

# SHORT STORIES

VOLUME 1



NIKKI BENNETT

I'm not a short story writer by nature. Most of my early attempts at short stories ended up as full-length novels (my YA novel, *Mukade Island*, is a victim of this). So, a few years ago, I started entering short story contests, just to get used to writing them.

Writing short stories use an entirely different part of the brain than writing novels, and entering contests (NYCMidnight is my favorite contest) helped me hone my short story writing skills. I even came 4th out of over 4,500 contestants in one contest!

So, here are all the stories I've written so far. Only two (they're the last ones in this book) were written without prompts from contests. I'm especially proud of "Summer of the Spiders", an original story that got an honorable mention in a Vocal+ contest.

I hope you enjoy reading these stories as much as I enjoyed writing them. Because they're almost all based off contest prompts, there's a variety of genres included here, from comedy to horror, and everything in between.

--Nikki Bennett

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# THE MECHANICAL ROOM METAMORPHASIS

*SciFi*

My last semester of college wasn't ending well. It hadn't started well either. At the beginning of the semester I had turned in a proposal for my final programming project, and my professor had promptly lectured me in front of the class.

"Janine," he had said. "You want to develop a *game* app as your final project?"

"You bet," I'd said. "I've already designed the characters. There's this guy called Eugene the Electrician who runs up and down the streets using his pliers to restore power to people's houses. The more houses he fixes, the higher up in the levels you can get."

Professor Jenkins had rubbed his eyes and sighed. "I expect a little more involvement for your final project than a simple game, Janine. Look at Alex Jeffries' project. He's proposing to develop a program that will enhance 3-D printing."

Alex, sitting in the front row, had turned to face the class. "That's right. I fully expect my project to take 3-D printing to a new and exciting level."

"Like what?" another student had asked.

Alex had given her an arrogant, patronizing smile. "It's too intricate to explain. But when I'm done, I guarantee you will be *wowed*."

Well, of course Brain-the-Size-of-China Alex Jeffries was going to show everyone up with something brilliant and light years beyond the normal student's brain capacity. It wasn't fair of Professor Jenkins to compare my project with Alex's. True, a goofy cell phone game wasn't that inventive—I certainly wasn't planning to cure cancer or alleviate world hunger with it—but in my mediocre, *let's-get-this-degree-done-and-over-with* mentality, I figured it would earn me a passing grade—if I could get the damn app to actually *work*.

But as the semester progressed, a glitch in the program had me stumped. I just couldn't figure out how to fix it. As the final two weeks rolled around, "stumped" had morphed into "panicked". I had two options: either plead with pompous Professor Jenkins for help or get up my nerve to ask class braniac, Alex Jeffries. I absolutely hated the thought of groveling to my professor, but was doubly nervous about approaching Alex. I'd gone through my whole college career alternatively abhorring his insufferable *I'm-a-genius-and-you're-not* attitude, or melting into a puddle of hormonal goo over his intense good looks. Wavy black hair, an aquiline nose, taller than Mt. Everest—he was the epitome of perfection, except he possessed the weirdest eyes I'd ever seen.

They were cloudy, like soapy gray water. They had no sparkle, no shine, no *life*.

Anyway, I decided that asking Alex for help was loads better than admitting defeat to Professor Jenkins. But how to approach the guy? Over the course of the semester, super-confident Alex had become withdrawn and moody. His full lips now drooped in a permanent frown. His usual, exuberant boasts had morphed into spastic, sullen snarls, and approaching him took all the nerve I possessed.

I cornered him as he sat at a lunch table in the cafeteria, hunched over his laptop, staring intently at its screen. He was so preoccupied he didn't even notice me until I sat, pulled out my own laptop, and cleared my throat four or five times.

"Hi," I said, sticking out my hand. "I'm Janine."

He didn't move his eyes from his screen. "I know. We're in the same programming class."

"Right." I lowered my hand and took a deep breath. "Listen, I'm kinda stumped on my project and was wondering..."

"You and everyone else. Why do all of you keep pestering me? Solve your own problems."

Well, *that* wasn't a heartening beginning. But, in for a penny, in for a pound. "It's just a little glitch," I went on, opening my laptop and bringing up the program. "See, I just can't get Eugene to move from Level 2 to Level 3..."

He snorted. "Look, I've got my *own* glitches to fix. Go bug someone else."

Wow. What an ass. On the other hand, brilliant Alex Jennings was struggling with his own program? Maybe he wasn't as smart as he had bragged. I frowned and watched Eugene the Electrician tromp across my screen. I punched a few buttons; Eugene threw his pliers at a transformer and restored power to a house. A cartoon woman ran out of the house, gave him a big kiss, and Eugene yelled, "Hooray!" in a squeaky voice.

Boy, my project *was* pretty stupid. And a bit sexist to boot. Why couldn't the woman fix her own power? Or why didn't I make Eugene a Eugeneia instead? I closed my laptop in disgust, only to find Alex scrutinizing my screen, a tiny glint of life suddenly shining in those flat eyes.

"Maybe I *can* help you," he said. "I've got class now, and I've got a job parking cars until seven-thirty tonight. Can you meet me after my shift? I work at Al's Parking Garage near the airport. You know where that is?"

I nodded, wondering why brilliant Alex Jeffries would want to work somewhere as mundane as a long-term parking garage.

"Meet you there," he said. "Don't be late. I can give you a half hour."

A half hour was probably all he'd need to fix the glitch I'd been wrestling with all semester. But something felt off. The spark of excitement I saw in his cold eyes—what was that all about? Why did he suddenly get all zazzed about my stupid project? Something about his abrupt change of heart made me a bit nervous.

But, help was help. That afternoon I took a bus to the airport and scrambled into the parking deck exactly at 7:28. Alex was trading shifts with another guy, and he waved me over.

“Come with me,” he said, and strode into the gloomy depths of the garage. I scurried after his bouncing backpack. We walked past rows of cars that felt like they were sinisterly surveying me behind their switched-off headlights. Creepy. We finally reached a metal door etched into the garage's concrete wall.

“In here,” he said, producing a key and opening the door. He ducked into a dark room and I followed.

“Where are we?” I asked, staring around the Spartan-like room.

“In the mechanical room. Al lets me use this place to study. It's quiet, nobody bugs me here.” He plopped onto a folding chair and smacked his hand against a metal desk. “OK, show me what you've got.”

I pulled my laptop out of my backpack and set it on the desk. Alex turned it on and found my program without me even telling him where the folder was. I nibbled my lip as Eugene the Electrician popped onto the screen, praying Alex wouldn't realize I'd based my design on his own attractive features. Except the eyes. I'd given Eugene normal blue ones.

Alex ran through the program, then rubbed his chin.

“So,” I ventured, “can you tell me where I'm goofing up?”

He didn't answer, just studied my screen in silence. Finally, he murmured, “Yes...yes...this might work. This *will* work.”

I leaned eagerly forward. “What'll work?”

He jumped, like he'd forgotten I was there. Then he cleared his throat. “Listen, can I keep this until tomorrow?”

“The whole laptop?” I asked. Alex turned and stared straight into my eyes with his weird, cloudy ones, and I found myself gulping and nodding.

“Great. Meet me back here tomorrow, same time.”

“Why can't I just meet you at school?”

“Because tomorrow's Saturday,” he said.

“Oh. Right.” I licked my dry lips. “Well...OK..see ya then?”

His eyes had moved back to my computer screen. He gave a curt jerk of his head but didn't say any-

thing. I stood there, not sure what to do next, then walked out of the room alone, wondering what the hell had just happened and why the cars lining my path suddenly seemed like they were about to roll forward and pounce on me for having the nerve to enter their shadowy domain.

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Alex wasn't at the guard shack when I arrived the next night—the guy on shift waved me on through. “He's holed up in the mechanical room,” the guy said. “Go on down.”

The garage seemed darker than yesterday, and the silent cars really had me freaked. I was almost positive they were *alive* somehow—watching and waiting for some strange opportunity to roll around me in a circle and devour me like a pack of wolves would after wounding and surrounding their prey.

But by the time I reached the bottom level, my overactive imagination had something else to occupy it. There was a light behind Alex's door—not the normal single-bulb-hanging-from-the-ceiling light; more like a fluorescent radiance that seeped through the door cracks and bathed the garage's floor in an eerie green glow. What was he *doing* in there? I took a deep breath and willed my shaking fist to rap on the door.

No answer. I pushed gently—the door swung open and the light enveloped me; I had to shut my eyes against it. They finally adjusted and I dared open them, but what I saw...if I could have screamed, I sure would have.

I couldn't. No sound found its way out of my dry throat. All I could do was stare with a thrill of horror at the life-sized, glowing entity filling the small room.

Eugene the Electrician stood there, watching me. He rapped his pliers against his palm. “It worked, Janine,” he whispered. “It *worked*.”

I tried to clear my throat and say something, but nope. I was as mute as a fish.

“It was the program, you see, my program,” Eugene went on. “I couldn't get it to work right. Something was missing, but when I saw your game, I figured out what the missing component was. I needed a design, see—a *character* is what I needed to make it all work. And look at me now.”

Eugene's rapturous face glowed with that eerie green light. I glanced over to my laptop on the desk—what was left of it. It had somehow melted into a practically unrecognizable puddle.

“What...what happened to my laptop?” I managed to croak.

“Don't worry about that...it isn't important...don't you *see*? My program worked! I've successfully 3-D printed your electrician character onto myself.”

Whoa...*what*? “Wait...Alex? That's *you*?”

A smile spread across Eugene the Electrician's face. "Is it me? No! It's the new me. And watch..."

He strode toward me and I scuttled out of the way. I wasn't getting near that...thing...if I could help it. He squeezed out the doorway and chucked his fluorescent pliers at a nearby car. As the pliers bounced off its hood, the car roared to life, its headlights blazing as it rocked on its wheels. Eugene laughed and shouted, "Hooray!"

"Eugene!" I yelled. "Uh...Alex...whoever you are. Maybe you should turn yourself back to...well...normal."

"Too late for that!" he sang as he recaptured the boomeranging pliers and danced up the aisle between the rows of cars. He spun around, and I realized Eugene's blue eyes had been replaced with Alex's cloudy gray ones. They sparkled with excitement. "Just think, Janine. With my enhanced program, people can become anything they want. A super hero, a cartoon character—anything. I'll make millions."

And he scampered through the garage, flinging his pliers at cars and laughing hysterically as they revved to life. I backtracked into the mechanical room, shut the door, and locked it.

Behind me, a green glow still emanated from Alex's computer. I tried to calm my heartbeat, but totally failed. Excitement and dread washed over me in waves.

Alex had created the impossible. No doubt about that. He was gloriously brilliant, even if he now resembled a cartoon character.

And me? Gloom enveloped me as I stared at my puddle of a laptop. I had blown any chance of a passing grade *this* semester, that was for damn sure.



# CUPCAKES AND KLEPTOS

## *Romantic Comedy*

Want to hear the worst advice your best friend can give you before a first date with a guy you really like? It's this: "Don't steal anything, Charlotte. That *won't* make a good impression."

We're standing in the *Charlotte's Cupcakes* kitchen, about to close for the afternoon, when Missy blindsides me with this whammy. I immediately get defensive. "What makes you think I'd do something stupid like that?"

Missy snorts. "Because you *always* steal stuff when you go out in public." She holds up a small spoon as evidence. "Swiped from an airplane. And this..." She grabs a hand towel with the words *Harbinger Hotel* stitched across its front and waves it in my face like a matador would to a crazed bull. "And this..." She lunges for my *Good Eats Cooking School* apron, hanging on its hook. "How the hell did you manage to nick this one?"

"I didn't 'nick' it. I paid for that cooking course. The apron was complimentary."

"No, it wasn't. I took that class too, and they never said we could keep the aprons. You just decided to. Promise me you won't steal any cutlery from the restaurant tonight, especially if this dream date of yours takes you someplace swanky."

Leave it to Missy to put me on edge right before I meet up with the man I've been drooling over the past month. I already have plenty of issues combating stomach-disturbing nerves, she doesn't have to add a guilt trip on top of it. It's a miracle he asked me out in the first place.

My cupcake shop is situated right on the boardwalk, which means plenty of tan beach boys looking for a little summer romance enter for cupcakes and coffee. But do they bother to glance my way? No. I'm always overshadowed by Missy, who, I have to admit, is gorgeous. Sometimes I think hiring her was not my brightest moment, but that's just jealousy talking, and to be honest, she's much better dealing with the customers than I am. She's bubbly and vivacious while I'm as introverted as a reclusive cat. And her blue eyes and wavy blond locks guarantee a long line of panting customers (mostly men, some women) while my boring brown orbs and dull black hair only appeal to friendless old crones who don't buy anything but want to hang around and chat.

But then *he* came in. Last month, when I'd pretty much given up on any real romantic action happening this summer, he strolled into the shop. He was perfection in a Hawaiian shirt: tan, buff arms, bright red tinging his aquiline nose, and golden streaks running through that dark mop of hair. The heroic aura swirling around him was so intense he *glowed* as he took his place in line. He made all my other customers look as drab and piti-

ful as prison convicts shuffling towards their execution. Even the sunlight glinting off the rolling waves behind him seemed dim in comparison.

He came in every weekday morning after that, precisely at eight, and finally I figured I'd better make some sort of move before Missy nabbed him, married him, and popped out a slew of angelic babies. The only chance I had to attract *any* guy while she was around was to somehow overshadow her with my stunning personality, which meant I had about as much chance at landing that glorious man as winning Miss Universe. No matter, I was determined to take a stab at it. Granted, he was probably showing up like clockwork every morning to see *her*, not me, but never mind.

So yesterday at eight o'clock I scurried out of the kitchen, threw off my apron, and pushed Missy away from the counter. "I'll take over," I whispered. "You can have a break if you want."

"We just opened," Missy said. "You sure this doesn't have anything to do with that Adonis you've been mooning over all month?"

"I'm not mooning," I gave my hopeful prize a quick glance. He caught my gaze and smiled. I swear, the angelic glow surrounding him amped up to at least a thousand watts, and the butterflies that had fluttered around my stomach as he walked in promptly formed a Rockettes-style line and kicked up their heels with supreme gusto. I managed to smile back before turning to Missy.

"Go get the cupcakes out of the oven."

"Fine," she laughed, tripping into the kitchen. I rang up the next three customers. Then, his gray eyes stared into mine as he leaned against the counter.

I forced my lips into a cheery beam. "Hi there! How can I help you today?"

He smiled. My butterfly kick line morphed into a twisting, spiraling jitterbug. "Two pumpkin cupcakes and a cup of coffee, please."

"Comin' right up." I fumbled for the coffee pot and poured a scalding stream onto my fingers, completely missing the paper cup. I quickly gulped down the blistering swear words bubbling up my esophagus.

"Hey, are you OK?" His voice dripped with concern, and I inwardly cringed. What a tone of pathetic sympathy. I figured that at that point I'd totally blown it. The hint of confidence I'd been forcing into my voice promptly skedaddled back to its hidey-hole.

"I'm fine, sorry," I mumbled before turning away so he won't hear the profanity that finally spilled out my mouth as the pain bored into my skin.

"Get it under cool water, quick," he said. "Cool, not ice-cold. That'll stop any blistering."

I hobbled into the kitchen, motioning for Missy to take over. She sighed, plunked a piping hot tray of cupcakes onto the table, and headed to the counter, taking any chance of me landing that guy with her.

I rinsed my throbbing fingers under the cool water, then dried them with the *Harbinger Hotel* towel. The kitchen door cracked open and Missy poked her head in.

“You OK, Charlotte?”

“I’m fine.”

“Can you come back out? Baker wants to talk to the baker.”

“What?”

Her voice dropped to a giggly whisper. “His name is *Baker*. His actual first name. Is that a good omen or what?”

Baker? What a goofy name for such a gorgeous guy. Somehow, that made him less heroic and more approachable, so I took a huge breath and willed the butterflies into a sedate waltz. *Anyway, he probably just wants to make sure you’re OK, Charlotte. Nothing more.*

My store doesn’t have any seating; customers normally mosey on in from off the beach and then wander back to their blankets with their cupcakes. So, I stepped outside with...*Baker*...and we walked down the boardwalk for a bit of privacy. He glanced at my hand.

“It didn’t get too burned, did it?”

“No, just a bit red. Is your name really Baker?” Gak. What a question to spout right off the bat.

He laughed. “Yeah. My mom had a penchant for weird names. My sister got stuck with ‘Canyon’. So, I guess Baker isn’t too bad, in comparison. Listen, I was wondering...”

Uh-oh. Butterflies ramping it up into a weird breakdancing mode.

“...I just moved here and don’t really know anybody, and thought maybe you’d like to get a bite to eat with me later tonight?”

At that point, I gave the butterflies my wholehearted permission to break into a victory jig. “Tonight? That’d be wonderful!”

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The excitement overwhelmed my introverted shyness for all of fifteen minutes after Baker left, then I spent the rest of my day in a shaking, freaky mess. Now that I’ve finally steeled myself to walk out that door and meet Baker at a small café for a quick bite to eat, Missy *has* to bring up my kleptomania problem. She waves the towel around again.

“Charlotte, seriously. What do you need all this stuff for anyway?”

“I dunno, Missy. I just know that when I’m in a restaurant, I sometimes think, ‘Man, this is a nice spoon. It’ll come in handy for stirring my coffee in the morning.’ So, I take it.”

“Yeah, but how many spoons does a single woman need to stir coffee with? I’ll give you a hint, Charlotte. The answer is one. *One*. And it’s stealing, no matter how hard you try to justify it to yourself.”

“Do you consider taking the shampoo and soap from hotels stealing too?”

“Well, no, those are complimentary, I guess.”

“Then how do you know the spoon isn’t complimentary?”

“Because it’s a stainless-steel spoon, Charlotte, geez! Restaurants have to replace those things. It cuts into their budget. How would you feel if someone came into the bakery and started swiping all your mixing bowls?”

“Pfft. I’d like to see someone *try* to smuggle a mixing bowl out of here.”

Missy gives a disgusted snort, drops the conversation, and I head out the door to meet Baker, thinking: *she doesn’t get it*. And while the far corners of my brain nag me that there might be something *slightly* criminal in taking this stuff, it isn’t my fault that I do. It’s my mom’s. She started it. And she would agree with me that it really is OK.

“It isn’t stealing,” Mom once told me. “We paid for the service, so we paid for this too.”

Because of Mom’s teachings, I have an entire drawer full of ketchup packets that I will never use, some so old I’m pretty sure they’d detonate and blow my apartment clean away if I open them. Swiped silverware from plane trips and restaurants fills at least three kitchen drawers at the bakery. And one side of my bedroom closet is dedicated to hotel bathrobes. It’s not like those companies will ever notice, I tell myself. They can afford it.

Now, sitting across from my dream man, the zillion lectures Missy has flung my way crowd into my brain. What would Baker say if he caught me in the act? That’d put a damper on this relationship super-quick. My hand hovers over a knife that would work great for cutting butter at the bakery, but I reluctantly pull it back. Nope. Not in front of the potential father of my children. He cannot know my weakness.

Weakness. Wow, that’s the first time I’ve thought of it that way.

“Charlotte? You OK?”

“Huh?” I wrench my thoughts away from the knife. Damn. Scatterbrained me cannot be making a good impression here. There’s no greater turn-off than a date who doesn’t pay attention to a word you’re saying, and I

haven't heard a single syllable Baker has uttered for at least the last three minutes.

He gives me a concerned look with those beautiful gray eyes. God, why is this so hard? Why can't I just have a nice, relaxing meal without this great desire to hoard something I honestly know I don't need?

"I was asking how you liked working on the beach," he says.

"Oh...um...great. I like to people-watch." *Sounds lame, Charlotte, change the subject.* "So...what do you do?"

"I'm a lawyer."

Oh, great. Borderline kleptomaniac Charlotte attracted to someone who probably knows exactly how to put her away. "What...uh...type of lawyer?"

"Deeds mostly. I work in home sales. Pretty boring, huh? Anyway, my dad just opened up a firm down here and offered me the job. His idea was to get away from the city and live near the beach, and I've gotta say, so far he's bang on the money."

He gives me a lopsided grin. My stomach butterflies are busy gnawing on my dinner entrée, so I get the courage (or stupidity) to blurt, "Yeah, it's great. But what possessed you to ask *me* out?"

He shrugs. "You seem nice. And like I said, I don't really know anyone here. Why'd you say yes?"

*Because you're gorgeous* would be the wrong answer here. I'm getting the feeling that this guy is one of those precious beings who doesn't think much about his looks. So, I say the next response that pops into my brain. "Well, I like kind guys. And you looked kind."

Heat trickles into my cheeks, but that was obviously the right thing to say because he gives me a genuine, relaxed smile, and I relax too.

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It happens after the dessert. Baker excuses himself to use the restroom and I promptly get into a wrestling match with my inner demon on whether or not I should bag the dinner knife. And maybe also the newly opened bottle of ketchup that would come in handy since I'd just run out at home. And since I'm struggling over swiping *both* objects, I decided if I only take one, that won't be half as bad as taking two.

The knife is easier to slide into my purse than the ketchup bottle, so I wrap it in a linen napkin (hey, I don't want to get the stuff in my purse all sticky) and slide it into the purse on my lap. Done and done.

A whiskery chin tickles my ear and Baker's deep voice whispers, "I saw what you just did."

A weird mix of sensations grips me—the excited feeling of dancing butterflies as his breath caressed my ear mixed with the sting of a zillion angry hornets as his words puncture my eardrum. Oh God. He saw.

He slides into his seat. Is he *smiling*? He must notice the absolute terror on my face because he says, “It’s OK. I do it too.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. When I was a kid, I used to steal grapes from the grocery store. You know, one out of a bunch. Mom always used to do it—she said it was ‘sampling’ before she bought. I still tend to do it. And on food bigger than grapes sometimes.” He lowers his voice. “Last week, I swiped a peach.”

“Do you take...stuff, too? You know, like knives?”

“No.” He grins. “No, that’s lying. I swiped a towel from a hotel just last month. I don’t know why. I didn’t need it. But sometimes, those hotel towels come in handy.”

The *Harbinger Hotel* towel fills my mind. And with that mental picture, the wasps and butterflies decide to leave my body and migrate elsewhere. “Exactly! But...I guess it is wrong though, isn’t it?”

He leans closer. “Yeah, maybe. But there are worse things. And don’t worry. I won’t squeal on you.”

He smiles. And I think, *Charlotte, this guy is a keeper. Probably an enabler too. But most definitely a keeper.*

# TALES FROM THE CLOSET

## *Ghost Story*

Well, here I am again.

In one way, it seems like I haven't seen this classroom for ages. In another, I only closed my eyes for a second, opened them, and *bam-o*. Summer's over, and I'm here among an energetic new batch of eleven-year-olds who still get excited about the first day of school because they haven't hit the rebellious stage of puberty yet. They're eager to see their friends. To jump into a new routine. To possibly learn something.

And to hear the story about the closet.

Its door is flung open like it always is the first day of school. Sceptic yet half-believing kids peer into it. One cowering girl wraps strands of yellow hair around a nervous finger as she stares, eyes frightened and unblinking, into the closet's murky darkness. A tough-looking boy lounges in his chair, pretending to not care and yawning in a pitiful attempt to impress the girl sitting next to him with his aloofness. That girl ignores him and leans forward, intent on the closet's open door. She grips her pencil in a boa constrictor-like squeeze.

The first question is always the same.

"Is it true? Did a teacher really get murdered in there?"

I don't catch who says it, but it doesn't matter. The reply is stock. "So they say. Her name was Mary Turnball. They found her stuffed in there the first day of school, a knife stuck in her back."

Every student gasps except the tough-looking kid, who rolls his eyes. The murder is the only interesting story associated with this crumbling pile of bricks we call Ferryville Elementary. Kids have discussed it at recess for generations until their interpretation of events differs wildly from what *actually* happened. These kids are excited because they're the lucky few who get to spend the school year in the "Murder Room". And on the first day of school, the teacher assigned to this classroom is obliged to rehash the details and answer all questions if she holds any hope of refocusing her new students to the task of learning something constructive.

The ritualistic questions begin.

"Who did it?"

"When did it happen?"

"Did they ever catch the killer?"

And the formulaic answers follow. "No, they never caught him. But Mary Turnball died fifty years ago today..."

Wow. Has it really been fifty years?

“...and some say that her husband, Matthew Turnball, did it. But he was never convicted. No solid evidence. And they say...”

Here the students rip their gazes away from the closet and clamp their eyes on the storyteller.

“...they say Mary Turnball’s ghost is still trapped in there. And every year, on the first day of school, she reappears. See those marks on the closet wall?”

Eyes swivel back to the closet. Kids involuntarily rise out of their chairs, like marionettes on strings, and glide forward to get a better view.

“Every year, on the first day of school, the scratch marks appear. They’re gone by the end of the day. Her last attempt to escape her murderer...”

We all peer at the marks. Because they *are* there. Faint but obvious on the faded yellow paint—the one concrete proof these kids have that a slain teacher’s ghost *does* appear in this closet every year. That she *does* make a desperate attempt to claw away from her attacker. Year after year it happens.

But I don’t ever remember making those marks.

I simply wake up from whatever trance I stay in the rest of the year, and I stare out the closet at a mass of new students peering back at me. Through me, rather, because they can’t see me, but I sure see them. Their shining faces are so...alive. And the teacher always reclines at her desk, a puzzled smile clinging to her face because although she doesn’t quite believe it, even *she* can’t logically explain away those claw marks. This year that woman is a doppelgänger of me from fifty years ago. Young and fresh. Eager to teach and eager to learn. She has dreams beyond this classroom, I’ll bet. Like I once had.

“But why?” the yellow-haired girl asks. She’s twined a clump of that hair so tight that the tip of her finger is turning purple. “Why would he kill his own wife?”

The teacher shrugs. “Well, if you believe the story, Mary Turnball was supposedly brilliant. She invented a device that would make them rich. And he wanted the money for himself. So, he killed her and stole the idea.”

“Bastard,” the girl with the pencil breathes.

The teacher ignores her remark. In my day, that kind of language would have earned that kid an hour standing in the corner with a dictionary balanced on her head.

They’re inching closer to the closet. The teacher continues in a theatrical whisper. “Until her murderer is brought to justice, she’s bound to come back every year. To remind everyone of her gruesome death. And that the killer is still on the loose.”



“What did she invent?” the tough boy, who now doesn’t sound so aloof, asks.

A wistful smile crawls onto the teacher’s lips. “Well, Mary Turnball loved boats. She loved to sail, she loved the sea. I’m that way too. I was in the Coast Guard before I became a teacher.”

Wide eyes stare at the teacher with a new respect.

“She invented a piece of equipment that helps aid ship navigation. Most ships still use it. The theory is that her husband killed her and took the credit. And it made him rich. He, of course, insisted that the invention was his idea and he never would have murdered his dear wife. And there’s no real way to disprove it.”

The tough boy’s face softens. “So the poor teacher...she’s bound to suffer for all eternity? Is that how it works?”

They’re practically in the closet now. The girl clutching the pencil pokes it through the doorway, and I shrink back—not that it matters. I won’t feel it, no more than I can feel the shelves piled with books or the teacher’s coat hanging neatly on its peg.

I wish I *could* feel it. It’d be nice to touch something. To experience texture again. Hardness and softness. Or warmth and cold. All I experience in this waking time is hazy thought, a dreamy awareness. A slight curiosity, wondering what the kids will say this year. Their clothing styles may change, and their haircuts, and even their slang, but each new batch of students never fails to ask interesting questions.

“I bet he did it,” the tough boy says. “He stole her idea and hacked her to bits.”

That’s true. Well, except the “hacked to bits” part. One excruciating stab, a sudden brightness, and that was it. Until the next first day of school, when I blinked into my ghostly existence for the first time.

“If he did it,” the girl with the pencil says, “and she’s doomed to haunt the closet until her killer is brought to justice, then what will happen next year?”

“What do you mean?” the teacher says.

“They’re tearing the school down, aren’t they? That’s what my mom said. They’re building a new one on the other side of Ferry River. What will happen to her then? She won’t have a closet to haunt.”

This is new. The first truly unique question in fifty years. And for the first time in fifty years a prickling sensation crawls up my nonexistent spine. I can *feel* it.

What *will* happen to me then?

The girl with the yellow hair yanks her finger forward and the hair unravels. “She’ll be stuck in limbo.” She sticks the purple finger in her mouth and nibbles on an already frayed fingernail. “Imbo for ’tern’ty.”

And I shudder. For the first time this closet feels like a suffocating coffin. All these years I’ve gazed out

of it, bemused at the young faces staring so intently in, but what if those faces disappear forever? And all that is left when I wake each year is black nothingness? Is that what I'm doomed to see—to *feel*—for all eternity?

“Maybe we can save her,” the tough boy says.

The teacher smiles. “What do you mean?”

His eyes are bright now, sparkling. He's a thinker, the smartest kid in the class I'll bet, underneath all that pretend aloofness. “What if those scratch marks on the wall *mean* something?”

