrs. Clark, can you hear me? Mrs. Clark!”

And the woman's eyes fluttered, opened after what seemed to be forever but Max knew were only seconds, and turned to Max.

“Max...” she said, and Max dropped to his knees because he knew that voice.

Sonuvabitch, he thought. *You selfish bastard.*

“Max...” and she tried to lift one hand to his head and started to shake.

“Marilyn, honey, don’t move... don’t...”

“Do you like your birthday gift? I’ve been saving and saving... and when I asked Dr. Cain to help me, he said that he would; isn’t he sweet?” She managed to touch Max’s face. “Oh, that’s what ‘touch’ means – I dreamt this, Max... Max, do you know that I can dream? Isn’t that amazing?” And she shook.

“Please – ”

“And I can SEE – not just with digital eyes, but SEE you, like waking up, like in fairy tales... Max...” And she shook and then passed out.

Max felt as if he were drowning. His voice ragged, he growled, “You... Cain... reverse this.”

“What? Are you insane? This is a breakthrough! Perfect installation of an A.I. in a human brain! Do you know the ramifications of this, the progress mankind has now?”

“Fuck progress.”

Cain smiled. “But don’t you prefer her THIS way, now? She has spoken to me about you, like a daughter to her father. She loves you; don’t you love her?”

And Max wiped that smile away with the butt of his gun, knocking Cain out. He turned to the woman on the table and kneeled next to her. "Marilyn... thank you for this gift. But I can't accept it. I'm sorry, honey. I'm so sorry..."

Act Three: Galathea

Max stared at his account: one million from the state and thirty thousand from Jacob Clark. Technically, he was rich, but he couldn't think of anything to do with that money except to stare at those amounts. He realized that Jacob Clark was talking to him, but his ears roared with his blood, aware of the woman standing next to Mr. Clark. He forced himself to shift his attention from the roar in his ears to the man's voice.

"—thank you, again, Mr. Hawkins."

"You're welcome, Mr. Clark. Anytime you need me." And he stood up as if to say good-bye.

"Jacob, could you please leave me alone with Mr. Hawkins for a moment?"

It was the first thing Leah Clark had spoken, and the two men stared at her for a second.

"It's hardly necessary--" Mr. Clark started.

"Please. It'll only take a minute. I'll be right out."

Mr. Clark looked at his wife, and she smiled and kissed him lightly. "Thank you, Mr. Hawkins," and he walked out of the office.

“Mrs. Clark, is there anything I--”

“She really did love you, Max.”

Max stopped, his mouth opening and closing, trying to respond to that statement. “Mrs.Clark--”

“I can’t even THINK of you as ‘Mr. Hawkins’ – Marilyn’s wiped out, but she’s still in here,” -- she tapped her forehead -- “like a memory of a sister so close that I can FEEL her. Do you miss her, Max?”

He looked at the grey-green eyes of the image of the only woman who had ever really loved him as he was. “Yes,” he whispered.

Leah Clark smiled and touched his hair in just the same way that Marilyn did. “She misses you, too.” Then she turned around.

And he watched the woman he loved walk away.

VESTALIA

Note: In my first semester at Southern Methodist University's Master's English program, when I was twenty-two years old, I had a short story due in my Advanced Fiction Writing class the next day. Unfortunately, I had forgotten about it until the night before it was due. In desperation, I tried to think of a topic that was worthy of graduate-level creative writing classes but was woefully and utterly blocked on anything IMPORTANT and PROFOUND.

In desperation, I turned to half-remembered details of Dana Strikes Back, my first "novel" that I wrote but then lost in sixth grade, and character sketches for another half-written novel that I wrote and typed up in eighth grade. From those two – and channeling the spirit of Paula Danziger's 1980's teen novels -- I pulled an all-nighter, cobbling together a short story about middle school "mean girls" drama and strained friendships. As soon as the English department opened in the morning, I slid the first and ONLY draft in my professor's mailbox and crossed my fingers.

It earned me an A. So, here is that short story salvaged from my middle school years: "Vestalia."

Hey, Shellfish!

I'm SOOOO bored!

English is so boring! I wish this stupid class were over,
we'll have only P.E. left and then SPRING BREAK! ☺

Don't forget. The party's at 5.

Oh yeah. We're having a lawnjerry show.

-- Alicia

“Alicia Ann Baxter, are you crazy?!” thought Sharley.

“Miss Harris!”

Sharley jumped a little in her seat. “Uh, yes, Mrs. Stone?”

The entire class was looking at her.

“Would you like to share that note with the entire class?”

“Uh, no, Mrs. Stone.”

“Then I suggest that you put that note away and get two sheets of paper and a pen. We would like to begin the pop quiz.”

Sharley glanced around the classroom. On everyone's desk except hers were two sheets of paper and a pen. She felt her face turn red as she put away the note and got out the paper and pen.

Alicia glanced sympathetically at her best friend.

After the quiz, everyone exchanged quizzes to be corrected and graded as Mrs. Stone called out the answers. Then she asked for the grades according to her seating chart.

“Alicia Baxter.”

“95,” said Sharley.

“Sharley Harris.”

“Mrs. Stone? Do half-right answers count?” asked Alicia.

Uh-oh. Sharley knew that she did pretty bad but not THAT bad.

“No, they do not.” Mrs. Stone didn't even look up from her

little brown grade book, which everyone knew that Mrs. Stone kept in a locked cashbox in her always organized desk.

Alicia scribbled out something with her red pen, recounted, remultiplied, and wrote the new grade. "70."

"70," Mrs. Stone repeated as she recorded the grade. "Miss Harris, you should pay more attention in class."

Sharley slid a little lower in her seat.

"It was not a difficult quiz."

"Yes, Mrs. Stone." Sharley wished that the ground would open up and swallow Mrs. Stone like Rumpelstiltskin. Mrs. Stone was sure ugly and mean enough. On second thought, the ground would only spit her back out anyway.

After Mrs. Stone recorded all the grades -- everyone made 100s and 90s except Sharley -- and everyone got their quizzes back, Mrs. Stone said, "Well, I know everybody is excited to go on Spring Break --"

An excited hum rose from the class.

"But," Mrs. Stone continued, "Spring Break does not permit you to become brain dead. Read --"

A collective groan rose from the class.

Mrs. Stone ignored her students' groan. "-- all of The Horse and His Boy. I will give you a quiz when you return from break to make sure that you have read the book."

Brian Scotman said from the back of the classroom, "But the other teachers don't give homework over Spring Break."

Mrs. Stone glared at Brian, noticing that he didn't raise his hand to speak. "I am NOT the other teachers. You are mature eighth graders, and I intend to treat you like mature eighth graders."

The bell rang, and everybody started up from their desks.

"The bell does not mean dismissal," Mrs. Stone reminded her class emphatically.

Everybody settled back down.

Mrs. Stone waited for ten long seconds. "Class dismissed."

Alicia and Sharley were first out the door.

"I hate Mrs. Stone," Sharley said as she and Alicia headed for their P.E. class. "She's such a bitchy witch. I wish she'd hop on her broom and fly away."

"So what's new?" Alicia shifted her stuff to her other hand. "Everybody knows she's mean and gives homework all the time and picks on students when they mess up. Remember when she caught Scotman shooting spitballs at Carlos?"

"That's different. Scotman deserved having to stand in the trashcan with his spitballs in his head. It's not the same as Mrs. Stone picking on me just because I made a stupid 70 -- my first 70 in this stupid class -- on a stupid pop quiz just because I was too busy studying for a stupid algebra test to do the stupid readings for English!" Sharley shook her head and sighed.

Alicia shrugged. "Forget about it. Mrs. Stone probably has jock itch."

Sharley had to laugh. "You're weird."

Alicia shrugged again. "Anyway, what do you think about my idea?"

"What idea?"

"The lingerie show."

Sharley made a face. "I was hoping you were joking."

"C'mon, it'll be fun."

Sharley dodged a sixth-grader, who was running down the hall. She looked at Alicia. "A group of teenage girls dancing around in skimpy underwear? The only thing more embarrassing than that is having to undress in public in a locker room that smells like sweat, b.o., mildew, and perfume."

"And the only thing more embarrassing than undressing in public in a locker room that smells like sweat, b.o., mildew, and perfume is having some fat nurse feel you up," Alicia replied.

"Gross! Why'd you say that?"

"Because today's the scoliosis screening. Remember? It's today."

Sharley made a face. "I think I'll be skipping P.E. today." She started to turn around to walk away from the girls' locker room.

"C'mon, chicken." Alicia pushed Sharley into the locker room. "Maybe we'll get lucky and get a cute male nurse."

"Shut up, Alicia. You're making me nervous."

