

THE ALALITCOM

*Selected Works from the Alabama Writers' Conclave
2012
Literary Competition*



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ALALITCOM

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Editor
Marian Lewis

Cover: *Portal*, Goldsmith Schiffman Wildlife Sanctuary, Huntsville, Alabama
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~ **INTRODUCTION** ~

The Alabama Writers' Conclave (AWC) proudly presents the **2012 ALALITCOM**. This issue includes the works of writers who won first through fourth place awards in each of the eight categories of the Annual AWC Writing Contest. There are stories charged with intrigue, suspense and conflict; poems that evoke tears and entertain; laugh-out-loud humor and first chapters of novels that enthrall.

Now in its 89th year, the Conclave is one of the oldest writers' organizations in continuous existence in the United States. From inception, its mission has been "...to promote fellowship, to provide an opportunity for improvement of craft, and to support Alabama writers."¹ Through its annual meeting and writing contest, the AWC seeks to fulfill this mission. Alabama writers across the state, many from towns with poetic-sounding names like Daphne, Eva, Fairhope, Spanish Fork, Grove Hill, Brierfield, Theodore, Chelsea and Odenville entered the 2012 writing contest. In addition to Alabama authors, the AWC embraces a larger community of writers. Participants in the 2012 contest hailed from Canada and Ireland as well as locations throughout the United States.

As *Alalitcom* editor, I express sincere appreciation to Sonya Bennett, 2012 Contest Chair, for her untiring effort, dedication and sensitivity in managing the AWC Writing Contest from which the stories, articles, poems and chapters in this issue of the *Alalitcom* are derived.

Congratulations to the 2012 contest winners. As always, each story, article, poem and novel chapter entered into the AWC contest represents a writer's creativity and honor of the craft; thus every participant is a winner. I hope you enjoy the **2012 ALALITCOM**.

Marian Lewis, Editor

¹Raecile Gwaltney Davis, *Giant Sages of the Pen: A Narrative History of the Alabama Writer's Conclave, 1923-1946*, (Alabama: R.G. Davis, 1993)

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(F) Fiction, (NF) Nonfiction, (SF) Short Fiction, (JF) Juvenile Fiction,
(H) Humor, (FVP) Free Verse Poetry, (TP) Traditional Poetry,
(FCN) First Chapter Novel

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*Traditional Poem*

# ***A Southern Spring***

**Jerri Hardesty**

The redbuds and forsythia have burst  
Their tiny colored tufts from naked limbs.  
Along with daffodils, they come out first,  
Just like the Sunday morning sunrise hymns,  
To waken southern skies with colors bright,  
And tantalize the eyes with beauty fair.  
The crickets launch their chorus of the night  
In dogwood blooms and snowy Branford Pear,  
And spring awakens, stretching in the sun,  
To lie upon the fresh and verdant grass,  
The lily and the iris have begun  
To nod in time as perfect moments pass.  
Each year my sleepy senses are renewed  
By southern spring, with easy, sultry mood.

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**Jerri Hardesty** and husband, Kirk, live in the Alabama woods with too many animals. They run the nonprofit, NewDawnUnlimited, Inc. dedicated to poetry publishing, production, performance, promotion, preservation, and education. Jerri has published 250 poems and won more than 500 awards locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally in written and spoken word/performance poetry.

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Nonfiction

The Spaces In-between

Beth Thames

She had the unlikely name of London Bridges, though her given name was Eleanor. She was my art teacher, and, like the other students, I was as charmed by the name as by the woman who wore it with such panache.

She had lived in London in her younger life and had studied painting there, so the name stuck. She was our first bohemian, though we did not know that word then. We just knew we were falling for her.

London—she made us call her that instead of the more formal Mrs. Bridges—dressed in black slacks when most women wore stockings and dresses. Her hair was straight and cropped and brown, and bore no mark of ever having been permed, in the popular and proper style of the day in 1950's Birmingham. Her lipstick was what she called "Alizarin Crimson," the same bold color we brushed onto our palettes before our weekly class.

Our mothers played card games and went to Presbyterian Church suppers and Literary Guild meetings, but London did none of that. Instead, she practiced something called "Yoga." As we students filed into her studio, our canvas bags filled with notepads and charcoal drawing pens, she sometimes waited for us in a pose: her feet in black Chinese peasant shoes, her legs wide apart, one arm pointing skyward.

By the time I met London, I was twelve and skinny and shy, and had just moved back to Alabama from parts north. I tried to smooth out the edges of my Ohio accent, but it still sounded odd, even to me. I compensated by not saying much.

But I didn't have to. London spoke quietly and kindly to us, circling around our easels, telling stories about her art school days and

making suggestions about line and shape and pattern. Sometimes she stopped talking and the only sounds were the swooshing of the paint brushes or the sounds of the jazz tunes on what we called London's hi-fi; she swayed to the music and nodded with the beat.

She was in that robust period of adult life that we guessed was thirty-something, though one student said she was as ancient as forty.

In fact, she had a child only a few years younger than we were. She hung around the edges of the drawing studio when we came to take our lessons, or played out in the yard, sometimes staring through the window at us from the branches of an elm she had climbed. She, too, had a nickname. Squirrel? Bird? Something like that.

There was no mention of a Mr. Bridges, and we knew nothing about the family except that they were an old Birmingham tribe. I saw a newspaper photo of a society event once, and London's mother, grand in a huge picture hat and a string of pearls, stood in a garden somewhere at a charity event. They were "old" money, our parents said, whatever that meant, and they were eccentric which meant they were odd and didn't care what people thought.

We were lucky enough to have parents who took turns driving us after school from our industrial town of Bessemer to the glamour of Southside, with its wicker-filled porches, wide as laps and filled with ferns and flowers, just so we could learn about art.

Our classes lasted two hours, and we usually broke for snacks, served in London's yellow kitchen. One of us asked about the mural she had painted on the wall from floor to ceiling: a deep blue river with a boat gliding down it. She said it was the Left Bank. "The left bank of what?" we all wondered, but we never asked.

She served us home-baked lemon cookies and Russian tea. We were in the chill of the Cold War days, and we thought it brave that London had somehow managed to get tea from behind the Iron Curtain, that heavy lead drape that hung over dreary parts of the world, where

children did not eat Frosted Flakes or see Sandra Dee movies or buy penny loafers.

We felt daring, drinking that tea. It was probably illegal. It was one more thing we didn't tell our parents about. When they asked what we did in art class, we stared out the car window and told them we drew pictures.

And we did not tell them about the young men who hung out in the large living room, sprawled on the sofas, smoking and chatting—students from the university we were told, or the friend who told our fortunes one day by reading our palms (We were all going to have long and happy lives, she said).

I once saw a man standing on his head in a corner of this room; by then I knew this was the thing called "Yoga."

Some days we left the studio, riding in London's station wagon to a park or a creek-bed. We waited to hear our assignment. Sometimes we drew what was around us, like pansies, elephant ears, mushrooms sprouting from a log.

And sometimes, on those September, sun-splashed afternoons, London pointed upward and told us to sketch the empty places in between the branches. "Negative space," she called it. A few times, we drew each other, being careful to minimize a broad nose or what London called a "generous" mouth. If we were having trouble, London floated her small hand on top of ours, guiding the strokes, barely touching us.

The weekly classes went on for a year; then they ended. I never knew if our parents tired of driving us or did not see the value of sketching odd shapes and empty air. I grew up and moved on with my life. I never saw London again. I heard that she had died, and a friend from those days, now an artist in California, confirmed this for me.

I've thought of London over the years when I passed through her old neighborhood or sipped Russian tea or saw a mural in someone's home. And the first time I went to Paris, forty years after those art

lessons, I stood on the Left Bank at the edge of the Seine, and asked my husband to take a picture of me there.

We remember people for all kinds of reasons. I remember London because, like all good teachers, she showed me how to look at the world, the big, bold part that is visible, and the smaller spaces that dwell in between. Since my long-ago London days, I have never looked at trees in the same way. Their branches frame a sky that changes with the seasons and hints at possibilities we rarely see from below.

Beth Thames is a free-lance writer, former community college English instructor and weekly columnist for the *Huntsville Times*. Her writing career began on NPR's All Things Considered. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Southern Living*, *Atlanta Magazine*, *Hometown Press*, *Alabama Magazine* and other regional journals.

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# ***Awake the God of Day***

**Glen Wood**

## **Chapter 1**

Barrett Brown lay still, afraid to move, wondering how much of his body was broken. His head rested in something moist and sticky, like mud but possibly blood. First light had come to the horizon, and a shroud of fog hung thick amongst the trees. Hoot owls, near and far, conversed, as if curious about the stranger who lay in their midst.

He maneuvered himself upright and sat cross-legged, motionless, like a monk. His was not on a quest for truth or enlightenment, but a sort of halfway house between lying and standing. His left eye was tender, almost swollen shut, and the back of his head had an aching, solitary knot. Something had been laid over his head—a blackjack, possibly the butt of a pistol. But the inside felt even worse—shaken loose—with the aftereffects of the alcohol that had started the trouble.

He groaned as he struggled to his feet, feeling his ribs, his shoulders, arms, and legs, expecting to find more injuries. But other than being creaky from a night on the cold ground, he was intact. His wallet lay several feet away, open, face down, with pieces of paper strewn around it. He stumbled over and picked it up, but didn't bother looking inside. He slipped a finger within its folds, but felt only the smooth leather lining.

For a moment, the North Star shone, keeping vigil until the sun made its appearance. With the dense, drifting fog, Barrett had no way of telling where he was but sensed he was on a mountain and began walking in hope of finding a road. It wasn't lost on him that this moment was an allegory for most of the twenty years he'd been alive.

As the sky brightened, the towering trees came to life with birds awakening, singing their various songs. But the fog remained, allowing him to see only a few yards ahead.

Just as the chirping birds had followed the nocturnal owls, human voices arose from the distance. Barrett stopped, listening more closely, wondering if these were the men who'd beaten and ditched him. With quiet steps, he walked, letting his ears be his guide. The voices would vanish and then return, until Barrett had followed them to the edge of a precipice.

For a moment, the veil of fog lifted, and he saw the tents and shanties of a work camp scattered before him. A handful of men milled about, some talking and smoking. Barrett saw that one of them carried a shotgun, and another dragged a young, gangly boy across the encampment by the shirt collar. The boy was black and no more than fifteen. Before he could see more, the fog descended, obliterating his vision once again.

Though concealed by the milky air, Barrett crouched, not knowing if the man with the gun had seen him. He wondered if the dried mud that caked his face would camouflage him. As the fog moved into the distance and faded, he glimpsed a mountain hillside stripped of trees, the scar of clear cutting stretching far into the valley.

It was the timber operation that started in '37. Two years and no apparent sign of slowing. This gave him a point of reference. Someone must have driven him across the state line and dumped him in the hills of North Georgia.

He listened through the clouds as the boy began to speak. "I'm trying!" the voice said. "I just ain't strong enough. These others is grown men."

"You don't pull your weight, you pay the consequences." The voice was cold, measured. "You know the rules."

"Get him over here," another voice said.

The swirling brume shifted, and for a moment the view was as clear as midday. The boy, in tattered gray work clothes, stood facing a tall wooden barrel with his hands tied behind him.

“Y’all ain’t gotta do this,” the boy said. “I’ll do better.”

“You’re damn right you will.”

A man popped the butt of his shotgun against the boy’s neck, more to knock him off balance than to hurt him. Then two men seized the stumbling boy as the curtain of fog pulled closed. The sound of struggle and splashing water rose up.

Barrett searched for something to use as a weapon, but found only a large rock half-buried in the earth. His heart raced as he clawed at the lodged stone. The splashing slowed, and then came the sound of resurrection as the boy choked up water, fighting for breath.

“Thirsty?” one of the men said, stirring laughter in the others.

As the coughing and panting subsided, the sloshing struggle recommenced, along with a command to grab the boy’s legs. Barrett could hear some of the men talking casually amongst themselves.

He tried to locate where each man stood behind the fog. As the rock began to loosen, his mind debated which of the men he’d throw it at. The armed one, obviously. But once it was thrown, his legs would have to carry him faster and farther than they’d ever carried him before.

The fog cleared. The men threw the boy to the ground, landing him on his chest. After coughing up more water—with the help of a boot pressing down on his spine—the boy lay crying, pitifully, and whimpered something.

“What’d he say?” one of the men asked.

The hovering clouds hid them again, and the voice seemed to come through a smirk.

“He said to shoot him, that he’d rather die than be treated like this.”

“Is that so? First time any of them’s asked to be shot.”

With a small stick, Barrett feverishly dug around the rock, scraping the red clay that encased it. Finally, it was free. He’d have to heave it in a high arc, and start running before it landed. Even if it hit no one, they’d realize *somebody saw, somebody knows*.

He lifted the jagged, muddy, baseball-sized stone up and down, testing its weight. He was plenty strong enough to launch it. "Bring him over here," a voice said. Barrett stared through the white dark trying to make out their figures.

As the rolling clouds faded, he saw the boy standing, dripping water, and a man with his shotgun muzzle against the boy's neck. "This whatcha want?" the man said. "Maybe we'll dunk you again and then do it."

"Just go on and shoot me," the trembling boy said, barely audible, in a voice of both defiance and defeat. "I'd rather be dead."

The armed man stood clear, with the long barrel of the shotgun putting distance between him and the boy. Barrett had his target. He planted a foot to stand, but when he did, it caused a rustling in the bushes.

The gunman wheeled around, his eyes shooting up the embankment in Barrett's direction. Barrett remained kneeling behind the foliage, unable to move, gazing through the hedge. The man walked closer, raising the gun to his shoulder, the barrel lowered but at the ready. He scanned the ledge, his eyes stopping near Barrett, but not fixing on him.

Barrett's heart quickened as his chest constricted along with his breath. If he so much as moved, buckshot would riddle him. The man raised a hand, as if a deer had come into sight and he needed silence.

"There ain't nothin' up there, Happy. Nothin' on two legs anyhow."

Happy broke open the gray steel 12-gauge and, without looking down, took shells from his shirt pocket and fed them into the dual chambers. He clicked the gun shut. "We're being watched," he said.

Barrett's right hand rested on the stone. If the man turned, Barrett could aim for his head. But whether he hit him or not, the danger would come afterward when he had nowhere to hide.

"Get the dogs," Happy, who looked anything but pleasant, said. "We'll take care of this right now."

“Lord, Hap,” said another man. “It’s probably a squirrel—or a nut falling out of a tree for crying out loud.”

Happy raised the gun. He studied the hillside with the eye that looked over the barrel. Inch by inch, he worked his way across the bluff line, the eye searching, the finger poised to fire. He moved closer to Barrett, whose body was upright but concealed behind the coppice. Barrett hardly breathed. But as the man’s eye came to him, it didn’t lock on, as if Barrett were behind a window that had the effect of a mirror.

“If you want me to get the dogs,” the other man said, “I’ll get ’em.”