We stare at the marks again. *Do* they mean something? Was I not quite dead when that bastard of a husband slunk away, his plastic-wrapped boots muffling his presence, his gloved hands leaving no fingerprints? Did I scratch out a clue? They make no sense, those marks. In my dying delirium I scribbled out something entirely indecipherable.

Or is it? A tiny memory tickles my conscious. The scratches begin to take on a meaning. The teacher moves to the closet and scrutinizes them too. I can visualize the neurons in her brain firing away as she rubs her chin. No cold gold band grips *her* ring finger. Good for you, lady. Keep your ideas for yourself.

“If you tilt your head sideways,” she says, “they look like Morse code.”

The yellow-haired girl's teeth rip out a bit of fingernail. “What's 'at?”

“A code they used long ago, before computers were invented. We still use it in the Coast Guard.”

“What does it mean?” the girl with the pencil says.

“Well, those scratches...they look like this.” The teacher crosses the room, grabs a marker, and transcribes the scratches to a marker board:

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“Two dashes and one dash,” she whispers. “M and T.”

The tough kid sucks in his breath. “Matthew Turnball.”

A cold quiet fills the room. If I still had a heart, it would be beating madly.

The girl with the pencil scratches her temple with it. “Someone must have thought of that before.”

*No, I want to scream. In fifty years, no. Not until this minute.*

The yellow-haired girl stops chewing her fingernail. Her hand falls to her side. “If she was alive enough to write it in Morse code, why didn't she just scratch his initials in English?”

Good question, kid. Why didn't I? Maybe it was the only language that made sense to my dying brain. A desperate S.O.S. from a ship lost at sea.

“Is he still alive? Her husband?” the girl with the pencil says.

The teacher nods. "I think so. He lives in a big mansion, up in the heights above the river."

She takes out a cell phone and snaps a picture of the marks on the wall. "I'll send this to my boyfriend at the police station. He might be interested in this."

The tough boy frowns. "But will it save her? If we tell everybody, will she be at peace?"

The teacher gives him a sympathetic look. She's the sensible type. She's doing this to humor the kids more than anything. She doesn't believe in ghosts.

But the girl with the pencil, the one he was trying to impress, touches his shoulder. "I think maybe now she will."

Their faces begin to dissolve. The teacher opens her mouth to say something, but I don't hear her words. I glance at the wall. The scratches have faded away. Like they do every year.

But next year, maybe it will be different. Next year, when this school has been razed to the ground, maybe I won't wake to cold darkness in an unknown place. Not if they can convince *someone* of his guilt.

Next year maybe I'll walk in a land that's warm and bright. Or I'll sail on an endless sea, with cool spray kissing my face and sunshine sparkling on the waves. I'll miss their faces, all those curious kids. But it'll be nice to never see that closet again. And it'll be nice to find some place I can call home.

Home for eternity.

# HOW TO MAKE AN ENTRANCE

*Drama/Young Adult*

He's downstairs. Holy hell.

The doorbell rang while I was shimmying into my slip, and Dad must've opened the door and let him in, and now I can hear them talking in the hallway.

"Damn it, he's already here," I whisper as Mom drops the shimmering satin dress over my head.

"Jessie, don't cuss," Mom says. She threads my hands through the dress's armholes and zips me up.

"You'll survive."

I stare into the mirror. It *should* reflect a pretty girl in a pretty dress except that girl has a look of absolute horror plastered on her face that no amount of makeup can hide. "Oh, God, this is gonna be so embarrassing."

Mom snorts. "Adolescence is nothing but a series of embarrassments. Get over it. Maybe he'll think your entrance is cool."

"He'll see right up my dress."

Now she laughs. "Fix your hair. I'll see if I can distract him."

She leaves the room, and I hear her shoes clunk down the ladder. That'll be me in a few minutes. Descending a wooden ladder in my satin dress to meet my prom date. Could this get any more humiliating? What if my dress rips on that old nail that keeps working its way loose? What if I fall? I've already tumbled off that damn ladder once, when I was trying to carry a plate of mid-term study snacks up to my room. I sprained my ankle and had to sleep on the downstairs couch for two weeks.

"I'll get the stairs put in ASAP, hon," Dad had said. "Then you won't have to use the ladder anymore."

He stated that brash lie a full month ago. A pile of boards is propped up against the house but it hasn't morphed into anything that remotely resembles stairs yet.

The house. I still have a hard time calling it that. Six months ago, it wasn't a house at all. It was simply the abandoned cow barn I would hide in when I wanted to escape the cramped confines of the trailer we were living in. I had fixed up the old feed room with a used couch and hung some of my watercolors on the walls, and that's where I'd go to read in peace, away from Dad's screaming sports shows blaring from the TV and Mom's constant nagging.

Then, the cheap trailer with the shoddy electric wiring burned down one day and the dilapidated barn was the only building left unscathed and standing. So, we moved into it.























I had hated the trailer. We'd moved to it when Dad landed a job in Virginia and cheerily made us pull up roots and move there. I'd left all my old friends behind in Pennsylvania, and my opinion of Virginia, once I was stuck living in it, was that it sucked. The three acres my parents had bought, complete with the crappy trailer and crumbling barn, sucked. My new school and all its snooty students who laughed at newcomers sucked. Everything about the move, in the eyes of a morose fourteen-year-old girl, completely and utterly sucked.

"Living in the trailer is only temporary, sweetie," Dad said. "I'll build us a real house soon."

He (emphatically) made that statement three years ago, but he instantly got too busy to follow-through with his grand plans. We would have remained in that moldy, depressing, rat hole forever if it hadn't decided to hasten its demise by bursting into flames. Luckily, we weren't in it at the time. We had temporarily escaped its miserable confines for a few blissful hours and were touring the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC when it happened. By the time we got home, all that was left of the Trailer from Hell was a smoldering heap of nothing.

"That could've been us," Mom whispered as we stared at the still smoking remains. "We could've been in there."

"Well," Dad said, "we weren't."

"But where will we live now?" I choked out between sobs. I wasn't sad that the trailer had burned to a crisp, but every possession I owned had burned up with it.

"Well," Dad said, "a motel I guess, for a bit. Until I can build the house."

"That'll take months," Mom said. "We can't live in a motel for months."

Dad turned his eyes to the old barn with its rusting tin roof and broken windows. "Well, we could build a house faster if we convert the barn."

Mom let out her trademarked contemptuous snort. "That dilapidated old thing? Are you serious?"

"Sure, why not? It's got a solid foundation and thick beams. Most of the wood is still good. It'll make a perfect house. A *unique* house."

"The roof is half caved in and there's no plumbing or electricity," Mom pointed out. "You'd be better off demolishing the whole thing and starting from scratch."

Dad had already got the excited, sparkly-eyed look he gets when he's planning a great project, though. "Who wants to live in a boring old house when we can live in a barn? All I have to do is fix it up."

So, with terrific gusto, he started the project. Amazingly, in six months he'd cobbled together a working

kitchen and a living room where the cow stalls once stood, and three bedrooms carved into the hayloft. It wasn't the prettiest job. Dad was adamant that he could do anything better and cheaper than a professional, which really meant that it took ten times as long for him to finish anything. So, even though he managed to patch the leaky roof and he'd rigged up some sort of plumbing system that sporadically worked, we still had no *stairs* to the bedrooms, just the old hayloft ladder because Dad's interest in the whole project petered out after he'd finished the tricky stuff. Even my bout with the sprained ankle hadn't jostled him into action.

"I just don't have time now," he said. "I'm slam busy at work; it's the craziest time of the year. Why don't you come up with a design, Jessie? I bet you could build it."

"Last time I tried to use a hammer, I punched a hole in the drywall with it and you yelled at me not to pick one up, ever again," I said.

He laughed. "Sweetie, I was just mad that day. I'll tell you what...I'll teach you some carpentry tricks. We'll put up those stairs together."

But that idea petered out too. He was too busy and I was too busy, and it was easier to use the ladder than spend time coming up with a solution. So, there we were.

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And here I sit, in front of the mirror, my stomach clenching into pretzel-like knots. What was I thinking? Why hadn't I just gotten dressed in the kitchen? Then I wouldn't have to shimmy down the stupid ladder in front of everyone. What will my date think?

The problem is, I don't know this boy that well. He's just a kid in my chemistry class. A cute kid, one that makes me blush every time he glances my way, but I'd never really *talked* to him. I didn't have the nerve to try. So, when he approached my table at lunch two weeks ago and asked me to the prom, I had blurted out "yes" so fast the milk I'd been drinking almost spurted out my nose.

Now I'm rethinking my quick acceptance to his invitation. I hadn't thought through the consequences. Like him picking me up at my old barn-house with the rooms that have drywall up but no paint on them yet, the half-tiled bathroom, and the nonexistent stairs. The Prom—the most important night of any kid's high school experience—is our very first date. What was I thinking? What kind of desperate person says "yes" to the prom with a boy she hasn't even gone out to the movies with yet? And what kind of girl meets her prom date by climbing down a rickety ladder in a fancy dress?

The idea of changing back into jeans and a sweat shirt flits through my head. But then I hear my mother's high-pitched, snorting laughter and my father's grating guffaws and wonder what sort of embarrassing



childhood story they might be regaling my date with, and I decide climbing down that ladder won't be as humiliating and leaving that poor boy alone with my parents.

I vacate the safety of my bedroom and climb down the ladder.

Mom hasn't even attempted to surreptitiously move my date into another room where he can't see me make my grand entrance. She's still standing with him in the foyer. They're both laughing at something she's said. Dad has his cell phone pulled out, and he begins snapping pictures as soon as my foot hits the first rung. I'm too busy making sure I don't slip to yell at him to stop.

I land on my feet. No torn dress, no sprained ankle. I turn and force a smile on my face, and say, "Hi!"

His eyes sparkle, and he has a goofy grin on his face, "Wow!" he says, "That's the best entrance ever!"

And then he insists on climbing the ladder. Because he may be my prom date, and we may be going to a grown-up restaurant before we hit the dance floor, but he's still seventeen. And ladders are fun, if you aren't worried about ripping a dress.

"I meant to have the stairs done," Dad says, "but I just got too busy. Jessie was going to try to finish them, but she hasn't practiced enough with the hammer."

My date shimmies back down the ladder. "I love building things," he says to me. "Maybe we can both work on it. If you'd be okay with that."

I smile. The pretzel-like knots in my stomach have relaxed and untangled themselves. "Sounds great," I say. "That's a definite date."

# HOW NOT TO GROW OLD

*SciFi*

Sometimes I think I'm too damn old to learn new tricks. Take cooking native vegetables on a new planet, for example. Here I stand, years of culinary experience behind me, but can I convert these inedible alien plants into something humanly palatable?

Nope. I fail miserably every time.

I've tried the normal methods. I've zapped 'em with a Laggasinator; they burned into a smoldering pile of dust. I massaged 'em with a Puckifier; they morphed into a gooey lump. When I test-fed the stuff to the house staff, the digestive tract effects morphed quickly from simple gut-gurgling to all-out puke fests that forced everyone to bed for two days.

"I just *can't* cook this crap," I groan, rubbing my aching back. "They're gonna pack me back to Earth, guaranteed. I'm too old to figure this out."

Milli, the housekeeper, laughs. "Janelle, stop the melodramatics. The Admiral won't fire you for being old. We're *all* old. Try something easier. We brought plenty of Earth food with us, work your culinary magic on that."

"No, by God. It's the Admiral's first dinner party on this planet, and he wants to wow his friends with the local cuisine. He's hoping they'll move here, too." I scowl at the pile of green gook lying on my heretofore immaculate prep table. "I've eaten this stuff before. The cook down in Shanty Town makes it *perfect*, but damned if I can prepare it right."

"Did you ask her *how* to prepare it?" Milli says.

I hadn't. I'd wrongly assumed my highly-trained self would easily unlock this world's gastronomic secrets. After all, the Admiral equipped his new kitchen with every advanced gizmo known to culinary science. Has any of that done me a lick of good?

Hell no.

So, I grab my cane and hobble to what we've dubbed as Shanty Town. The Admiral built his house on a hill overlooking this eyesore. Fields of wavering purple grass lead down to Shanty Town, which teeters on top of a cliff surrounding a crystal-clear lake. It's all very picturesque, except for the dilapidated town itself. Years ago, when the first wave of colonists settled here, the government provided them the basics and promised that a second wave of settlers with better supplies would follow. But with all the Earth wars and economic woes, the

far-flung settlement was forgotten until recently when someone thought it might be prudent to send a ship out and see if anyone was still alive and kicking. A handful *were* kicking, so the government called the settlement a success and a few retired bigwigs, like my Admiral, decided they'd settle down here too. It's more peaceful than Earth. No wars. No stress. A great place to retire.

I shuffle down the town's one and only street. Dilapidated huts line it. They were only meant to be temporary shelters, but they've had to last all these years, and most look like they'll implode if you breathe on them wrong. Some settlers have managed to thatch their rusting roofs with mounds of purple grass, or shore up their leaning structures with stones dredged out of the lake. The restaurant I enter creaks ominously every time the breeze hits it. I pray it doesn't fall on my head as I limp through the doorway.

A few curious eyes glance my way when I enter. Connie, the plump old proprietor, greets me with a kind smile. Their Earth food must've been used up years ago, but the old settlers sure aren't hurting for sustenance. They've all gotten pudgy on the local cuisine. I've gotta figure out Connie's secret.

"Morning," I say.

Her smile gets even sunnier. "Morning...Janelle, is it?"

A burly settler, probably as old as Connie but sour-faced and grumpy, gulps his mouthful and growls, "You live in that fancy-schmanzy mansion don't ya? When's that Admiral of yours gonna send for more building materials so we can fix our own houses up? We've been waiting *decades* for supplies."

I shake my head. "I don't know anything about that. Maybe they're coming on the next transport."

The man glares at me, like it's my fault. "They'd better. We've been living like hobos for years."

"Enough, Harry," Connie says. "It isn't Janelle's fault." She turns to me. "How can I help you, dear?"

I let out a grateful sigh. "Listen, I'm in a bind. That green stuff you served me when I was in here last week..."

"We call it New World Asparagus," Connie says.

"Yeah, that. How the hell do you cook it so it's edible? I've tried every way I can think of, and it still tastes like something the cat puked up."

"Easy," Connie says. "You boil it."

She shows me her kitchen. There, sitting on the stove, is a metal pot brimming with bubbling water. How old-school. I feel like such an idiot for not even *thinking* of something as basic as boiling. *Nobody* uses that antiquated method anymore.

I grab my cane. "Thanks a billion."

She seizes my arm before I can head out. “Wait a sec, newbie. I haven’t told you the secret ingredient yet.” She points out the cracked window to the glistening lake. “Your fancy house on the hill uses well water, and that won’t make the food edible. It doesn’t have the right minerals, or something. Only the lake water has it.”

I frown. “You’re saying that in order to cook these native plants…”

Connie nods. “You need lake water. Why do you think we built our settlement where we did? Lake water is the only way to turn anything on this planet edible, although it does have one nasty side effect.”

I frown. “What?”

She gives me a sad smile. “It makes you sterile. Look around. See any young folk? Only old people live here. The original settlers, what’s left of us. We were supposed to start a viable colony, but nobody ever had any kids. Now it’s too late for any of us.” She stares sadly out the window. “We reported this fact back to Earth when they finally made contact with us. This world won’t work for a major resettlement. No chance of anyone having offspring.”

“So why are you all still here?” I ask. “Why not go back to Earth?”

Harry, the surly, burly guy, pushes his chair back and burps. “Tell her about the *good* side effect.”

Connie leans closer to me. “That water might make folks sterile, see, but it also keeps us from getting older.”

Harry nods. “I’m eighty-two, myself.”

I stare at his bulging muscles and wrinkle-free brow. “Are you serious?”

Harry beams and sucks in his gut a little. “Absolutely.”

Excitement starts to permeate my brain with possibilities. No wonder the Admiral and his rich friends want to retire here. And what can this wonderful elixir do for me? An end to my pesky back aches and miserable sciatica? My eyesight has been dimming a bit, too. I wonder if the lake water can fix that.

I grip Connie’s arm. “Does it work on anything?”

“Just about. That water eases aches, cures sickness, keeps ya strong. If you’re old or don’t want any babies, this world beats the Garden of Eden. So, we’re staying.”

“Yeah,” Harry says, turning surly again. “The only thing we need is better housing.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it,” I say. Harry snorts and turns his attention back to his plate.

I gaze at the wonderful lake. “Maybe the Admiral could pipe the water up to his house.”

Connie shrugs. “I suppose. We’re so close, we just lug it up in pails. The walk down to the lake is pretty

peaceful, even if it is a bit steep. Here.” She scoots into the kitchen and returns lugging a pail brimming with water. “You can take this. Bring the pail back when you’re done.”

I grab the handle. The pail’s weight practically drags me to the floor. “Shit,” I say as my back begins to spasm.

“Oops,” Connie says. “I forgot. You haven’t reaped the lake water’s benefits yet. Harry, be a doll and help her out, why dontcha?”

Harry grumbles, but plucks the pail from my hand and chugs through Shanty Town and up the hill, me struggling vainly to keep up. He scowls as we enter my kitchen, which is probably larger than half the town’s huts combined. He plops the pail on my now thoroughly messy prep table and stomps out. Once I catch my breath and rest my screaming back, I finally get to the task of boiling the New World Asparagus.

Does it work this time?

You bet it does. On the night of the Admiral’s party, I serve the tastiest damn dinner I’ve ever made.

“God,” one guest murmurs, gulping her last morsel. “This clinches it. Great food *and* an age-defying lake. We’re retiring here for sure.”

The Admiral wipes his lips and smiles at me. “Good job,” he whispers. “They’ll be moving here in droves.”

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Move here in droves is exactly what happens. Trouble is, only bits and pieces of the planet are habitable. The lake lies at the bottom of a gorge, and Shanty Town’s trail leads right to it. The only other trail lies a good twenty kilometers north, at the end of the fertile rolling fields and the beginning of a swampy jungle. *Nobody* wants to live there.

So, the best spot to build retirement houses was where Shanty Town squatted. The Admiral, who owned the entire parcel, gave the orders to raze the eyesore and build expensive mansions there instead. If he had gone about this fairly, it could’ve worked out great for everyone. He could have built nice accommodations for the old settlers just a little further along the cliffs. The old settlers could have then provided the incoming retirees with the benefit of their New World knowledge and experience, and everyone could have lived in a wonderful, kumbaya-like state of peaceful and cooperative happiness for the remainder of their days.

Obviously, this doesn’t happen.

Because once the lake’s Fountain of Youth properties had been trumpeted to the universe, every Earth retiree who could afford it slogged across space to claim their slice of the New World pie. Land values sky-

rocketed, and the Admiral made a killing. The new settlers imported their own staff, so the old settlers weren't needed for anything. The Admiral decided to rebuild their town near the other path to the lake, the one next to the swampy jungle.

Why didn't the old settlers fight this injustice? They tried at first, but what can a handful of poor has-beens do against the huge tide of wealthy and powerful people moving in? They had no choice *except* to relocate.

As the years rolled on, and my aches and pains dissolved away, I didn't give the old settlers much thought. I was too happy. Back spasms and sciatica? Ancient history! Failing eyesight? An eagle couldn't see clearer than me. Sickness? I haven't had as much as a sniffle in years.

But now, the Admiral—now the richest man in this solar system—decides it's time to hire a newer, hipper chef. And he's given me a cruel ultimatum. Pack my bags and head back to Earth or join the old settlers in the swamp.

The choice is obvious. No way am I leaving. I'd turn to a heap of old dust the second I left this planet's orbital pull. So, I catch a hovercraft to what the rich snobs have officially dubbed "New Shanty Town". It drops me and my meager bags off at the imposing high wall surrounding the town.

They aren't expecting me. But when I knock on the gate, it creaks open and Connie sticks her head out. She doesn't look happy to see me. The kind smile I remember has morphed into an annoyed frown.

"Kicked you out and threw you to the curb, did they?" she says. "What makes you think we want you here?"

I gulp. This wasn't what I was expecting from nice old Connie. "I'm sorry. I have nowhere else to go."

She grudgingly opens the gate. "Bound to happen, I suppose. Those people think of nobody except themselves." She hesitates. "They didn't send you to spy on us, did they?"

Her coldness depresses me. Maybe I made the wrong choice, coming here. "Why would they do that?"

She shrugs. "Maybe they've heard about our secret."

She motions me to follow, and we head down the street. This Shanty Town is a bit nicer than the old one, but a depressing gloominess hangs over it. "What secret?" I say.

She leads me into her new establishment. Harry, looking even more muscly and even more annoyed since the last time I saw him, sits at a table shoveling soup into his mouth. I smile at him, but he doesn't return it.

"Why'd you let her in?" he growls.

“They kicked her out.” Connie turns to me. “Listen, now that you’re here, you’re stuck here. We can’t have you blabbing. Those snooty bigwigs can’t find out what have here. They’d move in for sure, and we aren’t gonna let *that* happen again.”

“What do you have?” I say.

She hesitates. “The spring.”

I plop down my bag. “Come again?”

“The main spring that feeds the lake. It’s located right here. That’s why this place is so swampy.”

Harry nods. “The spring water is even more potent than the lake. Makes ya not only stop aging, ya start *de-aging*. *Look* at me. Ninety-two and my hair is turning red again.”

“Hence the wall and our self-imposed isolation,” Connie says. “Anybody else finds out about this place, they’ll take over quicker’n you can snap your fingers.”

“And now that you know,” Harry growls, “you can’t leave. We can’t risk anyone finding out about this. Ever.”

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The promise of eternal youth isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Sure, I feel younger the longer I’m here, but am I happy?

Not really, no.

Nobody is. We have nothing to do and an eternity to do it. I don’t recognize the people here anymore, and not just because they look younger. Connie’s lost her kindness and wears a distrustful frown. Harry has morphed from surly to downright bitter. Everyone’s so worried about losing their hold on this place that they don’t realize how miserable they are living in it. It’s like a prison. A self-imposed Shangri-La where everyone gets healthier but exponentially unhappier. Relocating back to Earth, even if we quickly withered away, would have been a better choice than staying here.

I wish I could leave. There’s nothing to do here but cook food, eat food, and stare at that damned lake. They’ll never let me leave, though. Sometimes I think: what I wouldn’t give for a shorter, more fulfilling life, wrinkles on my brow, and a back spasm or two.

# BREAKUP AND MAKEUP

*Comedy*

OK, cake. Listen up.

You hate me, and I hate you. So, here's the deal. We absolutely cannot see each other anymore. We are through. Finito. Done.

Don't look at me like that. Don't act so shocked. You knew this was coming. Our relationship has been shaky for months. And I have to say it, as cruel as it sounds...I just don't find you tasty anymore.

God, who am I kidding? What am I even saying? It's not true at all, not a word of it. I'm lying. I'm heartless. I *love* you, you sweet, chocolaty slice of heavenly bliss. Truly I do! How could I spout such cruel words like "hate" and "finito", and especially "not tasty"? How could I even *think* of treating you so shabbily? It isn't me saying these ugly things, I swear! It's...*her*.

I think it's because she's jealous of you, you scrumptious pile of sugary layers. She's jealous of your perfection. Your moistness. The absolute harmony you and my tastebuds have when you meet up and begin to tango together. I'd get rid of her if I could, I swear to you I would. Then we could be together always. Like we used to be. Remember? Remember when she didn't exist? It was just you and me, and we were so happy.

But then, she sneaked in one day. Stealthy, like a fox. And now...well, she's always here, you see? Judging us. Poisoning me against you. Telling me horrible things. Like how bad and evil you are. How you're out to get me. How I should have *nothing* to do with you. And...oh my dear, dear love...please forgive me...she's *so* persuasive. I'm starting to listen to her. I don't mean to, honestly, I don't. I try to shut my ears, but she's so firmly stuck inside my head now. Oh, the horrible things she says about you!

And you torment her on purpose, don't you? You're a bit spiteful too, admit it. Every time you meet her, you taunt her and get all in-your-face about our relationship. You won't let her forget it, how much more I love you than her. It humiliates her, don't you see? Now, honestly, whose side am I supposed to take? Yours or hers?

I know, I know. I shouldn't take sides. I should trust in you, and only you, my beautiful brown stack of love. But here's the thing. My whole body is beginning to take her side. It's revolting against me. Me, the person who has cared for it all these years. I mean, my skin is now covering layers of invasive fat. I don't know how the hell that fat crept in. But it's there. And my skin is in league with it. It tries to hide the fat from me, but I'm not blind. Folds of the stuff have totally obliterated my belly button—sucked it in to a blubbery black hole. And don't get me started on the rebellion my digestive tract is involved in. My intestines rumble and groan and



give me shooting pains every time you and I hold a secret rendezvous. My stomach has started spurting up geysers of acid into my esophagus, as consistent as Old Faithful.

Now, I know none of this can possibly be your fault. But she insists that *she* isn't the bad guy. She says she's trying to help me, but she's taken to threatening me with worse things...horrible things yet to come...unless I cease and desist any more late-night assignations with you. She's warning of additional fat that my already weak back will have to carry. Extra weight to stress my creaky knees. And scary diseases...she's whispered the names to me in my dreams: *diabetes, fatty liver, hardened arteries*. Horrible, horrible words, you understand?

So, as much as I love you, I have to let you go. Please don't cry. Don't mess up your fluffy, fudgy frosting on my account. I'm not worth it, truly I'm not. If I had any backbone, I'd tell her to go straight to hell. I'd run off with you and never listen to her again. But, I can't. She's in my head, you see? She's lodged herself in there and I can't get her out.

I know, deep in my heart, you'll find someone who will love you with all the passion that I do. Well, maybe not quite as much. No one will ever surpass my undying fervor for you. It just isn't physically possible. I love you that much. But I must let you go.

Oh, how I'll miss you. I'll miss that wonderful chocolaty taste on my tongue.

I'll miss the sweet swirly softness of your frosting.

I'll even miss the dry leftover crumbs I find the next day on the unwashed plate. The last sweet reminders of our secret love.

<<<<>>>>

She first barged into our lives after that fateful visit to Dr. Paulson's office, when he gave me the grave news.

"You are borderline diabetic," he said.

"Which means...?" I prompted.

"It means you need to lose weight. Cut down on your sugar intake. Exercise. Drop at least twenty pounds."

I celebrated that news with you, remember? Well, it was more like a commiseration than a celebration as I tried to figure out how to cut calories and sugar without damaging our relationship.

"I'll start eating wheat bran for breakfast," I said. "And more protein, of course. Wholesome vegetables at least once a day. But there'll still be room for you, don't you worry. The doc didn't say I had to give up sugar completely. Just to cut down on it."

And that's where she butted into our conversation and said, "Who are you kidding, girl? Chocolate cake *is* your sugar intake. You cut it out of your life, and you'll have smooth sailing. Doc Paulson will be so impressed with your improvement next time you visit, he'll probably give you a gold star and a lollipop."

I ignored her. I shoveled you into my mouth and chewed loudly, to drown out her unwanted advice.

A week later, after I'd jogged a gazillion miles and pumped iron at the gym until my arms threatened to fall off, I stared at the scale numbers glaring up at me from between my toes.

"How the hell did I go *up* in weight?" I screamed.

"You finished each workout session with a slab of chocolate cake," she said. "That's how."

And so it began. The constant fight with my conscious over you. And unfortunately, my wonderous glop of confectionary brilliance, she's winning the fight. She's beating my will to a miserable pulp. You, unfortunately, are no match for her.

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So that's it. There's simply nothing else we can do except say goodbye. Oh, the world is cruel, isn't it, my one true love? I'll tell you what, just one last little kiss. For old time's sake. One more tiny lick of frosting...

Or maybe just a teeny bite.

Or a forkful, that should do.

Just this one last slice. Then we're through. Finito. I swear.

# BIJOU'S TALE

## *Historical Fiction*

In the Year of Our Lord 1458, a dog went on public trial in Bourgogne, France. The charge: thievery. The punishment if convicted: death.

Putting an animal on trial wasn't a new occurrence; the previous year the good people of Bourgogne had tried a pig and her six piglets for murder. The sow was accused of killing a baby; her piglets named as accomplices. The judge exonerated the piglets but found the sow guilty and sentenced her to death by hanging. Nobody cried over the demise of the murdering pig, but people had mixed feelings about this new accusation. It centered around the loveable Bijou, the little black dog owned by the equally loveable Jacques the Bard. Jacques spent his days journeying through Europe, spinning stories in public squares to rapt audiences. He usually wandered through Bourgogne in early spring and wove wonderful tales of princes and popes and mighty kings while the playful Bijou romped with the village children.

One night, while Jacques ensnared the villagers with his melodic voice, Bijou wandered through the enthralled crowd and chanced upon a velvet pouch lying in the dirt next to Madame D'Airelle's feet. Rooting through the pouch, Bijou's wet tongue wrapped around a large ruby ring. As he tugged the ring into his mouth, Madame D'Airelle glanced down, let out a horrific scream, and wrestled the ring from the wriggling dog, who thought this was some grand new game of tug-o-war.