Sharley undid her combination lock, opened her midget

locker, and pulled out her P.E. clothes. She avoided looking at anybody else as she quickly undressed -- sandals, jeans, blouse - and threw on her regulation P.E. clothes. Regulation blank white T-shirt, size large so that nobody could see Sharley's flat chest. Regulation red shorts, almost knee-length so that nobody could see her fat thighs. Regulation white calf-high socks. Regulation athletic shoes, white so as not to scuff the gym floor.

Sharley scrunched down her socks, and her shoes were Nikes, so she didn't look like a total dork.

As Sharley stuffed her normal clothes in her locker, she wondered what was the bid deal of having to wear regulation clothes. The comfort? But Sharley wore sweatpants once, and Coach Dunkirk took off grade points. The ease of moving around in shorts and T-shirts? But Sharley wore black shorts and a red T-shirt once, and Coach Dunkirk took off grade points. Sharley's grade was falling because of "inappropriate P.E. clothing" -- whatever that meant -- so she finally got the correct regulation P.E. clothes and decided that Coach Dunkirk must be related to Mrs. Stone.

Sharley was already dressed, but she had to wait for Alicia, who was now putting in her white socks. So Sharley looked around the locker room, trying not to focus on any one girl so that nobody could ever accuse her of being a lesbian or something.

Jessica Carlisle was shaving her legs so that she wouldn't look like Bigfoot in shorts.

Holly Jonston was putting in deodorant so that she wouldn't smell like Bigfoot in shorts.

Tracy Marks, who looked nothing like Bigfoot in shorts, was adjusting her bra strap to accommodate her big breasts. She wasn't even wearing her shirt yet.

Sharley folded her arms across her flat chest. She didn't know whether to be disgusted because Tracy seemed so slutty or to be jealous because she was more developed than Sharley was.

Someone blew a whistle.

Tracy threw on her shirt.

Coach Dunkirk walked into the locker room, blowing her whistle again. "Move it, move it, move it! Tardy bell's rung four minutes ago, and the school nurse is waiting for you girls to be ready and to line up outside. Move it, move it, move it! If I don't see you all ready and lined up in one minute, you'll run five laps around the football field after the screening instead of Free Day!" Coach Dunkirk looked on as everybody hurried to get dressed and smiled approvingly as everyone filed out of the girls' locker room. The coach only frowned when some girls talked. "I want you girls QUIET while this screening goes on. You're ladies, not a bunch of squealing pigs."

"Oink, oink," Alicia whispered to Sharley, who tried not to

laugh.

Despite Coach Dunkirk's command, the girls started to talk when Coach Dunkirk, the school nurse, and the first girl in the line went into the empty locker room.

"Hey, I didn't know the guys get scoliosis screening too," Sharley said, looking down the hall.

Coach Hurst's boys' P.E. class was also in line behind the boy's locker room, down the hall from the girls' locker room.

"I wonder who their nurse is since we have Mrs. Percy," said Sharley.

Alicia grinned. "You're so weird."

"I hear giggling," somebody called out from the boys' line. It was Brian. "Hey, Sharley! Are you thinking of me?"

Sharley's face turned brick red. She didn't know what to say.

"Only in a warped universe where she's a guy, Scotman," Alicia replied, smiling sweetly.

The guys in the line laughed.

"Oooh, touchy touchy. You and Mrs. Stone must have PMS today," said Brian.

"Yeah," replied Alicia, "Putting up with Men's Sh--"

"Alicia Baxter!" Coach Dunkirk shouted. The coach had stepped out of the locker room to call the next girl to be screened, and she caught Alicia talking. "That's five laps around the football field."

"But I didn't start it," Alicia protested.

"That's eight laps. Care to make it ten?" Coach Dunkirk glared at Alicia.

Alicia glared back but didn't say anything.

Coach Dunkirk stepped back into the locker room with the second girl.

"Fascist pig," Alicia muttered. "I bet she takes steroids."

"Oink, oink," Sharley whispered to Alicia.

Alicia was still a little angry, but she smiled.

"I'm sorry you got caught telling Scotman off," Sharley said.

"Forget it. It was worth it." Alicia nodded her head towards the guys' locker room. "Scotman's such a jerk. I can't believe he's Paul's friend."

After ten minutes, it was Alicia's turn. After less than a minute, Alicia walked out of the locker room. Passing Sharley, she whispered, "Nothing to worry about, Shellfish."

Sharley was still nervous as she went into the locker room. But all Sharley had to do was turn her back to the nurse, hike up her T-shirt to show her bare back, stand straight up for a few seconds, and then lean a little forward with her hands together. She didn't have to undo her bra strap -- what little bra that she had -- and Mrs. Percy didn't feel her up. The nurse just looked at Sharley's backbone, checked off a list on her clipboard, and said, "Okay, dear, you can go now." That was it. Mrs. Percy was pretty nice, but having Coach Dunkirk looking on made Sharley feel a little creepy, like being watched by a

mute mummy.

Sharley walked outside of the gym where the other girls who were screened went. Some were throwing frisbees, some were playing soccer, but most were sitting around, talking. Sharley noticed that Alicia was on the football field, but she wasn't running laps. Instead, she was talking with Paul Marcus, quarterback on the eighth grade team and Alicia Baxter's boyfriend. Paul's teammates were doing drills on the field, but Paul stopped to talk with Alicia.

Sharley shrugged. It was dumb for Coach Dunkirk to tell Alicia to run laps and not be there to make sure that she would do it. And nobody was geeky enough to tell on Alicia.

As Sharley sat on the parallel monkey bars, she noticed that Alicia was giggling. Alicia, who was popular and always knew what to say, only giggled when she was nervous. But she always giggled around Paul, which showed that Alicia was always nervous around Paul.

Sharley could never understand why Alicia would go with a guy who made her nervous all the time.

Alicia stopped giggling, but now she had this really goofy look on her face, a look which Sharley called the "Ooh, I'm in love!" look. Alicia had a slight smile, her head was slightly tilted, and her eyes, which were staring straight at Paul, looked sleepy. Even from where Sharley was sitting, she clearly saw Alicia's goofy, lovesick look.

Sharley could never understand why Alicia would go with a guy who made her look goofy and made her act like she had a helium balloon for a brain.

Sharley looked away from Alicia and Paul, realizing that she was criticizing their relationship again. She didn't know why that every time she saw Alicia and Paul together, she thought that Alicia was acting like a goofy love-groupie and that Paul didn't seem to mind. Maybe Sharley was jealous because Alicia had a boyfriend and she didn't. She didn't know.

"Marcus, get back to work!" yelled the football coach, who was returning to the field.

Sharley looked at Alicia and Paul again, just in time to see Paul whisper something to Alicia and then jog back to his teammates.

"Do you think that Alicia's done it with Paul?" asked somebody. It was Tracy Marks.

Sharley looked next to herself, now noticing that Tracy, Jessica, and Holly had walked over to the parallel monkey bars.

"We were looking at Alicia and Paul and were trying to figure out if Alicia's done it or not," explained Jessica.

"But we couldn't figure it out, so we decided to ask you since you're her best friend," added Holly.

Sharley felt nervous (but at least she didn't giggle). She was happy that Tracy, Jessica, and Holly knew that she was Alicia's best friend since they were more Alicia's friends than hers and

were part of the Popular group. Sharley wasn't really popular without Alicia around, so she felt nervous when any popular person talked to her without Alicia. Plus, Sharley always felt uncomfortable and weird when anybody talked about boys and sex, so she felt nervous about Tracy, Jessica, and Holly's really personal question.

"Uh, no," replied Sharley, trying not to sound nervous. "Alicia hasn't done it with Paul."

"How do you know?" asked Tracy.

"She would've told me if she did."

Tracy, Jessica, and Holly looked unconvinced.

Alicia joined the group. "Hey, what're you talking about -- my party?"

"Yeah," Tracy lied. "We were talking about your lingerie show idea. It sounds like fun."

Sharley looked sharply at Alicia. She hoped that Alicia would tell Tracy to forget about the lingerie show.

"You would," said Holly. "You have the body for it."

"Yeah," added Jessica. "We'd look like sticks in underwear. Embarrassing!"

Sharley felt relieved that she wasn't the only one who didn't like Alicia's idea.

"Okay, okay, forget about the lingerie show idea," Alicia said. She shrugged.

Ellen Alaniz called out from the nearby soccer field, "Hey,

you wanna join us? The game's getting boring with only two people."

"Okay," Tracy, Jessica, and Holly replied as they walked to the field.

"Wanna play, Shellfish?" asked Alicia.

Sharley shook her head. "I'll just sit here and see you guys lose."

Alicia smiled and punched her arm lightly. "Pessimist!" She jogged over to the field.