Hap kept the gun trained on the hilltop for several more seconds, then lowered it. “No,” he said, still looking toward Barrett, “that’s all right.”

One of them began to untie the boy’s hands. Barrett breathed a quiet sigh of relief, and sensed that the nightmare was over, that danger was now dissipating along with the fog.

The boy rubbed the water from his eyes and then massaged the rope burns on his wrists. Barrett, ever so carefully, stepped back and away, and after a few steps was out of view of the camp. He began trotting along a makeshift path. He’d gone maybe 100 yards when gunfire cracked the air. He ran faster, ducking low to make himself a smaller target. But after a few steps, he slowed. The sound had not been aimed his way, but was farther back, down the embankment and muffled by the fog.

It may have been a warning shot fired into the hedge, or maybe the gun had gone off accidentally. But Barrett knew what had really happened. Happy had turned around, leveled the weapon at the boy’s head, and pulled the trigger. And Barrett, who was now a safe distance away, had done nothing to stop it.

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He made his way to a road, which wasn’t far from where he’d awakened, and within a half hour of walking flagged down a ride. It took

some explaining before the man would let him in, given Barrett's beaten, bedraggled condition. "Mister," Barrett finally said, "the people who did this to me are the ones to worry about. I'm doing well to walk."

"I'll take you to the police station, the hospital, or the edge of town," the man said. "Them's your choices."

Barrett agreed and got in, melting into the upholstery. The car smelled of coffee and after shave—smells of security, normalcy. The man furtively lowered his window, making Barrett realize he'd brought smells of his own. "I appreciate this," he said. "And will make it up to you."

"Just trying to help a fella out," the man said without looking at Barrett. "And we'll leave it at that."

"I can't remember what happened." He eased down in the seat. "I was..."

"Ain't none of my business."

Barrett wondered why the obviously decent man would be so rude. His mind was still addled from the incident with the boy and he found himself wanting to talk, to piece together what had happened.

"Anybody that'd do that to a person." The man nodded toward Barrett's head. "The less I know about them the better. I've got enough troubles of my own."

"I understand," Barrett said. "But I do appreciate the ride."

They rode in silence until, true to his word, the man let Barrett out at the edge of town. After shaking the man's hand, Barrett navigated through the back streets to McCallie Street which was busy with Sunday morning church traffic. He was too far gone to ponder any impressions he was making. As he dragged up the sidewalk against the flow, churchgoers stared in disgust. Some recognized him. None showed surprise.

Exhausted, cotton-mouthed, his brain pulsating, expanding against his skull, he limped two streets up, then drifted parallel with McCallie. Ahead was a black church, one where the handprints of slaves who'd



helped construct it generations before could still be seen in the plaster walls. He eased down on a curb behind the building. He was almost home.

A man at the front entrance walked around the corner and stood watching, then went inside. Just as Barrett memorized the rhythm of the song coming from the windows, Henrietta, his family's housekeeper, came rushing out. He seldom saw her so well-dressed—dark rouge on her lips, a wide-brimmed hat on her head, her hands tucked into pristine white gloves—and felt a momentary pang of guilt, for reasons his mind was unable to articulate. He stood as she approached.

“Lord Jesus!” she said, as if being at church required her comment to have religious overtones. “What happened?!” Her face reflected the alarm of a mother seeing her own in distress. As she rushed closer, her alarm grew and she prepared to take him into her arms. But when standing face to face, her empathy melted, and her heart grew hard. “You’re drunk,” she said. Henrietta was one of the few Barrett was ashamed to disappoint.

She surveyed the wounds on his face, like the ringside “cut man” in a boxing match. “You been out all night?”

“I fell asleep over on Tenth,” he lied. He couldn’t quite piece the night together; something in his head felt broken.

“Passed out, you mean.” She looked him over: his wrinkled, dirty, slept-in clothes, his disheveled brown-blond hair, the bruised and swollen face. The odor of alcohol almost formed a vapor in front of him. “Barrett,” she whispered, though there was no one in sight, “you can’t let people see you like this. If you’ve got to do that kind of thing, then do it behind closed doors. Look where it’s getting you.”

Henrietta studied him, her face drawn tight, her head shaking “no,” as if wondering how someone with so much could go so wrong, could demand so little of himself. She’d said to him more than once: You don’t

deserve to be white. "I'll get some water for your face. Will you be here when I get back?"

"Yes ma'am."

As Henrietta climbed the small embankment to the building, she stopped and looked back. "You could use some of what's goin' on in this church house," she said.

A car whizzed past. Barrett, now more cognizant of his surroundings, turned away so he wouldn't be recognized. He put both hands to his temples to ease the pounding in his head.

The music in the church faded. He sat listening, wishing a tree or wall would appear for him to lean against. Holding himself erect seemed to sap what energy was left in him. His insides simmered with nausea, but he figured it would pass soon enough. The eye and his head, however, were another matter.

Henrietta walked sideways down the slope with two glasses of water and a rag. Barrett turned when he heard her approaching. "Thanks" involuntarily left his mouth when he saw the second glass.

"I figured you'd need one to drink."

He took one of the glasses, and fearing it'd disturb his insides, took only sips, despite his thirst. Henrietta dabbed the rag in the other glass and wiped the dried blood and mud from the wounds.

With the crusty patch gone, the eye looked better. Not good, but better. "I'm going back in," she said. "Drink your water then get on home."

"Thanks, Henrietta," Barrett said, looking at her through embarrassed eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow."

From inside the church came a voice of authority. He spoke of better days, of a Promised Land—a time of accounting, when God would set things right. "The first shall be last, and the last—shall—be—first!"

"The tree," he went on, "was beautiful, but produced no fruit. Only leaves! Leaves greener than money. But God had commanded the tree—

make fruit, and then leaves. The tree defied God—reversing his order. But Jesus said, ‘You know the tree by—its—fruit, and he *cursed the tree!*’

Hands clapped; voices shouted in response.

Barrett wondered how he’d let things get so out of control. He thought about the young boy trembling with the shotgun against his jugular. *I did nothing*, he thought. *I ran.*

As the man stopped speaking, Barrett looked down to see the glass tipped over—broken—with the water having returned to the earth. Henrietta would think he’d done it deliberately, or carelessly. But the truth was he needed water so badly he could have put his lips to the ground.

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**Glen Wood’s** stories have appeared in several literary journals, and a novel was short listed in the ‘07 Faulkner-Wisdom Creative Writing Competition. He was a participant at the 2009 Sewanee Writers’ Conference and received a fellowship to the Hambidge Artists’ Residency Program. He lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

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Traditional Poem

Learning to Tell Time

Joe Whitten

Six months ago tonight, October third,
with autumn colors radiant in full hue,
you died.

It was the season when we loved
to drive the Alabama byways just to drink
the glorious gold and scarlet while it blazed
the valleys and the hills. You by my side.

So now it's spring, with all my world in bloom,
but I am left to drive "alone" and yet,
sometimes I feel that you're still there by me.
And when I see exalting yellow bells,
or Bradford pears in Belgian lace, and say,
out loud, "Look there, Sweetheart; how beautiful!"
I almost think you'll answer me. Almost.

We measure time from things that changed our lives:
John F. Kennedy's assassination.
The Challenger's exploding, spiraling plumes.
Twin Towers crumbling into hateful heaps.

Tonight I blow you kisses through the stars.

Joseph Whitten, Odenville, AL, is a member of AWC and the Alabama State Poetry Society. In the ASPS, he has served as Treasurer, Contest Chair, and presently as President. He was ASPS Poet of the Year for 2002. He also holds membership in Pennsylvania and Georgia poetry societies.

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*Fiction*

# ***Dance All Night***

**Charles Farley**

Alex peered with apprehension at the post mark on the plain, white envelope that had been delivered to his desk. “Clarksdale, MS” it read across the face of the stark Liberty Bell stamp. There was no return address, but he already knew who it was from and what news the contents most likely contained. Despite the faint reassurance, *FOREVER*, printed on the stamp’s brittle edge, he sensed the news was otherwise. He felt like he might be sick, so he waited for his stomach to settle before he opened the letter.

The problem was he had fallen in love with a school teacher. When they had first met she had eyed him sternly while he was dancing alone alongside her in a swaying crowd of sweltering blues fans. Then she had finally shook her head and said, “Oh well, what the hell,” and started dancing with him.

He didn’t even have to ask. It was hard to have a conversation above the din of the band anyway, so he just smiled and tried to match the sexy, supple moves that she made with such efficient, ethereal ease. Finally, the band stopped playing.

--Oh man, I’m sweatin’ like a pig, but I enjoyed that.

--Me too.

--Your name?

--Tanya. Yours?

--Alex. I like your dancing.

--You’re not bad yourself, for a white boy.

--Thanks, I think.

He offered to buy her a drink. She declined, but accepted when he offered to share his can of Miller Lite with her. He found this bit of unintended intimacy touching, and it, along with a building beer buzz, gave him the courage to forge ahead with her. After awhile, however, he no longer heard her words, but instead became deafly transfixed by her dark brown eyes that seemed to be pulling him into her like two enticing pools of muddy water.

Later, outside on the sidewalk in front of a ramshackle juke joint called Red's, she phoned her mother, who was taking care of Tanya's two young daughters, and told her that she would be late. And he finally coaxed a smile from her as they made love in his dingy hotel room while the air conditioner rattled and clattered like some weird, whacked out blues band that couldn't locate the right key. That was the first time.

So, every first weekend in August, a week or so before his birthday and wedding anniversary, Alex met the serious, third-grade teacher again in the sleepy little Mississippi Delta town of Clarksdale for the annual blues festival, and they again danced and made love all night. After eleven years, it had become sort of a tradition, like in that movie, "Same Time Next Year." He would leave his wife, Elizabeth, who liked neither the blues nor the oppressive Delta heat, and his three children, who were happy to be rid of him for a few days, and drive the three hours from Birmingham to Clarksdale for his blues weekend, his only "private" time in the year.

They would meet at the same spot where they had shared their first dance, next to a faded yellow fire hydrant planted incongruously near the back of the lawn in front of the main stage. She would stare at him scornfully and finally say, "Oh well, what the hell," and they would dance again as the bands blared on into the hot, humid southern night.

Dragonflies, as big as bats, darted in and out of the bright spotlights, teenagers promenaded through the sweating crowd, and an odd mixture of locals and tourists mingled with no more than one thing in common: some kind of curious affinity for this simple but seductive music.

It was like a sentimental snapshot in time, since they only saw each other for this one weekend each year. As in a family photo that's slipped into a Christmas card each year, showing an aunt or uncle's vaguely familiar face growing older in choppy, twelve-month increments, they watched themselves slipping bit by bit into middle age. They both had some gray hair now and neither was as trim as they used to be, despite ferocious dieting a few months before each meeting. One year Alex stayed at home to help his wife take care of an ailing child. Another, Tanya had a stomach bug. And some years, because of some maelstrom of personal, family, job, and mundane accidents, one or the other would approach the weekend with so much pent-up anticipation that the reality would result in a mere melancholy let-down.

But most years they were fine, when they accepted the arrangement for what it was: an opportunity to get away from the grind and to dance and make love and briefly forget about the unassuming lives that they had somehow created for themselves.

Early on, they had talked seriously about the possibility of their being together. Late at night, curled securely in each other's arms, half drunk, they tried to figure it out.

--You could move to Birmingham. They're always looking for good teachers there.

--Mama would never leave Clarksdale. And the girls are too attached to her. Come here.

--Elizabeth would never move here, and I can't abandon the kids. Besides who's going to hire a software engineer in Clarksdale?

--How about half way? Somewhere like Columbus or Starkville?

--Ugh. It'd never work—too much driving, too little kids, too little you.

--Better than now. Oh, but you're right; it'd ruin us all and whatever it is that we have.

And so it continued, year after year, like seeing long lost relatives at holidays, but with sex. It remained exciting to see each other after so many months, but, as with family, it became almost as gratifying to see the photos of their children that they randomly spread across the faded, hotel bedspread.

--That's Shemekia at her first piano recital.

--Beautiful, just like her mama, and, my God, look at Alicia, she's almost as tall as you.

--I know. And sassy too. Girl's got an attitude. Who's that?

--Sharon.

--Sharon? Oh no! She's got a figure. How'd that happen?

--Don't know, but it scares the shit out of me. Look here at Tom and Max in their baseball uniforms.

--They're handsome. What's that he got on his head? A Yankee cap. What's with that? That must kill you.

Lying there together naked on the bed, with the photographs scattered between them, like the pieces of a puzzle that formed their lives, they used the silent, smiling images to launch endless stories about what had happened to each child during the past year, not the awards and accomplishments, although there was always some bragging, but more about the personalities and what each individual was uniquely becoming. And, in so doing, they told their own stories, all too often



about their own failures as parents to nurture some aspect or another in their children that they had missed or been too self-absorbed to notice, until now, in this annual review. Alex had the benefit of being able to spread the blame since he shared the children's upbringing with Elizabeth. Tanya, on the other hand, had no such luxury, since she was a single mother, having divorced her husband when the girls were small and before she had met Alex, although Tanya's mother had helped until her death a few years ago.

That was the only time that he had visited Clarksdale when there was no blues festival. Sometime in February, after his daughter Sharon's birthday, Alex had received an email at work from Tanya, informing him of her mother's fatal heart attack. He never did find out how she located his email address, but it was one of the few times that she had contacted him in Birmingham in all those years, although he phoned her from his office a couple of times a month. He lied to Elizabeth and said he had to go on an emergency business trip. He drove to Clarksdale and sat with Tanya in her gloomy kitchen, through endless rounds of black coffee, nearly the entire night before the funeral.

--Thanks so much for coming. It means a lot.

--It's good to see you in winter, even under the circumstances.

--It is good, isn't it. More coffee?

--Yes. It was good to finally meet your girls too. After all these years.

--Yes, although I'm not sure they bought my story of who you are. I hate to lie to them, but what else could I do?

--You mean you don't think they believe I'm a friend of yours from school?

--No, it's a small town. A new friend who they've never met before suddenly shows up? And white, to boot. Oh well, I'm sure there'll be plenty of tongues wagging at the funeral tomorrow. But, you know, I'm

sure people see us at the blues festival every year, but not one has ever said a word to me about it, except my mother, of course, God rest her soul. But I suppose there's been talk that I've never heard. So be it. I'm getting too old to care anymore.

--If you don't care, I don't either. I'll brace myself for some stares though. And if anyone says anything, I'll punch them out—really make a scene.

--Don't you dare.

--Come back with me to Birmingham.

--No, not now. Let's talk again in August.