The matter should have ended there, except cranky, sour old Madame D'Airelle abhorred dogs and insisted the mayor charge the mongrel with theft. So, a few days later, the trial commenced.

They held it on a warm April afternoon in the town square so everyone could attend. Bijou sat, tongue lolling happily, in a makeshift prosecution box as Madame D'Airelle stated her case. After she finished her rant, the mayor, who acted as judge, turned solemnly to Jacques.

"As the accused cannot defend itself, you may speak for it, if you wish."

Jacques the Bard wrapped his travel-stained cloak around his shoulders and turned to the crowd, his faded stringy hair framing his gaunt but pleasant face. He cleared his throat, and the warm baritone that had filled the air on so many happy spring nights now wrapped around the crowd like a comforting old blanket.

"I will not only prove my dog's innocence," he said, "I will convince you that Bijou is the most noble dog who has ever lived. Listen now, to my story."

A couple of years ago (said Jacques), in the Germanic town of Mainz, there lived a great man wrestling with a great conundrum. Johannes Gutenberg, creator of that famous invention, the printing press, was unsure exactly what to *do* with his new device now he'd invented it. He had used it to publish a poem, but that seemed an inept product for such a wonderful machine. No, he *must* find a noble use for the press. But what?

He pondered for days with no success. He sat one morning, staring at the contraption, and didn't notice little Bijou poking his curious nose into the room. The dog had strayed from me as we roamed along Mainz's cobbled streets, and had found Gutenberg's door ajar. Bijou scrambled into the room and began sniffing around, hoping to find a scrap to eat. You know how hungry my little Bijou gets.

*(The crowd chuckled.)*

Well, about this time, Gutenberg noticed the dog. At first, he was annoyed. Bijou had jumped on a bench and was sniffing a painting of the Virgin Mary hanging on the wall. Johannes leaned forward to shoo him away, and it was then that Bijou turned his beautiful brown eyes on the great inventor. Nobody can resist those eyes. Look at them now.

*(He nodded at Bijou. The dog thumped his tail and fixed his bright brown orbs on the crowd, who oohed in adoration, except Madame D'Airelle who harrumphed in disgust.)*

Gutenberg reached out to pet Bijou. As his hand touched the dog's curly fur, his eyes came to rest on the serene face of the Virgin Mary. And it was then that the solution to his problem swept over him, like a divine wind.

"Mein Gott!" he said, dropping to his knees and crossing himself.

*Bibles.* Bibles that would be available for all to read and treasure, from the mightiest king to the humblest peasant. He would print Bibles...for the good of mankind and the glory of God.

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Madame D'Airelle wrinkled her long nose. "*Mon dieu!* Do you seriously expect us to believe that the great Gutenberg's decision to print Bibles was based solely on the influence of your filthy mongrel?"

Jacques smoothed his cape and gazed steadily at his accuser. "Gutenberg was *so* grateful that he gave me a gold florin and asked if he could keep the dog. But I couldn't bear to part with my sweet Bijou. My long journeys would be lonely without him." He patted a small leather pouch tied around his neck and smiled at Bijou, now curled up in the prosecution box with his eyes shut. "I still keep the florin close to my heart, as a reminder of how precious my little Bijou is."

Madame D'Airelle frowned. The dog let out a squeaky yawn, and the crowd chuckled with delight.

Jacques's warm smile widened.

“I shall give you another example of Bijou's goodness,” he said. “Something closer to home.”

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It was a glorious day. Our noble French soldiers were on the verge of their greatest triumph—defeating the English and recapturing Bordeaux. The never-ending War that had ravaged our country for a hundred years was close to an end.

Now, Bijou and I happened to be traveling with our army as entertainers, to keep up the soldiers' morale with stories and songs, when the Battle of Castillion—the last battle of the war—occurred. And it was Providence that we were there because one last holdout—a garrison of stubborn English soldiers—refused to surrender.

Our soldiers had easily vanquished most of the English army. But this little band had taken refuge in a rocky crevice. While our general pondered on whether to use the cannon or charge the entrenched soldiers, thus possibly sacrificing more French blood, the good little Bijou took action. Most of you know how intelligent my dog is. One could almost say he has the wisdom of a saint.

*(“Blasphemy!” Madame D'Airelle hissed.*

*“Shh!” someone in the crowd whispered.)*

Well, little Bijou began to bark. Before we could comprehend *why* he was barking, all manners of dogs began heeding Bijou's call and running to his side. They came out of nowhere: big curs and dainty lap dogs, lean and quick hounds and muscular fighting dogs. They streamed towards Bijou like rats flocking to the Pied Piper.

And with Bijou in the lead, that brave army of mongrels charged the English line and routed them with bites and snarls. The enemy soldiers were more terrified than if our men had leveled their firearms and barraged them with shot. They ran, screaming in confusion, leaving their weapons behind. The battle was won, the War over. The general proclaimed Bijou a honorary captain and hero of France.

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Madame D'Airelle's thin lips clamped into a hard line. She turned to the mayor. “You cannot possibly believe this nonsense.”

“King Charles himself presented Bijou with a medal of appreciation,” Jacques said.

“Let's see it, then.”

Jacques stared despondently at his feet. “Alas, I traded it for food during the horrible winter we experi-

enced last year.”

“Of course, you did,” Madame D’Airelle snapped.

The mayor turned to his aide and winked. “I do recall something about a pack of dogs at the Battle of Castillion, don’t you?”

The aide nodded. “*Oui*, I heard that too.”

“What a brave dog,” someone in the crowd said.

Madame D’Airelle folded her arms across her ample bosom. “This is preposterous. The war was already won, regardless of the dog. Your story proves nothing.”

“Perhaps one more example is in order,” Jacques said.

<<<<>>>>

Our final story finds Bijou and I wandering towards the town of Domrémy, in northern France. I spotted a haystack and decided to take shelter there for the night. As I curled up in the warm hay, Bijou wandered off to explore the farmhouse nearby.

In the courtyard sat a young girl gazing at the golden sunset. She was an ordinary girl, of no great consequence. Yet Bijou, who in his nighttime escapades tends to keep away from strangers, was immediately attracted to her, as if he knew this little peasant girl would go on to do great things.

He approached her cautiously. The girl did not notice the dog, yet as her eyes drifted from the setting sun to the quiet courtyard, she glimpsed Bijou’s shadow stretching across the ground...a shadow that, in her eyes, took the form of a beautiful angel...

*(“Wait!” Madam D’Airelle yelled. “Domrémy? A young girl? You’re describing Joan d’Arc. She has been canonized a saint. This is heresy!”*

*“If you interrupt again,” the mayor warned, “we will escort you from the premises.”*

*“But this incident would have happened over thirty years ago. The dog wouldn’t even exist yet.”*

*“Remove her,” the mayor said to his aide. “We want to listen to this story in peace.”*

*Madame D’Airelle shook off the aide’s hand and stalked off in fury. The crowd gave her departure a rousing cheer.)*

...a beautiful angel (Jacques went on). The girl rose to her feet and whispered, “Who are you?”

In response, Bijou sneezed. But to the girl it sounded like a call. An angel’s call to war...

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“And with that last wonderful tale,” the mayor said after Jacques finished, “I find the dog, Bijou, inno-

cent of all charges. And a truly noble animal besides.” He scratched Bijou behind the dog’s alert little ears.

The crowd cheered. Jacques the Bard scooped the wriggling Bijou into his arms. The mayor shook his hand. “Sorry for the trial, Jacques,” he whispered. “We never believed horrible Madame D’Airelle’s claims that Bijou was a thief. We just wanted to hear you tell a few more stories before you left.”

Jacques bowed to the mayor and turned to the crowd. “Unfortunately, now we must now leave the good people of Bourgogne and resume our journey. The people of Seville are waiting, and it is a long trek. Until next year!”

After many heartfelt *adieux*, man and dog trotted down the dirt road and into the countryside, escorted by skipping children and friendly farmers. Hours later, they walked alone, their well-wishers left far behind. Jacques studied the dimming sky, then picked out a quiet patch of woods where they might spend the night in the soft heather.

He lay down, and Bijou snuggled next to him. Jacques stroked the dog’s head, then held out his hand. Bijou’s mouth opened, and five saliva-covered silver pennies dropped into Jacques’s palm.

“Not bad, Bijou.” Jacques dried the pennies on the heather and shoved them into his leather pouch. “You must have swiped these from that nice farmer—the one who let us ride in his cart those last couple of miles. Where were the coins hidden?”

Bijou thumped his tail in response and gave his master’s hand a lick.

“Well, you keep your secrets, then, my friend. Thank you for the pennies, although that ruby ring would have fetched a fantastic price on the streets of Seville. Too bad that nasty woman caught you.”

He patted the fluffy head again. Bijou closed his eyes and yawned.

“Good dog,” said Jacques the Bard.

# DUCK, DUCK, GOOSE

*Romantic Comedy*

First Shot

“Maggie,” my husband of thirty years whispers as he stares around our old high school chemistry lab, “what the hell are we doing here?”

“Don’t you remember, honey? This is where we first kissed.”

His only response is a blank stare.

“Dammit, Ron, you’re as romantic as a bag of rocks. It was the day you, me, Sarah, and Ken were in detention, and Dr. Bernstein went for one of his infamously long bathroom breaks.”

“Ah,” Sarah says, pushing past me. “*That’s* why you insisted Ken and I show up tonight. To replay some perceived romantic nonsense from our youth.”

“Plus, you’re the high school principal now and have the keys.” I glance at Ken, who lurks in the shadowy hallway. “Come on, Ken. We don’t bite.”

He ducks into the room and frowns at Sarah. “You might not, but *she* does.”

“Maggie,” Ron says, “this is *not* what I had in mind for our thirtieth anniversary date.”

“Then *you* should have planned something. Show a romantic spark for once.”

“How can this be romantic if we aren’t alone? Why are Sarah and Ken here?”

“They *have* to be here so we can recreate it.”

He rubs his bald temples. Years ago, they were covered by unruly blond hair. “Recreate what, exactly?” he says.

“Our first kiss. We all got goofy and played spin the bottle that day, remember?”

Sarah groans. “Good Lord, Maggie, I’m fifty-two. And I’m certainly not kissing *him* again.” She jerks a thumb at Ken.

I grin and pull a bottle of Grey Goose vodka out of my shoulder bag. “You two can drink instead of kiss. Hell, we’ll all drink.”

Sarah’s eyes widen, then she laughs. Ron slumps to the floor in defeat.

“Let’s get this over with,” he says. “Then we can do something more adult. Dinner at a restaurant, maybe.”

I lay the bottle on the tiled floor and make him spin first. It lands on me. I take a swig. Not as romantic



as a kiss, but hopefully we'll get there.

#### Second Shot

Five minutes in.

I slug down another mouthful, cap up the bottle, and spin. It lands on Ken.

"Don't do it, Ken," Sarah says. "You know how you get."

"You're not my boss. Not since the divorce." He takes a defiant gulp.

Ron loses next. "This would go a lot faster if we just passed the bottle around," he says.

#### Third Shot

"So, what have you two been up to since I last saw you?" Ken says. "We kinda lost touch after the divorce."

"I'm unemployed." I say. "Company went under."

"Sorry," Ken says.

"I'm not. Figure I'll start retirement early."

He slurps on the bottle. "What about you, Ron?"

"He's still an accountant," I say. "The least exciting of any profession."

Ron frowns. "And the most stable, luckily for you, Mags."

Ken spins. The bottle lands between me and Sarah. I grab it first and take a hard pull.

#### Fourth Shot

I lick my lips. "That's good shtuff."

"Really? You're slurring after four shots?" Sarah says. "You're as bad as Ken."

Ken studies his fingers. "My nails are blue."

Sarah shakes her head. "No, they aren't. Why do you always see weird colors when you drink? Your turn, Ron. Try spinning it this way. I could use a shot."

#### Fifth Shot

"You haf purdy eyes," Ken says, staring at Sarah. "Purdy green eyes."

"They're brown, you idiot." Sarah stares hopefully at the bottle, but it spins past her and lands on me. "Damn it."

I tip the bottle an inch over my mouth and try to catch the vodka before it spills down my shirt. "Ron, how come you never say my eyes are pretty?"

"After thirty years, do I still have to?"

“It’d be ’mantic if you did.”

“I’m as romantic as a bag of rocks, remember?”

“When you kissed me that first time...*that* was ’mantic.”

“No, that was the luck of the bottle spin,” Sarah says.

“Not true. He coulda picked *you* to kiss, but he picked *me*.”

“Ken threatened to punch him if he tried to kiss me,” Sarah says. “Ron had no choice.”

I stare at Ron and point a shaking finger at a slumped over Ken. “You mean our entire relationship is based on a Ken threat?”

Ron smiles. “No. That first kiss was electric. Like all the ones since.”

He can still make my heart flutter. Or is that arrhythmia? I reach out, find his hand, and squeeze it.

“See that, Ken?” Sarah says. “*That* was romantic. If you’d said stuff like that, we might still be married.”

Ken leers at the vodka bottle. “That purple goose is smiling at me,” he says.

I spin. Sarah grabs the bottle before it stops and drains half of what’s left.

### The Dregs

Ron leans against the wall and lowers his eyelids. “Member when Dr. Bernstein came back from the bathroom and found us all on the floor?”

I rest my head in his lap and guzzle the vodka like a toddler sucking on a baby bottle. I pass the container to Sarah and wipe my mouth. “His fly was still undone. I ’member that.”

Sarah laughs. “He was mad ’cause we were spinning a leaking bottle of nitric acid on the floor. Killjoy.”

“And now you’re the principal,” Ron murmurs. “You aren’t acting very principally tonight, Sarah.”

“Well, sometimes you shouldn’t. She gazes at the near-empty bottle. “Hey, Ken, you think we could light the fumes on fire with a Bunsen burner?”

Ken scrambles up, grinning. “Let’s do it.”

They giggle and shuffle away. I tilt my head and stare into Ron’s eyes. He leans down for a long kiss.

“There,” he whispers. “Still electric.”

I smile. “Admit it, this was a great way to celebrate our anniversary.”

“Yes,” he says. “Yes, it was.”

We laugh. From somewhere in the lab, Ken yells, “Why is that flame *green*?”

# MAKING MERENGUES

*(This story won me 4th place out of 4500+ contestants in the NYC Midnight Micro Fiction Contest)*

When I'm down, I make meringue cookies. There's something magical about whipping egg whites and watching them transform from disgusting liquid slime into towering white peaks of heavenly fluff. Miraculous, like an ugly caterpillar morphing into a beautiful butterfly. Makes me feel better about things.

My mother always says life is like a meringue cookie. Make it correctly, it's wondrous. Make it wrong, it falls flat.

"Always use a stainless-steel bowl to make meringue," she said once. "If you use plastic, the eggs'll never fluff into peaks. They'll just stay eggs."

She spouted out that nugget of wisdom as we made meringues for my wedding reception. My choice of husband (Dan) was, according to her, a plastic bowl. Our decision not to have kids was another plastic bowl. And me flipping from one job to another constituted an entire cupboard full of inferior crockery. Mom is convinced all my life choices have led to one humongous collapsing meringue.

And as Dan's car crunches up the driveway, I pull my latest batch of cookies from the oven. They went in big and fluffy but come out flat as pancakes. Drat. I peel one off the tray and eat it anyway.

Dan comes in. "Try this," I say, popping a deflated cookie into his mouth.

"Mmm," he says. "Delish."

I agree. They're not pretty, nor perfect, but they taste fabulous. Maybe life really *is* like a meringue cookie. Even when it collapses, you still end up with something worth savoring.



# THE NOH SHOW

*Horror*

I wish she hadn't brought the game.

She sits on my couch, her thin arms encircling a frayed box with the words *Fortuna's Fashion Show* stamped on its cover. "Ready to play?" she says.

No, I'm not. My head pounds and my clogged nose forces me to suck air through my mouth, each breath ripping my sore throat like a dull razor shreds skin. Babysitting to make extra money sucks. But college tuition and the rent won't pay for themselves.

"Susie," I say. "I'm not up for playing a game tonight. Can't we watch T.V. instead?"

She freezes, her bony fingers gripping the box. A pink splash appears on her chin, spreads through her sallow face, and invades her flat, gray eyes, morphing them to a fiery red. God, I can't deal with one of her vicious tantrums tonight. I hate this kid. Why couldn't her parents cancel their date night? Why didn't I refuse to watch her? I *told* them I had a cold. But they dumped her on my doorstep anyway, as if she was an unwanted puppy and my cramped apartment was the pound, and I took her in, wondering what kind of desperate parents would leave their susceptible child with such a contagious babysitter. Maybe they hate her, too.

I swallow the phlegm clogging my throat and try one last, desperate tactic. "We need props to play *Fortuna's Fashion Show*, sweetie. You have a whole trunk of dress-up clothes at your house, but all I've got are some ratty t-shirts and a couple of baseball caps."

Susie points a finger at a row of Japanese Noh masks hanging on the wall. My ex-roommate picked up the somewhat creepy souvenirs while studying Japanese art in Kyoto. When she bailed on her last rent payment, she left them behind. I keep meaning to take them down but somehow, they're still there.

"We'll use those," Susie says.

I reach for a tissue and blow my nose. "You want to use Noh masks in place of fashion show costumes?"

She contemplates the masks with solemn eyes. "They're scary. I like them."

I throw away the dripping tissue. "They're used in Japanese Noh plays. But I don't think we should use them for this..."

Susie shoots me a determined glare that always manages to trump my feeble protests. "They're just on pegs, right? We can hang them up again when we're done."

She pulls the game pieces out of the box, unfolds the gameboard shaped like a fashion runway, and rolls

the dice. She moves her game piece three steps along the runway and picks up a card. “I got ‘Couture’,” she says.

I cave in and contemplate the masks, wondering which one will pass for ‘couture’ fashion. Susie reaches for the Deigan Noh—a woman’s white face, blood-red lips, and black hair. She holds the face over her own and sashays around the room like a model on a runway. I want to laugh, but something about that stark white visage blanketing Susie’s wan features like a death mask makes me shiver. Those masks are *so* going in the garbage after tonight.

“You need to score my performance now,” she says.

I award her the usual ten. I don’t dare give her anything lower. She *must* win the title of Fashion Show Queen. The epic outburst following an imperfect score is not worth it.

She hands me the dice with one hand; the other still clamps the mask against her face. “Your turn,” she whispers, her eerie gray irises blinking through slotted eyeholes.

I roll, move my piece, and pick up a card: ‘Goth’. Susie points to the Shishi-guchi Noh—the lion monster mask. Its demonic eyes blaze at me, its gaping red mouth and pointy fangs defy me to reach for it. I stand and stretch trembling fingers toward the mask.

“Put it on,” Susie says. Her eyes burn like fire behind her alabaster veil.

I take a raspy breath and hold the Shishi-guchi Noh against my face. I can’t breathe. Not with this horrible cold and the Shishi-guchi’s snarling teeth covering my chapped lips. I try to yank the mask away, but it clamps against my face like an octopus suctioning itself to a rock. My breath comes in short stabs. Susie begins laughing.

I try to scream at her for help, but her laughter drowns out my muffled cries. “Walk the runway!” she shrieks. “Walk it or I’ll give you a zero!”

I turn and stumble away, panic racing through my bloodstream as the suffocating mask grips my face. Growls fill my ears, like a demonic lion purring at his prey. I crash through the bathroom door and fall against the sink, hands gripping the cold porcelain, eyes riveted to the smudged mirror. My own face—pale as death, pupils dilated with fear—reflects from the mirror. The Noh mask isn’t there. Yet I feel it pressing against my mouth, a smell of cedar and cheap paint somehow noticeable to my clogged nostrils. One shaking fingertip reaches up and touches a hard, pointed fang, but in the mirror that same fingertip skitters across my bare cheek.

Susie’s chattering laughter echoes through the bathroom, the sound amplifying as it bounces off the walls. I scream as an alabaster face with blood-red lips materializes in the mirror, behind my shoulder, float-

ing and bodiless. Next to it, the Shishi-guchi rises, its fanged jaws opening and closing like a ravenous Venus flytrap. I claw at the mask covering my face, gasping, frantic, but it only tightens, choking off any air supply, dropping me to the floor as the last atom of precious oxygen escapes my lungs.

Susie's laughter is hysterical now. My eyes search the mirror one last time. Her voice echoes through the Deigan Noh's frozen red lips, her dead gray eyes stare out of its ghostly face. "Game over," she says. "I am the Fashion Show Queen...forever and ever. And you...you lose..."

A lion's roar smothers her fading voice, the last sound I hear. Oh, how I wish...how I wish she hadn't brought that game...

# MR. X AND THE SILVER HAND

*SciFi/Noir*

I met Mr. X at the Third Avenue wharf. Years ago, before rising seawater inundated the coast, the wharf sprawled below First Avenue where old Seattle met the Puget Sound. Now a muddy sea covers the place where Pike's Market and the old piers used to be, so a new wharf was built on Third.

Mr. X sits at a grimy table and munches on a burrito, a glob of red sauce clinging to his grizzled beard. My stomach churns at the sight of that errant glob. I thrust my left index finger into my mouth and pray the mentholated vapors spewing from the fingernail will calm my horrific gag reflex before I retch onto the table.

Mr. X doesn't notice my queasiness. He glances up and says, "Maria Stuckey?"

"That's me." I sit, my eyes focused on his necktie. "There's sauce in your beard."

He runs a napkin across his chin, and I pull my gaze to his frowning but now clean face. "Ms. Stuckey, watch this," he says.

He raises his left hand. A video screen embedded in the palm projects a woman slouched against a street lamp, blond hair blanketing her face. One slim hand grips the lamppost. The other arm trails into the street, a trickle of blood oozing from its mangled stump and dribbling into the gutter.

I suck my finger, drawing in another mouthful of gag-eliminating mentholated vapor, more out of a nervous habit than a reaction to the image on the screen. Blood doesn't make me queasy. Saliva, yes. Puke, absolutely. Snot and drool, you bet. But blood...I'm cool with it.

"That's Gwen Pomfrey," Mr. X says. "Wife of Ted Pomfrey, owner of Elliot Bay Villas, those fancy underwater houses they built on the seabed of Puget Sound. I believe Gwen employed your...special services just last week, Ms. Stuckey."

I nod. "She thought her husband was cheating on her. Hired me to collect the evidence."

Mr. X closes his fist and leans forward. "She's dead, Ms. Stuckey. They found her corpse sprawled near the Space Needle this morning. Somebody killed her and stole her hand. I want you to find it."

"How much is it worth to you?"

Mr. X frowns and takes a bite of his burrito. I've dealt with him before, and he isn't one to trifle with. A frown isn't a good thing. But he puts down the burrito and taps on his palm screen as he chews. He turns his palm towards me again. A number flashes across the screen. A big number.

I hold out my right hand—my *real* hand. He grips it with his clammy, meaty one, and we shake. "Deal,"



I say.

“I’m sending half to you upfront,” he says, dropping my hand and tapping his palm again. “Don’t let me down, Ms. Stuckey.” He stuffs the rest of the burrito between his thick lips.

I wonder, as I excuse myself from the table, why this two-bit mobster would offer to pay me, a lowly private detective, so much for the retrieval of someone’s hand, no matter how valuable that hand is. He has plenty of goons to do his dirty work, so why bother with me? He isn’t telling me something. This deal doesn’t feel right at all. But, money’s money.

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Life in New Seattle isn’t easy. My entire thirty-year existence has been shadowed by raging forest fires, rising seas, famine, death. A human culling occurred before the world finally righted itself, the population reached a tenuous equilibrium, and humanity marched towards a new, advanced society. One advancement is the almost exclusive use of solar power. The other is something dubbed Hand Technology.

Not everyone owns a Hand. The beggars, still prevalent in Seattle’s poorer districts, can’t afford the luxury. For those who can, the type of material used to make the bionic hands signifies your class. Mr. X’s is a mobster’s steel; Gwen Pomfrey’s an elite silver. I gaze at my left hand, a cheap and ugly workman’s aluminum. Like Mr. X’s, my palm contains a screen where I can upload any information I desire. The thumb unlocks my apartment. The index finger is loaded with calming mentholated vapors, and I now suck it pensively as I leave the wharf.

*Gwen Pomfrey’s Hand must contain something of great importance if Mr. X wants it so badly*, I think as I enter the old underground subway. The tunnel has been retrofitted with a glass tube that snakes to the water’s edge, drops to the seabed, and runs straight to Elliot Bay Villas. I climb into a pod, shoot down the tube, and enter the watery world of Seattle’s upper class.

A glass dome encapsulates the ornate houses in a protective cocoon. Two orcas swim outside the dome’s perimeter, toothy mouths half open, tails swishing through murky water. Above, huge glass tubes jut into the sky: some pulling in fresh air, others expelling the old. I exit the pod and hurry down the street to the last house. Ted Pomfrey’s residence.

I glance around the deserted neighborhood before pulling a silver object from my purse. I press it against the keypad, and the front door swings open. I stuff Gwen Pomfrey’s hand back into the purse and enter.

Ted, Gwen’s husband, lounges on a sofa. His startled eyes meet mine as I stride into the room. “Maria! What are you doing here...?”

His eyes widen as my aluminum middle finger points at his head, the other fingers curling into a fist.

“Maria, wait...”

“What’s so special about Gwen’s Hand?” I say.

“What? I don’t understand...”

“Your wife hired me to find evidence of your affair with another woman, Ted. Isn’t that funny? She actually hires the ‘other woman’ to rat you out.”

Ted shakes his head. “No, it isn’t funny, Maria.”

I laugh wildly. The urge to suck some mentho-vapor is strong, but I resist and keep my middle finger trained on Ted. “It *is* funny, Ted. Hysterical. And you know what? While we were discussing her case, she let slip that her Hand held the key to something...something immensely important. Mr. X seemed to think it was important too...so much so that he just paid me a shitload of money to find that Hand and give it to him. Well, *I’ve* got the Hand, Ted. I pried it off your wife’s dead body after I shot her. Now tell me...what does it do?”

Ted’s eyes fill with fright. “You killed my wife? Why...I don’t understand...”

I take a step towards him, steadying my finger. “I need money, Ted. Lots of it. I’ve gotta get out of New Seattle. Too many people pissed off with me. You were supposed to be my ticket, but you’re such a damn tightwad. So, I took your wife’s money when she hired me, and I killed her when I found out her Hand was worth something. Now...tell me *why* it’s worth something, Ted.”

“Please, Maria,” he jibbers. “I love you. How could this happen?”

“Easy,” I say, coldly. “Her Hand is more important to me than you are. What does it do?”

A thin line of spittle dribbles out of his gaping mouth. My stomach churns...I can’t keep my weapon pointed at his head *and* calm the gagging with my index finger. “Tell me quick, Ted,” I growl. “I’m about to lose it. You don’t want me to lose it.”

He raises his platinum hand and makes a sudden lunge towards me. A bullet erupts from my middle finger. I cram the index finger into my mouth and inhaled its calming vapors as the bullet smashes into Ted Pomfrey’s heart.

<<<>>>

I board a solar train at New King Station, gripping a thick leather bag stuffed with two metal hands and all my worldly possessions, which don’t amount to much. Once I figured out how to crack his password, I discovered that Ted’s palm screen listed all the locations of his gold vaults, and Gwen’s silver thumb was the key I needed to open them. I smile and flex my new gold hand. Ted has vaults spread all over the continent, all of

them chock-full of gold, silver, precious stones. Solid wealth, something I can turn in for all the crypto cash I'll ever need. If I can stay one step ahead of Mr. X and his goons, I'll be set for life.

The train slides out of the station. A waitress pushing a tray down the aisle is asking passengers if they want to purchase a meal. Ahead of me, a hand shoots into the air.

A mobster's steel hand.

"Burrito, please."

I cram my new gold index finger into my mouth and inhale desperately as Mr. X turns around, his malicious eyes gleaming, a deadly smile on his lips.

# INTO THE MIST

## *Supernatural Thriller*

At night, the Lafayette Cemetery in New Orleans' Garden District is chained shut. During the day tourists stream in to poke around, but when dusk falls, the iron gates clang together and silence envelops the tombs.

This night someone has neglected to secure the gates. He inches them apart, nervous eyes scanning the sidewalk for witnesses. The neighborhood is ghostly quiet. He slides between the gates, tiptoes among the shadowy tombs. A clammy mist blankets the ground. The tombs rise through the mist in stark rows, like ranks of ethereal soldiers ready to advance. He shivers at the unnatural quiet permeating the air—the voiceless din of the dead, silent yet unnervingly present. He rests a twitching hand against a tomb and takes a steadying breath. The tomb reminds him of a tiny house, with its blank windows and ornate door, and he wonders: when no living beings are around, do the dead float out these doors and congregate along the cracked concrete alleyway? Do they throw their own version of a Mardi Gras parade, flinging spectral beads in the air, pounding out zydeco on supernatural instruments?