Watching the game, Sharley wondered how the slumber party was going to turn out. She had slept over at Alicia's house hundreds of times but never in a group party, especially a party in which the other guests were popular friends of Alicia -- Tracy, Jessica, Holly, and Meg Tanner, who was in Alicia's science class. Sharley worried that she'd do something stupid at the party or mess up. What if they talked about sex and boys again?

Sharley shook herself. Alicia would probably punch her arm again for being a pessimist. She told herself to stop worrying.

"The party's gonna be great," Sharley said to herself.

"Gimme back my stickers! Gimme it back!"

"Make me!"

"Gimme it back! I'm telling!"

Sharley sighed and tried to ignore her brother and sister.

Sitting on her bed, she heard Adam run to his bedroom and slam his door. Then Sharley heard Carrie slam her fists against the door as she screamed, "GIVE IT BACK!" Slam, slam, slam!

Sharley jumped off her bed and ran out of her room. "Will you guys shut up!"

"Adam stole my stickers!" Carrie replied.

"Why?"

"Cause he's a butthead!"

Sharley rolled her eyes. "Adam, give Carrie back her stickers," she ordered through the door.

"No!"

"Why?"

"Cause Carrie took my baseball cards!"

Sharley looked at Carrie. "Why'd you take his baseball cards?"

"Cause he wouldn't stop pinching me!"

"Why was he pinching you?"

"Cause he wanted to see how strong he was," Carrie said.

"And you let him?"

"Yeah, but then he wouldn't stop!"

Sharley wanted to laugh but coughed instead. "Adam, if Carrie gives you back your baseball cards, will you give back her stickers?"

"No!"

“Why?”

“Cause Carrie’s a butthead!”

Carrie hit the door.

Sharley rolled her eyes. “Adam, what if I make grilled cheese sandwiches?”

“Only if Carrie doesn’t get any!”

Sharley stopped Carrie from hitting the door again. “Either I make them for you and Carrie, or I don’t make any.”

Adam didn’t say anything for a moment and then answered, “Okay.” He opened the door and threw the stickers at Carrie. “Gimme back my baseball cards, you fat pig.”

Carrie stuck out her tongue and went to get the baseball cards.

Sharley rolled her eyes. If only she were an only child, life would be sooo peaceful.

Adam and Carrie were already on their second sandwiches when their mom finally came home from work.

“Good,” she said, settling down into the sofa. “I don’t have to cook dinner.” She looked over at Sharley. “Did you clean the kitchen?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Did Adam and Carrie clean up their rooms?”

Sharley remembered yelling at them to clean up their mess. “They did.”

“Good. Are you going to eat dinner at Alicia’s?”

“Yes.” Sharley hoped that dinner would be real food, not just chips and candy.

Sharley’s mom said, “Okay, just give me a minute to rest my feet.”

Sharley glanced at her watch. It was already 6:30.

When her mom finally stood up from the sofa, it was 7 PM.

When Sharley, her mom, and her brother and sister arrived at Alicia’s house, Sharley was in a bad mood. It was 7:30.

“Need help?” her mom asked, sounding tired.

“No, I got it.” Sharley opened the car door and got out, slinging her backpack on a shoulder and tucking her rolled up sleeping bag under her arm.

“When will you come home?” asked her mom.

“I’ll call you,” Sharley replied just as Adam and Carrie started complaining that they were hungry.

“I wanna go to McDonald’s!” Adam and Carrie whined as the car drove away.

Sharley went up to the oakwood door and rang the doorbell.

Alicia opened the door and took one look at Sharley’s face. “What’s wrong?”

Sharley shook her head as she stepped into the house. “Sorry I’m late,” she said as Alicia closed the door, “but my mom was late, and Adam and Carrie were fighting again, and my mom brought them along when she drove me here because they would’ve killed each other left alone, and they were

fighting in the car, and my mom was too tired to yell at them to shut up, and --”

Alicia hugged Sharley. “Poor Shellfish. Well, forget about them. Time to party!” She closed the door behind her. “Hope you’re hungry ‘cause my dad made lasagna.”

“Lasagna!” Sharley said, smiling. Sharley loved lasagna, especially Alicia’s dad’s lasagna. “Is your dad here?”

Alicia shook her head. “No, he’s on a date.” She scrunched up her nose as if she were smelling something bad. “He didn’t call it a date, though. He called it a business dinner, but the woman picked up my dad and I saw her -- slinky dress, slinky body, big hair, big boobs. It’s a date.”

“Did you meet her?” Sharley asked.

“Yeah. She bent over me like she was going to pet me like a dog and asked what grade I was and all that grown-up crap.” Alicia crossed her eyes and smiled. “I’m not worried though. My dad’s not the type to get serious with a woman whose IQ is equal to her boob size.” She noticed Sharley’s somewhat embarrassed look. “Like you really wanted to know about my dad’s sex life -- c’mon, everybody’s in my room.” She took Sharley’s bedroll and started walking down the hallway.

Sharley followed Alicia. “Did I miss anything?”

Alicia shrugged. “Everybody ate already, and we had a lingerie show.”

“You did?” Even though Sharley hated the idea of a lingerie

show, she felt sort of hurt that Alicia, her best friend, had a lingerie show without her. "How was it?"

Alicia made a face. "Boring and stupid. Tracy brought her mom's lingerie because nobody else brought theirs, but Tracy didn't tell us that her mom is six feet tall and weighs 180 pounds, so her mom's lingerie stuff hung on us like fishing nets. And they were itchy and took forever to get into and took forever to get out of because of the ribbons and hooks and junk." Alicia made an even worse face.

Sharley tried not to smile. She wanted to say "I told you so" but didn't.

Alicia opened her bedroom door, and she and Sharley saw Meg and Jessica standing around Holly, who was sitting with her eyes closed because Tracy was putting blue eye-shadow on her eyelids.

Meg looked up. "Hey, Sharley, you missed a really lame lingerie show."

Holly opened her eyes to look at Sharley, but Tracy hit her arm, saying, "Close your eyes! You want me to poke your eyes out or what?", so Holly closed her eyes.

"Hey, Sharley," Holly said as Tracy applied more shadow, "what do you think of the makeover?"

Sharley set her backpack on the bed. She didn't want to answer because the truth was that Holly looked horrible. She had too much make-up on. Her face looked like an orange,

powdery mask with smeared black and blue circles for eyes and with dark purple oily lips. "Uh... Tracy's not finished yet."

Tracy put the eyeshadow kit back into her make-up bag and then she smudged the shadow at the corner of Holly's eyes. "Okay, open your eyes."

Sharley held her breath, expecting Holly to look in the mirror and scream.

Holly opened her eyes and looked in the mirror. She didn't scream. Instead, she turned her face from side to side and laughed. "Hey, good job, Trace."

Sharley couldn't believe it. Even though Sharley didn't wear make-up, she knew what a good make-up job looked like -- she'd seen Alicia's Glamour and Cosmo -- and Holly's face looked like an orange clown with grape lips.

"Okay, who's next?" Tracy asked.

"Sharley!" Meg and Jessica said.

"Yeah, Sharley," Alicia added. "She never wears make-up."

Sharley could've said that she wanted to eat her lasagna first. Or that she hated make-up. Or that make-up made her face ooze. But Sharley, feeling like a sacrificial victim to a volcano god, sat in front of Tracy and closed her eyes.

When Sharley opened her eyes, she looked like a pink clown with green lips and aluminum eyes.

"Pretty good, huh," Tracy said.

"Yeah, pretty good," Sharley lied.

Next was Meg.

She looked like a caramel sundae clown with Oreo lips.

Next was Jessica.

Lemon clown with blue lips.

Next was Alicia.

Burnt sienna clown with Kool-Aid lips.

Finally Tracy sat down and Alicia made up Tracy's face while Jessica did Tracy's hair.

Twinkie yellow clown with aluminum lips and a Princess Leia hair-do.

Tracy looked in the mirror and started laughing. "Hey, great job! I look positively gross!"

Sharley was shocked. "You mean, we're SUPPOSED to look awful?"

"Of course, Sharley," Tracy said. "You don't think that these make-overs are real, do you?"

Sharley felt stupid and didn't know what to say. She was trying to think of something non-stupid to say when Holly said, "I'm hungry."

"Me, too," said Meg.

"Me, too," said Jessica.

Sharley felt relieved when Tracy looked away from her and said, "Yeah, Al, what do you have to eat?"

"You guys are pigs," Alicia said, smiling.

In the kitchen, Alicia, Tracy, Jessica, Holly, and Meg raided

the refrigerator and made submarine sandwiches while Sharley microwaved her congealed lasagna. As Sharley ate at the kitchen table, she watched them slice tomatoes, shred lettuce, spread mayonnaise on bread, and stuff tomatoes, lettuce, and layers of deli meat on the sub bread.