But they never did. Now, two or was it three years later, he wished they had. Instead, he was sitting there with her letter, fingering it gingerly, as if, by waiting, it might disintegrate before his eyes. Finally, he ripped it opened and read:

*Dear Alex,*

*Please forgive me for writing. I thought about calling, but could never get up enough courage. The reason I am contacting you like this is because I have met a man who has been very kind to me and the girls. I'm not sure where it is going with him, but I don't think it would be a good idea for you and me to see each other this year. I hope you understand. You don't know how much I have valued our time together.*

*Best always,*

*Tanya*

Alex did not know exactly what to do with this news. *Our time together.* Was that all there was to it, just hanging out, spending some time together? He didn't know whether to be angry or sad or both. So he just sat there in his cramped little office for a long time, stomach churning,

staring at the thin white paper and the tight, meticulous script until the words became bleary and he could no longer decipher them.

He later decided that he would not go to the blues festival this year. After all these years, he had to admit that it had all become a little tiresome anyway. The only reason to return was to see Tanya and she did not want to see him, so what was the point? But, of course, Elizabeth just assumed.

--What do you mean, you're not going? You always go.

--I don't know. I've just got tired of it, I guess.

--You'll be fine once you get there. I know if you stay around here, you'll just end up moping around, wishing you had gone. Besides I've got all kinds of chick flicks I've been recording just for this weekend.

So he found himself again driving to Clarksdale on the second Friday of August, up Highway 49, across the flat, monotonous Mississippi Delta through endless fields of cotton now in full bloom and nearly as high as his head. Out of habit, curiosity, nostalgia, he wasn't sure which, he returned to their spot, next to the old fire hydrant, foolishly hoping that maybe Tanya had changed her mind and that she would again ease up to him and whisper, "Oh well, what the hell." And despite the crowd and the familiar beat, as solid and reassuring as ever, he could barely summon the energy to dance. But he did. Dance he did, alone in the crowd, late into the dark Delta night.

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*Charles Farley lives in Huntsville, Alabama. He has written for American Libraries, Library Hi-Tech, Library Journal, and Living Blues. His first book was a biography of blues great Bobby "Blue" Bland, **Soul of the Man**. His second book, entitled **Secrets of San Blas**, is his first novel.*

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CHASING A HALLOWEEN HARE

E. Gail Chandler

My husband, Herman, careened toward the door with golf clubs on his back. “When you pick up Halloween candy today, get a bag of Snickers,” he said stumbling over a pumpkin perched on the front step. Catching himself, he kept talking. “After my lesson, I’m meeting Albert for lunch at *The All You Can Eat Buffet* and then we’re going to look at lawnmowers.”

“See you tonight.” I glanced at his waistline and resolved to make the candy purchase small. I stacked the dishes and looked at the clock, only eight. Plenty of time for the treat trip later.

I filled my Garfield mug with coffee, picked up the paper and walked to the front porch. The fall sun covered the stoop and as I stood planning the descent of my aging body to the warmest spot, a shadow fell across the steps. I looked up and saw wisps of fog.

As I examined the landscape, more fog emerged and wandered up the hill, herded by a pack of breezes. The mist gathered on our front lawn, gaining form and deepening in color. I watched mouth open as the shape shifted and solidified. A door emerged. Nothing lay on either side of the portal but it begged to be opened.

The only thing needed to complete the scene was a white rabbit. But this was real life, I wasn’t Alice. The entrance looked solid as I approached. I touched the knob. It felt solid. The door opened and I stepped in.

Inside, the fog swirled and as my eyes adjusted, I watched another shape evolve—a horizontal tornado. The wind and noise increased intensity. The vortex jerked me forward. I whirled through space, sucked along like dust in some monstrous vacuum cleaner. The trip seemed to

last hours but I doubt it was more than a few minutes. Thud, I landed on my back.

I opened my eyes and only 18 inches away, saw my feet. They were tiny, covered in booties and moving constantly. I looked around, the view distorted by white bars.

A familiar mottled-gray plastic table with chrome legs registered first. Years ago, my parents owned a similar one. I smelled rubber burning and looked out the window. A sign proclaimed “Dayton Tire Company.” Then I saw the calendar, turned to April 1943. I was three months old.

Torn between terror and fascination, I assessed the situation. Probably a rift in the space-time continuum. I know my Star Trek. Gene Roddenberry was clear about such schisms—never disturb the time line. From where I lay drooling in a wet diaper, I realized if this went on long, I only had two choices.

I could live my life as close to the first run as possible. Oh, I might buy some stock in Wal-Mart but this existence would just be a repeat—same schools, jobs and friends. This had a big advantage: history as we know it would be safe. But this meant replaying the same puberty and first marriage.

Alternatively, I could live this life anew, take advantage of past knowledge, but not reveal the future to others. I might disturb the time line a little but I would be careful...

“Hey, anybody home? I need a diaper change, s’il vous plait.” My mother came running and rubbing her eyes. She felt my pants and looked at me, furrowed her brows and went to work.

The last time I saw her, she was eighty-four, now here she was, twenty-two and blonde. My father always said she looked like Doris Day and she did. I decided not freak her out today. If I am here tomorrow, I can demonstrate my genius then. After the pants operation, she gave me a bottle. I goo-gooed and took a nap.

I awoke to smells of supper and my father opening the front door. He hugged my mother and pinched her butt. I averted my eyes. “How was your day, sweetheart?”

“I took a little nap and had the strangest dream. I thought the baby asked me to change her diaper and said please...in French.”

“This apartment must be getting to you.” He laughed, throwing his Wright Patterson mechanics shirt on the couch. He pulled on a white tee. “I had a weird day, too. My boss told me the results from our aptitude tests came in—I had the highest score ever. Qualifies me for an instructor. Said he couldn’t believe a hillbilly could be that smart, the little jerk.”

“We’re having scrambled eggs for supper again. Will the new job mean a raise?”

“You bet! But your scrabbled eggs are mar-vel-ous.”

My crib was in the kitchen with a view of the food. She served the eggs with an artful touch of paprika. Fried potatoes, canned peas and biscuits rounded out the meal, which smelled wonderful. I drank another bottle and sulked.

Long after my father left for work the next morning, my mother stood in the front doorway looking at the streetcar track. “I am sick of milk,” I yelled. She ran to my crib, her mouth open and eyes large. “Listen, I don’t mean to upset you, but lying in this crib is getting really old. I’m getting bedsores and besides, I’m bored with nothing but milk. Let me tell you, it’s not fun at all.”

“You’re talking,” she said tremulously.

“I’m just advanced...”

She leaned on the crib and looked at me.

I reached out my arms toward her; she picked me up and held me close. I patted her back. “Don’t be frightened—you’re not nuts. I’m really talking to you. I tried to keep quiet so you wouldn’t be scared but I thought about eighteen months in wet pants. Just couldn’t do it.”

She sat down on the couch and laid me on her lap. “I feel silly talking to a baby.”

“Pretend I’m an adult.”

She looked so young. “OK.”

“Let’s talk about the boredom first,” I said. “Would you hand me that Reader’s Digest. Maybe I can read.”

She handed me the magazine. I clutched it in my fists and felt an urge to chew on it. I restrained myself but the book fell on my face.

“Waaa waaaa.” I was crying like a baby—but I was a baby. “Waaa Waaa.”

My mother held me again. “I’ll read to you.”

I stopped crying. “What?”

“How about the *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*? I bought a copy with my very first paycheck. I was working as a maid.”

I’d heard the story before. “I’m not much on Shakespeare. Got any Dickens?”

“*Oliver Twist* and *a Tale of Two Cities*.”

“The French Revolution seems a bit heavy. *Oliver Twist* will do nicely. Oh, one more thing—before we read could I have a few bites of scrambled egg?”

I watched her mix powdered eggs with water and remembered rationing coupons. They still tasted wonderful but seconds later, I threw up. “Guess it’s back to milk for me but it tastes funny,” I said.

“I just heard someone invented a new process for milk this year. It’s called pasteurizing. Would you like to try that?”

“Yes—sounds interesting.” By the time Oliver asked for more porridge, I was asleep.

When my father came home a few hours later, Mama met him at the door. “I’ve got to talk to you about the baby. She’s talking.” The words tumbled out, she scarcely breathed between them.

“Honey...” He put his arms around her.

“No! I’m not crazy!”

I needed to rescue her and quick. “I think I have your genes—I’m not a dumb hillbilly either.”

“I’m dreaming,” he said, his blue eyes opening wide.

“No,” I said and repeated what I told my mother.

Gradually, he calmed and sat down at the table. “My boss will never believe this!”

“No, no, no! This has to be our secret—I won’t perform in front of anyone. They’ll think you’ve lost your mind.”

Mama cleared her throat. “I’ve got to go to the store before supper. Can you watch the baby a few minutes?”

He eyed me warily and nodded. She walked out the door.

“We’ve got to talk—the days get long. Can you get a radio?”

“Can’t afford it.”

“I love Jack Benny—I mean I’m sure I would.”

“Sorry, kid.” He picked up the Reader’s Digest and plopped on the couch where he remained until my mother reappeared with a bottle of pasteurized milk.

Halloween, 1943.

My mother and I sat on our living room floor playing checkers. I had just beaten her three times.

“You stay right here, I’ve got to use the bathroom.” She straightened my blanket.

Just as I heard the kitchen door close, I saw the fog slithering into the room from my parents’ bedroom. The portal appeared. My thoughts whirled.

Herman, I can see Herman and I can go home—I can have my life back. But my mother will be lonely and my father disappointed. I will leave them with an ordinary baby that does nothing but cry and wet her

pants. And I'll not get a chance to live life with the benefit of experience. Then I thought about Herman again.

I patted the soft blanket and took a swig from my bottle. I could not reach the knob but the door opened and I crawled through.

I picked myself up from the front lawn and evaluated my feet—huge. The filled coffee cup and the paper were still on the porch. I looked at my watch, four o'clock, and just enough time to buy Halloween candy.

Herman was home and watching TV when I returned. I hugged him and handed him a bag of Snickers. "How was your day?" he asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. How about an early supper of scrambled eggs before the beggars come?"

"Scrambled eggs?"

"With paprika—it's a long story."

After we ate, I called my mother. "How're you doing?"

"Oh, we're fine—you're father's eighty-sixth birthday is Saturday. Will you be here?"

"Of course. Are you ready for the beggars tonight?"

"I never did care much for Halloween," she said, her voice pensive.

"Listen, Mama, for Christmas this year, I only want one thing—that old copy of *Oliver Twist*."

She hesitated. "You always did like that book."

E. Gail Chandler's poems have appeared in *Appalachian Heritage*, *Limestone*, *Kudzu*, *Pegasus and the anthologies*, *Standing on the Mountain and Motif*. Her nonfiction book, **Sunflowers on Market Street**, was published in 2003 and a poetry chapbook, **Where the Red Road Meets the Sky**, was released in 2009 by *Finishing Line*.

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# **Autumn Chill**

**Deb Jellett**

It was September, a week after Labor Day. A storm had passed through the day before and cleared away the last of summer. It was to be a cool day, with a constant gentle breeze, the sky a clear deep blue. The hard green of summer grass seemed to have faded overnight and the sunlight seemed a little gentler, a little more tentative. A day of transitioning, of picking up limbs and twigs and hearing the crunch of pecans under foot. A perfect day, full of the contemplation of cooler weather, cozy sweaters and fires in the fireplace. Winter no longer seemed an impossibility.

The leaves had begun to fall and lay in soggy clumps on the ground. It was her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. It would be her last day.

She got up early, well before dawn and sat at the kitchen counter, sipping coffee from a cracked, sky blue mug.

She idly turned the pages of the newspaper. Nobody she knew had died.

It would be a day like any other. There was nowhere she had to go and nothing she had to do.

Her son was living well on the other side of the country. He emailed and sent pictures of the grandchildren occasionally. He almost never called. When he did he complained about his job and the kids. She listened. At the end, he would ask how she was.

“Fine.” She would say. “Just fine.” And then he was gone.

She did a little volunteer work, when she could be bothered. She had not bothered for some time. Occasionally, old friends from the country club or the church called to ask if she would like to have lunch

or go shopping. She knew that they felt sorry for her. Her answer was always the same.

“I’ve got to check my calendar.” She would promise to call in a day or two, but never did.

She went into the bathroom and ran a brush through graying hair. Her shoulder ached. It had been her knee the day before. She brushed her teeth and hung her robe on a hook and slipped into a navy sweatshirt, black yoga pants and running shoes. She would not bother with makeup.

She went back into the kitchen and poured herself another cup of coffee, drank half of it and then poured the rest down the sink. She rinsed the cup out and put it in the dishwasher and then switched off the coffee maker.

It was 6 a.m. Still dark. She walked through the living room, pausing to straighten a cushion on the overstuffed white sofa. From the mantelpiece, a man and a woman watched her. He was smiling. The woman was not. She went over to the mantel and put the silver frame face down and walked out the door unseen.

It had rained in the night and drops of water rolled off the roof and plopped down from the trees. A drop landed on her face and rolled down her cheek. Sweet cool air misted over her and she breathed in deeply. She began walking. At first slowly and then faster and faster. Behind her street lights switched off with a click. She would have to hurry.

A few early commuters were already on the road and, when she got to a busy intersection, she stopped at the curb, carefully looked both ways and then jumped into the street just as the light was turning green and the “Don’t Walk” sign was flashing. It was over in a few seconds.

Her son flew in for the funeral and flew out the next day. Acquaintances from the old days came to the funeral parlor and stood over her with more concern for their own mortality than for her passing.

They said what a wonderful person she had been and how much she would be missed.

There had been a brief grave side service and then a few people had gathered at the church hall to eat and gossip. After that, life moved on. The insurance people paid up pretty quickly. Then, a swarm of strangers with credit cards and wads of cash came to the estate sale and judged her and bought up her life, carrying it away in plastic bags and on the back of pickup trucks.

No one paid the least bit of attention to the man who bought the silver frame and the old sky blue mug. The man paid cash and the agent dropped the frame and the mug into a plastic bag from Walmart. He walked through the nearly empty living room and out the open front door, closing it quietly behind him.

He crossed the porch and sat down in a white wicker chair at the far end, the bag resting on his lap. A real estate agent pounded a “For Sale” sign into the ground and a squabbling couple loaded the overstuffed sofa onto a flatbed trailer. The woman had a cigarette dangling from her mouth. The front door flew open and a young girl with a cell phone pressed to her ear hurried down the steps.

“No. Nothing any good. Old people stuff. Meet you at Starbucks in five.”

The sun was setting when the agent came out to lock up the house at the end of a long, successful sales day. The man was still sitting there, his chin resting on his chest.

She swore under her breath and fumbled with the stiff locks for what seemed an eternity and when she turned back, to tell him he would have to go, he was gone. The soft clinking of memories mingled with the chirps of crickets and then disappeared into night. The street lamps clicked on.

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*Born and raised in Mobile, **Deb Jellett** moved to England, became a lawyer, then relocated to Virginia where she ran a women's fitness franchise before "retiring" back to the Mobile area. Over the last few years, she has focused on writing and will begin an MFA program in the Fall.*

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Manelli's San Pedro, Belize

Cindy Peavy

I noticed her from the doorway
where we stood trying to decide if we should go in—
a girl of four or five in a yellow sun dress.
She rode on a four-horse merry-go-round
with her head resting on the blue horse's mane.
I thought she'd somehow fallen asleep
amidst the noise of game-machine explosions
and the merry-go-round's tinny rendition
of "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush"
played over and over.