Never mind. He isn't here to contemplate the tombs or the souls occupying them. He's here to find his driver's license. He had it when he took the cemetery tour earlier in the day. At some point later in the afternoon he noticed that it had vanished from his wallet. He'd retraced all his steps with no luck, and ended up back at the cemetery. Damned fortunate they hadn't locked the gates yet.

He shuffles along through the unnatural mist, his eyes fixed on the uneven ground, careful not to stub his toe and trip. He wanders under dripping magnolias lining the path and inches past silent tombs that study him with invisible, judging eyes. He scans the ground for his missing license. It will be a true miracle if he finds it in this eerie fog.

Close to the crumbling brick wall surrounding the cemetery, he stumbles upon an open, empty tomb. He remembers stopping here earlier with the tour group. The tour guide had explained how folks in New Orleans bury their dead.

"This old cemetery is still active," the guide said to the crowd. "Whenever a family member dies, the family tomb is reopened. If you look inside this tomb, you can see that there are two vaults, one on top of the other. Notice how the bottom vault is equipped with metal rods to slide in the coffin."

The tourists peered into the dark hole. He asked, "Why isn't anyone in it now?"

"This particular crypt has been abandoned. But if there *were* bodies in it, they'd decay quickly, due to

Louisiana's steamy heat. So, the curators move the decomposed remains to the top vault and put the new body in the bottom vault. Once the body is interred, they reseal the tomb.”

It had seemed innocuous enough during the day when he viewed it with a gaggle of other tourists. Now the unnervingly empty tomb forces a violent shiver through his body. He doesn't spot his license anywhere, so he scurries away from the open tomb, his footsteps squishing through muddy spots where the walkway has disintegrated. He pauses as a dog's bark echoes through the cemetery from somewhere far away. He takes a step then pauses again as another distant sound floats over the cemetery walls.

*Clomp...click!*

*Clomp...click!*

*Clomp...click!*

A second shudder jolts through him. He shakes his head, takes a steadying breath, and resumes walking.

Farther up the path, almost in the cemetery's corner, sits another tomb with its door removed. *They must be getting ready to inter a new occupant into this gloomy little house*, he thinks. He doesn't remember this tomb being open during the tour, and a morbid curiosity forces him toward it. He peers in. A thin plaster wall still covers the upper vault, but the lower vault yawns wide open...*like a mouth*, he thinks. The bars to glide the coffin in glint in the meager moonlight.

Something else glimmers through the mist covering the vault floor.

His driver's license.

How did it end up lying in this freshly-opened tomb? He pushes his head into the dark opening, wondering how many decomposed bodies lie in the vault above. He half-expects the opening to close around his neck, trapping him—half-in, half-out—in this macabre death house. Chills tickle up his spine like a multitude of skittering spider legs. He reaches in, wraps trembling fingers around the license, yanks it out. He scrambles to his feet and takes a few steps backward. He wants to run away from this tomb, but his feet are suddenly heavy, like his shoes have turned to lead weights.

He raises his eyes and reads the name “Bauerle”, etched over the open vault.

*Bauerle*. He knew that name. But from where?

Dim memories. A faraway country with dripping heat and wavering palm trees. Two planes flying low. A crash. A ball of fire...

His left eyelid begins to tic, like it had all those years ago. Quick, pulsating, like an electric shock. He licks dry lips and rubs the eyelid with a trembling hand, praying the pulses will stop.

Behind him, a distant clang, like metal hitting metal. A sound rises out of the mist—far away at first, but growing louder.

*Clomp...click!*

*Clomp...click!*

*Clomp...click!*

Footsteps. Odd, unnatural footsteps. His twitching hand clutches the license. Is it a policeman, intent on nabbing him for trespassing? Or is it something else...something not quite of this world...materializing out of the mist?

The plastic license sears his palm, like someone has set it on fire. His fist jerks open. The license falls to the pavement as a heavysset man hobbles out of the gloom, one thick boot stomping across the cracked alleyway, one titanium leg clanking behind it. *Clomp...click! Clomp...click!* His heart skids into an arrhythmic beat, mimicking the footstep—hard thumps followed by frenzied flutters.

In the darkness he can't tell if the man even possesses a pair of eyes; a bushy black beard obliterates any normal facial features. One hairy hand rests on a cane, the other strokes a rawhide necklace tangled in the unkempt beard. A grotesque, shriveled chicken foot dangles from the necklace.

“Tom Hopper,” the stranger growls.

His eyelid twitches violently. His voice comes out as a squeak. “Who...who are you?”

The man raises his cane, pokes Tom Hopper's chest. “You don't recognize me.”

Tom reaches behind him, hoping to steady himself against the tomb. His hand misses the wall and punches into the gaping vault. He almost loses his balance, but manages to steady his feet.

“I'm...I'm sorry. I don't...”

“I'm Armand Gatreau,” the stranger hisses. “I bet *that* name rings a bell.”

*Armand Gatreau.*

His eyelid pulses harder. A burst of fear forces him to spin around. He stumbles and sprawls across the uneven concrete. Armand Gatreau leans on his cane, his glittering, malicious eyes, now perfectly visible in the darkness. Those eyes flash down at the now prostrate figure lying on the cement walkway.

“You know who's buried in this tomb, Tom?” Armand shifts his weight to his good leg and points his cane toward the open crypt. Tom wants to look where the cane points but can't pull his eyes away from Armand's titanium leg. Khaki shorts fall to just above its metal knee. Instead of a prosthetic foot, the leg ends in a curious metal claw that clicks against the pavement, beating out an impatient staccato.

He forces his eyes upward, to the name etched across the tomb.

*Bauerle.*

A nauseous fear fills his stomach, crawls up his esophagus. He almost vomits the name out. “Gilles.”

Armand leans down, stooping so low his thick beard tickles Tom’s cheek. “That’s right, Tom. Gilles Bauerle’s remains were interred here five years ago today. What was left of ’em, anyway. There wasn’t much for us to bury, as you should well remember.”

He desperately tries to speak, but his throat has dried and closed. He opens and shuts his mouth like a dying fish flopping on the bottom of a boat. A smile pushes Armand Gatreau’s thick beard apart. He pulls a roll of duct tape out of his shorts pocket, yanks a piece of tape off the roll, presses it against his victim’s gaping mouth. Tom’s hands reach for the tape, scratch ineffectively against it. Armand grabs his wrists and winds the tape around them. Before Tom can react to this affront, Armand spirals the roll tightly around his legs., tucks the tape into his pocket, picks up the discarded driver’s license. He studies it as his other hand squeezes the chicken foot attached to the rawhide necklace.

“You might wonder, Tom, how you came to lose this license. You might wonder how it ended up in Gilles Bauerle’s tomb. You might wonder how you happened to come to this spot and look for it, and how, against all odds, we met here at this precise moment, five years to the day of Gilles’ internment.” He raises the chicken foot to his lips and kisses it. “You might wonder all these things, but the fact is that we *are* both here now, Tom Hopper. And Gilles Bauerle’s death is about to be avenged.”

Armand kneels and holds the license in front of Tom’s ticking eyelid. “See that? I’ve crossed your name out. You no longer exist. See what I wrote? ‘The Damned.’ That’s you, Tom.” He thrusts the license into Tom’s shirt pocket. “You’ve just obtained a License to Hell. And I’m going to send you there.”

He grabs his captive’s bound feet and drags him across the pavement. “You need to pay, Tom Hopper. Our planes collided because of your ineptitude. They should have never allowed you into the tower that day. Your nervousness, your tics. Why would they even let someone as edgy as you become an air traffic controller? Easier and safer than actually flying the planes, maybe? You sniveling coward.”

Armand stops in front of the vault entrance, the anger in his voice diminishing to a hiss. “You know, they never open up these tombs until the next family member needs interring. Unluckily for you, Gilles Bauerle was the last of his family. So, I don’t suppose they’ll open this tomb again for years, once I shut it. Although it won’t matter much to you. You’ll be long dead before anyone realizes you’re missing.”

He drops Tom’s bound feet into the vault. The stale, deathly air wraps around his legs, causing his

previously limp, shocked body to jerk and writhe. He screams against the tape covering his mouth. Above him, Armand Gatreau laughs.

“Nobody to help you, ol’ boy. I’ve locked the gates. You know what happens when you lose a leg, Tom? You certainly can’t stay in the Air Force, flying planes. I brought Gilles remains back here, to his final resting place, and stayed on as a cemetery guard. Wasn’t good for much else once I’d lost my leg in that crash. Sometimes I wish you’d ended my life too, quick and painless like poor Gilles.”

He continues stuffing the writhing body into the vault. “Although,” he muses, “it wasn’t quick. Or painless. I was in shock. I didn’t feel it when my leg severed right off my body as I was thrown away from the plane. But I sure heard Gilles screaming. He shrieked and moaned until the fire burned all the screams right outta him. I suppose you must’ve felt bad, Tom. You didn’t mean for us to crash. Or did you?”

Tom’s feet hit the bottom of the vault. His thigh smashes into one of the metal rods. The duct tape stifles his groans. Armand grabs his shoulders and pushes, scraping Tom’s back along the concrete path.

“We were never friends, but did we deserve what you gave us? Maybe it wasn’t intentional, that day, but I bet it felt good in some way, didn’t it? To get your revenge for whatever petty thing we’d done to you. Did we make fun of your ties that day? Did we refuse to let you come to the bar with us? What dumb thing was it, Tom, that made you decide to not pay attention? To let us crash? Did you feel bad when it was over?”

Tom’s shirt snags against the vault’s toothy mouth. The fabric bunches up until the bricks grate across his exposed spine. He wants desperately to explain—to apologize like he should have all those years ago. He’d been too afraid then, too ashamed of what he’d done. But how could Armand think he *wanted* the crash to happen? Yes, they bullied and hazed him. Yes, he was too unconfident to stand up for himself. But he never wished them dead. He tries to apologize now, to explain, but the tape muffles his feeble attempt.

Armand places his huge hands against his victim’s head. “However you felt, Tom, I lost my leg and Gilles lost his life. And feeling bad ain’t enough. A dishonorable discharge ain’t enough. This...” he says, shoving with a force that thrusts Tom’s entire body into the crypt, “*this* is enough.”

The back of Tom’s head smashes against the vault’s brick floor. Searing pain shoots through his shoulder blade as it shatters against a metal bar. Through the dim mist blanketing his face, he glimpses Armand Gatreau’s smile hovering over him: yellowed, crooked teeth glinting between the coarse facial hair. The chicken-foot necklace dangles just above Tom’s nose. If his hands were free, he could reach up and grab it.

Armand strokes the talisman with a hairy hand. “They say the chicken foot is supposed to protect you from your enemies,” he whispers. “Maybe so, Tom. Maybe so. But I find *my* foot to work even better.”



He pulls his head away from the vault's opening. Tom's eyes widen as Armand's titanium leg enters the vault and the attached claw slices across his neck. He feels the warmth of his own blood, and the hazy gray mist blanketing his eyes morphs to red.

"I *should* let you die slow," Armand whispers, his voice sounding farther and farther away. "But I'll show you this mercy and let you die quick. It's something you didn't show me. Or Gilles. Goodbye, Tom Hopper."

Tom's eyelid ceases to tic. His body stops its writhing. His dying ears barely register the footsteps fading into the distance.

Into the swirling mist.

*Clomp...click.*

*Clomp...click.*

*Clomp...*

# THE GHOST AND DR. PEACOCK

*Ghost Story*

December 2035

He looks nothing like the first time I saw him. The same wispy gray hair covers his head and his long face is still cleanly shaven, but instead of traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century clothes he wears a white clown suit with puffy red pom-poms for buttons. He stands in the center of the snowy glade and contemplates us with a thin-lipped frown, one finger tapping his square chin. Then he slowly pivots, as if to get his bearings.

A long knife protrudes out the back of the clown suit.

I tuck my thick skirt closer to my shivering legs, pull my gaze away from the apparition, and turn to the man sitting rigid on the log next to mine. “There he is.”

“I see him,” Dr. Peacock whispers as he grips the gnarled log with both hands. “But why is he wearing a clown suit?” The professor’s eyes, dilated with amazement, flick to me. “Ruby, could you put that down? It’s embarrassing.”

My fists, clenched so tight with excitement that the arthritic knuckles are now as white as the ghost in front of me, grip a banner that says: “Welcome John Lansing Jr. from Beyond!” in large letters, and in smaller script: “Dead 1829 – 2018”.

“Embarrassing to whom?” I say. “I doubt the ghost cares. And what’s wrong with the clown suit? It looks...festive.”

“Ruby, if I didn’t know you for the brilliant lawyer you are, I’d swear you’ve gone absolutely batty. And if he is who you say he is, *he* was a distinguished lawyer once too, and an admired politician to boot. Not a damn clown. *That’s* what’s wrong with it.”

“Ah,” I say, understanding. Dr. Peacock is a dry historian, not an avid ghost hunter like me. He came here seeking logical answers, not to see a freak show. He wants to find out who murdered the once living John Lansing, Jr. I don’t care about that. It happened almost two hundred years ago. Both the murderer and murderee are long dead.

I’m sitting in these bone-chilling woods for another reason. Five years ago, when hunters first stumbled upon the ghost wandering around this little glade, he was dressed how a man from the early 1800s ought: long navy coat, shiny top hat, pointy shoes. And I, as an intrepid ghost hunter—at least on days when I’m not stuck

in a courtroom mediating a messy divorce—want to know why, over the last five years, this particular ghost has morphed from a proper 19<sup>th</sup> century murder victim into an eccentrically dressed peculiarity.

Nobody believed the hunters when they ran into the nearest town announcing that they'd seen a ghost with a knife sticking out of his back. Nobody, that is, except me. Every year since, on the anniversary of his murder, I wait in this glade for the apparition to appear. And every year his dress becomes more eccentric. The only constant is the knife.

Three years ago, a ten-gallon cowboy hat had replaced the top hat on the ghost's lofty head.

Two years ago, he stumbled into the glade donning a pitcher's mitt and a New York Yankees baseball jersey.

Last year, ballet slippers encased his feet and a frilly tutu circled his waist.

And now, the clown suit. Dr. Peacock snaps a picture with his phone, although it won't turn out. Photos never seem to work here.

He studies the silent ghost. "Does he ever say anything?"

I put down the banner and wrap my arms around my waist, trying to warm them. It's five below tonight, and I'm still slightly amazed that Dr. Peacock decided to show up and brave the cold. "Rarely," I say.

"Maybe this is the wrong fellow," he says.

"No, he's John Lansing, alright."

The professor studies the apparition, who now has his fingers laced together behind his back as he tromps in a silent, contemplative circle. "How do you *know*?"

"Because last year I got up the gumption to ask who he was, and he responded, clear as day, 'John Lansing Jr., at your service,' before disappearing. It's the only time he's said anything."

As soon as the ghost had mentioned his name, I had switched my phone from the useless photo mode to a frantic internet search and decided the ghost must be the same John Lansing Jr. who served as a New York delegate to the Constitutional Congress, although he disagreed with the proceedings and ended up walking out. And who, one cold December day some forty-plus years after the Constitution's ratification (which he also tried to dissuade), had strolled out of a hotel and vanished without a trace. The consensus among historians had always been that someone murdered him, but there'd never been any proof since a corpse had never surfaced.

I decided I'd better invite a historian well-versed in early American history to my annual rendezvous. The only academic I knew who had enough curiosity to accept and brave the weather was Dr. Peacock. I'd negotiated his divorce the year before, much to his financial benefit, and we'd become friends since.

The ghost stops his pacing and turns to us, one transparent finger twiddling a pom-pom. “Does it still exist?”

It’s the first time in five years he’s started a conversation. His deep, clear voice travels across the frozen glade, and the shocked Dr. Peacock slips off his log and plunks into a snow drift while I drum up the courage to speak.

“Does *what* exist?”

“That document. The one I tried to squelch.”

My eyes turn to the professor for clarification. His mouth hangs open and his eyes stare without blinking, as if hearing the ghostly voice has paralyzed him. I flip through the card catalog of John Lansing facts stored in my brain.

“Do you mean The Constitution?”

The ghost nods. “That’s the one.”

“It still exists.”

Dr. Peacock coughs and adds, “Just holding on by a thread, though.”

The apparition frowns. “Nobody thought it would last, you know. Not even the men who ratified it. They gave it twenty years; I gave it zero. And it *still* exists. How is that for being proved wrong?” He pinches the pom-pom between his fingers and stares at it. “But I’ll be vindicated. You wait and see.”

He begins to fade into the snow. Dr. Peacock, remembering what he came here for, yells, “Wait! Who murdered...?”

But John Lansing Jr. is gone. The last pom-pom pops into oblivion. The professor sits frozen in a nest of snow, staring at the spot previously occupied by the apparition, I give him a consolatory pat on his shoulder, fold up my banner, and head to the campsite and my warm sleeping bag. I don’t really care who murdered John Lansing, Jr.

But I *am* curious as to what the ghost will wear next year.

December 2036

From behind a tree he steps into the glade. Real. Solid. His eyes skitter around the broken soil where shovels have punctured the earth in a vain attempt to find the murdered corpse of John Lansing, Jr. He spots me and smiles.

“Well hello, Dr. Peacock,” I say, patting to an empty spot on my log. “Come and have a seat. Try to stay on it this time.”

The professor gives a strained laugh and sits on the log. “Dr. Peacock is too formal, don’t you think, Ruby? Call me Dave. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Why on Earth *wouldn’t* I be here?”

He shrugs. “I just figured...what with everything that’s happened this year...you would have other things to do.”

I smile grimly as I unroll the banner that now says: “Welcome Back, John Lansing, Jr.: 190 years and counting!”. “There is absolutely nothing nowadays better to do than waste my time chasing ghosts.” I say. “Nobody’s getting divorced, it seems...business is super-slow. Everyone’s too nervous with the state of things.”

Dr. Peacock—Dave—nods. “Work is slow at the university, too. We’ve lost most of our funding.”

“Well,” I say, “at least there’s no snow tonight. And I do want to see what kind of kooky outfit he’s wearing this year.”

My eyes drift around the glade. Broken roots poke through the ravaged soil. The once tranquil spot now looks like an abandoned construction zone. “You could’ve filled the holes when you were done,” I say.

He shrugs. “Ran out of funding, remember?”

“Ever find a body?”

“Nope. Not even a bone. We didn’t get far before they shut the project down.”

He sighs. He seems ages older than when we met last year. We hadn’t had a chance to get together since, although we’d talked on the phone a bit. He’s been too busy demonstrating at political rallies and I’ve been too busy laying low. His hair has grayed. His face is thin and haggard. I must look ages older too. Worry will do that to a person. I pat his bony hand.

“Do you still want to know who murdered him?” I ask.

“I’m not sure if I really care anymore.”

“So why are you here, then?”

He clasps his hands together and leans forward in a contemplative slouch. “Because, like you, I have absolutely nothing better to do. I want to hear what he has to say about everything that’s been happening in this country. And...I wanted to see you, too.”

My old heart skips a beat. I smile and squeeze his arm. “They’ve only amended the Constitution, Dave. They haven’t gotten rid of it.”

“They’ve changed it enough to matter, and not in a good way,” he says glumly. “Definitely enough for that ghost to say, ‘I told you so’.”

“Told you so, what?”

The deep voice of John Lansing, Jr. shoots across the glade like a bullet. My startled eyes swivel away from the professor to the ghost who peers out of a hole, a wide-brimmed straw hat plastered with flowers drooping over his eyes. He rises out of the hole and brushes off some phantom dirt.

“Nice dress,” I say.

The ghost smooths the dress’s rustling taffeta skirt and gives me a stony stare. “Has the document finally failed? It must be getting close.” He stares down at the skirt as if his current state of dress is all the Constitution’s fault.

Dr. Peacock clears his throat. “Well...they’ve made some significant changes...”

One ethereal hand straightens the huge flowery hat. “Changes?”

“Amendments, you know. They strengthen the government considerably...”

“I *knew* it,” the ghost says in triumph. “I warned them this would happen. I told them a consolidated government could never protect the liberties of the people. I quit the Continental Convention for that reason, and I argued against its ratification, but did anyone listen? No. And look what’s happened.”

“But on the upside,” I say, trying to put a positive spin on things, “It worked pretty well for over two hundred years. You have to admit, that’s quite an accomplishment.”

John Lansing, Jr. frowns and pulls the hat tighter on his head. He begins to fade away.

The temptation becomes too much for the professor. He jumps up and blurts, “Before you go, who *did* murder you?”

The ghost’s frown deepens as he sinks into a bulldozed hole. “How the devil should I know? My back was turned when the scoundrel did it.”

### December 2037

It’s cold again this year. Snow covers the weedy mounds left from the futile attempt to dig up the remains of John Lansing, Jr. I move gingerly so I don’t trip into a hole. It would be horrible if I broke a leg out here, alone in the wilderness. I left my phone at home. I didn’t want anyone to track me here. Not that they give a fig about a loony old divorce lawyer like me. They care more about the protesters and the radicals who try and fight for justice. The ones who could actually do them some damage. But I stay away from anything that might track my movements anyway, just in case.

Frankly, I have more pressing things to worry about than stalking an eccentric ghost. I made the trek out here mostly out of habit and a desire to see how he’ll beat last year’s costume. It’s the only thing I can look

forward to these days.

He disappoints me, though. He pops into existence dressed in a stern blue waistcoat and a shiny top hat. Nicely pressed pants, pointy polished shoes. Only the gleaming knife sticking through the coat sparks up the boring ensemble. He looks happy, for once.

“Where’s the other one?” he says.

He means Dr. Peacock. Dave. *My* Dave.

“In jail,” I say.

They took him away the week after I married him. Me, who always swore I’d never marry—I’d seen too many horror divorces to ever want to go through one myself. But we had grown close last year, with everything that had gone on, and we’d decided, much too spontaneously—almost foolishly—to tie the knot.

The ghost frowns. “I’m sorry to hear it. Where’s my banner?”

I raise my empty hands. “Didn’t have the heart to make one this year, I’m afraid.”

“Oh,” he says. “I liked the banner. Made me feel important. What about the document? Does it still exist?”

“No. They abolished it this September. There’s a new government now.”

He gives a huge, sad sigh. “There you have it, then. I’ve been vindicated.”

“Why are you so happy to see it fail?”

He shrugs. “I didn’t say I was happy. Everything fails eventually.”

“Then you haven’t been vindicated at all. It was a tremendous achievement, the Constitution, until they trashed it.”

He nods and murmurs, “The last great experiment for promoting human happiness. That’s what George Washington said. Will you be back next year?”

I stare at his mundane outfit. “Will you be dressed in that?”

He smooths the wool coat with a wispy hand. “I expect so.”

“Then no,” I say, my heart sinking. “No, I don’t think I’ll make it back here again.”

# YELLOW DOG

## *Drama*

Far away in the woods a rumble begins. A slight vibration travels through the trailer's floor and into my feet. I stare around the bedroom, a nervous twitch forming in my stomach. Earthquake? No. The coffee in my mug isn't rippling. The framed photograph of Frank and me on our honeymoon—young, happy, and still in love—hasn't tilted. A lone wire poking from the broken smoke detector hangs overhead, motionless. The dog, its lanky yellow legs splayed across the floor, doesn't move.

“Feel that?” I whisper.

The dog yawns. Its eyelids remain shut.

“Earthquake, maybe?”

The dog growls and thrusts out a leg; probably chasing rabbits in its dreams. Maybe it chased them when it was young, but now hungry ribs rise and fall under tangled clumps of yellow fur, and a cloudy cataract blankets the dog's only eye. Someone abandoned it on this dusty road to die, and it crawled, whining, to my travel trailer last night. Must've known I wanted company.

Doesn't it *feel* that reverberation, dim but ominous, like a tidal wave still far out at sea but rushing towards its unsuspecting victims? I sidle across the bedroom—the “Grand Master Bedroom” Frank calls it, although it's the *only* bedroom in the trailer. It once held bunkbeds until Frank yanked them out and installed a “Queen Bed for the Queen” so we could sleep together on road trips instead of piled on top of each other like little kids.

I open the window. The metal sill vibrates under my gripping fingers. Outside, mist curls around tree trunks like ghostly flames licking living firewood. A supernatural quietness blankets the woods. No birds chirping. No insects buzzing. Nothing. Like they guessed at some imminent danger and hastily flew away.

I shiver and shut the window against the dead world. The rumbling inches closer. The window rattles. Frank's voice echoes through my brain as I nervously ponder what I should do.

*You're nuts, Janice, you know? Truly insane. You feel things that just aren't there.*

The rumble deepens. Long, slow waves ripple across the floor. The dog's ear twitches as it snores.

*Insane.* A furious increase in my heartbeat matches the tremor's swelling intensity. I rush into the kitchen, grab a knife like it might protect me, open the trailer door, and jump into the mist.

A graveled road winds past the trailer, cutting through the woods for miles before it reaches civilization.



Thorny blackberry vines creep through its potholes, threatening to obliterate the road entirely. We parked in this solitary place five days ago to hash out our marriage and decide whether staying together was worth it.

Two days in, Frank decided it wasn't.

*Going to get supplies*, he'd said.

*We have plenty to last the trip*, I'd argued.

*I'll be back soon*, he'd said.

That was three days ago. He unhitched the truck and left. On Day One, I wept, wondering how my life could go on if I lost him. Day Two, I fell onto the Grand Master Bedroom, staring at the ceiling and pondering how long it would take to die if I laid there forever. But when I woke this morning, all I felt was hate and contempt. How could he dump me—someone he used to care about—out in the middle of nowhere, like that unwanted yellow dog? I packed some essentials in a backpack and decided to eat breakfast before I abandoned our dream trailer—the last common bond we shared—to rot in the wilderness.

Now I wish I'd left sooner. And I wonder, as I shiver in the chilly mist, if the rumbling is real. Or am I insane, like Frank always insisted?

A high-pitched howl blasts out the trailer door, and I drop the knife in terror before I remember the dog. I scramble inside and poke my head into the bedroom. The dog stands rigid near the bed, its cataracted eye rolling wildly in its socket, a trembling nose pointing towards the smoke detector's wire as it howls.

Then I smell it.

Just a whiff...a scent of something woody and dangerous, still far away but rushing fast, as if it fears its prey will escape if it waits too long. I lunge for the window and stare out.

The mist has burned away. In the distance, black smoke curls into the sky.

Fire.

A coldness tickles my arm, forcing an involuntary scream out of my throat. It's the dog again, nudging my elbow with a wet nose. It lumbers for the trailer door. I grab my backpack and follow.

Outside, the ground shakes like the tarmac under a revving airplane. The dog limps down the road, and I chase after it, wondering if Frank will cry with remorse when I burn to death. The rumbling sounds ruptures through the air like a volcano. I glance behind me. Flames devour the trees and roll towards the trailer like a river of lava, obliterating everything in their way.

They're fast. So much faster than me. Or the dog.

Waves of heat wash across the road as I race past the hobbling dog. Blackberry vines clutch at my flee-

ing feet, like they're in league with the fire: the stooges that hold you down while a gang of thugs beats you up.

I can't outrun this.

I fling the backpack off, sacrificing it to the brambles. *Goddamit, I will beat this. My marriage may be over, but my life is not. RUN!*

I put my head down and fly—as hard and as fast as I can possibly go.

A loud explosion forces me to slow for a precious second and turn my head. Our trailer. A cloud of smoke, blacker than night, marks the spot of its demise. Far behind me now, the yellow dog emits a final, desperate howl before the roar of the flames silences it forever.

I face the road ahead of me and run. I don't look back.

# HEART DECO

## *Romance*

Cold. Mind-numbing, bone-shattering cold—that sums up downtown Chicago in winter. My gloved hands tug my hat over my ears—a futile attempt to escape the frigid wind. Carl is oblivious to it. His uncovered hair blows in the icy breeze as his eyes shine up at the old skyscraper looming above us.

“Look at it, Amy. Art deco architecture at its finest.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I grunt. “As long as it’s warm inside.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me up the steps like a ravenous kid yanking a parent into a candy store. And I puzzle, yet again, on how our first vacation together turned into a freezing stomp through an urban jungle instead of a warm bask on a Caribbean beach.

We stumble into a vast lobby with a domed stained-glass ceiling held up by massive arches—a huge, cold cavern almost empty except for a couple of wandering tourists. Carl spins through the lobby, goggling at the patterns on the floor and the inlaid tiles climbing the walls. His architect brain is in blissful heaven; meanwhile, my hopeful eyes scan the lobby for a coffee stand. Nope. People come in here to marvel at some bygone era’s grandeur, not to sip on a soothing cup o’ Joe.

Across the lobby, a handsome man with dark hair yawns and stares at his smartphone as the woman next to him yammers away in an excited voice while pointing at the stained-glass dome. That couple is us, in reverse. I wonder if the man is dreaming about a white sand beach too.

How did we end up together anyway? I’m a dancing social butterfly, Carl is more like a seventeen-year cicada who would bury himself in his studio forever and never come out if he had his way. I’m a beach person, he’s a city guy. I laugh at goofy comedies and he solemnly studies boring documentaries. We have absolutely nothing in common.