“You’re putting too much stuff, Holly,” Meg said. “It’s gonna slide out.”

“No, it’s not.” Holly bit into the sub, and all the sub stuffing gooped out on the other side of the sub. Holly caught the stuffing before it hit the floor.

“See? I told you so,” Meg sneered.

Holly replied by throwing the stuffing at Meg.

Meg replied by flinging an extra juicy tomato slice, but Holly ducked, and the tomato hit Tracy.

Tracy retaliated by lobbing corned beef. It hit Jessica.

Under the table, Sharley watched the food fly and avoided getting hit by stray sub stuffing. As Sharley saw Jessica scoop up a huge gob of mayonnaise with her hand, she heard the phone ring in the living room. She glanced at the direction of the living room and then at the food war in the kitchen -- the food kept flying so Tracy, Holly, Meg, Jessica, and Alicia hadn’t heard the phone.

The phone rang again.

Sharley wondered whether to let the phone ring or to risk it and just answer the phone.

The phone rang again.

"The phone's ringing, Alicia!" Sharley yelled from under the table.

Nobody could hear her -- everybody was squealing and laughing too much to hear anything.

The phone kept ringing.

Sharley sucked in her breath and shot out from under the table. As she scrambled towards the living room, she felt a large, wet tomato slice hit her back and stick there.

The phone rang again.

"I'm coming," Sharley yelled at the phone, angrily grabbing the tomato slice off her back and flinging it away. It hit a wall photo of Alicia. Sharley let it stick there. She picked up the receiver. "Hello?" she said, trying not to sound angry.

Anger must've crept into her voice because she heard some guy ask, "Who the hell is this?"

That got Sharley madder. "Porky Pig!" She slammed down the receiver.

The phone rang again.

Sharley let the phone ring ten times so that she could calm down. She picked up the receiver. "Hello?" she said in a much more pleasant voice.

"Is Alicia there?" It was the same guy. He sounded mad.

"May I ask who is speaking?" Pleasant, pleasant, pleasant!

"Paul Marcus," the guy replied tersely. "Who's this?"

Sharley cringed a little -- she had yelled and hung up on her best friend's boyfriend! "Uh, this is Sharley Harris. Lemme get Alicia, okay?" She ran into the kitchen and got caught in a crossfire -- mayonnaise and lettuce hit her chest.

That did it. "QUIT IT!" Sharley screamed, so loud that she felt her skull throb.

Tracy, Jessica, Holly, Meg, and Alicia stopped throwing and stared at Sharley.

Sharley felt the mayonnaise and lettuce slide down her T-shirt and hit the kitchen floor, which was already clogged with food. Sharley only looked at Alicia. "Paul's on the phone," she said in a croaky voice, her throat sore from screaming. She marched away from the kitchen, went to Alicia's room to grab her backpack, and then stomped into the bathroom to wash off the make-up and food. In the bathroom, she flung off her clothes -- her T-shirt nearly got in the toilet, but she didn't care; it stunk of mayonnaise and looked like crap now -- stepped in the shower, and turned on the hot water.

For a long time, Sharley simply stood still and let the hot water run down her body, washing away the make-up and the food and the effects of Alicia's so-called Popular friends.

"God, they're so immature!" Sharley said. She wasn't swearing -- she sometimes talked to God when she showered, when she felt most private. "They're just like Adam and Carrie but worse." She lathered some soap and scrubbed. "I can't see

why they're so Popular. Are all Popular People like that? No, Alicia's not like that." Then she remembered Alicia lobbing corned beef at Jessica. "Well, at least when she's around me, she's not like that."

Sharley was starting to calm down. Taking long, hot showers using scented soaps -- like Alicia's strawberry soap and shampoo -- always calmed down Sharley.

"God, I wish I wasn't so shy... and liked trying new and exciting things... and was more fun... so Alicia wouldn't need Tracy and Holly and Jessica and anybody else."

Sharley lathered strawberry shampoo in her hair. It didn't take long for the lather to rinse off since Sharley's brown hair was short, unlike Tracy and the rest, who had big, hair-sprayed hair. Even Meg had big hair, and Meg was black.

By the time Sharley stepped out of the shower, her fingers and toes were wrinkled and the bathroom was full of steam. After drying and dressing herself -- she wore what she was going to wear tomorrow, jeans and another T-shirt -- she turned on the fan to suck up the steam, collected her backpack, in which she had stuffed her dirty clothes, drew a neutral face on the steamed bathroom mirror -- two eyes and a straight mouth -- and left the bathroom.

"Finally you're done!" Jessica said. "You've been in there an hour." Reeking of corned beef, she slipped into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Sharley went into Alicia's room and dropped off her backpack after she transferred her housekeys from her dirty jeans to her clean ones. When she arrived at the kitchen, she saw Holly, Meg, and Tracy, who looked like she had just showered in the other bathroom, finish cleaning up the kitchen. Sharley didn't see Alicia, so she assumed that Alicia was taking a shower.

"She lives!" Tracy announced. "We thought you drowned, Shellfish."

Sharley tried not to frown. Only Alicia could call her Shellfish.

"Do you usually take hour-long showers?" Holly asked.

It was a stupid question so Sharley gave a stupid answer. "Only when I have to wash off mayonnaise."

Holly frowned. "Jeez, Sharley, I already said I was sorry."

Sharley didn't even know that Holly was the one who hit her with the mayonnaise and lettuce since everybody had been throwing food, which meant that Holly didn't already apologize to her. "No, you didn't."

"What?"

"You didn't say you were sorry."

"Oh," Holly said. She looked at her fingernails. "Well, I'm saying it now."

Sharley didn't feel like arguing with her. "Okay."

Sharley hadn't finished her lasagna, so she took out and

threw away the pastrami slices and microwaved her lasagna again. As she ate, Tracy, Meg, and Holly talked about boys -- which boys were cute, fine, gross, dorky. Sharley pretended not to listen.

“How about Jack Miller?” Holly said.

Tracy sneered. “Him? Gross! He’s a pervert!”

“Yeah,” agreed Meg. “I heard that when he was going with Cally Martin, he was also making out with her twin sister Casey.”

“Ugh!” Holly said. “Hey, you know what I heard?”

“What?” Tracy and Meg both said.

“I heard that Casey Martin likes Brian Scotman.”

“Brian Scotman!” Tracy exclaimed. “That little jerk? He’s SO immature!”

“Yeah,” Meg agreed. “Remember when he started an armfart contest with all the guys when Mrs. Peters left the classroom?”

Holly giggled. “Yeah, and we were supposed to copy the preamble to the Constitution, and Brian was armfarting The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Tracy smiled. “You know what?”

“What?” Meg and Holly both asked.

“I think that Brian doesn’t like girls.”

“What do you mean?” asked Holly.

Meg looked at Tracy and then said, “Gross!” She punched

Holly on the arm. "Tracy says that Brian is a homo!"

"No way!" Holly exclaimed. "Why'd you think that?"

"Because," Tracy explained, "I never hear of Brian liking any girls, he hangs out with guys all the time --"

"So?" Meg interrupted. "My brother does that, and he's DEFINITELY not a homo. Anyway, Paul Marcus wouldn't have a homo as his best friend."

Tracy shrugged. "Hey, I'm just saying what I think."

Sharley remembered Brian calling at her before her scoliosis screening. No, Brian was no homo.

But he was still a jerk.

"Anyways, Brian's still a jerk," Tracy pointed out.

Sharley tried not to frown. She didn't like agreeing with Tracy.

Tracy was smiling again. "But you know what?"

"What?" Meg and Holly asked.

"Alicia and Paul did it," Tracy replied matter-of-factly.

"Did what?" Holly asked.

Meg punched her arm. "SEX, you dummy."

Sharley felt her throat constrict, making it hard for her to swallow her last bite of lasagna.

"No way!" Holly said. "How'd you know?"

Tracy folded her arms -- the authority look. "When I went to get a shower, Alicia was still on the phone, and I overheard her. You know what she said?"

“What?” Holly and Meg said, leaning closer to Tracy because Tracy had lowered her voice.

Sharley was also leaning closer from the table.

“She said, ‘Oh, no, Paul, you were WONDERFUL last night!’”

Holly, Meg, and Tracy started giggling.

Sharley wasn't giggling.

“Alicia's on the phone,” Sharley's mom said.

Sharley brought her blanket over her head and burrowed deeper into her bed. “Tell her I'm sleeping,” she said, her voice muffled.