The shop was uninviting—hot and overcrowded;
a chipped linoleum floor, sticky
and smudged; walls with peeling paint
masked by tattered posters:
a community flea market, a church bake sale,
last month's free outdoor concert. Still,
the promise of coconut ice cream
and the lilting sound of Creole,
rising and falling like waves of music,
drew us inside.

We joined the line
crammed between the counter and the merry-go-round.
Unable to talk above the din, we watched
the little girl circle by us—
her brown feet in flip-flops,

remnants of blue polish freckling her toenails.

When the merry-go-round slowed
and stopped, she raised her head and grinned,
showing her missing front teeth.

I tried to recall when I'd seen joy that pure,
like nothing could have been better
than to ride that horse.

I searched my pocket for fifty cents
so I could be the one to make the merry-go-round
and her smile last—a participant in her joy, not a witness.
But before I could find any change,
her mother carried her away,
and I was left in the crowd,
a foreigner.

Cindy Peavy teaches writing at Mountain Brook Elementary and proudly displays her student-made "Queen of Poetry" coffee mug. She's a teacher consultant with the UAB Red Mountain Writing Project dedicated to improving teachers' writing instruction. For continuous encouragement and thoughtful critique, she's indebted to the women in *Women Writing for (a) Change*.

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*Juvenile Fiction*

# ***From Cradle to Grave***

**Sandra Havriluk**

Excerpt, Young Adult novel in verse

~ 1 ~

## **June 21, 1934: Thirteenth Birthday**

My mama pushed me into this world and  
herself out of it thirteen years ago  
today. The way Daddy sees it, he got  
the raw end of that deal. Netty, who cooks  
and cares and cleans for us, sees into my  
heart like only somebody who loves you  
like a mama can. She balls up her  
hands onto her skinny hips. Her curved, dark  
arms shine with summer day sweat, her muscles  
ropy like twists of licorice candy.  
“Belle Downing,” she says to me, “you didn’t  
ask to be born. Your mama’s dying ain’t  
your fault.” She holds my hand between hers.  
We call it our moon pie, my marshmallow  
white squeezed between her chocolate covering.  
She lets go, sighs. “We all have our lot in life.  
So’s time you be accepting yours, chile.” But  
that’s hard to do when the June day’s heat wraps  
you up, smothers you like a blanket of blame.

\*\*\*\*\*



Sarah Rose twists me in our tire swing, using  
all her one-year-older-than-me-big-sister  
strength. I hang on tight while the rope un-twirls.  
It all blurs together: pine trees, pasture,  
garden, cotton crop, rows of peach trees, our  
faded-to-gray lumber shack called home, wood  
crosses for Mama and for still-born Roy Junior.  
Daddy's gruff voice travels the summer wind.  
"Sarah Rose, git yourself over here. Chicks  
need more water. Belle, harvest the beans 'fore  
they ruin. There's work to be done. No time  
to play." Sarah Rose calls out, "Jump to, Belle."  
She don't need to warn me twice. My thigh still smarts  
from Daddy's belt landing on it yesterday.

\*\*\*\*\*

I watch Daddy from the garden, resting  
my sore fingers from picking beans. Hat in hand,  
he's bowed over Mama's grave doing his  
hard grieving. That's what Netty calls it, says  
her dying set him in his mean ways,  
making him drown in bootlegger moonshine.  
She says, "Your mama made him whole and good."  
She says, "Your mama's death broke him apart,  
stirred up devils inside him." Now that's  
a hard chew for me to swallow. I bet  
Daddy's more'n likely wishing that cross  
said BELLE, not MARY MARGARET.  
Sometimes, that same wishing comes over me,  
and when no one's looking,

I stretch out on top of Mama to feel  
the fit of forever-after. I converse with the Lord,  
ask Him right out loud, "Why did you take her and not me?"  
ask right out loud, "I have the right to know, don't I, Lord?"  
ask right out loud, "Lord, how's this fair?"  
I don't expect He'll write his answers down  
on stone tablets like Moses, or nothing like that.  
God can just whisper them in the wind  
and that'd be fine by me.  
Daddy tugs on his hat and goes on off,  
rattling down the gritty, gravelly road,  
thirsting after his likker so's he can  
forget this day. Forget about me.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Come on over here, Will, swing with me,"  
I invite him, my lap full of snap beans.  
I'm keeping an eye on him, like usual,  
though he's fifteen and should be all grow'd up.  
Netty calls me Will's keeper, being as  
I'm the only one he'll let touch him  
and the only one he'll listen to.  
Daddy can't stand it, says God has it out for him,  
giving him a retard for a son.  
Right now Will ain't listening to me a'tall.  
He's sitting on the porch's splintery wood floor,  
leaning his scrawny body against the screen door,  
his hazel eyes fixed in that straight-ahead look.  
His red cowlick pokes up like a rooster's cockscomb  
and his legs are crisscrossed, Indian style.

I can't help but grin. There's no such thing  
as a red-headed Indian. Their hair looked  
raven-black in the Tim McCoy cowboy picture  
Sarah Rose and me saw last week.  
We sneaked in through the COLOREDS door  
("Come on goody-two-shoes," she egged me on, til I did).  
We sat right there with them in their balcony.  
Sarah Rose bet none of them would tell  
the white ticket taker, and she bet right.  
But she didn't figure on the colored grapevine  
that spreads faster than kudzu. By the time we got home,  
Netty know'd already what we'd been up to.  
She switched our legs all but raw that day.  
"You'd be worse off if'n it was your Daddy finding out,"  
she'd said, and she was dern right about that.  
"Well, goody-two-shoes, would you do it again?"  
Sarah Rose asked while we doctored up  
our punishment with Mercurochrome.  
"Only if you let me sneak Will in, too," I answered.  
"Why you gotta do that?" she argued.  
I started to say, "Maybe a moving picture'll  
snap him to. Maybe he'd even laugh."  
But I didn't. She'd just want to keep on  
keeping on. I just answered, "Cause so."  
My bean snapping's keeping time with Will's  
rocking. I reckon if I ask him why  
he does that, he'd just answer back, "Cause so."  
If he'd ever talk.  
Daddy says he's not getting stuck with him.  
He says when I git, he'll have Will locked up  
in the Milledgeville Lunatic Asylum.

From what I've heard, that place ain't fit for  
a mad dog. But there's no reason to get  
all worked up, 'cause I'll stay here forever  
'fore I'll let Daddy put Will away.

\*\*\*\*\*

Netty puts out my birthday spread for our supper:

Fried ham  
    from our smokehouse  
Stewed okra with tomatoes  
    from last summer's canning  
Snap beans  
    from our garden  
Cornbread  
    from the pan, fried crisp

I say Grace (my hunger sneaking between the lines):

*Come Lord Jesus,*  
    because the smoky  
*be our guest*  
    peppery  
*may this food by Thee be blessed*  
    fried aromas  
*may our souls by Thee be fed*  
    rising from the table  
*ever on the living bread*  
    make my stomach rumble  
*Amen.*

\*\*\*\*\*

I squeeze my full-as-a-tick-ready-to-burst  
self 'tween Will and Sarah Rose on the swing.  
Its creaking sings a duet with the katydids.  
Netty cranks the ice cream churn's handle,  
her bicep bulging at each turn. It twitches  
when she stops to add more ice, chipped from  
the frozen block in our wooden icebox.  
Daddy staggers from the old Model T,  
a likker jar in one hand and a bunch  
of wild daisies in the other. We spoon  
our soft vanilla treat, watching him  
cover Mama in a yellow and white blanket of love  
and then stagger past us to sleep it off.

\*\*\*\*\*

Under the summer moonlight, Sarah Rose  
and Will stretch out on the blue-and-white  
ticking mattress. We drag it out on the porch  
every summer to catch the night breezes.  
The fireflies Sarah Rose and me caught swarm  
inside our glass jar. We added some dirt  
and weeds to give 'em a home and punched holes  
in the lid to give 'em air. But it's still  
not the same as being free to blaze trails  
in the dark.  
That sad truth pokes at me.  
Netty and I swing arm-in-arm,  
our black and white weaved together.  
"Tell me the story, Netty," I ask.  
The swing creaks beneath us, like a baby's cry.

“You know it already, chile,” she answers.

“I done tol’ you a thousand times over.”

She shifts her weight, readying to mine her memories,  
to tell our story. I wish it started

*Once-upon-a-time* and ended *Happily-ever-after*.

But it ain’t yet.

~ 2 ~

### **Storytelling time**

“Your birthday means it’s been thirteen years.

I was fifteen back in ’21, all alone

in my family’s sharecropper shack in Tennessee  
not far outside Nashville, hungry and scared.

They’d all up and died—my mama and Daddy,  
my sister— from the grip, the influenza epidemic  
that killed so many round Nashville a couple a years  
a’fore. The Bossman’s family, the Goodalls,  
who owned the land, they all fell sick and died too,  
'cepting for Jarvis, the oldest son,

only three years older’n me. Young Mr. Jarvis,  
he kept on living by his self in his big ole empty house.

I kept on living by myself in my shanty.

We was sorrowing over our people dying,  
wondering why we was spared from dying too.

Pretty soon, Mr. Jarvis, he started  
spending all his time in Nashville,  
drinking and gambling.

That’s when your Daddy met up with him.

Mr. Roy, he did love your mama,

but his wanderlust kept a-knocking on him,  
got him to thinking he could find easy fortune.  
He left your mama here in Benevolence,  
with two at her knee and you on the way.  
He took the train from Georgia into Nashville.  
That's where their paths crossed, Mr. Jarvis  
and Mr. Roy, at a poker game.  
Mr. Roy was there to win a future.  
Mr. Jarvis was there to forget his past.  
Mr. Jarvis bet his inheritance and lost.  
Mr. Roy bet his hopes and won.  
Your Daddy, he won it all—a little bit of money,  
the Goodall property, Model T truck,  
everything else that went with it, meaning  
my hand was played out right there, too. Mr. Jarvis,  
he felt so bad about what he'd done. He said  
to your Daddy, 'Give this colored girl a home.  
She can be your servant-girl.' Mr. Roy answered,  
'I suppose she'd be of help to my wife.'  
And I think, 'Where else can I go, a poor colored  
sharecropper's daughter who owns nothing and has nobody?'

\*\*\*\*\*

Netty turns quiet, lost back in the  
*Once-upon-a-time.*  
The fireflies in the jar are getting dimmer.  
The moon's light pours over us all:  
Sarah Rose and Will, sleeping on;  
Netty, the poor colored sharecropper's daughter,  
and me.

I think about Daddy's calling Netty  
his nigger woman, the way he spits the words out  
like sour milk.

I ask her, "Why should you being black like the night  
matter to anyone when it don't matter to me?"

She pulls from my hold and shakes her head.

"Most white folk make it matter." Her voice dips low.

Her words come slow. "You'll learn someday. It'll always matter."

My words come loud, sure-of-heart fast.

"It'll never matter to me." She gives me that look,  
the one that says *you're too young to know no better*,  
and folds back into my hold, ready to tell the rest.

\*\*\*\*\*

"When your Daddy brought me back here, we found  
your mama bad-off. Not long after,  
she played her own hand, at childbirth—but she lost out.  
Before she went, she whispered 'Name her Belle,'  
spit on her finger and crossed you for baptism.  
Then she crossed her Cat'lic self, closed her eyes,  
and died.

That's when Mr. Roy turned you-all over to me,  
a young and scared girl who had never took care  
of nobody other than herself.

But when I looked at one-year-old Sarah Rose,  
two-year-old Will, and you, a newborn  
caterwauling for a mama's loving,  
my heart melted right then and there.

I knew'd what I had to do.

Your Daddy's dreams, they snapped like dry brittle twigs.



He buried your mama next to Roy Junior.  
I never seen such grief in a man,  
but it didn't take long for that grief of his  
to turn into bright red anger,  
as red as this Georgia clay, as red as  
flames a-burning.  
Against Roy Junior, for being born dead.  
Against Will, for being of weak mind.  
Against Sarah Rose, for favoring your mama's looks.  
Against you, Belle, for being here instead of your mama.  
Mr. Roy dug down his roots at your mama's grave,  
paid off the farmhouse and the land.  
He put the Goodall deed into your Mama's wooden box,  
where she kept her precious items,  
and shoved it under his bed.  
The rest of the money he gambled away  
or spent on his moonshine.  
He's done fenced us in with his bitterness  
way out in the middle of nothing  
but red Georgia clay and pines."

\*\*\*\*\*

Her story ends like it always does,  
with no *happily-ever-after*.  
Not yet, at least.  
The swing stills beneath us, Netty gone off  
into her thoughts again.  
I want to tell her, "black or white, it don't matter to me,"  
tell her, "and, it's not 'cause I'm young and don't know no better."  
Instead I slide from the swing and grab up

the firefly jar next to Sarah Rose.  
She pulls the sheet up over her head.  
Will lets out a soft snore. At the edge  
of our dirt yard, I unscrew the lid  
and fling the bugs out. "Go on now, y'hear?"  
They fly off, dizzy with freedom.  
The ring 'round the moon warns of morning rain.

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**Sandra Havriluk** holds her MFA in Creative Writing from Spalding University and earned her AB in English from the University of Georgia. She teaches English at Gwinnett Technical College and is a member of the Society of Children Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) and the Atlanta Writers Club (AWC).

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Daddy's Girl

Michelle Lowery Combs

Winifred

I was ten the summer I killed my father. Of course, no one ever suspected that it was me who'd done the terrible thing—his death was blamed on an exploding heart, something I hadn't even known a heart could do.

I'd heard talk about the varied and mysterious things a heart was capable of: soaring, breaking, giving out. Never had I been told one could up and explode. But that's exactly how my grandmother, who never minced words, explained what killed her son-in-law to my neighbor, Ms. Bertie Butler. I overheard them when Grandmother came to collect my older sister Rachel, our baby brother Jamie and me from Mrs. Butler's house the first morning of our lives as fatherless children.

Grandmother's story was accepted and repeated without hesitation by all who heard it, but I knew better. I knew that I'd killed Daddy.

I wanted to tell Ms. Butler what I'd done when Rachel and I ran to her house for help that June afternoon after Daddy stumbled from the shower like a blind mind in a rock quarry and collapsed onto the white eyelet bedspread that covered his bed. Momma had yelled for Rachel to "get Ms. Butler to the house quick!" While Rachel had hurried to sit Jamie in his playpen, I'd gone to our parents' room to see what all the fuss was about. Momma usually never yelled, and I couldn't imagine what she needed a neighbor for.