Back in college he flipped burgers on the weekends, and on Saturday my friends and I would tromp in to suck on a milkshake, goof off, occasionally study. Carl always had an endearing, lopsided grin plastered on his face. He kept his thick blond hair covered in a hair net so it wouldn’t shed onto the hamburgers. On our first date he forgot to take the hair net off. He ambled into this fancy restaurant with his shy grin and his hair all bunched up. I still tease him about that hair net. It’s our personal joke.

Now, two years later, he points at the floor as I rub my gloved hands together, trying to get some feeling back in my fingers.

“See this? It must’ve taken the artisan months to lay this pattern. Why can’t they make buildings like this anymore?”

I stare at the black and white tiles. “Too expensive? Too opulent? And what’s the point? This building isn’t even used any more. It’s like a dead monument to some past civilization.”

He shakes his head. “But it *is* being used. By us. We’re in it now.”

He wanders off to study a mosaic, and I peruse the pattern on the floor. Ebony tiles intersperse with ivory, beginning in the lobby’s center and spiraling out like a kaleidoscopic version of the Yellow Brick Road. I meander to its center and tap a black tile with my foot. The other foot taps the next black tile, and suddenly both shoes begin clickity-clacking across the floor, beating out a rhythm that echoes into the air and reverberates off the arches spanning above my head. Warmth spreads up my legs as I dance.

“Amy, what are you doing?” Carl stares at me, that lopsided smile I love hanging off his face.

“This floor is like a big dance pattern!” I say as I spiral away from the center. I dance by him and grab his hands. He gives a nervous laugh as his introverted eyes skitter around the room, but there’s nobody here to witness this except the yawning man and chattering woman. We spin around the room like little kids, holding hands and laughing. Carl’s cheeks turn red from the exertion. Heat creeps into my own face, and I wonder if my cheeks look rosy too.

“Amy,” he gasps as we reach the far end of the lobby, “I have something for you.”

He glides us to a stop next to a marble bench, and we collapse on it, our warm breath circling around us in wispy white puffs. He takes my hand and places something soft on it.

I squeeze and feel something hard underneath the softness. I open my fist. A balled-up hair net lies on my palm. Our old joke. I laugh.

The laughter fades as I spot the glint. It shines through the net and sparkles as a shaft of light streams through the stained-glass dome above.

“We don’t have much in common,” Carl whispers. “But maybe that’s why we work so well together.”

He reaches out and untangles the ring from the net. The applause from the woman and man should sound as loud as gunshots in this empty room, but I barely hear it as he slides the ring on my finger, and then we’re off, spinning across the floor again like there’s a full orchestra in the lobby sawing out a waltz. The sun shines through the stained-glass dome, and for a few precious minutes I feel like this city couldn’t get any hotter.

“This is wonderful,” I whisper as we glide across the floor. “But for the honeymoon...I insist on a Carib-

bean cruise leaving from sunny Miami.”

“Deal,” he says. “Miami is chock-full of art deco buildings we can visit.”

I think about arguing against his idea. But I’m beginning to like these old skyscrapers. Amazing things happen in them, if you give them a chance.

# PLANET NINE

*SciFi*

In five days, they're going to evaporate me.

They'll march me into a cold chamber and hit a switch, and within half a millisecond this inept body and all the jumbled thoughts in its pitiful brain will dissolve into a gazillion atoms. Quicker than you can snap your fingers. And then they'll open the hatch, and the black void out there will suck all my pitiful particles into its nothingness.

And that'll be it. Done. Finito. No more Marilyn Connor.

Devin taps his left running shoe with a calloused finger and gazes into its mirrored surface. "Quit being melodramatic, Marilyn. They aren't going to evaporate you."

I sit on my cot and touch what's left of my once beautiful hair. They shaved it off last week, and now only nubby spikes cover my skull. Less resistance, they say. You need all the speed you can get, they say, otherwise you won't cross the finish line and then into the evaporator you'll go.

"There's no way I'll win."

Devin frowns at his shoes. "You don't have to win. You just gotta cross the finish line before the sun sets."

"What if I don't?"

"You will."

"Easy for you to say. *You* don't have anything to worry about. You're the most athletic kid on this planet."

He taps his shoe again. "Your problem, sis, is that you've got no faith in yourself. We're twins, remember? We've got the same genes. You're fast enough. *Damn* it." He pounds the shoe with a fist. "What's wrong with this thing? It isn't turning on. Are your shoes working?"

I scoot to the floor and peer under the cot. My running shoes stare at me from their dusty hiding place. I yank them out and switch them on. They work fine, not that it will make any difference.

"I can't do it, Devin. I've never run a marathon in my life."

"Neither has anybody else. It's everyone's first time, Marilyn. But you've got a huge advantage. You've got me. And I *know* this course. I've walked it every day for the last seven years." He taps his left shoe once more. It sparks, then glows, and a bunch of jumbled numbers flash across its surface.

“I’ll never remember where I’m supposed to run. I’ll forget as soon as we start and I’ll make a wrong turn and end up sliding into a mile-deep crater,” I say.

Devin snorts. “There aren’t any craters on the course.”

“No, but I’ll be *off* the course. Wrong turn, remember?”

I pull on my running shoes. The soft insides vibrate against my toes. Glowing numbers flit across the left shoe. My heartbeat: 75. The time: 29:52. Miles I’ve run today: 3. My age in years, months, days: 17-8-0. Days until this insane race starts, I fail to cross the finish line, and they throw me into the evaporator: 5.

“I wish they’d never discovered this stupid planet,” I say.

“Not everyone can stay on Earth. It’s too crowded and hot.”

“Yeah, and here it’s too dark and cold. What’s the difference?”

Devin shrugs. “We have an endless supply of food here. That’s a good thing.”

I move to the window and stare into horrible blackness. Forty-five hours of miserable dark, every day. One small sliver of sun is all we get. And in five days, that meager half-hour of sunlight will either shine on a victorious Marilyn Conner or seal her doom.

In five days, when those rays from the far-off sun hit Planet Nine, Devin will be crossing the finish line. Triumphant. And his sister will be chugging for her life, miles away, hoping to get to the line before the light disappears.

Three hours. Three hours is all they’ve given us to run fifty miles. The universe’s most grueling, ruthless ultra-marathon. And when that little speck of sunlight fades, the kids on the wrong side of the finish line can kiss their pitiful existences goodbye.

They send the strongest and hardest losers to the mines. A life sentence of toil: pumping water from the deep wells, digging into the vast lodes of nourishing minerals hidden under the planet’s surface. In the kitchens, we pound those minerals into a fine flour and knead the flour into dough. That dough provides everyone on Earth and Planet Nine—our solar system’s outermost planet—with a continuous supply of food.

The more intelligent losers get the dubious chance of improving their odds of survival by climbing into a spaceship and blasting past the last edges of the solar system, in the hopes they’ll find some place better for the human race to populate. A mythical planet of sun and cool breezes and everlasting joy. In the fifty years humans have lived on Planet Nine, not one of those ships has returned.

The rest—the ones too weak for the mines and too dimwitted to make it as members of a spaceship crew—those wretched souls get evaporated. A quick and “rational” way to eliminate a superfluous portion of

the population.

But the kids who cross the finish line before the sun sets—those lucky bastards head home to Earth, their seven mandated years of indentured servitude on this horrible planet over. And even though Earth is so hot you'd slowly cook from the inside out if you didn't always wear a cooling suit, it's still home. And it has light. Beautiful, wonderful light.

Devin is going home for sure.

His sister is not.

Devin pulls out his writing tablet. "Here, I'll show you the course." He swishes one finger through the air, and a black line snakes across the tablet's white surface.

"The start line. There'll be six-thousand seventeen-year olds running this year, every one of them vying for a spot on the spaceship bound for Earth. They say only a thousand will cross the finish line before the sun sets."

"One in six."

"Yeah, but don't let the odds scare you. You'll be fine. You've been training whenever we can sneak some treadmill time in. You ran twenty miles in less than an hour yesterday."

"I used up all I had in me, though. I can't keep up that pace for fifty miles."

"You can. Just *believe* in yourself, Marilyn. Look." He moves his finger, and the black line expands across the tablet. "You run up the Jagermeyer for the first twenty miles. It's steep, but you can do it in under an hour if you really try. The next twenty miles are all downhill. Decrease the gravity pull in your shoes, and you can practically fly down that part of the course."

"Doesn't sound too bad."

"The tricky part is the last ten miles." Devin's fingers squiggle in the air, and the black line mirrors his movements, looping across the tablet in intricate knots. "It's slower because there's all those crazy paths through the Zunlouer forest, and that's where you can get lost if you don't pick the right one. Just remember: keep the pincheons on the right."

"The pincheons," I repeat.

"Yeah, those tall, spiky rock formations."

I shake my head. "I've never *seen* the pincheons, Devin. You've seen them because your work keeps you outside, but I'm always stuck in the stupid kitchens. How can I train for an ultramarathon when I'm pounding out dough to send back to Earth all day? It's made my arms strong, but not my legs."



Devin grins. “I guess getting assigned to work on the hauling team has helped me train up a bit.”

“A bit? Every kid on your crew has more stamina than anyone else on the planet. It isn’t fair, Devin. You’re practically guaranteed a trip back to Earth. And *I’m* guaranteed a one-way ticket to the evaporation chamber.”

He sighs. “Marilyn, don’t start that again. Haven’t I been helping you out the last few weeks? Aren’t I helping you now?”

True. We aren’t allowed much free time, but Devin coaches me on the treadmill whenever we can steal a few minutes. Now he hands me the tablet. “Just memorize the map I’ve drawn, and you won’t go off the trail. Your shoes will help you—they’ll keep you going—just run like you’ve never run before, and stay on the damned trail. You’ll be fine.”

If Devin weren’t almost always right about everything, I wouldn’t believe a word he says. “You promise?”

He smiles, and in his eyes, just a shade bluer than mine, I find some confidence.

“I promise. In five days, we’ll both be heading home.”

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The magnetic running shoes keep my feet on the ground. They cling to the rocks as I scan the numbers running across the left shoe. Heartbeat: 99. Time: 15:00. Miles run today: 0. Age: 17-8-5. Days until this insane marathon starts: 0.

A blast. A bright red shower of sparks overhead. Six thousand kids pound forward. We head towards the Jagermeyer—a massive mound of rock that has blocked my view of anything to the east since Devin and I arrived on this horrible planet. We were ten then. Ten: the age we could start work. The age our parents grasped us in their arms for the last time before we boarded the spaceship to Planet Nine. Their imminent reunion with Devin plays out in my head. They throw their arms around him, smiling. They search for me, but I’m long-gone—evaporated into a zillion pieces.

*Refocus, Marilyn. Refocus.*

I concentrate on Devin’s map, now stamped permanently into my brain. His voice reverberates through my ears. *Head straight over the Jagermeyer. Turn the magnets down in your shoes when you get to the top. When you reach the Zunlouer forest, keep the pincheons to the right. The right.*

I scan the crowd but can’t spot my brother in the throng, so I focus my goggles on the path ahead. The sky may be pitch-black, but the goggles reflect everything: pounding feet, rolling rocks, the looming Jagermeyer

obstructing the horizon.

I heed Devin's advice and steamroll past the slower kids. Climbing the Jagermeyer is the most physically challenging part of the race, and I push forward as fast as I can, breathing hard. Those precious stolen minutes on the treadmill are paying off. The running shoes speed me up—I can run miles faster than I could without them; the weak gravity helps too, bounding me forward in great leaps.

Heartbeat: 165. Time: 16:05. Miles run: 20.

Down the Jagermeyer. I pause and decrease the magnetic pull of the running shoes, then fly past more kids. My eyes focus on the rocky path, my shoes, my gloved fists as they pump forward and back, one after the other. My breath rasps through the breathing tube.

Heartbeat: 145. Time: 16:51. Miles completed: 40.

The field of runners thins. The road narrows. My goggles scan for Devin, but everyone looks the same. Silver suits. Breathing masks hiding flushed faces. The only human bits that stick out are the stubby hairs on the backs of heads. They've shaved off everyone's hair. Devin's crewcut is indistinguishable from anyone else's.

The thinning pack slows as we enter the Zunlouer forest. Tall spires appear in the goggles. The pincheons. Razor-thin rocks—if you crashed into them, they'd cut you clean in two. Kids stumble. Hesitate. The trail splits into a maze of squirrely paths.

Remember Devin's advice. Remember his map. Keep the pincheons to the right. The *right*.

A sliver of light dances on the horizon, signaling the beginning of the countdown clock. Only a half-hour left.

I can't run as fast with all the sharp turns, but I put on as much speed as I dare without flying off the trail and goring myself on a jagged pincheon. Devin must be up ahead, zig-zagging through this forest of rock with the front-runners. He'll make it. But he was right. I'm going to make it too. A fierce burst of pride radiates through my chest, followed by an intense sadness that quickly overwhelms any joy.

I'll make it. Thousands of kids behind me won't.

They'll fade away in the mines. Disappear into outer space. Evaporate into nothingness.

The burst of sorrow dissipates, leaving me numb, my mind empty. Even Devin's map, so indelibly stamped into my conscious these last few days, fades. The remaining miles pass in a haze: how the running shoes stay on the path is anyone's guess. I stumble across the finish line while the sunlight is still intensifying. Way ahead of the three-hour mark.

I've done it. I've accomplished the impossible. I'm going home.

My knees buckle and I crumble to the ground. Fiery, gasping breaths scorch my lungs. The goggles scan the crowd for Devin, then focus on my left shoe.

Heartbeat: 125. Time: 17:40. Miles completed: 50.

Then another line: WINNER. DESTINATION: EARTH.

I vaguely wonder: what do the losers' shoes say?

A large purple space suit fills my goggles. Whoever lives inside it extends a hand and helps me up. "Congratulations. You're the three hundred and sixth person to cross the finish line."

The hand guides me through a doorway, and I pull off my breathing mask and suck in deep drafts of oxygenated air pumping through the room. Kids mill around, dazed. Exhausted. Euphoric.

"Where is he? My brother? Devin Connor?"

The purple suit shrugs, turns away, and exits the building. Through the open door, I watch as the sun's final rays skitter behind the Jagermeyer and disappear.

<<<<>>>>

Breathless excitement floods the ship. Jubilant kids peer through huge windows, their eager eyes fixed towards Planet Earth. I'm the only one who gazes behind as the darkness swallows Planet Nine, the last seven years, and my twin brother.

His shoes. He'd asked for a different pair; the ones they'd issued him kept shorting out. But on race day he'd had no choice except to strap the faulty shoes on and pray they'd work.

They hadn't.

Out of all the kids serving their time on Planet Nine, Devin had the best shot of beating the sunset to the finish line. He knew the course. Knew it so well, he taught it to me. All those years he spent escorting sledges heaped with minerals from the mines—through the Zunlouer forest, over the Jagermeyer, into our kitchens—those years had hardened his body into the perfect athletic machine.

But even he couldn't race such a long distance in the time allotted without working running shoes. A stupid technical error cost him his life, his freedom. A damn glitch in the system.

Fifty miles. Six-thousand kids running for their lives. Only one in six had a chance of crossing the finish line before that treacherous sunlight blinked out of existence.

My thoughts switch to the reunion ahead. Our parents embrace me and search the masses exiting the spaceship, hoping to spot Devin, but he's not there. He's long gone.

Forced into the mines? Rocketed into another solar system? Evaporated into a zillion pieces?

I'll never, ever know.

# FREDDIE AND ME

## *Ghost Story*

The eyes stare at me. Even in the dark I can see them, white and glaring. I lie on the bed, unable to escape their gaze.

Earlier, when we'd arrived at Aunt Sue's, Mom rolled my wheelchair into this bedroom. Warm sunlight streamed through the big bay window, illuminating the beautiful antique carousel horse sitting in the corner, and I thought: what a perfect room to sleep in.

But now it's night. Now the comforting sunlight is gone. Now darkness covers this room, and the horse's white eyes follow me no matter how hard I try to avoid them. I want to scream for Mom and insist she move me to another room, or at least throw a bedsheet over that horrible horse. But dammit, I'm fifteen. This is all in my head. I'm too old to get all freaked at things when the lights go out.

I take a deep breath and will my eyelids to stay shut, not to peek.

I still see those eyes though. But I don't see Aunt Sue's dark spare bedroom anymore. Instead, I'm outside on a blue day, and I'm six years-old, riding the old merry-go-round that used to sit in the town square. My horse moves up and down on its pole, and next to me my cousin, Freddie, rides the wild, white-eyed horse. Freddie's laughing lips are sticky with cotton candy. He's six too.

My hands grip the pole as I kick my horse's sides and yell, "Giddyap!" My legs are full and strong, not all shriveled and useless like in reality.

"Dare ya to stand up, Freddie!" I yell.

Freddie's smile fades. "Nah, we'd get in trouble."

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

I raise my feet to my horse's back and stand, my hands climbing up the pole. I grin at Freddie who mimics me and stands up too, gripping his pole so hard his knuckles turn bone-white.

"You don't need the pole," I say. "See?"

And I let go, balancing on my horse's rising and falling back, like an acrobat at the circus. I laugh. "Let go, Freddie! It's like flying."

He whimpers but loosens his grip, and we spin past Mom and Aunt Sue who scream at us to sit, but now Freddie's flying too...

I open my eyes, gasping. That actually happened. A long time ago when we were six. I rode that merry-

go-round with Freddie and...

And what? I've never clearly remembered, not until now. Mom had to tell me while I lay paralyzed on that hospital bed all those years ago About how a gear on the merry-go-round went wonky and the ride jolted to a stop, throwing both Freddie and me off our horses. How I landed against the bench in front of my horse and broke my back. How Freddie...

I turn my head and stare at the carousel horse. Freddie's horse. The room is still dark. I can't see anything but the white eyes, and they're not in the corner anymore. The horse has moved, quietly, to where my wheelchair sits, inches from the bed.

My heart thrashes violently in my chest, but I can't scream. My voice has gone as limp as my legs. I squeeze my eyelids shut, but the horrible whiteness from those eyes is burned into my brain.

How'd this particular horse get into Aunt Sue's house? They dismantled the merry-go-round years ago—it'd been ancient even when we were little kids. Aunt Sue must've bought the horse. Did she know it was the same one her son lost his life on? Is this room some weird shrine to her dead boy? Did she put me in here as some kind of punishment?

I keep my eyes shut. And again, I see the merry-go-round, and we're six years-old, only now it's gray and stormy, and I'm in my wheelchair sitting next to the white-eyed horse going up and down, and Freddie sits on it and stares at nothing with dead, glassy eyes.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I didn't mean it. I was just playing. At least you can't ever get scared or feel pain anymore. At least you don't have to get pushed around in a wheelchair for the rest of your life."

Freddie's limp, lifeless body somehow balances on the horse's back as it rises and falls, but his dead lips can't reply. Can't tell me I'm forgiven.

I blink and look up. The room is still dark. The wooden horse hovers over me now, its eyes inches above my face. I shrink into my pillow. A puff of air washes over me; it smells sweet, like cotton candy. The eyes gaze softly at me. I stare into them, then reach my arms out and wrap them around the horse's neck.

"I'm sorry," I whisper again.

And I close my eyes and sigh, and now I'm fifteen years-old, my actual age, but the wheelchair is gone and I'm on the merry-go-round in the middle of the town square under a blue sky, and Freddie rides the wild-eyed horse, his blue eyes sparkling with life. He's fifteen too.

"Don't you think we might be too old for this?" I say.

"We're never too old," Freddie laughs, then he stands on his horse's back. I stand too. Tall and straight,

legs strong under me, holding onto the pole with both hands.

“I *am* sorry,” I say.

He smiles, a wild, happy smile. “It was never your fault.”

The merry-go-round spins, faster than it should, but I’m not afraid. I ask Freddie, “Does your mother know she bought the horse you fell off of? Does she know that’s what’s in her spare bedroom?”

“Maybe,” he says. “Maybe I led her to it. Maybe she could feel I was there and so she brought me home.”

He lets go of his pole, and so do I. And we fly like we once did, Freddie and me.

# PASS OR FAIL

*SciFi*

I was born with rotten luck embedded in my genes. That's the only reasonable explanation I have for choosing to hijack a student driver instead of someone with more experience behind the wheel. To be fair, I hadn't realized he was a student when I careened around the corner and saw him maneuvering one of those air/land hybrids (a perfect getaway vehicle) down from the skylane and into a parking spot. I just ran to the passenger door and yanked it open, thankful for the lucky break.

Course, it wasn't lucky at all.

I zapped the guy sitting in the passenger seat, wrenched him out, and jumped into the vacated spot. The pimply-faced kid in the driver's seat yelped, then said, "Holy shit! What'd you do to Mr. Gilbert?"

I jammed the zapper into his pudgy side. "Drive us outta here or you're toast."

"Shit," the kid squeaked again. He thrust the aircar into a bobbling ascent. "Is this part of the test?" he asked in a hopeful, desperate voice.

"Shut up and head to the harbor." With any luck, Milo was waiting there with a better escape vehicle than this wobbling tin can and its now crying driver. The aircar lurched about. "Keep it steady, for Christ's sake," I cautioned. "Stop crying. Shit...watch out for that building!"

We grazed the top of it, then the kid got his emotions in check, steadied the vehicle, and entered the skylane. "Sorry, takeoffs aren't my thing," he whispered. "Mr. Gilbert already docked me points for it."

"What?" I said.

"The DMV guy." The kid wiped his tears away with a shaky hand. "You didn't...kill him, did you?"

I glanced at my zapper, still pushed into the kid's side. It was in the "exterminate" position. I flipped it to "shock" and cursed myself for offing the knowledgeable instructor instead of the inept kid. Nothing was going my way today.

It wasn't for the kid either. "I just...*hic!*...wanted to pass my...*hic!*...driver's test," he blubbered.

I thought—briefly but intensely—about shoving him out the driver's door and taking over the controls, but I'd already committed two murders today, if you counted both Mr. Gilbert and the guy I'd zapped before fatefully hijacking this pitiful excuse for an escape vehicle. I decided not to add a third murder to my count. Three was an unlucky number.

But a panicking kid manhandling an aircar into a potential crash wasn't lucky either. I extracted my zap-



per from his fleshy folds and said, “Calm down. Take a deep breath. I promise I won’t hurt you if you’ll just get me to the harbor. Stop crying, now.”

“I...can’t...” he wheezed. “Panic...attack...need...inhaler...”

I scanned the aircar’s interior. “Where?”

“Jacket. Back...at...DMV...” The chubby hand gripping the joystick started to spasm. The aircar vibrated like a martini in a cocktail shaker.

“OK, hold on, I’ve got something that’ll help.” I fumbled through my vest pockets. It was an old fisherman’s vest, the one reminder I had of happier, more carefree days. The pockets had ample storage, allowing me to carry everything I needed while keeping my hands free for business. The trouble was remembering which pockets contained what. My hand finally wrapped around a small bottle. I pulled it out, unscrewed the lid, and filled the attached eyedropper with amber liquid. “Open up,” I said.

“What is it?” the kid gasped.

“It’ll calm you.”

A single drop would do. Any more and he’d be out cold. The kid opened his mouth, and I squeezed a drop onto his tongue. He gulped, took a shaky breath, then sighed. The aircar resumed a stable path.

“Great. Now keep her steady and this’ll all be over soon. What’s your name, kid?”

“Sam.”

He didn’t ask for my name, and I didn’t offer it. The aircar slowed as we approached another vehicle.

“Pass it,” I said.

“Oh, geez,” the kid said, panic returning despite the drug. “I’m not good at passing.”

“Good lord,” I said. “You’re flying, Sam. You can go above, under, to the left or right. Four choices, kid. Pick one.”

He froze and picked none. I grabbed the joystick and glided us under the dawdling vehicle. Sam had his eyes shut. “How do you expect to pass your driver’s test if you can’t pass a vehicle?” I said.

“I don’t,” he said. “I’ve failed three times now.”

We finally flew over the harbor, crammed with old-fashioned floating boats and newer sailing subs that could float, hover, or dive deep enough to traverse the sea floor. It was lawless down there in the depths. Practically untrackable. I spotted Milo’s sleek sailing sub.

“Land down there while I alert my partner,” I said.

Sam pushed the joystick towards me, forcing the aircar to bank sharply. “You do it. I suck at landings.

Mr. Gilbert had to help me that last time.”

My hands were searching the various vest pockets for my signaling device. “Straighten the car, damn it! I’ll put it a good word for you at the DMV if you’ll just shut up and get us down.”

He took a deep breath. “OK. Just give me a bit more of that calming stuff first.”

I found the bottle, shoved it his way, and resumed the search for my signaling device. Milo needed to have that sub ready to go the second we landed. *If* we landed. I glanced at Sam. He was holding up the eyedropper, liquid dripping from its end.

“Hey kid, careful with that stuff. It’s expensive...”

Before I could say another word, he shoved the eyedropper in my mouth and squeezed. Burning liquid squirted down my throat.

An entire eyedropper full.

Sleepiness immediately began to overtake me. “Well, that was brave of you, kid,” I mumbled. “You pass.”

My last thought was to wonder if he’d crash the aircar into the boats below or land safe and escape. It didn’t matter. *I* wouldn’t escape. A dose like that, if not fatal, would leave me a comatose mess, lying around just waiting for a policeman to drag me in. Damn rotten luck for me.

Like usual.

# ROAD TO SOMEWHERE

## *Drama*

“Ellen,” my husband of thirty-eight years said one drizzly winter morning. “I’ve decided to go into the mortuary business.”

I somehow managed to stop my mouthful of coffee from spewing all over the breakfast table. I swallowed and winced as the liquid scalded my throat. “*What?*”

Bob clasped his arthritic hands together and leaned toward me, his mild blue eyes filled with resolute gravity. I lowered my coffee cup, my brain scrambling for a more substantial response than “what?” to such an unanticipated announcement. I glanced out the window where cold raindrops splattered on the spanking-new RV sprawling against our curb like a beached whale. Marj Kennibocker, the president of our subdivision’s homeowner’s association, had pestered me about moving “that behemoth” off the street for the last two weeks, and I’d said that right after my retirement party she could kiss “that behemoth” *and* my ass goodbye forever.

I turned to Bob. “What about our travel plans?”

He frowned. “*Your* travel plans.”

“Bob, I wanted to spend my first week of retirement watching the sun rise over the Grand Canyon. Or we could head to a sunny beach somewhere. Or...”

He sighed and patted my hand. “See, that’s your problem, sweetie. You don’t even know where you want to go.”

“Isn’t that the point? We can go *anywhere*. I want to go somewhere where I can see the *sun*, Bob. Seattle is so damn rainy in the winter.”

He pulled his hand away and crossed his arms like a stubborn child. “Ellen, I don’t care if rains every day of the year. I’ve lived here all my life and I’m not ready to up and leave it.”

“Why on earth not? You’re retired, I’m about to retire—now’s the time to hit the road and see the world. Even if only for a little while. It’s not like living in the RV has to be permanent.”

He frowned. “If it isn’t permanent, why are we about to put the house up for sale? I’d like to hear your definition of ‘a little while.’”

I shrugged. “A year, maybe? Two?”

He stood. “Ellen, I’m sorry but I’d rather stay in this house and go back to work.”

He dumped his breakfast dishes into the sink and exited the room, leaving me huddled over my coffee

cup, my thoughts a jumbled mess. What had I been thinking? I should have *known* Bob's lukewarm support of my growing wanderlust would eventually fizzle out. For the past year I had dragged him to RV shows, and he'd gamely trudged around the campers, commenting on their flaws or benefits like someone who might *possibly* be interested in purchasing one. When I opted for the biggest RV on the lot, he put up a bit of an argument but eventually backed down. He stood aside as I withdrew half our savings for the down payment. He even helped me sort through our thirty-eight years of collective junk to choose what we should take and what we could chuck into storage.

That's the way our relationship worked: I made the decisions and Bob followed my lead. Why, after years of comfortable agreement, was he picking now to assert his ideas? And why on earth would he forego a retirement full of freedom to work as an *undertaker* of all professions? The man needed to worry about his own inevitable funeral, not spend his time planning somebody else's.

"Victor's behind this, isn't he?" I yelled. Bob had cranked up the TV volume in the living room, hoping, in vain, that its sound would drown mine out.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because he's your best friend and he's neck-deep in dead bodies. And his father just croaked, which means he doesn't have a partner to help run that death house of his."

"Funeral parlor," Bob corrected.

"Whatever. That place is creepy. I don't want you coming home every night with dead people stink on your hands."

He shuffled back into the kitchen. "What is this irrational fear you have with death, Ellen? Everyone dies eventually."

"Yeah, well, what's this irrational fear *you* have of living? We've led such humdrum lives, Bob. Retirement is the time to get a little adventurous and head out into the great unknown. Nobody can call us irresponsible members of society if we do it now."

"But I don't *want* to do it."