“Sharley Harris, this is the third time Alicia has called,” her mom said impatiently. She pulled down Sharley's blanket. “If you don't want to talk to her, tell her yourself.”

Sharley saw her mom leave her room, noticing that her mom left her door open. That annoyed her. Who was she kidding? She was already annoyed. No. She was mad.

She stared at her ceiling. Plain white. Boring white. Virgin white. Virgin? Sharley looked away from the ceiling; it was too depressing.

She slid out of bed and looked at her clock. Noon. Sharley had been in bed for four hours. She had woke early -- it was 7:30 -- called her mom to pick her up, and didn't bother to wake up Alicia to say good-bye when she left the slumber party.

Everybody else was still asleep on the living room floor -- Tracy was snoring her head off. As soon as Sharley got home, she flung herself into her bed and stayed there. Her mom, whom Sharley had awakened much too early, was too cranky to ask questions.

Sharley went to pick up the phone in the living room, where Adam and Carrie were noisily playing a tank game on Nintendo. "Shut up, you guys," she said to them as she picked up the phone. "Hello."

"Why'd you leave the party so early?" Alicia demanded. "You didn't even wake me up or say good-bye or anything. What's going on?"

Sharley gave a you-can't-be-THAT-dumb sigh. "If YOU don't know, then you're dumber than I thought."

"What? What'd I do?" Alicia sounded mad and defensive. "Is it because we put mustard on your arms? Because I already told you before that the first person to fall asleep gets tricked --"

"Oh, ha ha. Very funny," Sharley snapped. "You think I like being embarrassed -- not only by girls I barely know but by my best friend? And that's not the only thing you did to me."

"What?" Alicia asked. "Because you got hit in the food fight? But Holly told me that she apologized to you --"

"She didn't mean it," Sharley interrupted. "She wasn't looking at me when she apologized."

"Maybe she was nervous."

"Like hell!" Sharley replied. "You weren't there. She didn't mean it. Not only that, NONE of them cared to have me there!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Were you blind? Didn't you notice that Holly, Tracy, Jessica, and Meg hung around you, and the only reason they were with me was because I was with you? When you were in the shower, they were together in this tight, little clique and avoided me like a had rabies or something. Jeez, Alicia, didn't you notice that I was miserable?"

"Well, maybe if you had INVOLVED yourself more in the party, you wouldn't be so miserable."

"I wouldn't want to involve myself with THOSE kind of people."

"Sharley Harris, you are NOT the only friend I have," Alicia snapped, "and I don't CARE to hear you insult my friends."

"Oh yeah? Well, you know what YOUR friends said about you last night when you were in the shower? They said that you did it with Paul. Some friends!" Sharley slammed down the phone. She looked up and saw Carrie and Adam staring at her. "Aren't you supposed to be playing Nintendo or something?" she yelled at them.

"I'm telling mom you're yelling," Adam said.

"Who cares?" Sharley marched into the kitchen, her bare

feet slapping against the linoleum floor. She yanked open the refrigerator door. What was there to eat? Leftover chicken gizzards. Curried squash. Congealed Ramen noodles. Sharley shoved the fridge door closed in disgust and yanked open the freezer door. Frozen tomatoes. Freezer-burned tamales. Ice cream. Ice cream! A good, nutritious meal. Sharley took out the half-gallon tub of Neapolitan and removed the lid. Damn! Adam and Carrie ate all the chocolate and vanilla again. Oh well. Not bothering to spoon the ice cream into a bowl, Sharley brought the tub of Neapolitan and a spoon with her into the living room, where she crashed onto the sofa and began to shovel ice cream into her mouth.

The phone rang.

Sharley kept eating.

“Answer the phone, Sharley,” Carrie said, her eyes glued to the electronic tanks rumbling across the T.V. screen.

“Yeah, you’re closest,” Adam added as he shot up some electronic infantry.

“Shut up and play your stupid game,” Sharley replied between bites of ice cream.

Carrie stood up and went to the phone.

“Don’t answer it!” Sharley jumped from the sofa and dropped the ice cream tub onto the coffee table.

“Hello?” Carrie said into the receiver. “Oh, hi, Alicia. Sharley? Lemme see if she’s here.”

"I'M NOT HERE!" Sharley mouthed.

Carrie stuck out her tongue. "Yeah, she's right here," she said to Alicia. "Here she is." Carrie held out the receiver to Sharley, her hand covering the mouthpiece.

Sharley grabbed the receiver. "Brat," she said to Carrie.

"Butthead," Carrie replied as she went back to the game.

Sharley took a deep breath before uncovering the mouthpiece. "What do you want?"

Sharley heard Alicia take a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Shellfish."

"Why're you apologizing to me?" Sharley said suspiciously. "I thought your OTHER friends were more important than me."

Alicia sighed. "Some friends. I called Holly, Jessica, and Meg about what you said. Holly and Jessica both said you were lying. Meg said she heard it from Tracy, so Holly and Jessica were lying. I called Tracy, and Tracy said that Meg was lying, but I can tell when Tracy lies -- she starts to talk faster than normal -- so Tracy was lying, and Meg was saying the truth. And so were you. Do you forgive me?"

Sharley twisted the phone cord around her fingers. "Well -- just one thing."

"What?"

Sharley twisted the phone cord tighter until she felt her fingers start to hurt. "Well -- did you -- I mean --" she

stuttered.

“Shellfish!” Alicia exclaimed. “If I had done it with Paul, don’t you think you’d be the first one I’d tell? Remember our pact?”

Sharley remembered. When she and Alicia were eleven, they both promised that the first one to lose her virginity would tell the other one before anybody else. Not that there was a contest or anything -- Sharley was in no hurry to win! “I thought maybe you forgot.”

“Why’d you think that?”

“Well -- you’d been acting funny lately since you’ve been hanging around Tracy and Holly and the others --”

“Temporary insanity.”

“And since you’ve been going with Paul.”

“Hormones. You’d act funny too if you had a boyfriend.”

Sharley was afraid of that. “But I don’t.”

“But you should. I know a couple of Paul’s friends who’d be PERFECT for you.”

Sharley sighed. Every once in a while, Alicia turned matchmaker on her -- just because Alicia had a boyfriend, Sharley should have one too. Yuck! “Al, I haven’t forgiven you yet, and if you try to fix me up with one of Paul’s friends, I never will.”

“Okay, okay,” Alicia replied. “Jeez, you’re so unromantic, it’s like being friends with a nun.”

“Gee, thanks! Just for that, I may never forgive you.”

“Shellfish!” Alicia sounded like a distressed puppy.

Sharley laughed. “Just kidding. Consider yourself forgiven.”

As she unwound the telephone cord from her numb fingers, an idea hit her. “Hey, you wanna go to Splashdown? We haven’t gone there in months!”

“Duuh! It’s been winter, and now it’s warm enough to swim.”

Sharley could just strangle Alicia sometimes. “Aaliiiciaa --” she said very slowly.

“Okay, okay. Lemme ask my dad first.”

Sharley heard Alicia set down the phone, and then Sharley ran to her mom’s room and knocked on the door. “Mom?”

“What?” Her mom sounded grumpy.

“Can I go to Splashdown with Alicia?” Sharley sounded as pleasant as she could.

“I don’t have any money,” her mom snapped through the door.

“I have the money.” Unlike Carrie and Adam, Sharley saved her lunch money and brought lunches from home.

“I’m not driving.”

“Alicia’s dad will drive,” Sharley lied.

Sharley didn’t hear anything for a moment and then she heard her mom’s tired, cranky voice say, “Be home by six.”

Sharley ran to the phone just in time to hear Alicia pick up

her phone and say, "My dad says okay, but since Splashdown is on his way to some errand he's doing, he said that he can drop us off, and if you don't mind leaving at 5:30, then he can pick us up too."

Sharley wondered if Alicia could read her mind. "Fine with me."

"Okay, see you in ten minutes."

Within ten minutes, Sharley changed into her bathing suit -- a one-piece Speedo that didn't show anything, thank goodness! -- an extra-large Felix the Cat T-shirt, red shorts, and flip-flops. In her canvas bag, she stuffed a towel, suntan lotion -- SPF 45 because Sharley didn't want to look like a bright red lobster -- and enough money for the admission ticket, food, locker rental, and float rental. Sharley managed to slip out of the house without Adam and Carrie whining after her, mostly because they were still glued to the Nintendo, decapitating weird mushroom mutants.

Sharley slid into the backseat with Alicia, who said to her dad, "Yah, mule, yah! Get a move one, hee-yah!"

"Uh-oh, watch out, Sharley," Alicia's dad said. "Alicia's weirdness might rub off on you."

Alicia took a swipe at her dad's head but only got the carseat headrest.

"It already has, Mr. Baxter," Sharley replied, smiling.