Standing in the threshold of my parents' bedroom door, I saw Daddy askew on the bed, eyes closed, mouth hanging open like a cod fish. His skin was a funny ashen color. I could tell that he needed more help than Ms. Butler, despite being a nurse, could give him. Daddy

needed an ambulance. Ms. Butler happened to be our closest neighbor with a telephone.

Momma hadn't said for me to go with Rachel, but I couldn't just stand there with something so clearly, very wrong with Daddy...something I was beginning to realize with every passing second that *I* had caused.

Rachel was almost twelve, but I was the faster runner. I lit out like my tail was on fire, my Buster Browns *slap, slap, slapping* the sidewalk all the way to Ms. Butler's house, four houses down from mine. Rachel, a few feet behind me, joined me in yelling Ms. Butler's name as we climbed the woman's porch steps.

"Ms. Butler! Ms. Butler! Come quick!"

Ms. Butler smiled as she came to her screen door. She wore a soft blue house dress and yellow apron I'd never seen before. She looked different without the crisp white nurse's uniform she was always wearing the evenings I saw her get off the city bus in front of my house. I hardly recognized her in regular clothes. The same was true whenever I ran into any of my teachers in town. They looked strange when they weren't behind a desk or in front of a black board. It was like seeing Yogi Bear in Kirk's captain chair on Star Trek or something. I found it hard to believe that outside of school teachers were just like most other adults: regular people with errands to run, food to buy, meals to cook for a family waiting at home.

Ms. Butler didn't have a family, though. She lived alone, something I thought was only a little unusual for a woman in her mid-forties. She was still pretty neat. I planned to live alone myself as a grownup—that was if Daddy still insisted when the time came that he had to live with Momma and couldn't live with me at Disneyland.

"Hello, girls. I'm making a cake. Want to help me ice it in a bit?" Ms. Butler asked pleasantly from inside her screen door. There was a smudge of flour on Ms. Butler's chin and a clump of it in her graying

black hair. I thought of Momma, who would have rather eaten dirt than bake in the middle of a summer day. The only baked goods I'd be eating until October would be the store bought kind. The smell of yellow cake batter wafting off Ms. Butler as she opened her screen door made me forget for a second that my father was lying naked and gray in desperate need of help a half block away. I thought I might vomit when I remembered with a jolt what had brought my sister and me to Ms. Butler's door.

"Ms. Butler, please, our Momma needs you. It's urgent," Rachel insisted from behind me.

Ms. Butler's smile vanished as she stepped out onto the porch. "Well, okay...but..." she began.

"We have to hurry," I insisted, taking Ms. Butler's hands and practically pulling her down the porch steps.

"Girls?" she asked. "What's going on? Your parents...they're not...arguing...or anything...are they?" she asked hesitantly.

"No, no, of course not," I assured her. "It's nothing like that. Something...something is wrong with our Daddy," I said. "I...I..." I stammered, wanting to confess what I'd done to him, before the shame and terror of it constricted my throat and forced me to swallow the words.

"I have to get you to Daddy, Ms. Butler, and Rachel needs to use your phone to call for an ambulance," I said instead.

"Go ahead, Rachel. The phone is in the kitchen. Be sure to give the operator your address," Ms. Butler instructed over her shoulder as I drug her down the sidewalk to my house.

My classmate and sometimes best friend Curtis Gene Tolliver sat on his bicycle in my front yard watching us.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Butler. Hey, Winnie," he said. He pushed his Coca-Cola bottle-thick eyeglasses higher up on his nose before asking, "Wanna play, Winnie?"

“Not now!” I growled.

“Gheez, Louise!” Curtis Gene complained. “What in the world’s wrong with you?”

“Go home, Curtis Gene!” I ordered before shoving Ms. Butler inside the house and slamming the front door behind us.

I led Ms. Butler past Jamie, wailing in his playpen, to my parents’ bedroom. I’d meant to warn her about Daddy’s nakedness but, all things considered, it had slipped my mind. That he was unconscious seemed more important than the fact that he’d been showering when my carelessness endangered his life. I reminded myself that she was a nurse and had probably seen more than her fair share of naked people. I was relieved, however, to see that Momma had covered Daddy from waist to thigh with a bath towel. He wouldn’t want to run into Ms. Butler while out checking the mail or something and remember that she’d seen him in his birthday suit.

He looked worse than before. Much, much worse. His skin was almost purple. Momma sat crumpled on the floor by the bed, rocking back and forth, wailing in perfect time with Jamie down the hall.

“Eddie! Eddie!” she cried in a strangled sob over and over again.

The ambulance came, but my Daddy never made it to the hospital—there was nothing Ms. Butler or any doctor anywhere could have done for him. Instead, after the coroner was called, the paramedics delivered him to the funeral home downtown.

Grandmother came eventually and peeled my mother off her bedroom floor and took her away. When they were gone, Rachel, carrying a still crying Jamie on her hip, silently led me back to Ms. Butler’s house where it was decided that we would spend the night.

I planned to use Ms. Butler’s phone to call the police and let them know where they’d be able to find the person responsible for my Daddy’s death. I wasn’t exactly sure what they did to ten-year-old criminals of the worst sort in jail, but whatever it was, I deserved it. Even if I got The

Knocker. I pictured the ugly stick Curtis Gene's father wore on his hip as a member of the police force. Curtis Gene got The Knocker pretty good from time to time when his father had too much to drink. He'd even had to wear a cast for two months one winter.

I hope they break both my arms. Legs, too. I don't deserve to live. It should be me on the way to the funeral home not Daddy, I thought.

I sat staring at Ms. Butler's phone all evening, but in the end I was too chicken to make the call. I finally dozed off on the sofa, a murderer and a coward.

The next day, Grandmother came to collect us and began telling the story that she would repeat over and over again to anyone who asked.

"An exploding heart. That's what did it. Killed him instantly. Almost instantly, anyway. And now Dorothy has been practically struck dumb. Won't say anything but his name. That's it. Just his name, over and over."

After that, I knew that I would never be able to tell anyone what I'd done.

On the ride to Grandmother's I tried to understand how a sunny summer day like the day before could have started with such promise and turned into the worst day I'd ever known.

I'd been stretched out on the cool linoleum floor watching the last of the Saturday morning cartoons I lived for when Daddy came in from playing baseball. He played ball every Saturday morning with his buddies from the cotton mill. When I sat up to greet him, he'd lightly flicked the tip of my nose with one long, red dirt-stained finger.

"Whatcha' know, Peanut?" he'd asked.

"Daddy!" I'd protested after crossing my eyes and seeing the broad smudge he'd left across my nose. In the time that it took for me to wipe away the remnants of the ball field I'd forgiven him, though. Momma always said she could never stay mad at Daddy on account of he was so

good looking—something about the dimple that appeared in the center of his right cheek when he smiled forgiving all his sins. As a ten-year-old I was immune to dimples of all sorts. The dimples in Jamie’s chubby baby cheeks had never once made me forget that he could scream like a banshee and liked to bite. What I admired most about Daddy was his voice. His speaking voice was soothing and fine, but his singing voice, as cool and smooth as a dollop of Cool-Whip, always set my toes to tapping. As he’d crossed the room in front of me humming a snippet of the Dr. Pepper commercial playing on the television, I forgot all about the dirt.

“Charge! Get goin’ again...with the Dr. Pepper difference. Why be beat? Drink a bite to eat...at 10, 2 and 4 you’ll always want more, more, more...”

I’d watched him drag a fold-out chair from the corner of the room closer to the television before sitting down to remove his ancient leather cleats and long socks. He looked beat. The thin cotton jersey he always wore for ball practice clung to his chest. It was just a rag compared to his game jersey, embroidered in blue with “Adelaide Mill” on the front and our last name, “McGregor”, hand-stitched by Momma across the back.

Daddy had smelled of sweat and grass, but just under those smells, I could still make out a trace of AquaVelva aftershave and Juicy Fruit chewing gum. Watching him peel off his dusty socks, I’d noticed for the first time the faint lines beginning to form at the outside corners of his eyes. He’d turned thirty-one in March and was starting to wrinkle. I decided it only made his olive-colored face more handsome, his chocolate brown eyes twinkle a little brighter.

“Want something to drink, Daddy?” I’d offered.

“Only if it’s something cold,” he’d answered.

“How about a glass of tea?”

“Sounds mighty fine. You’re a good girl, Peanut.”

I’d bounded into the kitchen and Daddy had called after me. “Make sure to give me plenty of ice.”

At the icebox, I'd stood for a few seconds in front of the open door, letting the deliciously frosty air hit me in the face, before selecting five fat ice cubes from the bowl Momma always emptied the ice trays into and placing them in a glass. As I'd poured sweet tea over the ice, I'd remembered a warning from Grandmother about never drinking something cold when you're hot. She said it would give you a heart attack. According to her, the same was true about standing in front of a fan when you were overheated. I'd wondered briefly if it would've worried her to see me standing in front of the icebox in a house growing uncomfortably warm as the Alabama summer sun beat down on it. Grandmother worried about a lot of things she believed could make ill, maim or kill someone. For good measure, I'd put my hand to my heart like I did every morning at school for the Pledge of Allegiance and had been relieved by the rhythmic pounding I'd felt under my palm.

When I'd taken the glass of iced tea back to Daddy, he'd drained it in four giant gulps.

"Thanks a heap," he'd said. "That really hit the spot. Now I gotta get a shower before Momma sees how dirty I am. Where's she at anyway?"

"Hanging the sheets to dry," answered Rachel, coming into the room, carrying Jamie on her hip as he happily gnawed a graham cracker into a pulpy mess. "It's got to be almost one hundred degrees out there already."

"How'd you girls like to head out to the creek in Marshall when she's done? We could swim some. Maybe show Jamie a little fishing, Rachel?"

"Sure, Daddy," Rachel had beamed.

"Hey!" I'd complained. I'd always been Daddy's fishing buddy.

"I thought you didn't like to get dirty anymore," he'd answered with a grin and wagged his dirty hands at me.

“You know I’ve never been afraid of a little fish guts!” I’d whined as he’d dashed down the hall and into the bathroom connected to his and Momma’s bedroom.

I could hear Daddy singing the theme song from the cartoon I’d been watching as he started the shower.

“Busy, Busy Bees, watch them buzz, buzz, buzz. They’re happy, happy, happy just because, ‘cause, ‘cause,” he’d sung in his pitch-perfect tenor.

The sound of the water had soon drowned out his singing, and I’d gone back to watching television. Within a few minutes, the promise of the most perfect day of the summer, the promise of an afternoon spent splashing in cool water and fishing with my father, had been broken and my world shattered into a million pieces like a tall cold glass of iced tea dropped from a tenth story window.

Michelle Lowery Combs *lives in Alexandria, Alabama with one cat and too many children to count. When not in the presence of throngs of toddlers, tweens and teens, she can be found neglecting her roots, posting to her book blog, and dreaming up the next best seller.*

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*Short Fiction*

# **Chris**

**Tom Glenn**

I try to hang onto Chris. I think about the things that made him the man that he was. He was my hope. I don't want to be hopeless.

Chris was a diver. He'd step up to the three-meter board and then go into the approach, the hurdle, and the dive all in one motion, the way a diver is supposed to. But only Chris moved like that, as if he and fear were strangers. You had to know him to catch the twinkle of terror in his eyes. I used to wonder if he took up diving to impress me. I know how scared of heights he was.

Chris loved wine. On a Friday night, he and I would splurge on two bottles of cabernet. We'd sit and compare the virtues of Turning Leaf and Geyser Peak. He'd sniff the wine and hold it to the light before he sipped, just as I'd taught him. His blue eyes would go all liquid as he swallowed. For a minute he'd just sit there, completely absorbed in tasting. Then he'd pronounce his judgment. He loved the ritual. It was a game between just the two he loved the game more than the wine.

Chris loved people. All kinds of people. He used to embarrass me by bringing them to the house. He seemed to attract the ones who were in pain. I remember once he brought home a buddy with what they call post-traumatic stress disorder. The guy sat there all during dinner not talking. He was distant and tense, and he smiled as if he didn't understand what we were saying to him. After we'd all done the dishes together, Chris got him to talk, and the guy started crying. Chris held him and let him cry. A year later, Chris told me the guy killed himself.

Chris was a father, too. I remember the funny look he'd get on his face when he held his little Kathy. That look chilled me. It was if he knew

something was going to happen. Then he'd toss her in the air, and she'd shriek and giggle. Once, after a romp, he sat her on his knee and stroked her hair and said, "There's so much I want to tell you." Her hair is the same straw color as his.

Chris was a soldier, a fine soldier. His mother was so concerned about what might happen to him that she couldn't be proud of him. After he went to Afghanistan, I explained to her that Chris was carrying on the family tradition, and that if anything happened to him, it would be while he was serving with honor. I made her cry.

Chris was a hero. He had courage. Too much courage. And I will always have to live with the thought that maybe he was a fool. Or maybe he didn't want to live. When they told me how he died—tearing out there into the no-man's land with no weapon or helmet or flak jacket, all to save his buddy who was already dead .... Why did he have to care so much about being a hero? Why didn't he care more about us? I can't be angry at him anymore. It hurts too much.

Most of all, Chris was a man. He wasn't a perfect man. He was just Chris. That's all I wanted him to be. He was afraid I was disappointed in him. He always thought I expected him to be stronger, braver, fiercer. I only wanted to keep raising the bar so he'd be the best man he could be. I'd do anything to have him back, just the way he was.

Chris was my son. He was the hope of my life.

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*Many of **Tom Glenn's** prize-winning stories (15 in print) came from the better part of the thirteen years he operated under cover in and out of Vietnam before being evacuated under fire when Saigon fell. His web sites are <http://tom-tells-tales.org> and <http://vietnam-tragedy.org>.*

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Fiction

Virgin Falling

Paul Haley

I went into hooking for the money. No ghetto, no mommy dearest on crack, no loving daddy sizzling little Bobby in the microwave. My sheets were silk and my friends and I shared designer drugs in private schools.

I did okay in looks, grades, popularity—attractive but never outstanding in the ways that were important then. The only unique quality I recall from high school was that I could see things coming before my friends did. When they made up their minds to go all the way with their boyfriends, I knew it before they did. Something about the way they moved, or their changing clothes and makeup. I could see what was coming as clearly as the unfinished arc of a thrown diamond ring halfway across its flight. I saw virgins falling.

The month I graduated from high school my friend Chloe announced her upcoming marriage. Our circle of girlfriends heard about the bachelor party her fiancé's pals planned for the night before, and we decided to give Chloe what one of us called a “last night of girl freedom party” at a classy hotel.

Girl freedom.

Those words reverberated through my interior to the lowest chambers. To me marriage meant slavery, the only fate worse than getting a job and working for a living.

I found my first John in the hotel bar that night.

After I got used to it, turning tricks was as matter of fact as waiting tables, and a much faster way to pay for college. Alone in my room after a night's work I piled the cash on my bed and marveled. I clapped my

hands and shook my head and howled with the thrill of so much easy money. No husband, and I'd escaped the chains of nine to five.