I crossed my arms and imitated Bob's earlier stubborn pose. "Well, I *do*."

<<<>>>

Damn Victor Sampson. That unctuous, slick-haired best friend of Bob's was behind this sudden desire to go back to work. Pallid, sunken-eyed, red-lipped Victor fit the stereotypical undertaker description right down to his long white fingers. He oozed sympathetic charm like a slithering snake. Bob loved him like a brother. I tried

hard to stomach him but failed ninety-nine percent of the time.

I steeled my revulsion and drove to the funeral parlor the next day. Victor was escorting a sniffling woman out the door, patting her back with a bony hand. His beet-red lips morphed from a smile to a frown as he watched me stomp up the street, the cold rain plunking off my sodden umbrella and on to my shoes.

“Victor,” I said once the weeping lady had turned the corner, “what the hell is going on?”

“Come on in for a coffee,” he said. “It’s turning into a veritable pond out here.”

The last thing I wanted was to enter Victor’s morbid sanctuary, but the rain picked that inopportune moment to dump down in buckets, and I had no choice but to slink inside, trailing behind Victor’s morose shadow. He escorted me into a room decorated with rows of coffins and clumps of drooping white lilies in ugly Grecian urns. He poured me a cup of murky coffee. I sat on the couch and sipped it.

Victor sat opposite me, his long legs crossed, a revoltingly sympathetic smile plastered on his lips. “Bob’s not a traveler, Ellen,” he said in his silky, shiver-inducing voice. “He *needs* to work. It’s cruel for you to insist on this abrupt change of life.”

“For God’s sake, Victor, I’m not banishing him to a gulag in Siberia. We’re going on a long vacation, that’s all. Why do you think people work so hard all their lives? So they can enjoy retirement, that’s why.”

“He’ll enjoy it more working for me.” Victor leaned closer. I involuntary recoiled against the sofa cushions, which he pretended not to notice. “Ellen, Bob can’t stand being idle. He’d hate a life on the road. Do you really want to put up with a miserable man for the next few years?”

“You didn’t have to go and make him change his mind at the last second, Victor. What the hell am I supposed to do with that honking-huge RV now? What am I supposed to say to Marj Kennibocker? I already burned my bridges with her; she’ll insist on making my life a tortuous hell if I stay in that subdivision a second past my retirement party.”

Victor rested a clammy palm on my shoulder. “Sell the RV, apologize to Marj, and let Bob work here with me. It’s what he wants. Don’t you want him to be happy?”

I shrugged off Victor’s unpleasant hand and stared into my coffee cup as if it were a crystal ball. What about *my* happiness? My uninspired future took shape in the coffee’s muddy depths: there I was, pattering in the weedy garden, lounging on the sofa reading dull books, waiting for Bob to come home every afternoon so we could gulp down dinner in front of the TV. In my imagination, Bob always returned smelling like formaldehyde. Grave dirt crusted his fingernails even though undertakers didn’t usually dig graves by hand anymore, and besides, with his bad back Bob would’ve been useless with a shovel.

I couldn't stomach one aspect of that existence.

I glared into the coffee, willing the wretched image to morph into something more pleasant. It took a while, but then there I was, waking in the RV with a contented yawn. A smiling Bob poured me a cup of steaming cup of coffee, and I sipped it as morning rays peeked over a canyon rim and shone through the window.

Yes. *That's* how our story should unfold. Embracing life on the road. Not stuck in a cold funeral parlor surrounded by coffins.

<<<>>>

“What about a compromise?”

Bob shot me a baleful stare over the breakfast table. I knew what that stare meant: *you never compromise. It's your way or nothing.*

“Hear me out,” I said. “We keep the house, even though it means me snivelling up to Marj Kennibocker, rolling over, and accepting her ‘I told you so’ like a scolded puppy.”

His grimace morphed into a look of relief. “Sounds good, sweetie.”

“I'm not finished. We also keep the RV. We head out of the state for the rest of the winter. Somewhere warm. California, maybe.”

The grimace resurfaced. He pulled out a wad of business cards from a shirt pocket and handed me one. I read the elegant script: *Robert Johnston. Mortuary Assistant. Sampson and Son Funeral Parlor.*

He cleared his throat. “I start next week.”

The finality in his eyes deflated the jubilant euphoria of my well-thought out compromise quicker than a pin could pop a balloon. I stared at the ghostly white cards. This time, it was *his* way or nothing.

Victor was right. Bob had always felt a supreme need to work. When I came home from work, I usually plopped in front of the TV to relax. When Bob rolled in the door, he sat at his desk and *continued* to work until bedtime. How could I have thought he'd be happy driving for endless miles and lounging around a campfire surrounded by shining stars? For Bob, warm sunshine, hot sand, or vistas of mesas and canyons would never replace a hard chair, a sturdy desk, and a boss leaning over his shoulder demanding yesterday's report.

*That* was Bob's vision of happiness. But my impending retirement had altered my vision. The adventurous part of my brain had sprung awake after a deep, Rip Van Winkle-like sleep. Bob might happily continue in his humdrum routine, but I yearned for drastic change. I glanced over at Bob. His eyes were simultaneously determined and pleading.

“I can't, Bob. I've dreamed about this for so long.”

The hopeful gleam in his eyes faded. He shuffled the business cards like a down-on-his-luck poker player desperate for a winning hand. “So have I, sweetie. So have I.”

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Marj Kennibocker’s face was smeared with both cold cream and self-satisfaction when I knocked on her door and told her we wouldn’t be selling the house.

“In that case,” she said, “I assume you’ll be moving that eyesore off the street.”

I laughed. “Don’t crap in your pants, Marj, I’m moving it.”

Marj’s eyes narrowed. “Ellen, if you’re planning on staying in this neighborhood, you might want to think twice about pissing off the president of the HOA.”

“I’m *not* staying in this neighborhood, Marj. Bob is. Adios.”

I splashed away through puddles of rain, climbed into the RV, and revved it to life. I gazed out the window as my new home rolled past my old one. Bob stood on the porch, somehow managing to smile and frown at the same time. I lowered the window.

“You call me when you get to California, sweetie,” he said. “Don’t drive if you’re sleepy, pull over and take a nap.”

“I will. Good luck at the new job, Bob. See you in a few months.”

As he dropped out of sight, a sudden panic washed over me. I was leaving my boring but safe life for something truly unknown. I tried choking the irrational fear down with a huge gulp of coffee, but it persisted.

*No turning back now, Ellen. You can do this on your own.* I resolutely pointed the RV south and drove up the on-ramp to the highway, windshield wipers on full-blast.

I had faith that somewhere down that road the fear would ebb and the excitement would engulf me like a wave washing over the sand. Rays of sun pierced through the clouds, and I thought of Bob—poor, workaholic Bob—huddled in Victor’s gloomy preparation room, perusing the newest in a never-ending line of waxy dead bodies as the rain relentlessly hammered the shingles over his head.

The clouds parted and the sun’s warmth caressed my skin, and even though my sudden anxiety hadn’t quite dispersed, I knew with absolute certainty that I had chosen the right road. It wasn’t the road dead-ending in a mundane retirement in rainy Seattle. It was the one meandering into the sunset.





# SOMETHING FISHY

## *Action/Adventure*

I hate the smell of fish. My stomach rolls like a ship on a nauseous sea when that stench hits my nose, and right now, standing on the trading floor at the Shimonoseki Fish Market with its rows of iced fish, fish stuffed in buckets, and fish offal splashed along the concrete gutters, I'm trying my damndest not to spew my breakfast into a murky tank full of tiny octopi. I *must* overcome the gag reflex. I *must* succeed in this mission. I won't let the agency down again.

I've trailed my target, Dr. John, to the southern tip of Honshu, Japan's largest island. He's waddling around here somewhere; the remnant of his putrid cologne almost masking the market's fishy odors. My eyes search the crowd. It shouldn't be too hard to spot such a walrus of a man among all these petite Japanese.

*There*—ogling the blowfish tank. The city of Shimonoseki is famous for blowfish (or *fugu* as they call it); he must want to experience the exotic taste for himself. Now, how to approach him without being noticed.

My hand slides into my purse and wraps around a rectangular object. My fingers play with a fat button on the object's surface, then I pull my hand away. No. Not yet. Too many witnesses. I duck behind a tank full of sea urchins, wishing Dr. John would move outside where I could get a cleaner shot.

He turns his head and...*damn*, spotted! He frowns, his black piggy eyes disappearing under bushy eyebrows.

"Philomena Jenkins?" In contrast to his size, his voice sounds like a Chihuahua on helium.

I take a deep breath to keep my tone steady and firm. "Dr. John. You know what I'm here for."

The frown deepens. "What are you talking about now, kid?"

I pull the object—a small remote with a big red button—out of my purse and aim it at his belly. "Don't call me 'kid'. Hand it over. Now."

His eyes widen as he spies the object, and he wheels around and bolts, pushing a poor old Japanese woman headfirst into a crate of iced anchovies. An exhilarating release of adrenaline courses through my veins as I take off after him, pausing only to yank the woman out of the anchovies.

I barrel up the stairs behind him and thread my way between customers eyeing trays of sashimi, blood-red cuts of tuna, and plate after plate of thinly-sliced *fugu*. I almost lose Dr. John in the crowd. No, *there*—heading out the exit and towards the boardwalk. Excellent.

The boardwalk lining the Kammon Strait—the kilometer-wide body of water separating the Japanese

islands of Honshu and Kyushu—is slick with rain. Sheets of water drench my hair and drip into my eyes. I wipe my face and lose Dr. John in the rain and the crowd. Wait...*there*. He’s boarding a water taxi. It putters into the rapid current before I can reach it.

*Damn*. I whip out the remote and push the button. Nothing. He’s too far away. I race to the pier, hoping my scant Japanese will be understood.

“Where is that taxi heading?” I ask a man. He points to a sign: *Ganryu Island Tours*. My nervousness turns to elation. I get in line to wait for the next boat.

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Ganryu is a tiny island, famous for being the site of a duel between two great samurai, centuries ago. The only way on and off it is by the water taxi. Dr. John made a grievous mistake by heading here. I can view the island’s entirety as I step off the boat. It only takes a few seconds to spy the obese man cowering behind some bushes.

I approach him, confident. My poise fizzles as he straightens up and barrels towards me like a bull charging a matador. I fumble with the remote, aim, push the button, and...

Nothing.

Again. *Crap*...nothing!

Dr. John’s full weight plows into me, knocking the remote from my grasp and squishing me under three hundred pounds of angry blubber. My stomach heaves as his fishy-smelling hands wrap around my throat.

“What is it now, Philomena? What was that thing you were pointing at me?”

“You have a key...in your belt buckle,” I gasp.

His grip loosens. “A what in my *what*?”

I take a raspy breath, “There’s a silver key hidden in your belt buckle. They rigged the remote to send a pulse into the silver and... stun you so I could retrieve it...”

A tiny grin plays on his thick lips. He lets me go, pulls off his belt, and shows me the buckle. “It’s solid, kid. I’ve worn this buckle for twenty years.” He begins to cackle, his laugh sounding like a yipping Yorkshire terrier. “They’ve duped you, Philomena Jenkins. They’ve sent you here for no purpose whatsoever, except to get rid of you.”

Any jubilation I’d felt during the chase now morphs into frantic persuasion. “No, no...my agency sent me on an important mission.”

The amusement and sympathy radiating from his piggy eyes should infuriate me. But, now I think about

it, this whole caper *does* seem somewhat...fishy.

“What’s this key supposed to open?” he says.

“A safe...in Switzerland.” It sounds nonsensical, even in my own ears. Hot tears rush into my eyes.

*Damn* it.

He hands me a handkerchief with one chubby hand. “You’re a horrible agent, kid. They sent you here thinking I’d get rid of you for ’em. But we aren’t enemies. We just work for opposite sides. How about I treat you to dinner? The fish market has some great restaurants. I’m dying to try some of that fugu.”

My stomach gurgles as I take the handkerchief. I rise, wipe the tears and rain out of my eyes, and kick the useless remote into the Kammon Strait’s rushing waters. “Can’t we find a hamburger stand?” I say. “I don’t ever want to smell fish again.”

# SKELETONS

## *Suspense*

Josie says skeletons are buried in the crawlspace under her house, and we'll find them if we dig deep enough.

"Your mom said we weren't allowed to go into the crawlspace," I remind her.

She tightens a headlamp around her mop of orange hair. "Maggie, you're such a weenie. She's asleep. She won't know."

"But...there might be rats down there. Or spiders."

"There aren't. My brother said so—he's been in the crawlspace loads of times. Mom lets *him* dig. He found those old pottery pieces, remember?"

"He's fifteen. We're only ten. Anyway, I don't have a light."

Josie fumbles through the dim kitchen. She fishes an old flashlight out of a drawer. "Here, you can use this."

I flick it on. "There's hardly any light coming out of it."

"It'll be fine. My light is bright enough if your dies. Let's go."

She tiptoes into the hallway, and like an obedient puppy, I follow. The hallway mirror reflects a ghostly image of one confident kid and one cowering baby, her eyes clouded with fear. "Josie, I don't want to do this," I whisper.

"Why not?"

"Dark scares me. So do skeletons. What if we see a ghost?"

"Stop being such a chicken. I've lived in this house all my life and haven't seen a ghost yet. Anyway, it'd be cool to dig up a skeleton, don't you think?"

A shiver crawls up my spine and creeps into my spasming fingers. "No."

"Well, you're spending the night at my house, so you have to do what I do. Come on."

The trapdoor is in the hallway closet. Josie's brother discovered it last month under a thick, dusty carpet, and he climbed down and started unearthing old objects right away. "Ancient artifacts," Josie says, although the house was only built last century. Pieces of pottery, one frayed leather boot, three bent, rusty spoons, and an old tricycle seat now litter the back porch. Josie is convinced that the original owners buried everything in the crawlspace, including dead bodies.

We slide through the trapdoor. I crawl on trembling knees to avoid conking my head against the pipes and electrical wires crisscrossing the ceiling. One hand claws through the dirt, the other holds the flashlight. It illuminates Josie's bare feet as she crawls into the murky darkness.

"Here's where Peter dug last," she whispers, stopping.

My eyes follow her light. Someone has piled the dirt into long mounds. "They look like little hills," I say.

She shoots me an evil grin. "Or burial mounds."

"Don't say that."

Josie impales a mound with her garden trowel. She pulls out a load of dirt, and a tiny avalanche slides down the mound's side. She digs deeper, then the trowel scrapes across the hard floor. The scraping sounds like a living person trapped in a coffin, trying desperately to claw out.

"Skeletons," she whispers, sending me another malicious smile. "They're buried in these mounds, I bet."

Behind us, the trapdoor creaks and slams shut. My light picks this moment to flicker and fade. Josie's headlamp blinds me as she whips her head around. "Maggie...didn't you prop the door open?"

I gulp, trying to moisten the sudden dryness in my mouth. "I didn't know I was supposed to."

"Crawl back and open it."

My hands spasm into clenched fists. "My light is almost gone."

"It's only ten feet away. Go!"

A whimper escapes my throat as I crawl away from Josie's light. I clutch my flashlight. Its faint glow flicks along the ashen floor and grays my fingers so they look like dirty bones.

I push on the trapdoor. My fingers claw and beat on the wood. It doesn't budge. The flashlight's meager glow disappears completely. I drop it and turn to scramble towards Josie's light, but my limbs freeze.

"Maggie," Josie says. "Open the door!"

I want to scream, *I can't!* but the words refuse to form.

"*Maggie!*"

My arms twitch back to life. I pound on the door again.

Nothing.

Josie's once-confident voice disintegrates into a whimper. "Oh my God, we're stuck. We're stuckstuck-stuckstuck...what if they can't hear us, Maggie...what if they never find us?"

The lightbulb strapped to her head flickers. She pulls her knees to her chest. "No, no, no....what if we

die here? What if...”

She swivels her headlamp to one of the mounds. The dying light illuminates a small cascade of dirt running down its side. Then the light dies, and the room dissolves into blackness. Something scuttles towards me—is it Josie? Or is it whatever was buried in that mound she disturbed?

A hand grabs my arm. A scream blasts from my lungs before my brain can warn them that it’s just Josie, not some dead person.

She clutches me with two shivering arms. The now invisible crawlspace walls seem to press towards us, squeezing the room into an area the size of a coffin. In this moment of irrational terror, my panicked mind stumbles upon a previously unthought-of conclusion: If life is truly over, there’s no use panicking. No use whatsoever.

A strange calm settles over me, smothering my fear like a warm blanket.

“It’s OK,” I whisper, hugging my sobbing friend. “It’s just a crawlspace. There’s no one in here but us.”

The trapdoor creaks open and a sliver of light slices through the darkness. Josie’s older brother peers through it. His wicked grin matches the one Josie wore earlier, when she teased me about the skeletons.

Josie snuffles and wipes her eyes. “Peter, you *jerk*.”

He laughs. “Josie, you’re such a weenie.”

An unexpected sensation rumbles through my chest and soars up my throat. A series of wild giggles burst thick and fast into the air. I fall on the cold floor, howling uncontrollably.

Skeletons. How childish. How totally *ridiculous*.

# THE WALK OF SHAME

## *Romantic Comedy*

I step into the swanky restaurant and take a deep breath. Eyes swivel my way as I tiptoe past the tables. My cheeks begin to burn like they're on fire. Am I imagining it, or are all these glamorous people inwardly laughing at me? I involuntarily reach for the spot where my belt should be but isn't. Instead, my fingers touch a hard, round cord.

*Don't be stupid, I command myself. Nobody's paying any attention to you. They don't see it. They aren't laughing. It's all in your head.*

God, I *hope* so. My eyes lock onto the beautiful girl sitting with my buddy, Mike, and his girlfriend. That exquisite creature must be my date. She's dressed perfect, looks flawless, has a sunny, inviting smile. But I bet that smile will morph into a disgusted smirk if she glimpses what's hidden under my untucked shirt.

Mike waves at me. I *would* wave back, but I'm now terrified that if my fingers let go of the cord, it'll unravel and my pants will fall down and I'll stumble and take an unceremonious splat into someone's plate of *coq au vin*. Or the plug at the end of the cord, which I'd surreptitiously tucked into a pocket, might swing loose and shatter a wine glass or two.

This is absolutely humiliating. What was I thinking, coming here dressed like this? My first blind date, and this has to happen. The beautiful girl sitting next to Mike is already giving me the dreaded once-over, searching for faults. And while most of my adolescent imperfections—the acne, the chubby tummy, the geeky glasses—have long disappeared, my supreme lack of self confidence is apparently still alive and kicking. And my attempt at dressing suavely for this date crashed and burned when, a half hour before I was supposed to be at the restaurant, I realized Mom had thrown all my new skinny-boy pants into the washing machine and they'd never dry in time.

Now I creep towards the table wearing the only clothing I could find: a pair of my high school fat-boy trousers. And I've wrapped an extension cord through the belt loops because, in my last-ditch frenzy to get dressed and scoot out the door on time, I couldn't find a belt. Or a ball of twine or a rope, or *anything* less noticeable than this blaring orange cord now ineptly cinched around my churning stomach.

If I can successfully reach the table, I can hide my shame under the tablecloth. I manage to accomplish this Herculean task, and I slide into my seat, smiling idiotically at the girl.

Mike says, "Josh, this is Susie. Susie, Josh."

Susie smiles back, only it looks more like a grimace to me. I think: *well, that's that. She's pegged me for a dorky idiot already.*

But as we order drinks, our awkward first attempts at light chit-chat begin to expand. And I realize Susie is not only beautiful, but funny. Bright. A bit geeky, too. She's into gaming and anime. She was president of her high school's chess club. She is a gorgeous female version of nerdy ol' me. And as we realize we have all these goofy things in common, the conversation flows.

Mike leans towards me and winks. "I knew you two would hit it off."

And it's true. We chat right through the appetizer and main course, we laugh, we smile, we connect. I'm flying high in the clouds, and so, I hope, is she.

But now we've paid the bill. Now it's time to leave. Now I dive-bomb down from those heavenly clouds and punch a mile-wide crater into the Earth as I slam back into it. Now I can feel the piss-poor knot I forced that cord into start to unravel.

Mike and his girlfriend stand to leave. God, I don't want to move. Not when this date was going so well. I fumble frantically with the knot, praying it'll remain cinched.

Susie sits there too, not moving. Her face is pink. "Can I tell you a secret?" she whispers. "Promise you won't laugh?"

Oh, if only she knew. "I promise."

She leans towards me. Her perfume smells of lilacs. She gives me an embarrassed grin. "The button in my pants came off, right when I was leaving home. So, I used a safety pin to hold my pants together." The pink in her face deepens to scarlet. "I've lost the pin. It popped off and I can't find it."

"You can't?"

"Nope. And if I stand now, my pants are gonna slide right off."

*Don't laugh, Josh*, I think, but a smile creeps across my face anyway. She frowns. "You *promised*."

And I figure, now's the time to take a chance. I lean back, pull up my shirt. The extension cord's plug pops out of my pocket. "My pants don't wanna stay up, either."

She laughs, leans close, and kisses my cheek, a tingling butterfly kiss. "I'll say one thing, Josh. You are very possibly my soul mate."

I stand, hoist up my pants with one hand, and offer her the other. "Care to make a run for it?"

She giggles, grabs my hand, and we streak through the restaurant and out into the night.



# THE ESCAPE

## *Microfiction Ghost Story*

“He’s coming,” Mindy whispers. “It’s time.”

We huddle in the teacher’s supply closet, hiding in the shadows. Mindy’s hand trembles in mine as the door creaks open. A gnarled hand reaches in, dirty fingers fumbling for the light switch.

The closet bulb doesn’t emit any light.

“Damn,” the janitor growls.

He reaches for a pack of bulbs lying on a shelf near us. I cringe, but he can’t see me. When we were alive, young, and carefree, he saw us then—oh, how he saw us. One day after school, he lured us to this closet, trapping us inside. He strangled Mindy while I stared, too terrified to scream. Then, he fixed his wild, excited eyes on me and dug those grimy fingers into my throat.

The janitor pulls a fresh bulb from the box. His disgusting fingers grip the dead bulb and twist it from its socket, as casually as he had twisted our young necks.

Mindy releases my hand, and we float to the ceiling.

“Now,” Mindy says.

We place our own ethereal fingers into the socket as he begins to screw the new bulb in place.

The electric jolt we emit courses from the socket into his fingers. His rotting teeth chatter with the shock. His eyes widen in fear before abruptly dimming in death. Mindy’s eyes had looked like that too, when she had gasped her last.

“He’s gone,” she says.

We glide over the janitor’s corpse and out the open door, free at last.

# THE LONG WINTER

*Historical Fiction/Drama*

1316 - Summer

Good morning, my precious little ones. I've brought you a loaf of bread for your breakfast. It's a bit stale, but the castle was giving it away to all who must beg for food, so it will have to do.

Slow down, now, don't chew so fast. This tiny loaf is all we have. How about this...let's play a game. Whoever eats their piece of bread the slowest can play with this brooch. Isn't it pretty? See how the gold shines? There's a real ruby in it too. It's small, but you can see it when the light hits it right.

Your father gave me this brooch a few months before you were born. His mother bequeathed it to him before she died. My mother passed away too, a long time ago, but she had nothing precious to give me. Her parting gift was to secure a job for me as a servant in the castle...see it? The big stone building on that hill? I worked in the kitchen, helping the cook bake fresh, sweet bread. Whenever it was time to eat, everyone in the castle sat at a long table piled high with food. Not just bread, but meat pies and cheeses and tankards of ale. If people in the village were hungry, they were welcome to eat too. But they've stopped that now. Food is getting scarce.

I met your father at that table. He was a squire to the earl. We planned to marry one day, but had to wait—we were only fifteen, you see, and squires can't marry until they grow up and become knights. The cook said he'd never marry me. Why would a knight take an orphaned, penniless servant for a wife? she said. But he loved me truly, I know. He gave me the brooch to prove it, along with his vow of undying faithfulness.

It was then that the king called the earl to war, and the earl took your father with him. He and the earl traveled up to Scotland and fought the rebels there, but my love was slain with a fatal sword stroke near a swampy river called Bannockburn. His bones lie there now, entrapped in the cold, hostile mire.

What's that, my sweet? Why don't we still live in the castle? Well, I grew large in the belly, too large to hide. They said I couldn't work in the kitchens anymore, and they sent me away. No, it's not your fault that they banished me. I found a barn to stay in, and bore you two precious babes there. It was a nice barn, stuffed with hay. The kind farmer who lived there let me help his wife with chores in exchange for food to eat and the cozy barn to sleep in. Maybe the food wasn't as rich as the castle meals, but the hay in the barn was just as warm and comfortable as the straw in the castle. Do you remember? You learned to crawl and walk and talk in that barn. We spent a happy winter there, as happy as we could be while grieving over the loss of your father.

But then the rains came. Chilly rain fell for days and days, and the crops refused to grow, and the cattle and sheep died, and the winter came on again, colder than I have ever experienced. There was no more warm hay to fill the barn. The farmer passed away and his wife moved to her brother's, and the new tenants wouldn't let us stay. I took you two to the castle and begged for shelter there, but they turned us away, do you remember that day? You both cried when they told us to leave. Once, the castle was open to all. Once, the earl sheltered his people during hard times. But not now. That's why we live here, in this abandoned shed. I know it isn't as warm as the old barn, little ones. The bare floor is cold and damp at night, and a bitter, rainy wind whistles through even though it's summer and you should be playing under a warm, happy sun. At least the earl still has enough pity for his people to hand us his scraps. As long as we can still beg food from the castle, we will manage. Maybe when this bad time has passed, the earl will hire me to work in the castle kitchens again. You'll be old enough to help, and we can all eat at the long table, with the bread and cheeses and pies. Can you smell it, my darlings? Won't that be wonderful?

#### 1316 - Autumn

Here, now. You naughty children better quit complaining and eat what I've given you. Don't you realize how much misery I had to go through to get it? The castle has no more food to give away, and I had to beg and plead for those fish heads from a filthy, lecherous old fisherman. It was all he would give me, and I paid a heavy, disgusting price for it. Stop wrinkling your little noses; I know they're smelly and slimy, but it's food, isn't it?

I'll tell you what. Let's play a game... whoever manages to eat their fish head first will win a prize. No, I can't give you the brooch. I sold that, remember? The last remnant of my lost love, now wrenched away from me forever, and the small bag of pennies I got for it went to pay for meager morsels of whatever the villagers would sell me for you two to eat. This is the prize instead: whoever finishes their fish head first can have this pretty rock I found. You can pretend it's a beautiful jewel. Maybe it fell from the earl's lady's brooch when the earl and his household abandoned the castle to journey to London this morning. You missed seeing the procession; I left you curled up, asleep but shivering together on this cold, cold floor, when I went out to beg for food.

The last time I saw a procession like that was when the earl and his knights stumbled back from Bannockburn. It was a glorious and warm summer day. The sky was so blue and the trees were full of bright green leaves and joyous, twittering birds. I had a new dress, and wore it in anticipation of seeing my squire again. I crowded with the other villagers along the riverbank and watched the king's entourage cross the stone bridge, their horses trotting merrily, happy to be home at last. The sunlight bounced off the guards' armor and made the river sparkle. They had lost the battle, but we didn't care; our men were coming home. Everyone cheered, but I

searched in vain for my squire, for he wasn't there.

Today, while I was scavenging for your dinner, I watched the earl's procession plod gloomily across the frozen bridge as it left the village. The river reflected nothing but cold gray clouds blanketing the sky, and the only sound came from a howling wind tearing down the village street. The earl's party all wore thick cloaks because winter is almost here, and their drab colors blended right in with the sky and swollen, muddy river. No villagers lined the river banks to bade them farewell. I wasn't sad to see them go. If it weren't for the earl dragging him off to war, your father would be with us now, I would still be welcomed at the castle, and you'd be warm and fed and loved. Instead, we're holed up in this filthy hovel with half-cooked fish heads to eat. Don't ever forget that, my children. The earl is no friend of yours. He escorted your father to his death.

#### 1316-17 - Winter

Dear precious ones, why won't you open your eyes? I realize that it's bitter cold and you yearn for a warm sleep, but I ache for the sound of your voices. Do you remember how you would laugh with happiness when I let you play with my brooch? I even long for the sound of your angry protests when all I could feed you were those stinking fish heads. A whimper or a giggle or a cry...any sound would comfort me now.

Sometimes I wonder: is this is God's punishment for the wicked things I've done? For loving someone above my station and bringing you two innocent babes into this harsh world? But no, everyone in the village suffers, not just us. Then is this God's punishment to our country, our earl, our king? For fighting horrible wars where hope dies and love is lost? They said the time of hunger wouldn't last, but the last summer was so rainy and cold and once again the crops didn't grow. And now autumn has passed and we starve in this endless winter where nothing can flourish. The earl's household is still in London, and the castle stays locked and deserted, its food stores depleted. The fishermen cannot penetrate the frozen river to fish, so those that haven't starved have trudged south to try their luck in warmer climes. The shops have shuttered. Wool for clothing is scarce since most of the sheep have perished. Fuel to burn for warmth is impossible to find. There is no more milk for crying, hungry babes. Every day now, a cart trundles by our pitiful shack, weighted down with the wretched corpses of villagers starved out of existence.