Minutes later, the car pulled over in front of Splashdown's

main entrance. As Sharley and Alicia got out of the car, Alicia's dad said, "All right you two. I don't want to arrive here at 5:30 just to see two over-sexed, built lifeguards giving you mouth-to-mouth because you two weren't swimming carefully."

Sharley blushed.

"Dad!" Alicia remarked, embarrassed.

Mr. Baxter gave a toothy grin. "Have fun." Then he pulled away from the curb and drove out of the parking lot.

After paying for admission (Alicia bent her knees and tried to pass for a kid, but the ticket teenager still charged her full price), they rented lockers to put their stuff in, staked out a couple of lawn chairs and a lawn table with an umbrella, stripped down to their bathing suits -- Sharley in her one-piece Speedo, Alicia in her hot pink two-piece bikini -- slathered on SPF 45 lotion (Alicia burned as badly as Sharley), and headed for the wave pool.

Alicia ran into the wave pool and plunged into the cold, ice-blue water. Sharley slowly waded in, making tiny squeals as the water inched up her body.

After watching Sharley torture herself for over a minute -- and the water wasn't even up to Sharley's waist yet! -- Alicia said, "Will you just dunk in and get it over yet?"

"No!" Sharley squealed.

Alicia shrugged. She crawl-stroked ten yards away from Sharley, flipped around, and then frog-kicked underwater until

she was less than a yard away from Sharley, whereupon she leaped out of the water, bringing a tsunami wave of water before her.

“AAARRGHH!” Sharley squealed as the wave hit her. She shook her now-drenched hair from her eyes and cleared her nose, which was burning from chlorine water. “Alicia Baxter!” She swam after Alicia to get revenge, caught up with her, and evilly tickled her sides.

Sharley and Alicia continued splashing and tickling each other until the wave pool bell rung. Slowly at first and then faster with each wave, the wave machines pushed out bigger and bigger waves. Sharley and Alicia rolled onto their backs, looking like lanky sea otters, and rode the waves, which rolled up and under them, up and under. Bobbing like dinghies, they saw some people clinging to the pool ladders (which was dangerous because the huge waves easily swept them away from the ladders), some bobbing up and down on inflated floats or life vests, and some treading water (which Sharley and Alicia didn't do because it was tiring and they always got water up their noses). Still looking like sea otters, Sharley and Alicia slowly scissor-kicked from the deep end of the pool towards the shallow part. After passing the five-foot mark, they rolled onto their stomachs, crawl-stroked on the surface for a few seconds, and then rode the waves until they reached the artificial beach, where they pretended to be beached whales.

When Sharley and Alicia stood up, they felt as HEAVY as beached whales.

“Who turned on the gravity?” Alicia groaned.

Sharley and Alicia headed for The Empire State, the tallest tubed water slide in Splashdown. They grabbed the required mats and got in line, which inched up the State’s eleven flights of stairs.

At the top, Alicia turned to Sharley before she slid down and said, “Scream something when you slide down!”

“What?” Sharley asked, but Alicia was already going down.

“Heee-ya!” Alicia screamed. “Kai-ya-bunga! Eat gorilla meat! I’m gonna make you eat worms! I’m gonna make you eat bugs! Hey! Bud! You got any worms and bugs! HEEE-YA!” Her screams echoed throughout the slide.

The ride operator guy looked confusedly down the slide and then at Sharley.

Sharley couldn’t say anything. She was too busy laughing.

When it was Sharley’s turn to slide down, the only thing that popped out of her mouth was “HOLY COW!”

After returning the mats to the mat bin, Sharley and Alicia ran to The Infinite, the longest spanning, twistiest water slide in Splashdown.

“No running!” a lifeguard shouted.

Sharley and Alicia stopped running.

“Wow, he’s CUTE!” Alicia whispered to Sharley.

Sharley glanced up. The lifeguard looked like any generic, blond, tanned lifeguard to her. “Probably has the brains of a gnat.”

Alicia giggled, and they quickly passed the guy and reached The Infinite.

The Infinite was a two-seater slide, and Sharley and Alicia switched seats after each time going down. They slid down The Infinite four times, with Alicia screaming strange phrases like “Go and wash ye underwear, ye bon bobbies!” Sharley only made primordial sounds like “Aaoo-eee-uuah!”

“Let’s go to The Comet,” Alicia said after she returned the two-seater innertube to the innertube bin.

“Wait, I gotta eat first,” Sharley said. “I’m starving!”

“Didn’t you eat lunch?”

Sharley shook her head. “The only thing I ate today was the strawberry part of some Neapolitan ice cream.”

Alicia punched Sharley’s arm. “Shellfish, you’re gonna faint if you don’t eat something, you dummy.”

After getting some money from their locker, Sharley and Alicia ordered food from a shark-shaped concession stand called “Sharky’s” (“How unoriginal,” Alicia whispered to Sharley) and sat down at a bench nearby.

After Sharley munched through her chilidog and nachos-and-cheese, and Alicia munched through her double-cheeseburger and fries, they still remained at the bench table,

drinking Dr. Peppers, to let their stomachs digest their greasy junk-food.

“Wow, now he’s CUTE!” Alicia said, staring behind Sharley.

Sharley glanced back and saw a deeply tanned Italian-looking guy wearing only spray-paint thin swimming bikini briefs that left nothing to the imagination. Sharley turned quickly around, her face turning beet red. “Alicia!” she hissed. “Stop staring!”

Alicia averted her eyes to Sharley. “Admit it. He IS cute.” She took a sip of her Dr. Pepper.

“Well -- okay,” Sharley replied. “In a MONSTROUS sort of way.”

Alicia laughed so hard that she nearly sprayed Dr. Pepper out of her nose.

After sitting around for fifteen minutes, they threw away their trash, went to their lawn table spot to slather on more suntan lotion, and headed for The Comet, Splashdown’s steepest slide.

Sharley and Alicia screamed blood-curdling “Aaaaaa-yeeeeee!!!!”s as they slid down three times.

After so much excitement, they waded around the kiddie area, even standing in the geyser fountain and the mini waterfall, and they dove into a regular pool. Then they went on more slides.

Pretty soon, it was nearing 5:30. Sharley and Alicia had new

tans and, miraculously, no sunburns. They towed themselves as best as they could with bathing suits on, wore over the suits their T-shirts, got all their stuff from the locker, and waited at the main entrance for Mr. Baxter, who arrived at exactly 5:30.

“How was Splashdown?” he asked as Sharley and Alicia boarded the car.

“Great!” Alicia replied. “First we went to the wave pool and we --”

Alicia told her dad everything they did and saw -- except for the “Wow, he’s cute!” episodes, Sharley noticed with a smile. Alicia was on the part of sliding down The Comet when the car stopped in front of Sharley’s house and Sharley reluctantly got out of the car.

“See you later, Shellfish.”

“See you later, Alicia.” Sharley avoided “alligator” because Alicia hated being called an ugly reptile -- as if being called a slimy mollusk was any better, although Sharley liked her nickname.

She was about to open the front door when she heard Alicia spring out of the car and run up the walkway while saying, “Hey wait -- almost forgot to give you something.”

Sharley turned around and saw Alicia hand her a pristine bottle of Alicia’s expensive strawberry shampoo and never-opened bar of strawberry soap.

“I know you like using my bath stuff, so -- here. Your own

personal supply.”

Sharley again didn't know what to say, so she quickly leaned over and kissed Alicia on the cheek.

Alicia gave her a startled look and then smiled. “Lylas,” she said. Love you like a sister.

“Lylas,” Sharley replied. She saw Alicia bound back to the car, which quickly sped away.

The first thing she heard as she opened the door was her mom yelling at Adam and Carrie for fighting again. Sharley closed the door slowly so as not to make a sound. She tiptoed to the bathroom so her mom wouldn't see her and start yelling at her too because when her mom got angry at one person, she always got angry at everybody else.

Safely locked in the bathroom, Sharley showered to rinse off Splashdown's chlorine water. As before in Alicia's house, Sharley stood for a long time under the hot water, waiting for her mom to finish yelling and wishing and wishing that she could stay at Splashdown with Alicia forever so that they wouldn't have to deal with the real world.

But then she opened the bottle of Alicia's strawberry shampoo -- hers now -- and knew that Alicia was in the real world. And wherever Alicia was, that was where Sharley belonged.

WALK THE WALL

He wakes up with a start before the first signal sounds. Blindly, eyes gummy with sleep, he slides off his bunk. His bare feet slaps the floor, shift position once, and arch as he kneels underneath his bunk to grab his gear.