Girl freedom.

I moved to Manhattan. For a while I ran with a friend I met there who wasn't in the business but played on the street. Called herself Flame and wore bright feathers in her hair—a splendid, high velocity woman of unblemished integrity and effervescent humor. She went to college back around the time I did—some Ivy League school.

Flame never said it but she came from money. She wore expensive clothes, coordinated to look like a runaway gypsy, and she never ran any capers to her advantage. She played pranks nonstop on the streets—stunts that would have landed most of us in prison. Why would a rich girl invest the time and effort to become an adroit pickpocket? Picking pockets was a merry game.

The first time she let me watch she told me beforehand where to focus my eyes so her distractions wouldn't work on me. She wove her way through a crowded sidewalk, and in a move so fast I wasn't certain I'd actually seen it even after her warning, she lifted the wallet out of the purse of a woman in a long fur coat. Flame held it under her jacket for a few steps then slipped it into the coat pocket of an arrogant executive type in a three-piece suit, and relieved him of his billfold.

At the corner, where pedestrians clustered for the traffic light to change, she inserted the executive's billfold into the pocket of a cop. She bumped into him with her tits to distract him, and he cut a sharp glare at her, suspicious, but she disarmed him with a disgusted face as if he were a lecher and she was gone before he recovered.

I once saw Flame slither through the crush along a crowded New York sidewalk and transfer wallets from twelve people to someone walking a few paces behind each of them, never once getting caught or even leaving a victim startled or patting their pockets. And she never

kept a penny. Her juice was the laughs. “Magic fingers,” she’d say, and tap a melody in the air, and wink.

One winter night in the corner booth at our favorite bar, she described some of the consequences she hoped for from her antics in the street. She put down her drink to gesture with both hands as she spoke. “So this Wall Street tycoon goes home to his trophy wife and when they undress he pulls a flowery lavender woman’s wallet out of his pants right in front of her. And it has raunchy condoms in it.”

Flame laughed with her whole body, leaning back relaxed, like a child. Her laugh was a clean bubbling brook that flowed into something deep in me that wanted to take her in my arms and kiss her sensual mouth.

“Or this one,” she said, leaning forward. “This uptight big business stud stops for a power lunch at his exclusive executive club and pulls out a pink wallet at a table full of narcissistic alpha suits.” She slapped her thigh as she laughed. “And what about coming home and finding out you’ve lost your own wallet but you have a cop’s, including the badge and ID?”

Except for the occasional cop, Flame only picked the pockets of the wealthy and never planted stolen property on a poor person who might face serious legal charges if caught. But a dozen times I saw her slip cash out of a wallet and hand it to some soul who looked like he needed it.

I like to remember little things about her. How she’d pause if you said something stupid, as if to give you a chance to correct yourself. And the way she relished fine language, licking those perfect red lips when someone used a clever turn of phrase.

Then I got married.

I don’t know why. A change of pace, convenient drugs, someone to take out the garbage—why does anyone marry? I was depressed. Before

she died, my mom warned me, “This ‘girl freedom’ stuff you talk about will come to a bad end. Get a normal life.”

Turned out Jack was a wife beater and a junkie.

I dragged him to a marriage counselor but Jack was on mescaline that afternoon. He told the lady I was a witch, and I should be committed to a mental institution for casting spells on him. The shrink suggested I might want to consider another partner.

The last time Jack beat me, I shoved him so hard he fell off the balcony. I leaned over the rail and shouted down to his body, legs in the shrubbery, head and shoulders on the sidewalk, “You might want your junk,” and threw a fistful of joints and pills at him.

When I walked out of our apartment a half hour later dragging Jack’s duffel bag with everything I owned in it and still not full, he was lying in his blood, sobbing. I haven’t seen him since.

My depression was cured.

Jack and I are divorced now, or so I heard from my sister when I called to tell her I’d moved to New Orleans. “Whatcha doing down there?” she asked but she didn’t care and I didn’t bother to answer. I don’t know why we tell each other when we move. Maybe because we’re all the family we have left. We save each other’s email address and cell phone number but seldom use either one. Still, we always call when one of us moves on to another city.

The two of us alone aren’t much for small talk.

One of us said, “Keep in touch.”

The other said, “Yeah, I will.”

A while back I mentioned how I used to see things coming before my friends did. I still do once in a while. Not often. I never claimed I knew what to do about it.

The other night I traded rounds with an old hooker friend in a bar on Royal Street, down at the bottom of the French Quarter. The doors and windows were open to the warmth of a classic New Orleans night breeze. Airborne Valium. A love song of an evening.

We were the last ones in the bar around 2 a.m. and didn't have anything to do but drink whiskey and talk drunk while the bartender cleaned up and tallied the cash. He closed the front doors and said, "Y'all can stay till I'm done."

We'd drunk enough that my friend was slurring and her face was so gray I was leaning to suggest that she see a doctor when she said, "Being a looker has value but our game is youth. The good money's while you're young." She took a sip of whiskey. "You have to stash away a lot fast. You can make a ton in your twenties and you're still salable property when you cross thirty but the clock is ticking."

She took a drag off her cigarette then made a *Where was I?* face for a second, remembered, and continued. "This kind of work, it happens real fast. Before you know it, especially if you get into narcotics." She raised an unsteady index finger to warn me away from the Trail of Drugs. "You wake up one morning and you're older. The tricks get farther apart...the Johns complain.... Hell, they just don't want to pay."

She took another sip. So did I, the whiskey easy in the mouth. "Then comes the day when the only ones who want you are weirdoes and teenagers with no money."

I wanted to tell her she was still attractive but I couldn't say it to that clammy gray mask. I had no aces to offer and couldn't think of a wild card. I watched a drop of sweat slide down her cheek.

She said, "There's no Ladies of the Night Retirement Home out there for us, kid."

"So what do we do?" I said.

She looked over her glass at me then laid her left hand over mine, both flat on the table. The expression in her eyes lingers in perfect focus

in my mind. The rest of that night with her is hazy—not a whiskey blur but a casualty of emotions, a moment burned in clear then rubbed indistinct by the feelings that whirled through me gazing across the table at her gazing across the table at me. I fell through a twisted space-time flip flop, a psychedelic flash of me being her, and her me, beholding each other across the years as if she were my future and I her past, two sisters in time who for a moment are each other then each other's mother and each the other's daughter, spinning in a spiraling mystic helix of mixed identity over our sacred whiskey communion.

I saw her fate.

I cry to the moon that I can't remember whether she spoke it or I saw it in her eyes or I had a vision but I know. I felt it as certainly as a last goodbye kiss on the mouth. I saw it as clearly as the sparkling diamond arc of the virgins falling.

She's going all the way.

When the money runs out she has a full bottle of sleeping pills hidden in a cupboard. She'll swallow most of them with a tumbler of her best whiskey then wade out into the surf in her crimson negligee and swallow the rest, not with salt water that might make her throw up, but with only the wet of her mouth as she swims out with the midnight tide to her last night of girl freedom.

Dr. Paul R. Lees-Haley, Ph.D., *first published at age eight (a joke in the Birmingham News), then in high school, and wrote essays for college magazines (rags). Author or co-author of 200 nonfiction publications, he is Board-certified in forensic psychology and recipient of the Nelson Butters Award for his neuropsychology research.*

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Nonfiction

# ***The Single Secret***

**Annell Gordon**

*what if a much of a which of a wind  
gives truth to summer's lie;  
bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun  
and yanks immortal stars awry?*

...  
*—when skies are hanged and oceans drowned,  
the single secret will still be man.  
e.e.cummings*

Wind moaned and scraped against the house, raking shingles from the roof and flinging them through the air so that they sliced into limbs of thrashing pecan trees across the leaf-obliterated dirt road. Buffeted by the screaming gales, an ancient magnolia creaked and groaned, the hurricane stripping its heavy fruit, hurling the hard balls like hand grenades against the clapboards and windows of our old farmhouse. Inside the 1840's house we huddled, breathless, startled by each horrific gust, breathing again only when we realized that the crashes were limbs, not whole trees, smashing into our home. Young, in our twenties, with small children, we had moved to Grove Hill, Alabama, into my husband's great-aunt's house in 1976 and had spent three hard years renovating the place. Hurricane Frederick, we were told, would be a bad one. Our reasoning for riding out the storm in our home: The house, made of logs shaped from entire lengths of huge tree trunks, had been there for almost 140 years. We would be safe.

Also, our family had been buffeted by storms before. During our college years with then only two children, we lived in a mobile home perched atop a rise in a trailer park in Livingston—dead center of the infamous tornado alley. When a tornado warning would sound, we would speed up the road to an elderly cousin's house. She insisted that we spend the duration of each storm nestled in her den where our children

entertained themselves with her huge collection of costume jewelry. Her house was our haven during the tempests. After the danger had passed, we would trek back to the trailer safe and sound.

One terrifying day, we watched storm clouds roil onto campus while my husband and I took the National Teacher's test in Bibb Graves Hall at Livingston University. Thunder reverberated through the old building, and looking out the huge windows, we cringed each time a bolt of lightning streaked across blackened skies. I do not know how we managed to pass that test. We were both thoroughly distracted, mortally afraid that my babysitting parents and our children, stuck in a flimsy trailer, would be blown to Kingdom Come by the tornado that was ripping across the nearby countryside. They weren't, and we did pass the test. Another facet of our reasoning for riding out Hurricane Frederick in our old home: We had already been there and done that—in far less substantial dwellings than our 1840's farmhouse.

Leaving no time to worry about our personal safety, preparing for the wrath of Frederick had occupied us during the hours before the storm struck. We shooed nervous clucking chickens, turkeys, and guineas into the barn, turned the hunting hounds' houses to leeward, and placed a myriad of toys and tiny riding vehicles in the old log potato house. We replaced batteries in flashlights and filled oil lamps. Refrigerator items were tucked into ice-filled coolers. Each bathtub was brimful of water for flushing toilets. Those three years of country life had taught us to prepare for long-range power outages. We were ready to face Mr. Frederick head-on.

That night, the winds began to blow in earnest, so hard the power was knocked off, so we went to bed—my husband in one room, I in another with all three kids snuggled in around me. He knew he would pace the floors throughout the maelstrom. I was better suited to comfort uneasy children. We listened to storm reports on battery-operated radios. Just as I was dozing off, bone-tired from the day's flurry of activity, a

reporter announced the first fatalities of the storm—a mother and her children had perished as the hurricane ripped apart their mobile home. My heart broke. No more sleep for me. While our little ones rested peacefully, oblivious to the howling winds, I wept for that other young mother and walked the floors with my husband all night. The dark was a mercy. We could hear but could not see massive pines crashing down and dragging power and phone lines to the ground—all within inches of our home. Our imaginations, however, vividly recorded the huge magnolia surrendering its hold on the earth to topple over and crush the roof over our carport. The bone-jarring bang and subsequent screeching and splintering of roof joists lent appalling sound effects to our minds' images. Were we going to survive this hellish whirlwind?

While trees crashed to earth, the wind screamed, and the storm clattered, banged, and moaned, a poet's words spun to the surface of the eddying fear that raged inside my head. I kept thinking of E.E. Cummings's poem "what if a much of a which of a wind." The poet ponders mankind's resilience in the face of both natural and man-made disasters. A memory also surfaced. I recalled how terrified I had been as a child of the 60s when I learned that my best friend's family had built a nuclear fall-out shelter in their backyard. She had informed me that my family was not invited to join her family when Russia dropped their atomic bombs. There was room for only one family—hers. A chilling dread had filled my young mind. With Hurricane Frederick's fury, words from the Cummings poem echoed in my adult mind, "what if a dawn of a doom of a dream/bites this universe in two,/peels forever out of his grave/and sprinkles nowhere with me and you?" As the hurricane raged, the frightened little girl of the early sixties trembled within me. I began to doubt our decision to stay in the old farmhouse.

Dawn finally broke; the sun rose on an alien world. Frederick left in his wake a green leaf-strewn place of twisted and downed trees as far as the eye could see. I gazed at the storm's devastation, feeling that our

universe had been bitten in two. The red dirt road was nowhere to be seen. We felt lost in the eerie landscape of shattered foliage. We heard a chainsaw in the distance. Clambering over massive tree trunks, we saw our neighbor already cutting through downed trees to clear the road. My husband and I turned at the same moment to gaze back at our storm-ravaged home. I held our baby girl in my arms. Our older daughter in white go-go boots was busy gathering treasures—white oak acorns and bits of moss. Her big brother scrambled through the treetops brandishing a stick machete at imaginary enemies. We heard the rooster crowing in the barn, hens cackling, and hounds barking. The old magnolia had punched through the roof, pines covered the yard, our fence was crushed here and there, but none of the damage was irreparable. To paraphrase the poet, the immortal stars had been yanked awry, but our neighbor’s rattling chainsaw, and in the days ahead, the hammering on the damaged roof, would give voice to the “single secret” that this man, this woman, and this family had endured.

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**Annell C. Gordon**, *still lives in that old farmhouse, with her husband Steve. She is a retired math and English teacher who enjoys writing, reading, and visiting with her six grandchildren. She and her octogenarian father are members of the Grove Hill Writers Group.*

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Humor

The Silver Fox

Deb Jellett

When Charlene caught Gramps snuggling with a widow woman in the back of the movie house, all heck broke loose. Charlene had unilaterally declared herself his girlfriend.

Or, as Grandpa put it, “She pinned that badge on herself.”

It all started a few months before when he joined an online dating site, using the name “Silver Fox.” That right there should tell you something. He posted pictures of himself, his big house and his red Cadillac convertible and one of him with a puppy that he borrowed from a friend. The puppy got so excited he tinkled on Grandpa’s shirt. Now, Gramps was never much of a looker, but he and his money and his big blue eyes got a lot of attention. The women were all over him. And he was loving it.

Daddy had a conniption fit when he found out about it. Seems Gramp’s prune faced neighbor Mrs. Brewer had seen the Silver Fox and a woman she only described as a floosie going into a bar. I don’t think I had ever seen Daddy so upset. His face was red and the veins on his temples were throbbing to beat the band. He declared that the devil was behind the Internet and went straight over to Gramp’s house. When Daddy came in the kitchen door, he found Grandpa sitting at the kitchen table next to a woman in a blue, baby doll nightgown. He didn’t say what Gramps was wearing. I just know Daddy didn’t stay long. A few days later Daddy sent the Baptist preacher over to counsel Grandpa and pray over him. Gramps told him to mind his own business—that he liked being a sinner. And what was the point of being Baptist if you couldn’t backslide now and then. Grandpa had made his money in the logging business and when you had spent 40 years dealing with Cajun loggers,

you learned not to mince words. I was hiding in the other room and after the preacher turned tail and ran, Grandpa and I laughed until our sides hurt and then he put the top down on the Caddy and we went out for pizza and ice cream. Mama was mad because I was late back to dinner. But she didn't say anything to Gramps. Grandpa said it was because she was afraid he might cut her off. From what, he didn't say.