But let's not think about that now. Now it's time for you to eat. I'm sorry I could find nothing more for you except what I have here. A roach, dead from the cold. Some bits of moldy straw. A handful of dirty ice I clawed with my frozen fingers from the puddle outside. If you open those cold, blue lips now, I will push it in. Please, my little angels. Whoever opens up first will win. I have no prize to give you now, save a gentle kiss, a whispered prayer, and the hope that your father will welcome us soon with warm, open arms.

# THE ENTREPRENEUR

## *Nostalgic Comedy*

If any of the adults milling around Oak Valley Mall on this fine autumn day knew about my little side business in the bathroom corridor, they'd shut it down it quick. But they're clueless. No self-respecting adult wants to venture down this stinky hallway to take a dump anyway. That's like playing Toilet Roulette—you never know which stuffed up commode will overflow next. So, I have the corridor to myself.

All the kids in the mall know about my scheme, though. I made sure of that by sending Tommy, my cousin, to spread the word. He might not be the greatest poster boy, with his high risers and suspenders and geeky glasses (when it comes to fashion, Tommy, unlike Woodsy Owl, doesn't give a hoot). But he does own a luxurious mane of blond hair that girls go gaga over—the perfect medium for me to sculpt, or more precisely, shave. Now his mop of hair has a boss dragon carved into it.

And now all *I* need are paying customers. Then I'll be one step closer to ditching my crappy Atari for a spanking new Game Boy.

I watch Tommy tramp down the hallway, waving at kids and whispering our well-rehearsed pitch: “Want to freak out your parents? Get a genuine piece of artwork shaved onto your head!” The clique of preppie girls hanging around Fashion Bug roll their eyes at his message, and the jocks grouped in front of the arcade snort in derision, but a few geeks stick their turkey gobbler heads from behind the shelves in Radio Shack and scratch their chins—they're thinking about it. The freaks and geeks are definitely my target audience—I'll attract them before the jocks and preps catch on.

Maybelle Jenkins is my first customer. She's one of those punk chicks: she's half-shaved her head already, and what's left is flaming red and spiked like a rooster's comb. Back in middle school, when her hair was all soft brown and feathered, I was in love with her. Now she's dangerous looking but still attractive. She points to a patch of brown stubble over her right ear.

“Gimme a skull. Right there.”

I plug the Norelco razor swiped from Dad's bureau into a sparking socket. “Five bucks.”

She scrutinizes me with piercing green eyes. “I don't got much hair to shave. I should get a discount.”

Hmm. On one hand, I'm offering fine art here and should charge accordingly. Plus, I need the money. Then again, Maybelle looks like she could wrap that razor cord around my neck and string me up before you could say “Picasso” if she wanted. And I still kinda like her. A discount might make a good impression.

“OK. Half-price *if* you promise to tell your friends.”

She nods. “Deal.”

Shaving a skull is easy. She must like it because after she leaves, a tiny trickle of customers begins to arrive. They’re all punk and want skulls or snakes or spiderwebs, that kind of crap. But the money starts rolling in. Game Boy, here I come.

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It’s amazing how a tiny, entrepreneurial spark will flame a newfangled fad. By the next weekend word has spread and kids line up in my stinktacular place of business. Tommy, who now sports a dolphin on the other side of his head, collects the money for a small percentage of the pie.

He points to his head. “Mom isn’t too happy about this. She threatened to drag me to Hair Cuttery and have my whole head shaved clean.”

I switch my gaze to Argus Finch’s noggin, wondering how I’m gonna shave a Viking ship onto it. Argus flinches as my razor makes contact with his head and says, “Man, I hope *my* mom doesn’t pitch a fit.”

I mutter as I concentrate on my work, “Fine art is always worth the potential consequences, Argus.”

At this precise moment a very large and angry man, dragging Maybelle with one hand and a security guard with the other, storms down my corridor. Taking advantage of my shock and consternation at this unexpected sight, the razor attempts to escape by zigzagging across poor Argus’s scalp. Tommy tries to hurriedly shove the money box into his backpack but Maybelle’s irate father releases the security guard and grabs it from Tommy’s slick, sweaty hands. He pushes a crying Maybelle to the forefront. “What,” he yells, pointing to my artwork, “is THIS?”

I know better than to blurt out: “It’s a skull, *duh*.” What I really want to say (although I don’t) is: “She’s already got a bright red Mohawk and a pierced nose. But a *skull* is somehow what finally triggers your parental concern?”

The security guard says, “Kids, I’m shutting down this illicit establishment. And you should never plug something into a sparking socket. You could get electrocuted.”

Argus, at this point, makes a run for it, smothering his botched art job with both hands. I turn to Maybelle. The mascara she cakes on her eyelashes has run down her face in tearful black streaks.

Her father opens my money box and takes out half of what I’ve earned. “You’re gonna pay for her to get her hair fixed.”

Damn. All my dreams of Game Boy glory evaporate. With one good yank, the security guard unplugs

my dad's Norelco. The electric socket emits a stream of angry sparks in protest. A starving artist just can't get a break.

Suddenly Maybelle leans close, still sniffing, and whispers, "I r-really liked the s-skull." And she gives me a kiss on my cheek before her oaf of a father jerks her back down the corridor.

Tommy says, "Now how're we gonna get any money?"

Oddly, I don't care. My vision of a sweet gaming console has abruptly been replaced by a pair of green eyes, heavy with mascara. I touch my tingling cheek. Ah, Maybelle. Who'd have known that fine art might bring us together at last?

# DRAGON ATTACK

## *Fantasy*

If I tell you guys something, will you *swear* not to tell another soul? Promise? Okay.

I think my little sister doomed the world. You know that trip my family took to Japan over the summer? One day we visited a Buddhist temple, and Dad told me to watch Meghan while he and Mom went in. He was afraid if they took her with them, Meghan would climb onto the Buddha statue or break through a paper wall or something goofy like that. Just stay close to the temple, Dennis, Dad said, and don't let your little sister fall into the koi pond.

See, you can't take Meghan anywhere because she likes to run around and scream at things. Mom says it's cause she's only four, but who gets stuck watching her when she acts up? Me, that's who. The *second* our parents left Meghan ran off to the stone basin where you wash your hands before entering the temple. The basin had this dragon crouching on its edge. Not a real dragon, just a statue—one of those long, loopy, Japanese dragons with curling whiskers and a snaky tongue.

Stay away from the basin Meghan, I said, but did she listen? No. She made a face at me and splashed her hands in the water.

And that's when the dragon came to life.

I swear to *God* I'm not lying about this. It slunk around the basin 'til it reached Meghan, and curled one of its whiskers around her wrist. She screamed, so I tried to jump in and free her, and the dragon grabbed my wrist too. Then—and you won't believe this but I *swear* it's true—somehow, we shrunk to the *size* of the dragon and ended up standing on the edge of the basin with it. I am totally not lying. Then the dragon slid *into* the basin and dragged us in too, only the water wasn't shallow anymore, it was deep like an ocean.

The dragon pulled us underwater. I was afraid we'd drown, but instead we could *breathe*, like we were swimming through air. I looked at Meghan, and she smiled, like she knew some secret I didn't.

We dove deeper and deeper and finally swam into this underwater cave. Smack in the cave's center was a huge jewel lying on a rock. It looked like a pearl, except its pink and purple colors kept swirling around like drops of oil in one of those freaky lava lamps.

Then the dragon let us go. Pop! Just like that, and it swam away. Before we could even think about escaping, another weird creature swam into the cave, blocking the exit.

It's a princess, Meghan said, and even though we were under water I could hear her speak as clear as if



we were talking in our backyard. I gazed at the creature. It sure was freaky, all green and scaly with hair like tangled seaweed and a mouth full of pointy teeth. How do you know it's a princess? I asked, and Meghan rolled her four year-old eyes at me and said, boys don't know anything when it comes to princesses. She has a tiara on her head, see?

Besides the tiara, the creature also carried a scary looking stick in its clawed hand, and I wondered if it might club us with it. Instead, it swam to the rock and fixed the big jewel onto the end of the stick. Light burst out of the jewel and filled the room, like one of those disco balls that throws little pinpricks of color all over the place.

That's so pretty, Meghan said, but something about that jeweled stick scared me. It looks like a weapon, I said, and just then the dragon came back and the green monster screamed and pointed the stick at it.

Meghan said, she's an evil princess. We need to save the dragon or we won't get home, ever.

How? I said.

We take her tiara, Meghan said. That's her power source.

Before I could stop her, she swam up behind the evil thing and plucked the tiara off its head. And the creature collapsed into a lump of slimy seaweed, and the jewel, which *had* been huge, fell off the stick and shrunk to the size of a penny. Meghan took it and gave it to me for safekeeping because I'm older and I have pockets. Meghan wanted to keep the tiara, but it had turned to seaweed when the creature did.

The dragon took us back to the temple. I asked Meghan, how didja know how to defeat the princess?

Because on our way down, the dragon told me what it wanted me to do, Meghan said. Didn't it tell you?

No, I said, and two seconds later we were out of the water and back at the temple, and the dragon was a plain old statue again. Meghan said, maybe it could only talk to me. It said I was the only one who could defeat the princess and get the jewel.

Mom and Dad were on the temple steps putting their shoes back on. Mom said she was happy we stayed out of trouble. Meghan said she fought a monster princess, and Mom and Dad smiled. Then Meghan said, we have to destroy the jewel or the princess might return and take over the world, and the only way to destroy it is to throw it in Mt. Fuji's crater. And Mom said to Dad, I told you she was too young to watch Lord of the Rings, now look what she's dreaming up.

They didn't believe us. So, we didn't climb Mt. Fuji, the world might be doomed, and I still have the jewel. See? It's right here.

Okay, quit laughing, guys. It does *not* look like a marble. It's a cursed jewel, I swear. You won't be

laughing when that green monster princess thing regenerates and takes over the world. It'll happen. You wait and see.

# PROMISES

## *Drama*

The red rose Jacob brings me is at the height of its beauty and perfection. He places it near my hospital bed and covers it with my favorite glass cloche, the one I usually fill with flowers and set on the dining room table when we have company.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper.

He strokes my hair. “Happy anniversary, Meg.”

I push the medicine button on my IV and sigh. We should be spending this anniversary on the Mexican Riviera. Just two days ago we were packing our bags for the flight, but that night horrible intestinal cramps that left me curled on the bathroom floor sobbing with pain changed our plans. Jacob rushed me to the ER, they ran some tests, and the doctor came in with the news. I had a mass partially blocking my colon. I needed immediate surgery. And it would take a few days to find out if the mass was cancerous or not.

So, instead of lounging on a warm beach, I lie on an uncomfortable hospital bed, tangled in a mass of tubes and wires. The incision from the operation runs down my entire belly, and a wound vac keeps it sucked shut so it can heal from the inside out. A piece of my intestine pokes out of my skin—they call it a stoma. The stoma is encased in a plastic bag to catch my excrement which now has no other way to escape my body except through the stoma. A colostomy bag it’s called, and I might be stuck with it for life.

I stare around the room. No windows—the hospital was so crowded when we got here, so this was the only room they had available. Bare white walls—except for a medical board with all my info and a TV which I don’t have the strength to watch—surround me. I grip Jacob’s hand. How could my life have taken such a drastic turn? One minute I was normal and fit, planning on kayak adventures and romantic dinners in Los Cabos, next minute I’m helpless, not even able to turn myself over in bed. I squeeze Jacob’s hand. The medicine is starting to make me sleepy. “Tell me it’ll all be OK,” I whisper.

He squeezes back. “I promise, it’ll be OK.”

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The doctor cries when she tells us the mass was cancerous. It’s touching that she cries— she must be so used to delivering bad news. Yet my eyes stay dry. Jacob sits, stunned and stony-eyed. I glance at the rose under the cloche. A petal has fallen off.

“They got it all during surgery,” the doctor says. “But we’ll set you up with oncology for future treat-

ments.”

“It could come back?” Jacob says.

“It could. Meg, how are you feeling? Are you all right?”

I stare at the wilting flower and nod. But I can’t quite speak, not yet. All my life I’ve been afraid of getting cancer. Any time I got sick or felt slightly funny or went for an annual gynecological exam, I was terrified they’d find something, terrified of the pain and misery that would follow. But now that I know I have cancer, I feel nothing but a weirdly calm acceptance. Maybe the drugs coursing through my system are giving me this sense of peace. Or, maybe I was always more afraid of the *possibility* of getting cancer. Now that it’s a reality, there’s nothing to do but deal with it. Heal up from this operation and keep moving hopefully forward.

“We’ll beat this,” Jacob whispers after the doctor leaves.

I glance at the flower again. “That rose is like me, Jacob. Fragile and falling apart.”

“No,” Jacob says. “Meg, that flower will wither away because I cut it off its bush, its lifeline. But the only thing that’ll die in you is that cancer. Not you.”

He’s right. I am still alive. And I will get stronger, not fade like the flower under the glass. “Next year,” I say, “we’re gonna take that trip to Los Cabos, right? Do all the things we missed this year?”

“Absolutely,” he says. “You bet. I promise.”

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It’s time to go home. But it feels weird now to leave my little dark room. Discomfiting. Scary, even. Like I’m being thrown to the wolves. There’s so much I still have to deal with. I’m still tied to the wound vac, which I’ll have stuck to me until the incision heals. And I’m still learning how to change and drain the colostomy bag. I have weeks of slow healing ahead, and that’s before I tackle the next phase of possible chemotherapy. The doctors promise that home health nurses will visit me regularly, but what if something goes wrong when they’re not there?

But suddenly, here I am—home. And it feels good to see the sunlight streaming through our bedroom window after days of harsh hospital lights. Jacob puts the cloche back on the dining room table. He brings a potted plant into the bedroom and puts it on the bedstand.

“There,” he says. “That won’t fade. It’ll keep growing.”

I smile and snuggle into the familiar pillows. “We can plant it outside when it’s big enough.”

He nods and kisses my forehead. “By this time next year, it’ll practically be a tree.”

“This time next year we’ll be in Los Cabos,” I say.

He laughs. “You bet. Swimming in the ocean, hiking through the jungle—all that stuff. We’ll do it, Meg.”

I take his hand and squeeze it. “Yes, we will. I promise we will.”

## BAIT

*Micofiction/Horror*

They come here because this beach has the most beautiful seashells in the world.

They come knowing something bad might happen. But the sparkling shells entice them, help them forget. And when they come—the brave ones who dare—I rejoice. Because I am so hungry...

I feel the vibrations now. Two pairs of tromping feet wake me from my uncomfortable slumber. Closer... almost over my head. I push a tentacle slowly up through the squelching sand. I am so afraid I might lose them. What if they change direction—head down the beach, away from my grasp? But no. They’re above me now, I feel their movements. One stops, reaches down, picks up a shell.

I must move carefully. Slow...slow, then fast—I erupt from the sand, my tentacle sliding around a soft, meaty leg. Now the other tentacle, bursting free, wraps around a pudgy torso—oh! I can barely stand the hunger gnawing through me. It’s been so long...

One human runs—avoids my grasp. No matter, I’ve captured the heavier one. I clutch her and burrow back under the sand. She screams, but that won’t last long. The comforting sand enfolds us. I wrap her close to me, begin to digest. Oh, heaven. Wonderful sustenance at last. Her dead hand grips three seashells. I push them back to the surface. For the next time.

Because eventually humans will return here again to satisfy my appetite. The seashells here are too pretty for them to resist.

# THE TWITCHING HOUR

## *Supernatural*

If you're a New Orleans native wrestling with spiritual questions, you'll find the answers at the House of Madame Benoit, Interpreter of Dreams. The house sits in a forgotten alley, the only backstreet in the French Quarter that curves and twists instead of running in a straight line. There's something unsettling about the twists, like if you dare walk down them you might never find your way out. Tourists tend to avoid the alley without even knowing why. Which suits us locals just fine.

It's early morning, the sun hasn't climbed into the sky yet, and I wobble down the alley in a half-drunk-en haze, somehow avoiding the uprooted cobbles and weedy potholes. I stumble to a halt under Madame Benoit's rickety sign, hanging over an even ricketier door. I crush out my cigarette with a broken stiletto heel and knock.

A speakeasy grille built into the door slides open, and a blue eye covered by a twitching eyelid peers out the peephole. "Annette," the unseen mouth below the twitching eyelid says. "You look like shit. Whadd'ya want?"

I rest my pounding forehead against the door. "Mornin' to you too, Aunt Maxine. You gonna let me in?"

The door creaks open. Aunt Maxine stands there, gray hair in rollers, a ragged bathrobe draped across bony shoulders, pink bunny slippers covering skeletal feet. "I ain't open for business yet."

I stumble inside, my shaky hand grasping for a sturdy wall. "Great. We can have some tea before anybody else gets here."

She rubs her twitching eyelid. "You got money for that tea?"

"You're my aunt, for Christ's sake. You shouldn't charge me."

"Aunt-in-law," she corrects. "And I gotta make a livin'."

I fumble in my purse, pushing aside an empty cigarette pack, a bottle of aspirin, and what disgustingly feels like a used condom, and hand her a twenty. "Good enough?"

She takes the crumpled bill with two gnarled fingers, holding it like it's a dead rat, and shuffles into the tiny kitchen. I follow, slump into a chair, and lay my head against the cool wooden table.

"What's got you all fluffernutted enough to traipse over here at this ungodly hour, anyway?" Maxine says as she opens a cabinet.

"I had a disturbing dream last night."

She pulls two teacups off a shelf. “You don’t look like you’ve even slept.”

“I slept a little. Somewhere. A park bench, maybe.”

“What was the dream about?”

I lean back in the flimsy chair, praying it won’t buckle, and rub my throbbing temples. “I was standing next to an open grave. Then, suddenly, somebody pushed me in. But I couldn’t see his face.”

Aunt Maxine snorts. “You don’t need my tea, Annette. Any dream interpreter worth a lick of salt can tell you what *that* dream means.”

“You don’t get it. I need to *see* who pushed me in.”

She hobbles over and plunks down the cups. Hot water sloshes out and sizzles on the table top. She pulls out a pouch, opens it, and sprinkles its contents into the water. “Fine,” she says, sitting in the chair facing me. “Drink up. But you already know who you’re gonna see.”

Her twitchy eye shoots me a pitying look. I stare in the other direction as I gulp the bitter tea.

“You should see a doctor about that twitch,” I murmur as her hand grips mine and the room dissolves in a misty haze.

“Pfft,” she says. “It’s just a side effect from this horrible tea. Don’t need to waste money for a doctor to tell me *that*.”

Her scratchy voice fades as I slump onto the table and close my eyes.

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The grave lies black and yawning in the withered grass. I smell earth and rotting leaves. Then, rough hands slam into the small of my back, and I fall, landing in murky mud. I roll over and gaze up at a silhouette framed against a gray sky.

“Hello, Annette.”

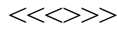
A ray of sun bursts through the gray, illuminating the speaker. He leans on a shovel encrusted with dirt. The soft blue eyes are exactly as I remember, except now they’re free from misery.

“Michael? Why would you push me into this hole?”

He smiles. In life, Michael had horrible teeth: yellow and rotting. The whiteness in his smile now is almost blinding. It’s like the sadistic grin of a macabre Cheshire cat. He picks up the shovel.

“Wait.” I raise a hand, as if that will stop what he’s about to do. “Why...?”

The shovel rises in the air. The soil falls into my eyes, blocking out that disturbingly white smile. I try to scream, but dirt fills my mouth and suffocates the sound.



I drop Maxine's hand and rub my twitching eyelid. "Ow."

"Hurts, don't it?" she says. "Be thankful it's only a temporary side effect. *My* twitch never goes away. I drink gallons of that damn tea every day, so many folks wanting to relive their dreams and me to interpret 'em. They ain't never satisfied with what they see, neither."

"His teeth were white. Michael's."

"I saw. Clean teeth. Not all yellow and rotting from tobacco and alcohol. Healthy teeth. Like when he was a boy, before the hard livin' caught up with him."

I massage the eyelid, willing the painful twitching to stop. "You blame me for that."

She shrugs. "Everyone makes choices in life, Annette. He chose you and your wicked ways. He loved you for some stupid reason."

I stop rubbing the eyelid and begin wiping the tears leaking from behind it instead. "I loved him too, you know."

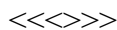
"I suppose you did, in your way. But it was the hard, sinful livin' that killed him, you can't deny it. Nothin' you can do 'bout that now."

"That grave in my dream...it was for me, and Michael dug it. Does that mean if I keep mourning him, it'll kill me? Is that what the dream's about?"

Aunt Maxine lets out a sharp laugh. "Hell no, that ain't what it's about. He's warning you, Annette. Something *is* gonna kill you someday. Same thing that killed him, same thing that'll kill me." She leans over the table, her eye inches from mine. "Poison."

I frown. "What poison?"

She sits back. "Whiskey. That's your poison of choice. My tea is mine. Sure, folks can relive their dreams if they drink my tea. And if I drink it, I can help 'em understand what those dreams mean. Takes a powerful medicine to generate that sort of hallucination. It's poison, just as poisonous as the crap you've shoved into your system all your adult life." She gives me another pitying look with her twitchy eye. "At least I *help* people with my poison. What the hell good does yours do you?"



Aunt Maxine predicted her own demise as accurately as she interpreted my dream. A few months after my visit she dropped dead, right in the middle of someone else's tea-induced visions. Heart attack, the doctor said, but I'm sure it was the tea. Now I stand next to the family crypt, wearing my one good black dress and



watching the grave diggers slide her coffin in, right above the pile of bones that was once my Michael.

I hadn't talked to her since that visit. I'd stormed out, angry that she dared to lecture my lifestyle. I'd staggered into the nearest open bar, downed five whiskey shots, and passed out on a filthy toilet seat.

But that ended up being my last drinking spree. Not by choice at first—I had no intention of stopping, not then. The next night I was back at the bar, ready to drown my sorrows once again, but after two shots my right eyelid began to twitch something horrible. I ended up crawling back to my hovel, miserable but dead sober. The twitching stopped once I crawled into bed.

I tried again, two days later, but the second the first drop of of poison hit my tongue, the eyelid went spastic. Now I can't even *glance* at a whiskey bottle without the twitching kicking in. I don't know how Aunt Maxine tolerated such a miserable side effect for so many years. I can't stand it for an instant.

They finish closing Aunt Maxine's crypt. I sigh and whisper a goodbye. My old Uncle Ramone pats my shoulder. "She always liked you best, you know."

Did she? "Thanks, Uncle Ramone."

That night, as I drift off to sleep, I see a grave. Not a crypt, but a yawning hole like the one in that old dream, and I suddenly realize *I'm* the one now digging. I jump in the hole and dig deeper and deeper until I glance at the steep sides and realize there's no way out. I drop the shovel, expecting Michael and his weird, white smile to begin shoveling dirt in my face, burying me alive again.

And a silhouette *does* appear against the gray sky, but it isn't Michael. It's Aunt Maxine. She grins—a nice, normal, yellow-toothed grin—and reaches out a bony hand. I take it. She pulls me back to the world of the living. We shovel dirt into the empty grave until there's nothing left to fill. Her eyelid doesn't twitch once.

# RAIN

## *Microfiction/Drama*

She lies in shadows, listening. Raindrops splatter against the window. Water from the punctured mattress drips on the floorboards. She hears a dying moan, then silence.

She moves; the mattress rolls like waves on a stormy sea. The idea that maybe she might drown in the waterbed's cold depths flits through her mind, but she floats, still alive. She raises her head and peers over the side of the bed.

Wet floor. Red blood mixes with water seeping from the mattress. He lies in the puddle, face as rigid and white as chiseled alabaster. Her eyes flit to the knife, still gripped in her hand.

On the floor below, footsteps thud. A loose stair creaks. Heavy boots climb slowly, stealthily. She rolls off the bed, climbs over the body, crouches in the corner.

Quiet now. The boots stop their tread. The doorknob turns. Her heart hammers. Then, the door swings open and her adrenaline surges — she slashes wildly with the knife. The gun drops from his fingers as his body falls. Clad in blue, like the first one.

Out the rain-splashed window she spies the empty cop car. She wipes the knife on the bed sheet, grabs the bag with the stash. Creeps down the creaky stairs and out the back door. She drops the knife in the bushes, suddenly terrified of how the cop car's spinning lights make it glint.

She slides, like a slippery eel, into the watery night.

# THE AGING PROCESS

## *Horror*

“You never know what’s buried deep in a wine cave.”

I always begin the tour with this sentence. We stand outside the cave: me talking, the tourists shading their eyes against the glaring sun, listening. Behind them, the vineyard with its smattering of grapes runs down the slope. Someone long ago drilled the cave into the hill above the vineyard, and the tourists, flush-faced and panting from their climb, crowd around its door, eager to get inside where it’s cool.

“There’s rumors,” I say as I creak open the heavy door, “that a grisly murder happened in here, over a century ago. The victim’s remains were stuffed into a wine barrel deep inside the cave, left to age for over a hundred years...”

They know this already; they’ve read the brochure. It’s why they’re here. A true wine connoisseur would patronize Sonoma’s posher establishments, not this place. Folks trekking out to this remote winery are in it for a gruesome tale, not the wine bar.

I study the tourists. An old woman, watery gray eyes twinkling with morbid excitement. A young man dressed in goth black, smiling in anticipation. A girl with pink hair, holding the young man’s hand and emitting bored sighs.

“When do we get to taste the wine?” the girl says.

I open the door and usher them in. “After the tour, we’ll sample our most famous brand.” I pick up an alarm clock sitting on a table near the door. It’s the old-fashioned kind with two bells on top. I set it for fifteen minutes—the normal length of our “Haunted Cave” tour—and flick on the lights, illuminating a dark, arched passageway. The lights cast eerie shadows on the crumbling bricks. Oaken barrels line the passageway.

“They look like caskets,” the old lady whispers, pointing at the barrels. “Round, swollen caskets about to burst.”

“Ew,” the girl says.

“Creepy,” the young man says.

“The oldest barrels are in the back,” I say.

I lead them down the passageway. The farther we venture in, the dimmer the lights get. Ancient barrels, hoops covered with rust, line the back wall. We stop and peruse them.

“They’ve never been opened,” I whisper. “They’re the last of the original year.”

The old lady claps with glee. The young man clicks a photo with his phone, bathing the barrels in a quick flash of light. The girl yawns.

Then, in quick, terrifying succession, the heavy cave door slams, the lights go out, and we're smothered in utter darkness. The girl's yawn morphs into a surprised scream. The young man bellows a shocked "Holy shit!" The old lady, who has obviously taken this tour before, laughs in delight.

"Over the years," I whisper, "the winemakers realized that something was...wrong with the wine. The first batch ever created was truly spectacular. But in the attempts that followed, the depth of the red lessened, the unique sweetness diminished. It took years to figure out the problem, to discover what made that first year's wine so incredible..."

"Here we go," the old lady cackles.

I drop my voice until it's barely audible. "Human flesh. From that first victim. It tainted that first batch. Tainted...in a delectable way." I flick on my flashlight, swipe the light over their faces—the now upset girl, the awed young man, the old lady, eyes shimmering with macabre delight—and train the beam on a lone barrel propped against the wall. "That barrel was where they stuffed and preserved the corpse. Now, whenever we need to flavor a new batch of wine, we hack off a piece and throw it into the vat. It's what sets our wine apart from everyone else's."

This is usually the end of my script. This is when, after a suitable amount of nervous shuffling, the lights pop on and I laugh and say in my normal voice, "Just kidding! It's really our amazing grapes, don't let the rumors fool you," and everyone lets out a relieved chuckle. The old lady fully expects this and resumes her clapping.

The lights don't pop back on. Not this time.

The old lady's claps fade away. Heavy footsteps clunk down the passageway towards us, the ominous sound heightened by a sudden, persistent metallic ringing—the alarm clock, warning me our time is up.

"I don't like this," the girl says, genuine fear replacing her previous disdain.

"Is this a new part of the tour?" the old woman whispers.

"Who's there?" the young man says. He nudges me. "Shine your light that way, will you?"

I keep my light trained on the barrel instead.

He raises his phone—to take a picture or to use the light function, I don't know, but we can't have that. I smash his arm with my flashlight, and the phone clatters onto the brick floor. The approaching steps quicken. The girl screams. I begin a new spiel.

“Unfortunately, we’re out of body parts. Clean out. Our wine won’t be *anything* special if we don’t have another corpse to hack pieces off of. And you’re the last official tour of the season. So…”

From out of the darkness a hatchet swings, and the young man drops, screaming, to the floor. The old woman slips in his spewing blood and crashes beside him. The girl wriggles around the huge man wielding the hatchet and stumbles up the dark passageway.

“Get her,” the man grunts.