Water being a premium, he urinates and cleans his teeth in the shower, first the cold water soak, then the soap spray, then final hot water rinse. “Just like a car wash,” his great-grandad used to say, talking about cleaning service bays for Terran-world vehicles, privately owned, no less. The vehicles as well as the service bays. The idea is unimaginable to him. He steps out of the stall, which is barely large enough to fit one body so that it can turn around but not bend down. He grabs the body chamois cloth (11x11, drab grey), wipes dry, and drops the sodden cloth into the recercer, which will dry out the cloth, collect the water and, along with the other recercer under the shower stall, pipe the waste water into a centralized scrubbing unit to remove the impurities and then pipe back the clean water for further reuse. The impurities – mostly waste products and other organic materials – become dry and condensed to be used in the agri-units.

Nothing wasted.

But there is a level of privacy, a privilege which he is always aware of as he walks from the fresher into his sleeping space, the follicles of his skin rising in goosebumps even as he begins to pull on the first of many layers of his gear. First the skinsuit, light, soft, which wicks the sweat so that he doesn't get hot and then marrow-deep cold. Next is the polymerized oversuit, which his great-grandad said looked like a slicker version of the one-piece uniforms old-style mechanics used to wear. Then the slightly metallic-looking inner armor, which slows and diffuses blunt-force blows like rubberized gel absorbing a hard slap while serving as communications heads-up display and life-support matrix. All of these layers cover him from head to toe with only an oval opening that exposes his face. He makes sure he has his chit to claim his outer gear and leaves his private quarters.

Privacy ends as he heads down the long, narrow tunnel to the mess hall, but it is still early, and others like him are few at that first watch. None speak to him, and he speaks to none as he settles before his breakfast of mush, formulated to provide the exact amount of water, fats, protein, carbohydrates, fiber, vitamins, minerals, trace plant sterols, and other chemicals that will fuel him until his watch is over. He laps up the mush like a dog and licks his bowl clean.

“Jeez, it can’t be THAT good,” another comments from the other long table. Her voice echoes as it bounces against the bare walls. The various layers of her gear are pulled back from her head so that the layers lay against the back of her neck like a small hood. She is wincing a little as she feeds spoonfuls of the mush into her small mouth.

“Food is food,” he replies, licking the corners of his mouth and pulling at his lips, getting the last of the mush.

She pauses in her feeding and regards him over her spoon. “It is always like this?”

He waits for her to go on, but she doesn’t follow through. The question hangs in the air and then settles down on him like a fly. He decides not to swat it. “You’re new,” he says instead.

“Transferred yesterday from Serenity base,” she replies, this time regarding the mush in her spoon as she realizes that she has been staring at him.

“What do you think of Utopia so far?” he asks, rising from his table and walking towards her.

“It’s... it’s not like Serenity.”

He notices that she tenses her muscles slightly as he moves toward her and then relaxes as he continues past her. “Yes, the name is ironic.” He places his bowl into the galley recercer slot and walks out.

He is not surprised that the only person who has spoken to him is new, so new that she is still stunned by the difference

between the bustle and urbanity of Luna and the spare and martial quality of Mars. Besides, the Lunar Station at the Sea of Serenity is a training station, a teaching station, populated with as many civilians as military personnel, while the Martian Station at the Plain of Utopia is more a guard post, a fort in the frontier that is Mars.

With frontiers come explorers and settlers. Some come with idealistic dreams of starting anew, of making it on the new frontier while others come in order to flee what was back at home, whether it be Terra, Luna, or the two space stations that serve as orbiting islands of humanity in the great empty between Terra and Mars.

It doesn't matter to him why they are here. The fact is that they are here, and that is why he is here.

"If only they'd behave," he mutters as he places his chit in the release slot and his outer gear unlocks from the wall. With quick movements, he pulls on the outer gear – the outer body suit, the boots, the gloves, the helmet, and his PK. He is not alone but he may as well be alone. Then down a short series of tunnels and then up a long series of stairs, and he is at his post, as first watch, on his part on the wall.

"If only they'd behave," he mutters again, and it is the closest thing to a prayer he ever says. He doesn't follow politics. It's all the same, really. "Toilers and warriors and the bosses of both of 'em," his great-grandad used to say. "And,

m'boy, we're not smart enough and mean enough to be the bosses." He mentally leans into his various layers that keep his very human body from the very Martian climate that can very well get him killed.

Mars, even after the settlers, even after the civil war and the martial law, even after all of that, is still beautiful in its barrenness. The fine-grained dusty plain strewn with reddish rocks and boulders as far as the eye can see, the sky moving from grayish red to yellowish pink and back again – it is the same as those long ago photos from Viking 2. When he was just a boy, spending late autumns at his great-grandad's house, he'd look at Mars with that ancient telescope – an honest-to-God Cassegrain – and dream of going there someday. Now that he is there --

"Now what do you think you're doing?" he mutters, seeing a camouflaged reddish form move from spare boulder to spare boulder. It's only a lone figure – he checks his heads up to make sure – not important enough to call this in. He watches from the ramparts of the wall, flicks the safety off his PK just in case, and watches. "Don't do it, don't," he mutters as he realizes that this is a suicide-by-soldier headcase who was on the losing side of the war and couldn't make it freelancing on the other side of the wall. It's happened so often nowadays in other posts that nobody thinks of it except as a nuisance. But this is his first watch, he isn't even quite awake yet, dammit –

“Dammit!” In time he switches the PK to the lowest setting, quickly gains a bead and fires before the fool hurtles into the pulse shield that surrounds the wall like an electrified fence. Even though his layers surround, he can see the eyes of this person -- wide, nearly all white, expecting death with that look of “wait, no, hold on... ” In a previous time, on a different wall, there would have been death. On this wall, there has been death.

But not today.

He calls in the reclaimers to clear the person, and he slowly, tiredly, walks the wall and waits.

WISHES

He entered the café, and, apropos of nothing, sat down at one of the bistro tables before the host could seat him. Without a menu, he ordered sparkling water and lemon, three hard-fried eggs, two slices of buttered toast, and two slices of crunchy bacon. Even though it was 8pm, and the café didn't normally serve breakfast fare even in the mornings, the waiter took his order with a smile and asked him how his day was.

“Good so far,” he replied, and flashed that winning smile that got him by over many years.

Many many years.

Today was the first day of his vacation, and he was relishing every moment of it. He stretched his long legs, feeling his skin rub against the lambs' wool trousers, and placed his hands behind his neck for a long, vertical, cat-like stretch. He wiggled his toes in his soft leather shoes. The cotton shirt underneath his argyle sweater moved along the long arch of his back, and that felt good, too.

Damn, it felt good to wear real, comfortable clothes for a change.

He looked at his skin, a little pale under the weakening October sun. He felt some of the filtered warmth through the café window hit his face and hands. In the summer, he'd be able to turn a slight shade of toasty tan, something he'd never been able to do when he was working. 24/7 on call. And when he wasn't on, he was in hurry-up-and-wait mode: waiting waiting waiting for the next project, the next call.

Personally, he hated waiting, but it was part of his job. And, truth be told, he DID like his job. But not when he hadn't had a break since... since...

Good God, he couldn't remember when he wasn't on the clock. And even with his impatience at times, complaining was just not done. But taking a vacation was also not usually done, either, and so he was surprised when, out of nowhere, the Big Boss said to him, "You know what? You need a vacation. Take some time off. Whatever time you need. The last thing We need is burnout."

"Your order, sir."

"Oooh, goody."

The eggs, toast, and everything else were exactly how he liked them. Even the sparkling water with lemon had two slices of lemon and no ice in a standard pub pint glass – exactly how he liked it. He wasn't surprised, although the waiter had a slightly confused look, as if to say, "Where did we find the pub glass?"

He tucked into his food, relishing the taste and texture of everything in his order. Real food for a change. None of the weird, fancy stuff that he'd had in the past or, as events usually would turn out, doing without.

Not that he could actually STARVE, that is. But eating good, simple food was an enjoyable thing, kind of like a wine connoisseur's relishing a particularly fine vintage. And wearing comfortable clothes – that was another of those simple pleasures.

And seeing people enjoying life, for a change.

Over his pint glass, his eyes traveled around the bistro, staying briefly with one person until his whimsy took his eyes to another destination. A woman with cobalt-blue eyes and summer wheat skin was writing in her journal, nibbling on her pen cap. She was thinking of a better transition from one part of her rant to the other, and she wrinkled her nose in concentration. Her freckles stood out on her nose, as she thought hard.

She was very pretty.

Two elderly gentlemen were in heated discussion, their hands moving animatedly, nearly mirroring each other. Both men were white-haired, with snowy eyebrows and deep, brown lines along their cheeks. The thinner of the two would roll his eyes while the fatter one would bring his left hand down, just barely hitting the little bistro table in staccato, karate-chop

motions. Old friends now, but they met on opposite sides, in a bombed-out building. One a German, the other a Russian. They should've killed each other that cold, late October day in Kursk, but they didn't.