But, the old Silver Fox was a victim of his own success. Women, lots of women, were calling him, asking him out. He said he thought he would never live to see the day when he could have too much of a good thing as far as women were concerned, but that that day had well and truly come. So, he developed a strategy for dealing with it.

He lied.

"I'm sorry, I can't go. My sweet little grandchild is sick." I didn't much like being called little or sweet, but my job, if I was in ear shot, was to cough and blow my nose hard.

"I'm sorry, I won't be able to make it. My cousin has died." The dead cousin still lives in Memphis.

The night he got caught at the movie house, Charlene thought he was at a wake. My BFF Haley was there too and she said that there was an almighty ruckus. Charlene was yelling and Gramps was trying to explain. He took her out to the lobby and told her some story or another and the widow woman slipped out the side door. A shopping spree in Atlanta and a couple of nights at The Four Seasons made the widow woman happy and a new pair of diamond earrings and a Visa gift card brought Charlene around.

But Charlene had what Mama called a strong sense of entitlement. She was wearing a low cut, knit dress, that the Visa had bought, and the diamond earrings when she got out her grandmother's Bible and made him swear that he would never, ever lie to her again. Gramps told me he had not been paying much attention to the Bible at the time.

Mama and Daddy told me I was being silly. But I was really and truly worried. Charlene was a big woman with a mean streak, and Gramps and lying went way back. They wouldn't admit it, but Mama and Daddy were worried too. Mama said something about spots and leopards that I didn't understand and Daddy put in a prayer request when the offering plate came by the next Sunday. He even went to the front and knelt on the steps and prayed at the end of the service.

Gramps seemed calm, cool and collected about it all and told me not to fret. "I can handle it. You see." He said putting a hand on my shoulder. "Women like Charlene think it is their God-given duty to save old rascals like me—to get me through those Pearly Gates. The worse I am, the harder she works. Think of her as a kind of missionary." Then he got a faraway look in his eyes and he smiled like he was remembering something really special.

He sniffed and chuckled. "Besides, she likes a challenge."

We were having dinner on TV trays, watching "Wheel of Fortune" when I told Mama what Gramps had said. She laughed so hard she choked on her cornbread and said that if Charlene liked a challenge, she should love the dickens out of Grandpa. Even Daddy laughed.

But, I was still worried. See, I had this dream the other night. Gramps had died and all the women, all of them, showed up for the funeral. They were pushing and shoving and shouting. I think Charlene was packing.

Gramps looked a little sad when I told him about it. But then he smiled so hard the wrinkles around his eyes were all bunched up and he chucked me on the chin and said I was a right little worrywart. He got that faraway look in his eyes again and said it would certainly be an interesting day—that I should be sure to take my camera. And that I should stay away from Charlene, especially if she had seen the will. Mama said she would explain all about that when I was a little older. She said that a lot.

Deb Jellett was born and raised in Mobile, but spent half her life in England and then D.C. She has been an English lawyer and a business owner. She is now focusing on writing. She will begin an MFA in the Fall.

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# ***The Misery Eaters***

**Debbie Izzi**

## **Chapter 1**

A pale face pressed hard against the glass of my bedroom window. It had no eyes. Its cheeks bulged and contorted as if something were in its mouth—something large and alive.

I squeezed my eyes shut. My body quivered. My twin brother Ethan was sleeping in the room right across the hall and I wanted to call out for him, but I didn't. I feared that if he heard me and ran in, the monster outside the window would know about him too.

Thump! Thump! Thump! It banged its forehead against the windowpane.

Sweat poured from my body. My blanket grew wet and itchy, but still I kept my eyes shut. Thoughts pulsed through my head: What was that thing out there? What did it want? Could it get into our house? How long had it been out there slithering around our roof?

Thump! Thump! Thump!

“Go away!” I pleaded silently. “Go Away!”

And finally, the thumping did stop. A long, long while later, I opened my eyes—just a slit—and peered out into the moon lit night.

The face had vanished.

I took a deep breath and then another. I lay listening to the comforting night sounds of our house: the heater blowing, the refrigerator humming, the crickets chirping, and I convinced myself that the face at my window had been just a terrible dream.

The next morning, I bounced out of bed and raced into Ethan's room. It was Saturday. Every Saturday, Ethan and I watched Evilocity

cartoons and battled with our Evilocity cards. It was our favorite day of the week.

Ethan and I are identical twins. We look alike and we have exactly the same genes. A lot of people think that makes us exactly the same person. That's wrong. Ethan and I are completely different. Ethan is smart and strong and even has a girlfriend who gives him all her orange M&M's at lunch. I'm—well—none of those things. But Ethan I are best friends anyway.

Ethan wasn't in his room. Strangely, his bed was perfectly made: the pillow fluffed the blanket tucked in. It was like no one had slept there—ever.

I checked the bathroom—maybe he was in there stinking it up—but no.

Down in the kitchen, it was warm and smelled of burnt toast. Aunt Dorothy stood at the stove, tapping her pencil against her lips and gazing into a pan of sizzling tofu and zucchini. Crayons, Play doe, and coffee cups covered our worn kitchen table. But still, the table seemed empty without Ethan slouching there in his usual spot, tossing and catching some ball.

My four-year-old sister Rosie sat on the floor in a splash of sunlight, drumming Ethan's Evilocity lunchbox with a pair of red chopsticks. Ethan's purple Tai Kwan Do belt was wrapped around her head like she had a head injury. "Joy to the World!" She sang.

"Awww, she's so cute," Aunt Dorothy said, beaming at Rosie.

"Hey, Aunt Dorothy," I said. "Where's Ethan?"

"Who?" She asked, stirring the tofu. Some of it spilled from the pan onto the floor.

"You are dead," Rosie sang louder.

"Ethan—you know—my twin brother."

Aunt Dorothy patted me on the head like I was a Chihuahua, “Silly Willy—there you go with that imagination of yours again.” She laughed. “A twin, now that’s a good one.”

“I’m going to barbeque your head!” Rosie screamed.

“I’m serious,” I said. “I need to find Ethan.”

“Willy, did you check your blood sugar today?” Aunt Dorothy asked.

“Yeah,” I said. The problem with Aunt Dorothy was that she treated me like I was a baby. Come on, I’ve had diabetes since I was five, and now that I was twelve, I knew to check my own blood sugar. By the way, Ethan doesn’t have diabetes. Like I said before, he’s perfect.

I eyed the clock. It was 7:50. Evilocity started at 8:00. “Look Aunt Dorothy, shouldn’t you be worried about Ethan? He’s going to miss breakfast and...cartoons!”

“Is Ethan your imaginary friend?” She asked.

“Ethan is my twin! I need to find him!” I said. “Maybe we should call Mom.”

“Willy!” Now Aunt Dorothy was yelling, so she could be heard over Rosie’s singing, or maybe she was just getting annoyed. “Your mom is working. We’ll call her only in an emergency. Losing your imaginary friend is NOT an emergency.”

“Joy to the World!” Rosie started again.

Aunt Dorothy stared down at Rosie. “Joy...Joy of the Jonquil, what a great name for a poem! I’ve got to write that down,” she said and wandered off. Aunt Dorothy liked to write poetry about flowers and vegetables and boring stuff like that.

I bent down, put my face right up close to Rosie’s and stared into her bright green eyes, eyes the same color as Ethan’s and mine. “Where’s Ethan” I asked, trying to ignore the fact she smelled like band-aids.

She pointed out the kitchen window, “Monsters.”

I didn’t even bother to look, but I should have.

Instead, I groaned, “You guys are not funny. I know Ethan is around here somewhere!” I searched the whole house then, even the closets and the laundry room. Rosie followed me around the whole time, repeating, “Monsters, monsters.”

Needless to say that was NOT HELPFUL.

I didn’t find Ethan inside. So, after Aunt Dorothy forced me to eat some of that charred tofu, I went out. It was oddly quiet outside. Ethan wasn’t tossing the baseball against the garage door or bouncing the basketball on the driveway and he didn’t call out, “Come on Willy, let’s play!” Even stranger, the basketball hoop that Mom had bought for Ethan, and that usually sat in the driveway, was gone.

I walked up the street, dragging my feet through piles of damp leaves. Crows chattered and flapped on the electricity wires strung above my head.

Mr. Zena stood in his driveway, washing his minivan. When I asked him about Ethan, he yelled something in Spanish and sprayed me with the hose. Dripping and shivering, I crossed the street and trotted past Mrs. Lopez’s house. Mrs. Lopez was nice but she was crazy and had a beard. Any woman with a beard would certainly not know what happened to my brother. Instead I asked Mrs. McMichael and then Old Mrs. Smee if they’d seen Ethan. They gawked like I had three heads and said that they hadn’t known I had a twin.

Now it’s one thing for Aunt Dorothy to pretend Ethan didn’t exist, but it was pretty unlikely that the neighbors would be in on it too. Something was wrong and maybe even creepy.

I was so worried about Ethan that I returned home and actually went to see my big brother Anthony.

Here’s the deal with Anthony:

1. He’s annoying.
2. Make that EXTREMELY annoying.

3. His room smells like dirty underwear, so don't breathe through your nose when you're in there.

Anthony lay sprawled across his bed, his size fourteen feet dangling over the side, stabbing at his phone with his fleshy fingers. Piles of dirty laundry, MacDonalds' trash and empty Skittles bags littered his floor. I hovered in the doorway.

"Go away, shrimpy," he muttered.

"Have you seen Ethan?" I asked.

Anthony let out a whopping yawn, tossed his long hair and blinked at me lazily. He reminded me of a big fat lion lounging around the Serengeti after just having gulped down a cute baby zebra.

"Who's Ethan?" He asked, reaching for a bag of skittles and pouring a bunch onto his thick tongue. My mouth watered. Anthony was forever eating candy in front of me, probably because he knew that I wasn't supposed to eat sweets. Sugar isn't good for people with diabetes. If I did eat skittles, I could eat one, maybe two. Let me tell you, eating one or two skittles was worse than not eating any—it reminded me what I was missing.

"Want some?" Anthony asked, holding out the crumpled bag, chewing exaggeratedly. I swear I could smell the sugar.

"Uh...no," I said. "I just want to know if you've seen Ethan—our brother."

"Shrimpola, you're crazy. We don't have another brother. Now get out!" He pelted me with a stiff sock.

I trudged down to the living room and plopped down onto the left side of the sofa. Ethan always sat on the right side.

Like a caught fish, my stomach flopped and flipped and flopped.

Ethan wasn't here. No one remembered him. Ethan was gone.

## **Chapter 2**

I wrapped the red afghan around my legs and eyed the blue afghan, wishing it were wrapped around Ethan instead of rolled up on the floor next to some old popcorn kernels.

Once, right before my dad had left for Iraq, he watched Evilocity with Ethan and me. “Look guys,” he said. “I’m going to be gone for a long time. You have to take care of each other. You’re more than just brothers—you’re twins.”

“I already take care of Willy,” Ethan said, tossing a handful of popcorn into his mouth.

“I know, and I’m proud of you.” Dad ruffled Ethan’s hair.

“Ethan never needs my help,” I said, feeling even lamer than usual.

“Maybe someday he will.” Dad looked right at me, his thick glasses reflecting the dark colors flashing on the TV. “Maybe there’ll come a time when you’re the only one who can help your brother.

“I doubt it,” I said.

Dad seemed disappointed. “Willy, I want you to promise me you’ll be there for Ethan...ok?”

I tried to imagine a situation where I could help Ethan out, and I couldn’t even think of one. But I had promised anyway.

I jumped up from the sofa.

Maybe now...maybe now was a time I could help Ethan!

I raced back to Ethan’s room. His room smelled bad—like a thousand gorilla armpits. I noticed again how perfect his bed looked. Then I saw something else: Ethan’s walls were blank. Ethan won awards for everything—the science fair, the spelling bee, the most valuable player—everything. And he had hung these awards all over his walls. Glued together puzzles and art from kindergarten decorated the walls of my room. But Ethan’s awards had disappeared. Only his preschool diploma hung above the nightstand. But when I looked closely, I saw that my name had replaced his.



“Holy Guacamole,” I said and I got that creepy feeling again. Goosebumps rose on my arms.

On Ethan’s desk was his favorite picture. It had been taken last winter right after his basketball team won the championship. “Hey Willy, get in here,” he had said, even though I wasn’t even on the basketball team. So we stood together grinning, arms around each other, while Mom snapped the photo.

That was it! Once I showed that picture to Aunt Dorothy, she’d have to remember Ethan. I crossed the room and grabbed it. But instead of seeing two skinny boys with hair the color of spaghetti noodles, I saw only one—only me. And I looked really goofy with my arm just sticking out into the air, hugging nobody. There was a big blank spot where Ethan had been standing. He had vanished from the photo. I dropped the picture in horror.

Ethan’s Evilocity cards strewed the floor. One was under my foot. I tried to step from it, but it stuck to my sock. When I pulled it off, I found my fingers gooey with slime. I knelt down and touched some of the other cards—they were sticky too. Ew! I followed the trail of slime. It led from the cards, across the carpet and out the door to the middle of the hallway where it stopped.

Then I heard Anthony cackling. I looked up. He was in the bathroom banging the Evilocity lunchbox on the toilet seat. He wore only his smiley face underwear and with each bang of the lunchbox his big butt—which was not entirely covered by his underwear—jiggled.

What the heck was he doing?

I hurried into the bathroom.

Anthony shook the open lunchbox above the toilet and then hammered it on the seat again. Plop! Something fell into the toilet. I squeezed around Anthony’s bulky body to see what it was.

A big snail looking thing flopped around in the bright blue water. Its shell—about the size of my fist and marked with what looked like a

black lightning bolt—bobbed like a buoy. It opened its mouth really big—180 degrees—like a snake. Triangle shaped, razor sharp, piranha-like teeth lined its mouth.

“That thing looks familiar,” I said, struggling to remember where I had seen something like that before—certainly not out in our yard, or in the zoo—on TV maybe?

It tried to climb up the side of the toilet bowl, but slid right back down, getting all tangled up in a stray piece of toilet paper.

“Let’s flush it!” Anthony said.

“Wait,” I said.

But it was too late. He had already pounded on the flusher. The toilet water whooshed. The thing spun round and round. The water flowed out of the toilet, pulling the thing down. Its tentacles stretched and its neck strained as it fought to not be sucked into the plumbing. But then, with a “ker-klink,” its shell got wedged in the drain.

“Stupid!” Anthony said. He grabbed the plunger and began poking the thing with it, huffing with the effort.

The toilet began to refill. I could see that the thing would either drown as its shell was still stuck in the drain or get poked to death by Anthony. Its mouth opened and shut, opened and shut.

“Anthony—stop!” I said.

“Look at those teeth! This thing is dangerous!” He said, jabbing it harder.