I train my light on the girl’s pink hair and race after her. She’s fast, but running blind. She careens into a barrel. I gain ground.

Behind me, the screaming fades, replaced by repetitive thuds of iron against flesh. The girl bolts forward and yanks at the door. Sunlight streams into the cave. I throw the flashlight aside, grab the wailing alarm clock, and smash it against her skull. The impact halts its obnoxious ring. The girl crumples.

Three corpses. We’ll be in business for years.

I smile and shut the door, blocking out the light.

# THE CHOICE

## *Drama*

The canoe capsized five minutes into the trip. The new puppy (I'd decided to call her Lily) was perched in the bow; she'd been hesitant about climbing into the canoe, and I'd cajoled her with a doggie biscuit before pushing off. Not long after, we smashed into an unyielding rock and the canoe flipped. Lily splashed into the cold river water first, followed by my tent, cooler, sleeping bag, and, lastly, myself.

John's prophetic words echoed in my head. *It's too early in the season, Amelia. The snows are still melting; the river's moving too fast.*

I had responded with, *I know what I'm doing, John. I've been canoeing since I was a kid.*

My cousin John owned a ranch on Washington's Olympic Peninsula. He always invited me to visit him, and I always said sure, but never had. Then, a week ago, when I'd decided my life had thoroughly gone to shit, I'd secured my canoe onto the car roof, packed a few things, and headed west. John had been sympathetic to my myriad of woes. He'd given me the puppy as a gift. *She'll keep you company*, he'd said.

My head bobbed out of the frigid water, and I glimpsed the old aluminum canoe disappearing behind me. It was wrapped around the rock, bent in half like a squished soda can.

*Lie on your back, feet out in front, cross your arms*, I reminded myself as I shot down the swollen river. The puppy's tiny golden head bobbed in front of me. She managed to paddle toward the shore. I moved in the same direction.

We ended up panting in a heap on a rocky bank. Lily whined and licked my hand. I stroked her downy head with a shivering hand.

"It figures, pup. It's the way my year's been going. First I lose my job, then Shawn breaks my heart, now this. I'd say *what else could go wrong*, except that'd jinx us. We don't need a bear or a cougar joining this pity party, do we?"

The puppy shook herself dry. I wished I could do the same. I yanked off my lifejacket and attempted to wring the icy water out of my flannel shirt before giving up and letting the shivers take over. My extra clothes were bobbing towards the ocean right now, and John wasn't due to meet us at the pickup point until tomorrow.

I gazed around. Pacific Northwest forests were so...*primeval*. Douglas firs loomed tall around us, reaching for the sky. Huge ferns lined the riverbank and moss dripped off the tree branches. I expected either a dinosaur or Sasquatch to lumber into our clearing any minute. I shivered, and not just from the chill.

Lily's trusting eyes stared up at me, and a hard lump formed in my stomach. She was only a puppy, too young to find her way home. I stroked her head while horrible thoughts tumbled through my brain. *You did this on purpose, didn't you?* the thoughts said. *You knew better than to canoe solo this early in the season. You wanted something like this to happen. Now this poor puppy'll die because of you. You're a horrid person. You don't deserve to live.*

Then a logical node of my brain began talking sense. *If you follow the bank back to the canoe, you'll find the dirt road. It might take you a few hours, but you can get to the main road and flag down a car. You aren't hurt. You're just cold. You can make it.*

Finally, the self-disparaging node I *wanted* to listen to spoke up. *You are hurt. You're hurt to the core. What's the point of going back? He's left you. You've lost your job and you're in debt...remember that. Nobody will care. Why don't you lie down here? Death won't be long in coming. Hypothermia isn't that painful. You'll drift off to sleep and your troubles will end...*

I lay shivering on the rocky ground and stared at the frigid, cloudy sky. Maybe it would snow. They'd find me on this beach entombed in an icy coffin—a little white lump in a great green forest. The puppy, I decided, would somehow get rescued. I couldn't wish death on an innocent puppy.

She whined, climbed onto my legs, and pushed her head under my flannel shirt. A fluttering warmth permeated my belly as she rested her head against it. A tiny tongue gave my trembling skin a tentative lick. Hot, pitiful tears trickled down my face as I wrapped my arms around her welcoming warmth.

Could the affection of this puppy keep me from giving up completely? If I'd owned her longer, maybe. But she'd only known me a couple of days. She was bound to wander off once I refused to move. She wouldn't guard my body or die in forlorn sympathy because I ceased to exist. Nobody would. Not one single person on this planet would mourn my demise for long.

Yet she stayed. She pushed her furry head up my shivering belly until it poked out the top of my flannel shirt. Her nose touched my chin. Her little pink tongue licked it. A chuckle bubbled up my throat, one I couldn't gulp back down.

"You silly puppy," I sighed, kissing her nose. With such a warm little body lying against me I didn't stand a chance of freezing. I'd starve first, and a prolonged starve wasn't half as appealing as a quick death by hypothermia. I hugged her to me and sat up.

"Maybe we can make it," I whispered. "The road isn't too far, and maybe things will get better. Maybe John will let me stay on the ranch until I get my life sorted out. Maybe you and I...if we stick together...well,

we *might* just be OK.”

Lily licked my face. I put her down and she trotted after me as I headed upstream to find the broken canoe and the old dirt road.



# BLACK-EYED SUSAN

## *Drama*

At Greeley Lake Golf Club, the one member everyone tried to avoid was Black-Eyed Susan. She played horribly (her most prevalent shot was a hard slice that usually took her ball into an adjacent fairway), she conversed in grunts and monosyllables, and the strange, almost putrid smell that clung to her always attracted gnats and flies, even on cool autumn days. If she hadn't been the club president's daughter, the entire membership would have shunned poor Susan, but instead they stoically tolerated her. On weekdays she worked as a clerk for her father—not that she had the mental *capacity* for clerk work, but it kept her busy—and on weekends she prowled the fairways, hooking up with any unlucky group that had room for an extra player.

Everyone called her Susan to her face but referred to her as Black-Eyed Susan in private conversations because of her strange eyes. They contained irises somewhere—blue ones probably—but Susan's pupils stayed permanently dilated, so much so that all you saw when those vacant eyes fixed on you was an unnerving black.

“They don't stare *at* you, that's the problem,” Maureen O'Rearden said to her husband, Fred. “They stare *through* you, like there's something more interesting on the other side.”

“Well,” Fred said, watching Susan shuffle toward them, lugging her set of golf clubs under one bony arm, “don't let it bug you too much, Maureen. We drew the short stick today, I'm afraid.”

Maureen peered into the gray sky. “Maybe it'll start raining.”

“She'll let us know if it's gonna,” Fred said. “You know how Black-Eyed Susan is. She's daft on every other subject, but she can sure predict the weather.”

“It's the only good thing about her,” Maureen grunted. “Last time we played together, she told me the wind was about to change and I should use my seven iron instead of my three wood, and that advice saved me from smacking my ball right into that damned water hazard on the sixth fairway.”

“See?” the ever-optimistic Fred said. “Maybe Black-Eyed Susan is your good luck charm.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” Maureen said. “Morning, Susan.”

“Mpf,” Susan said in greeting. She trudged past her golfing partners and headed for the first tee.

Maureen and Fred climbed into a golf cart and pattered after her. Susan always walked the course. No one had ever managed to convince her to use a golf cart. She stomped up to the first tee box, punched her tee into the soft ground, and swung. Her ball skittered off to the right and disappeared in the bushes. Maureen sighed.

“This is gonna be a long day,” she whispered to Fred as she watched Susan plod after the runaway ball.

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Five exhausting hours later, the eighteenth fairway found Maureen stuck in a sand trap, Fred searching for his ball in a clump of gorse, and Susan taking her seventh shot up the fairway. She suddenly stopped in mid-swing and riveted her dilated eyes to the blackening sky.

Maureen took another desperate chop with her sand wedge and missed her ball again. “Damn!”

“You’ll never get it out of there,” Fred yelled. “Take the penalty and put it on the green.”

“No, dammit. Me and this ball are having it out right here. I’m not giving in first.”

“Tornado,” Susan said.

Maureen froze. “What?”

“Tornado. To the left.”

Maureen’s eyes followed Susan’s pointing finger but didn’t see anything except grayish clouds. The air was dead-still—no wind, not even a rustle in the trees. “Are you sure?”

Susan grunted, picked up her ball, and shuffled toward the clubhouse.

“Hey!” Maureen dropped her club and climbed out of the sand pit. “Hey, Susan! Fred...”

Fred’s eyes peered out of the gorse bush. “Huh?”

“Susan says there’s a tornado coming.”

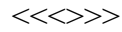
Fred pulled out his cell phone and stared at the screen. “Weather channel don’t say nothin’ about a tornado. Where’s the wind?”

The wind picked that moment to howl across the fairway, whipping Fred’s cap off his bald head and forcing Maureen two paces backwards. A roar, like a freight train rumbling through a tunnel, filled her ears.

“Get to the cart!” Fred yelled, and Maureen, her terrified heart pounding so hard she could barely hear him, stumbled towards the golf cart, which now tottered precariously on its wheels as the increasing gale buffeted it sideways. She slid in, Fred slammed his foot on the gas pedal, and they pattered toward Susan, the clubhouse, and the whirling cyclone that suddenly dropped from the sky and headed their way.

Maureen stared, horrified, as the dark, swirling monster smashed through the clubhouse, sending it splintering through the air. It bore down on the fairway and headed straight for Black-Eyed Susan, who, for some inexplicable reason, doggedly headed towards the now nonexistent clubhouse as if she expected it to suddenly rematerialize and shelter her. Fred slammed on the brakes, and Maureen watched with terrified eyes as the tornado plucked poor Susan off the green like a golfer would pick a ball out of the cup. Then it pulled back into the

sky, vanishing as quickly as it had appeared.



They eventually repaired the clubhouse and smoothed over the green, but they never found Black-Eyed Susan. Her father retired the dubious and unnecessary post of club clerk, and whenever Maureen played the course, she always skipped the eighteenth hole—out of respect, she said. Fred knew better. He knew Maureen did not dare gaze upon that fairway. Whenever she did, her pupils would dilate with a remembered terror, mutating her beautiful blue irises into an ugly, horrific black.

# SUMMER OF THE SPIDERS

*Drama*

*(This, and the next story, are the only short stories I've written on my own, without a contest prompt.)*

When the Japanese cremate a dead body, they leave the bones. We learned this when we were stationed at a military base in Japan, and Mom died. She'd loved Japan so much and wanted a traditional Japanese cremation, and even though the base chaplain warned Dad that it wouldn't be like in America where they char the bones down to dust, Dad said, that's okay. It's the way she would have wanted it.

The funeral took place right before my eighteenth birthday and only a month after Meghan's eighth. It began with a fairly normal service—a quick eulogy and prayers. We filed by the white casket, me holding my little sister's hand. The casket was closed but had a glass window so we could view Mom's gaunt but peaceful face covered with flower petals we'd sprinkled in earlier, also white. *Like Snow White in her glass coffin*, I thought, except a kiss, no matter how filled with love, would never bring Mom back.

We were ushered upstairs to wait while they rolled the coffin away so they could burn the body with the petals. They served us a meal; Dad and some of Mom's Japanese friends nibbled sushi in silence while my sister and I sat like wooden dolls and stared at our plates. I tried to choke down a rice ball, but it felt like sawdust in my mouth. Meghan didn't attempt to eat. Her glazed eyes focused on the pretty platters, her face as white as the petals they had sprinkled across Mom's lifeless face.

Finally, they escorted us into a small chamber and rolled in the cart loaded with our mother's bones. Meghan's eyes fell on the skull's crown, and she let out a heart-freezing wail. Mom used to make the same sound when something frightened her. Hitomi-san, our neighbor, grabbed Meghan's hand and led her out of the room while Dad wobbled next to me, sweating and cursing under his breath at the sound of Meghan's wail and the sight of his wife's bones.

But I stared at the pieces of skull and shoulder blades and could only think: *that's not Mom. That has nothing to do with her. It's just a pile of bones, like something you'd see in a laboratory or a museum.* I put a clammy hand on Dad's arm. He reached over and clutched it with a grip like a vise.

Hitomi-san and Meghan didn't return. The rest of the funeral party moved ahead with the final act: transferring the bones to the ceremonial box, where they'd already packed Mom's ashes and smaller bones. Everyone shuffled in pairs toward the cart, my dad and I in the lead. The priest handed us long, ceremonial chopsticks, which I gripped with sweaty fingers. I was so determined to do this right; to not look like an idiot in front of

Mom's Japanese friends by dropping a bone by mistake. Dad must have thought the same thing because his shaking hand suddenly became steady, and together we managed to grip one of Mom's charred arm bones with our chopsticks and transfer it perfectly into the box.

We passed the chopsticks to the next pair of mourners, and another bone disappeared in the box. Then another, and another, as the funeral guests solemnly shuffled to the cart. Finally, the top of the skull was the only bone left. The priest placed it on the white mound like a morbid crown. He sealed the box. It was over.

We took the box home. Dad hid it on the top shelf in his closet because Meghan couldn't stand the idea of Mom's bones in the house. She cried all night. I crawled in bed with her and held her until the sun's rays crept into our room.

"She's at peace now," I whispered, stroking Meghan's soft blonde hair. "You know how much pain she was in, near the end."

Meghan sniffled, wiped her nose, and stared at me with her solemn blue eyes. "Amy, do you think she's happy in that box?"

I hugged her and sighed. "I don't think she's happy or sad, Meghan. She doesn't feel anything. Not anymore."

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That happened in April. We had a traditional American funeral at the base chapel the next week. At that funeral, Dad wore his uniform with the medals. I put on a yellow dress and Meghan a blue one that matched her eyes, because Mom had made us promise we wouldn't wear black. People crowded into the chapel. Everyone knew everyone on a military base, and everyone liked Mom. But that funeral didn't feel real to me, not like the Japanese ceremony had. Something about the horror of seeing my mother intact in her coffin one minute and a heap of anonymous bones on a silver utility tray the next had driven it into my head that she was gone—permanently. Forever. I had gotten out my public grief then. I didn't want to have to go through it again.

May passed in a dismal blur, and summer break began. I graduated from high school, but I barely remembered pulling on my cap and gown and walking across the auditorium stage. What I remembered, when I took my diploma and glanced into the crowd, was a little Meghan, hunched next to Dad and staring at her shoes while Dad and the rest of the audience smiled and clapped.

It didn't surprise me. A year ago, when they had diagnosed Mom with cancer, my normally extroverted sister began to burrow deep into a self-imposed, reclusive cocoon. I could sometimes get her to smile and giggle, but then the funeral happened and Meghan barricaded the door to her little world with a stubborn silence.

She hadn't screamed or cried since the day of the funeral; she'd simply gone quiet.

I was busy getting ready for college, which meant a move back to America in August while Dad and Meghan stayed in Japan until Dad got his next assignment. Where they would end up next, we wouldn't know until later. Part of me couldn't wait to escape the country that now held nothing but painful memories. I couldn't even weep at the thought of leaving my little sister behind.

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The spiders in Asia get enormous. We found that out a couple of weeks after we moved to Japan. Meghan and I were in our room: Meghan lying on the floor playing with blocks and sixteen-year old me flopped on my bed, fuming because I had to share a bedroom with a six-year old. Mom and Dad had wanted to "immerse" us in Japanese culture so they had rented a traditional house in town with only two bedrooms, which meant Meghan and I were forced bunkmates.

Meghan stacked another block and said, "Amy, do you like Hitomi-san?"

I rolled my eyes. "I guess." Hitomi-san was married to a retired Marine, and Mom had hired her to babysit Meghan after school and to teach us conversational Japanese. I didn't mind studying Japanese, but I didn't enjoy having to learn it with Meghan's babysitter. Hitomi-san talked to us in a calm and patient voice, which Meghan responded to well but made me feel like an ignorant baby.

"*Ohayo go-zimas*," Meghan said to her block. "Good morning. *Ohayo go-zimas*, Amy."

"That's '*ohayo goz-ai-mas*', you goof," I said. "And it's evening now, not morning. You should be saying '*konbanwa*' instead."

"I know, but I'm practicing 'good morning' now," Meghan insisted.

A sudden scream pierced through the house: high and wailing and full of terror that sent my heart galloping like a frightened horse bolting toward a steep cliff. I rolled off the bed, and Meghan scrambled up, her bare feet sliding across the wooden floor. "What was that?" she whispered.

I ran into the hallway. The scream was coming from our tatami room, the traditional Japanese room covered with rice straw mats and lined with sliding paper doors. The wail was so high in pitch that, not for the first time, I thought of the way a dog yelps when it gets its tail stepped on. No *human* voice could hit such a high note.

But no, it was Mom. She had stumbled across the hugest spider I'd ever laid eyes on. Bigger than my fist, the spider crouched in a corner of the tatami room, its asymmetrical legs poised for an imminent attack, or so I imagined. Mom had almost crashed backwards through the tatami room's paper walls, so intent was she in



“I miss her,” Meghan whispered

“I know,” I said, hoping that would be the end of it.

“Pooky-chan misses her too.” She stared out the window, her finger spiraling through the vapor clinging to the pane.

I frowned. “Who is Pooky-chan?”

She pulled her finger away from the glass. On it, she had drawn a round circle with eight lines sticking out of it. “My pet,” she said.

She crawled to her bed, burrowed under the covers, and returned to her silent world. I sighed again and went to the living room to watch TV.

Pooky-chan turned out to be a huntsman spider about as big as my palm, which was fairly small for a huntsman but big enough to scare the hell out of any sane human being. Meghan pointed him out when I went in the bathroom to wash my hands. In our little Japanese house, the washer and dryer huddled next to the bathroom sink, and the spider crouched near the dryer vent, hoping, I assumed, that some tasty treat would wriggle out of it.

“He’s waiting for mukade,” Meghan said.

I stood, frozen in place, just like I had when Mom found the spider in the tatami room. Two years living in Japan had not helped me get used to the humungous arachnids that prowled around. “Meghan, go get Dad.”

“No,” she said. “Dad’ll smush him. He’s my pet. Hitomi-san says he isn’t poisonous. She says that I could pick up Pooky-chan, and he’d just curl up in a ball on my hand.”

“You haven’t...tried that, have you?”

“No, but I could. Anyway, he’s been there for three days now. You didn’t even notice until I pointed him out.”

I shuddered. All the times I’d been in that bathroom—taking a shower, brushing my teeth, folding laundry—and that monstrosity could have jumped on me or crawled into a shirt...

“He’ll eat the mukade if they get in the house,” Meghan insisted. “Hitomi-san said so.”

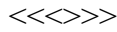
She crouched down and studied the spider. Her eyes showed no fear, not like that day two years ago when her screams had echoed Mom’s. The spider moved a hairy leg, and I scurried backwards. Meghan leaned closer.

“Look. He’s waving hello.”

“Meghan, what if that spider crawls into our bedroom? I don’t want to see that thing staring me in the



lonely shelf to keep her company. I wondered if she would mind it, now.



There's a point in time where you find yourself in a place where you thought you'd be happy—a place with freedom and independence, far away from all your perceived troubles—but it turns into a lonely place, like a deserted island with beautiful beaches and nobody to share them with. I reached that point a few weeks into my first semester. Suddenly the shiny newness of college life turned gray and lonely. I had spent my entire existence moving from military base to military base, country to country, city to city. I was used to adjusting to new places, but the constants—the people who kept me grounded and sane—Mom, Dad, and eventually Meghan—were missing. Without them, I floundered in a sea of shadowy faces. I began to ache for the mornings when I could chat on Zoom with my sister; hear her voice, stare at her wan face.

Now she peered out at me through my cell phone. She was getting ready for bed and I was finishing breakfast in the cafeteria. Her big blue eyes blinked.

“They left,” she said.

I chewed on my last bit of raisin bagel. “Who left, Meghan?”

“The spiders. They left a couple weeks after you did.”

“I'm sorry, sis.” I shot her a cross-continental smile, trying to cheer her up. But she didn't look as morose as she had over the summer. Color now flourished in her cheeks; her eyes sparkled with regained life. The blond hair that had hung in listless strands all summer was pulled into a cheery ponytail. She had bangs now.

“I guess there wasn't enough hunting for them in our house,” she said. “They never did catch a mukade. So, they had to leave and hunt somewhere else. Anyway, I thought you might want to know.”

I nodded. “How's Dad?”

“Okay. He's waiting to hear where his next assignment will be.”

“Maybe it'll be on the east coast, closer to me,” I said, suddenly aware of the wild hope clinging to my words.

She shrugged. “I wish we didn't have to move. Mom loved it here. I love it, too. I'll miss Hitomi-san.”

“Well, that's the life of the military brat, you goof,” I said.

She smiled, then said, “Amy, I gotta go. My friend Kari is calling.”

“Ok, Meghan. Bye. I love y...”

But she was gone. The last lump of bagel seemed to expand in my throat, threatening to choke me. I gulped some coffee as hot tears began to dribble down my cheeks. I wiped them with a quick, annoyed hand and

checked to see if anyone had noticed. But I was alone at my cafeteria table, my roommate having left earlier to run to her chemistry class.

Alone. I closed my eyes and thought of Mom—Mom before she was sick—laughing, sometimes yelling, screaming in that high-pitched way when something frightened her. I thought of Dad, quiet and steady and kind. I thought of Meghan, finally beginning to emerge from her self-imposed cocoon. I had great faith that soon she'd bloom and grow, like a beautiful, golden butterfly.

I missed them all.

I even missed the spiders.

# EYES AND FACES

*(This was my very first attempt at writing a short story)*

Christmas is here.

Christmas means cold. Cold rain, cold snow, cold people.

Ahead, Mount Rainier looms frigid and white against a winter sky. Four in the afternoon, and gloomy darkness already creeps up the mountain's sides. My battered truck veers away from the mountain and inches into the airport parking deck, already crammed with cars. Folks off on vacation: visiting families for Christmas, heading a ski slope, jaunting away to some warm island where there's less darkness and freezing rain. Not me. Not heading to anywhere sunny or filled with home-cooked meals and shiny presents stacked under tinsel trees.

Spending *my* Christmas Eve at the airport.

People whiz by dragging suitcases, blanketed in warm coats, cozy hats, thick boots. A few glance at my battered Crocs that flap against floor tiles and my patched down coat with stuffing poking out.

Straighten the old shawl covering my ratty gray hair. Not for warmth, but because hair hasn't seen shampoo since they shut the gas off and the shower water went stone cold.

Look away from faces rushing to their terminals and focus on an airport café instead. Girl behind counter chomps gum and wears too much mascara. Bored green eyes behind all that black gloop scan my face. She's thinking: *this old woman can't afford much. Not worth a cheerful holiday greeting.*

"What can I get you?" Girl says.

"What's the cheapest drink you've got?"

Girl snaps gum. "Plain coffee."

Plain coffee. Still expensive, but at least coffee is hot. And it's Christmas. Might as well splurge on a dark brew laced with fake holiday flavors.

Girl thrusts cup across counter and yawns.

Sip coffee. Soothing, comforting coffee.

Shuffle to a reclining massage chair, the kind that gives fifteen minutes of painful pounding for four quarters. Imitation peppermint coffee and an uncomfortable massage. Holiday gift to myself. Lay back, shove quarters in, stare around crowded lobby.

Two Asian women sit on a wooden bench and argue in a nasally language. Mother and daughter, maybe.

Mother's brown eyes flash and mouth snaps open and closed, biting off harsh words. Daughter stares at leather boots, ugly frown on round face, refusing to meet Mother's gaze. Maybe Daughter doesn't like Mother's travel choice.

"Why do we have to go *there* for the holidays?" she says (maybe). "We could go to Paris. Or Rome. *That* place is going to be so boring."

"I don't care," Mother says. "You are finally going to visit the village of your ancestors. Show some gratitude."

Mother's dream: walking with Daughter down childhood streets, visiting friends almost forgotten, smelling sweet aromas of a long-gone youth: crisp snow covering mountains, soft spices wafting from neighborhood restaurants, saltiness of sea air.

Daughter checks phone, hoping this unknown place will have good service so she can call Boyfriend and complain about how miserable her trip is.

Or, maybe it's the other way around. Maybe Daughter planned this vacation. "It might be the last chance you have to visit your birthplace, Mom," she says.

Daughter thinks: *when we get there, Mother will show me the park where Father proposed, the school where she played with her friends, the home where she dreamed of a bright, distant future.*

But Mother thinks: *God, not that place. Why does she want to take me there? Doesn't she realize there's a reason I left?*

Tired eyes shut. Hard balls in massage chair crunch my spine. Remembering *my* mother.

Blue eyes. Eyes that kept their vividness even as everything else faded to dull, sickly gray. They closed forever on my eighth birthday. Can't remember anything but those clear blue eyes, so unlike my muddy brown ones.

Massage chair grinds to a halt. Contemplate feeding it another handful of quarters but decide spine has had enough punishment. Open tired eyes. Asian women have left to catch their flight. Hope they have fun.

Get up, sip lukewarm coffee, peruse departure board.

BOSTON	ON-TIME
CHICAGO	DELAYED
DALLAS	NOW BOARDING

Old man wearing a Stetson hat hobbles by, huffing like a locomotive and so red in the face steam should whistle out his hairy ears. Silver belt buckle twinkles in artificial light. Tall boots clomp against floor. Old Cow-

boy is late for Dallas flight. Or maybe he's a crusty Bostonian with a penchant for the Old West. Don't know. Don't really care. Hope he doesn't miss his flight, though.

Never been to Boston. Or Dallas. Or anywhere interesting, except this airport where eyes stare at departure signs and dream, but body would never fly anywhere even if it had the money. World is a scary place. Better to stay put here.

Three young men with backpacks slung over shoulders and fuzzy beards crawling up faces pass by. They wear hoodies and hiking boots and lope down the corridor like young lions, confident and full of beans. Flying in airplanes is as commonplace to Young Lions as driving down the highway or walking to the grocery store. is to me. Way back, only rich people flew in airplanes. Rest of society piled into rickety Volkswagon buses and camped in cold tents under Mount Rainier or down by Puget Sound. Extent of *my* travels anyway. When Dad died, not long after Mom, even those meager adventures ended.

Pack of Young Lions might be hopping over to the Rockies for a ski trip. Or maybe they're heading home after a dreary semester studying and falling in and out of love with supple college girls who plan for successful careers where love takes a backseat to ambition. Their lives stretch into long, intolerably bright years, at least they think that now, and for some it might be true. But Young Lion Number One, who walks backward so he can see his friends' eyes when he tells them a funny joke—early grave. Too reckless. He'll flip a car over a mountain railing or try to scale a downtown building on a dare and get shot by cops. Or maybe he'll live forever. Who knows?

Never married or had kids. Losing Mom and Dad so early steered me clear of all that mess. Why get close to someone who'll vanish and leave you to hurt and struggle? Someone who will leave, permanently. With no chance of meeting again, not even for holiday dinners, family reunions, camping vacations by the sea.

Tall man in business suit hurries down the corridor. Stares over his shoulder, like he's waiting for someone to catch up. Nobody follows. Mr. Business Suit turns gaze forward and strides away. To a high-powered meeting in New York, perhaps. Or heading home for the holidays, but hopes if he dresses snappy, they'll bump him to first class. That sort of thing can happen if you're lucky. So I've heard.

My stained sweatpants, that most nights do double-duty as pajamas, won't merit first class. Not in a million lifetimes.

Holiday coffee gone. Chuck empty cup in a trash can, shuffle towards exit. A bit sorer and sadder than when I came in.

Homeless man sits in parking lot. His clothes look nicer than mine. Sits propped against cold concrete

wall and argues with nobody in particular. Sounds like he's talking with someone on the phone but hasn't got one. Eyes are vacant, unseeing. Halts his conversation when my Crocs shuffle past.

“Spare a dollar, ma'am?”

Educated. Nice voice. Fish out my last remaining quarters and plop them in his jar. Always someone worse off who deserves a nice Christmas too. Homeless Man won't be flying away from here either. Shuffle away as he reverts to his wild rant against someone who isn't there.

Get in truck, which sputters but finally starts. Drive down ramp. Outside, a black sky blankets Mount Rainier's snowy sides. Can't see the mountain's outline any more. Maybe it's a figment of my imagination.

Maybe it isn't even there at all.

# THANK YOU!

Thank you for reading this book. If you enjoyed it, please leave a review on Amazon. If you'd like to read more of my works (all the rest are novels!), you can see them all at my website:

<http://www.bennettcreativeservices.com/books>

OR visit:

<http://www.fire Drakebooks.com>

## LIST OF MY BOOKS:

### **Middle Grade**

*Four Fiends*

*Three Treasures*

*Two Portals*

*From the Magical Mind of Mindy Munsen*

*9th Street Ninjas*

*The Golden Cicada* (out soon!)

### **Young Adult**

*Mukade Island*

*Anansi Island*

*Moka Island*

*The trouble with Dead People*

### **Adult**

*The Quest for Avalon*

*Night at the Basking Iguana* (under the pseudonym Sandi Penniman)