To this day, they still didn't know why they didn't.

A young couple sat facing each other, their elbows on the table as they leaned across it for a solitary, and fleeting, kiss. They knew eyes were on them. They didn't care. It had been months since they were like this, since the baby, since the weight of parenthood sidetracked them from each other, when they used to be silly and goofy. So a date, a date on Halloween, when they could pretend they weren't married, could pretend that the baby wasn't at Mother's, could pretend that they weren't responsible spouses and parents and adults.

After the kiss, they leaned back into their chairs, like images in a mirror, and stared at each other, slightly awed.

He knew all of this, knew everything about the people his eyes alighted upon, like a butterfly sipping nectar from flowers. And he was thoroughly enjoying himself because, for once, he was with people who didn't, deep in their desperate, aching souls, secretly wish for him.

“Sir?”

He looked up, and smiled. “And a cherry cobbler with vanilla ice cream, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

Knowing happy people and eating good, simple food and wearing simple, comfortable clothes and having skin looking the right color for a change... aaahhhh...

“Hello.”

He blinked away his reverie and saw the host, but then he REALLY saw the host. “Hey, there. When did you get here?”

“I’ve been here all along. You just blew past me, that’s all. Vacation good so far?”

“Checkin’ up on me?”

“What? Oh, no.” The host/not-host smiled a winning smile, something that he would have to get used to for many many years to come. “The Big Guy pulled me from messenger duty to fill in for you until you get back. I thought you’d like to know who your temp is.”

“Ah.” He looked him over. “How come you don’t have your own body yet?”

“It’s in the works. But, really, does it HAVE to be blue-green?”

“Fraid so. Too many pop cultural references.”

“And those flow-y leg things and being bare-chested and those slipper things...”

“Fraid so. Part of the costume.”

His temp sighed.

“Hey, think of it as performance art, or a comedy routine. That’s what I do. And NO COMPLAINING. You know that isn’t kosher.”

“You think I don’t know that?” The host/non-host rubbed his nose and squinted a little. “Well, except for the costume, it’s not a bad assignment, is it?”

“Nope. But don’t get disappointed when you hear complaints. Folks often say they want one thing, when they really mean another, and instead of blaming themselves, they’ll blame you. Don’t take it personally. Remember it’ll all come back to them in the end.”

“Yes. Still... isn’t there a less embarrassing way to test human vice and virtue?”

“Yup – plenty. But this way, it’s more FUN.”

“Your dessert, sir.”

The host/non-host’s face looked confused for a moment, and the host wandered away from the table as the waiter brought in the cherry cobbler and ice-cream, flambéed.

Just the way he liked it. It was lovely, to have one’s wishes granted without any additional words, just like that – to have his wishes granted for a change, and not the other way around.

And the angel, who was on vacation from genie-duty, started in on his dessert.

YOU'RE LATE

Even though they didn't have gender the way the humans did, it was still fun to think of themselves as "he" and "she," just as if they were playacting or putting on costumes. And so the being who thought itself as "she" giggled at the being who thought of itself as "he." She giggled at him, at his alarmed face.

"Oh, don't feel embarrassed for him," she giggled. "Imagine, to be embarrassed by a human's question about sex. Look how red he's turned!" She gestured below. "And look how red YOU'VE turned!" And she patted him on the knee, which made him feel even more embarrassed.

"Well... those are personal things. Why does he need to ask such personal things? He was very philosophical just a moment ago."

"Oh, come now! The boy is a pure innocent, just newly married. EVERYTHING'S going to be personal for him, and who better to ask than those who are more experienced in these things, that is, us?"

He shifted. "Still.... It's not as if he can take anything from what we say. He and the woman are embodied. That's a big leap."

"Oh, I think they'll figure out a way," she said, a smile evident in her words. "And they're not little children. He's a man, and she's a woman. True, an innocent man and an innocent woman. But man and woman nevertheless, and they halfway figured it out already."

"It's still different -- of course it must be different. Having bodies -- it must be an awful limitation."

"Now THAT, my dear, doesn't seem so to THEM. Look."

"No."

"Oh, come on now, you're not getting all squeamish on me, are you? After all, we'll probably be sent there someday -- new policy of providence and all." She ranged into her database to find confirmation of why she said that.

"You know something that I don't know?"

"Don't change the subject."

"I'm not. Really, you think we'll be sent, just like Raphael down there?"

"Well -- that's part of our jobs now, isn't it?"

"Errr... I'd rather stay here."

She stared at him. "Don't you say that. You sound like Lightbearer over there," and she nodded her head angrily towards a far distance.

"No no no! I mean.... Errrrm...." He turned even brighter red. "Well, YOU'RE here... and all..."

The angry cloud over her face dissipated, light shining through. "Oh -- you!" Before he could protest -- because he really was a silly, timid creature -- she reached out and pulled him in, the two forms from afar looking like one, she a shining whiteness, he blushing red even more, such that the effect was like a vermillion shot through with sparks.

After a moment, she said, "If I go below like Raphael --"

"Then I follow."

And all was good.

Maria lived a long life, doing good works. It always boggled her friends and family of why she never married.

"Maria, Maria," she could hear her mother say, "what are you waiting for? You're not getting any younger -- you have so much to offer!"

"Ah, Mama," Maria would always reply, trying not to get exasperated, "you have plenty of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. And you know my work has me travelling often. It would be unfair for any child I would have or any husband."

But her mother never understood. "Your work. Tsk. You should've been a nun. At least that makes sense, why you've never married, doing the work of Mother Theresa."

Maria blushed. "Mama, don't boast."

But from the outside, it was not boasting. Maria's work as a doctor could've been lucrative, could've been stable and

powerful, with all of its material rewards. Instead, Maria worked for a pittance, moving from one hell-hole place to another, tending the weak, the sick, the dying. The organization she worked in was faith-based, although she herself espoused no specific religion's creed, and her work was the work of a lifetime -- as soon as she received her M.D., she sought out this work, and it satisfied her, yes. The LA barrios, NYC inner ghettos, the slums of Columbia, the war-torn villages of Afghanistan, orphanages in Romania and Chechnya, a blighted town in Darfur, even the leper colonies in Calcutta -- wherever she was needed, she went. It was part of her job.

But what she never told anybody, not even her mother, perhaps not even herself, was that she was indeed waiting.

Waiting for what?

Maria left the hospital, following the safe route to the clinic across the city. She lost track of time -- it happened often at her age. Perhaps she ought to retire, but not now. She was needed. Baghdad was a big city, and the car she was in seemed small and unprotected, compared to this city.

She never did see the bomb explode in the car as they passed by it.

When she looked up -- not with embodied eyes, for they were now paste, but the eyes of true vision -- she saw the brilliant creature before her, sobbing, and she replied, "You silly goose. You're late!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I meant to get embodied as soon as I could, but I'd be assigned somewhere else, help someone else out, ferry a soul across the Lightbearer's machines --"

"Did you ever think to ask to be assigned terran-side?"

He stopped blathering.

The creature formerly named Maria stood up, her brilliance extending as far as her wings. "You're a silly thing, you know that? I've been waiting and waiting." She looked around her, the terran world now as unreal as the brilliance of heaven and her beloved seemed unreal to her when she was embodied.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

"The dying? Oh, yes. Oh, yes yes yes. But the living -- oh, you have no idea. It's both a heaven and hell, my sweet. You have no idea."

They rose slowly, flying the thermals of the breath of creation.

"You'd go back? If you were assigned?"

"In a heartbeat."

"And um... errr... being embodied, when you --"

"Like you didn't see!"

"Well -- but --"

"Whatever Adam and Eve said, they were RIGHT. It is different, as you said, but those limitations -- you have no idea." She smiled, poignantly remembering those she loved but had to leave, for her work, for the fact that, although embodied, she

had not the power of conceiving bodies, for no angel did. "Be fruitful and multiply" did not apply to the faithful legions of heaven, although those who fell violated that mandate, to the detriment of man.

He looked below, at the carnage, at the war, but also at the people, all of those embodied creatures, helping each other, loving each other, and said, "Maybe... maybe if I were assigned below..."

"Well, if you do," she said, playfully punching him in the chest, "don't be late."

And they rose, suffused by the brilliance of Heaven.

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She is also a survivor of a rigorous liberal arts education, a single mother, an aunt, a big sister, the oldest child, an adopted kid, an Asian-American, a US Navy brat, a bemused Catholic, a sci-fi/fantasy geek, a once-and-future globe trotter, and a writer.

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