The water had reached its mouth and it began to squeak pitifully. I felt bad. Whatever that thing was, it had probably just wandered into our house accidentally, and now Anthony the Evil Giant was torturing it.

I grabbed Anthony’s sweaty arm. “It’s just a snail!”

He shrugged me off. “Get away shrimpito, or you’re next!”

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**Debbie Izzi** spent fifteen years in international finance. Then she had twins. Now she lives in Napa, California in a big yellow house with her husband and three boys. She spends her days playing baseball, searching for snakes, applying band-aids and of course, writing stories for children.

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OLD HABITS DIE HARD

Claudia Ware

Beryl looked up from her newspaper and saw that Harry was not there. She had not heard a sound, but that was hardly unusual given the time of day. She looked closer and saw Harry lying on the floor. At first, she thought he was playing a joke on her, but she soon realized Harry was not breathing. Indeed Harry was dead.

All she had wanted was a change of pace—a break in the predictable. Well she certainly had that now. Harry looked somewhat comical. His hair was uncombed, one hearing aid had popped out of his ear, and his mouth hung open enough to reveal that he had neglected to put in his dentures. She wanted to call the police, but thought that maybe she should fix him up a bit before they arrived. Then again, she had heard one should never disturb a murder scene. However, this wasn't a murder, was it? Not in the truest sense of the word.

It had all started out like any other morning. The sun had begun to peek through the curtains when the alarm sounded. As always, Beryl was the first to rise. She put on her bifocals, brushed her teeth, and used a razor on her chin hair. By now, Harry was up and struggling to pull his Dockers over the boxer shorts he had worn to bed. Beryl stood there trying to decide if she should wear long pants or shorts. It was cool now, but the weather forecast called for a low in the mid-80s, and she hated to change clothes twice in the same day.

She stood there while Harry went get the daily newspaper. Upon re-entering the house, he called from the kitchen hallway. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please." Beryl called.

"Coffee?" he repeated.

"Yes!" She answered louder now.

At the third request, Beryl walked to the bedroom doorway. “Harry,” irritation evident in her voice, “do you have your hearing aids in?”

“No.” he retorted gruffly.

“Well then, how do you expect to hear my answer?”

“Don’t know.” Harry headed for the kitchen. His hair stood straight up like feathers on an Indian headdress.

Beryl did not know why he bothered to ask her about the coffee. After 40 years of marriage, Beryl and Harry had reached the point in their lives where sameness hung over their day-to-day activities. They rose at the same time every day and went to bed at a precise hour each night—lives governed by some unseen clock. There was no deviation in when they ate their meals, how they were prepared, or even in the content of the food. Habitually, Beryl and Harry finished one another’s sentences; in fact, each of them anticipated every move or response the other would make. Every day had a preset purpose about it, and monotony permeated everything they did.

By the time, she got to the kitchen, Harry had poured her coffee and had set it beside her placemat. As usual, he was reading the sports section, with notes jotted on scrapes of paper that cluttered his side of the table. Once a week Beryl would ask him to clean up the accumulation. He grumbled about her nitpicking, but he obliged. She could not understand how he could live with such clutter. Harry had laid the other sections of the paper at her place. He would give a cursory glance at them later, but clearly they were not of much interest to him. Harry routinely got his information from the television.

Beryl always read the newspaper the same way—local, regional, world events—in that order. They did not speak to each other while they read, although every now and then Harry would utter some indistinguishable comment. It took Beryl about an hour to read the entire newspaper; Harry would still be on the sports section. How anyone could

take that much time to read about the outcome of games was beyond her. Therefore, it was a surprise to find him lying there.

Every morning, at about the same time, several cranes would fly by the kitchen window and today was no different. Beryl had thought the noise they made was a sign of distress, but she had learned it was normal chatter for cranes. Today, their chortles, sounded like laughter and the whole scene struck her as quite funny. Here was Harry on the floor, dead as a doorpost, and she was worried about how he looked. The truth was he looked dead.

The coroner came and found nothing out of the ordinary. Later, when he left, Beryl was sure that was exactly why Harry had died. Harry, quite simply, had been bored to death.

*A half-back, **Claudia Ware** resides in Morristown, Tennessee. She believes she was born to write. Her favorite genre is short stories, however she has had one novel published, and the second is in the final stages. She currently serves as Vice President of the Appalachian Authors Guild.*

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*First Chapter Novel*

# ***The Memory Gardener***

**Andrew Hamilton**

## **Chapter 1**

Kendrick held out a stick that went *clack clack clack* against the fence posts as he walked along the muddy road. Under the heavy handed Alabama sun, he stopped and checked his watch, a gift from his travelling father, that hung from his wrist with enough slack to fit two fingers underneath. The second hand was still stuck at the bottom of the hour, no matter how hard he shook his arm. The spring was malfunctioning, but its effort perpetual—the ticking, inexorable. He slipped the timepiece over his fingers and shoved it into his pocket. Out of sight and mind, but time was still stalled.

He started to walk again. He had just left his Aunt Maye, with whom he had lived for the last year. She was planted on the front porch with cheeks oily and sweaty and glistening, and Kendrick had told her he was going to visit his best friend Billy. She nodded without making eye contact, staring into dead space and moving a hand-held fan as if through molasses. She had reached to her glass filled with bourbon, ice, and a splash of water—Kendrick knew because he had made the drink—and dipped her fingers, bringing them to her lips.

*Clack clack clack* went the stick as he calculated the time he would have at Billy's, given the drink on the porch had been preceded by two in the living room. I can stay out until sundown, he thought. *She ain't even going to move lessen she falls off the swing.*

The dirt road hugged rows of corn on one side and railroad tracks on the other. The rumbling of the Coosa River and the Devil's Staircase, a series of shoals marking the natural fall line between the Appalachian

foothills and the coastal plain, could be heard beyond the trees. The river was unusually high, buoyed by summer rains and not yet drained by the impending late season dry spells. The water was tempting in the heat, but the current was swift, dangerous.

The open ground to his right gave way to woods, and the rails peeled from the road on the left, making its way toward Montgomery. Kendrick lowered the stick, planting it in the ground as he entered the woods, balancing himself on the strip of grass that ran down the middle and pretending the dirt tracks on either side were quicksand.

He knew there were 748 steps from where the train went away to the first glimpse of the pink roses around the bend. Every day he counted. Some days there were 740 or 754 steps, but more often than not, there were 748.

At step 250 a car approached from behind, and he stopped. Clouds of dust swirled from the truck as it raced toward him. He scurried to the side of the road and into the woods, finding the biggest tree he could. He crouched beside the trunk and pressed his soft cheek into the prickly bark. He waited and slowed his breath. The truck rode by without so much as a touch on the brakes, and Kendrick returned to the road, coughing in the reddish billow. He covered his mouth and marched on.

At step 700 the anticipation quickened both his heart and pace. When the first pink rose appeared at step 748, just as he predicted, he stopped breathing until he could see the entire archway covered in blooms full. He stopped and let out the air held hostage in his lungs, gazing at the display. It looked different to him at that moment, having transformed from part of the landscape he had passed hundreds of times into the modicum of a possibility, both a tangible and figurative aperture. The pink of the roses seemed deeper, more intense than before, and the flowers themselves seemed more bountiful. The sickly sweet scent of the flowers registered with him for the first time, as did the bees buzzing about.



Under the burst of color was a rusting iron gate, slightly ajar. Beyond, a narrow road reportedly led to the sprawling house and gardens—an estate really—of Imogene Edwards. And that morning, it was his secret objective.

When he reached the gate, he paused and looked in the direction he had traveled. He thought about Aunt Maye and quickly reexamined if the three drinks were enough to dissuade her from chasing him, imploring him to do the chores she would make up on the spot. The notion of additional glasses reassured him. If Aunt Maye could be counted on for anything on a Saturday, it was being drunk enough by early afternoon to leave him alone.

He looked through the iron bars and down the long driveway. It seemed to disappear into the woods like a snake going into a hole in the ground. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. Courage was a trait he read about in books: the rusting medals of Confederate generals, the painted faces of Indian chiefs, and the sandy wounds of D-Day soldiers. Never did he imagine it existed inside of *him*. Journeys are taken one step at a time, his mother used to say, all but the first requiring equal exertion.

He passed underneath the roses suspended above him, so thick they obscured any sense of structure and seemed to float in the air. He squeezed his body into the opening of the gate, not wanting to risk a squeak. The latch caught his shirt, and the tear of fabric hollowed his stomach. *I'll have to make up something.*

The thickness of the forest shaded him from the blistering sun but did not shield him from the humidity that lay on his skin like a wet, woolen blanket. Sweat had soaked through his shirt, and his brown curly hair looked like he had just emerged from a pool. Another car zoomed past the gate behind him, but this time he did not seek cover. He walked on, burrowing his hand into his back pocket to cradle the knife he had brought along, just in case.

The driveway narrowed as he walked, and the trees and bushes and grasses closed in on him so that the branches and leaves tickled his arms. Tall, slender pine trees soared above, like a receiving line, reaching to the heavens.

Thoughts of turning back occurred. He could go to Billy's like normal, forgetting it all. But the desire to meet Ms. Edwards would not let him. To see her house, to see the gardens he had heard were magical and mysterious and beautiful. And she, reportedly the opposite. A recluse, an eccentric, an outcast. A woman who seemed to live in shadows, lurking in people's imaginations and reflecting the projections of their worst fears.

He planted the stick in the ground consistent with a cadence in his head, hearing the drums from the school band as he walked: the snap of the snare cradled by the thump of the bass. When the driveway crested at the top of a hill, he paused. In the distance, a brick chimney rose from the rooftop, the rest of the house obscured by leaves and limbs. He closed his fingers around the knife and descended toward the house, keeping the snap of the rim shots in his head for comfort.

The crunch of the dirt gave way to the crackle of gravel as the woods retreated and the driveway sliced through an expanse of green lawn. Manicured edges outlined his path. Off to the right, Kendrick saw a single chair facing away from him underneath a huge oak. The call of a bobwhite sounded above.

He was suddenly aware of his vulnerability, approaching the house as a stranger and possibly a threat. He ran to the tree and stayed until his breath slowed, fingering the rip in the shirt. He could say they were playing pirates, and the shirt got caught on a metal stake substituting as a sword. He could say he ripped it climbing a fence. He could say a lot of things, he thought, yet he knew his aunt would not look kindly to a tear in the shirt of her boy. *Her* boy, not Kendrick.

He would be sure to show her in the morning, before the porch, before the bourbon, and before she thought about that day at the river. Aunt Maye never said it directly, but Kendrick was sure she wished that he had drowned and not her only son. She meant Kendrick specifically, he thought, not even a generic child one prays for God to take instead of their own.

He peered around the trunk and had a better view of the house. Large white columns held the portico, and the building cascaded on either side. It was the biggest house he had ever seen. He had always heard about its enormity, but seeing it in person was different. He dropped his hands from the tree and realized his mouth was open.

All was quiet. He approached the house. The door knocker was in the shape of a rose, and it echoed on the other side of solid wood as he dropped it three times against the brass plate. He waited a moment but not a sound. He reached again and grabbed the iron flower. *Clack. Clack. Clack.* Again, he waited, cradling the knife in his pocket. A final try, he thought, and felt the warm metal again in his fingers. But as he lifted the rose and before he could strike it again, the door opened.

A tall man in a charcoal suit hovered over him, staring without expression as if the boy was expected. Kendrick waited for his invitation to enter, but the man stood.

“Hi.” Kendrick said, but the man did not answer. His hair was black, thinning, and pulled across the crown of his head. His nose was sharp and angular. Kendrick paused and tightened his fingers around the knife. “Is Ms. Edwards home?”

Finally, the man spoke. “May I ask who’s calling?”

“Kendrick. My name is Kendrick. I’m her neighbor. Well, sort of.”

“I see.”

Kendrick’s mind turned over, trying to come up with something to say, to make up an excuse for an unannounced visit.

“Is she expecting you?”

“Not really. Well, no. Not at all. I just thought since we were neighbors and all, I should come say ‘hey’.”

“I see.” The man stood in the doorway like an impenetrable force field.

“Graham, who is it?” a voice called from behind him, the notes of the words floating in the air like dandelion seeds.

Graham swiveled his head. “A neighbor boy. He’s come to make your acquaintance.”

“Isn’t that nice!” she said again, this time closer.

Graham looked at Kendrick, nothing moving but his lips. “I suppose.”

Kendrick’s father had always told him a successful man in the world is a confident one. He said he was not sure if self-assurance bred success or if it was the other way around, but nonetheless, Kendrick should always carry himself like he belonged, like he was there to issue orders instead of take them. Kendrick stood at the door, his back straight and his expression blank while his heart sped and his fingers ached from gripping the knife. He forced a smile to creep along his lips.

The door opened wider, and the first thing Kendrick noticed was the white hair that sat on her head like a giant ball of cotton. It was thick and wavy with only traces of streaking dark gray strands. She wore a linen dress that seemed pieced together in layers, its movement mimicking her tresses and its color matching her skin so her entire appearance was that of an apparition.

“Thank you, Graham,” she said. He lowered his head toward her ever so slightly and disappeared into the hallway. “Well, now, who have we here?”

“I’m Kendrick.”

“Kendrick!” she said and put her hands together. “What a wonderful name. It’s a pleasure to meet you!” She extended her hand, the long, thin fingers capped with shiny red nails. Kendrick reached his arm

and they grasped. He was somewhat relieved he felt warmth and life, although he could still feel bones through skin. “Won’t you come in?” she said, and stepped back, opening the door wider.

She led him into the house, through the grand entrance hall, past the twin grandfather clocks guarding the walls, and underneath the double staircase that hugged the sides of the round foyer. They walked to the back and into the solarium off the kitchen, a room with windows for walls and overlooking the entire expanse of gardens in the rear. They seemed laid to the horizon, with rows of red brick partitions crisscrossing the land, making a patchwork of gardens and colors that looked like a quilt his grandmother had made and Aunt Maye had forbidden him to use. Kendrick stood at the windows as Ms. Edwards returned from the kitchen carrying a tray with a pitcher of tea, two glasses with ice, and a small jar with sprigs of mint and slices of lemon.

“Do you like gardens?” she asked. Kendrick kept looking out the window and nodded. She set the tray on the table and placed slices of lemon and twisted leaves of mint in each of the glasses.

“My mom had a garden,” Kendrick said. “I used to help her with it.”

“She doesn’t keep it any longer?”

“She’s dead.”

“Oh my. I’m sorry. When did she die?”

Kendrick turned and took a seat at the table. “I was real young.”

“How old were you?” Ms. Edwards poured the tea.

“Eight.”

“And how old are you now?”

“Twelve.”

“That’s still really young for a boy. Too young for a boy to lose a mama.”

“How old are you?”

“Older than dirt.” She paused. “I lost my mama, too, as a child. She died when I was fourteen. Felt like someone had just gone sucked

the life right out of me. She was my world, my mama. Maybe it's different for a girl. You know, a mama and a daughter."

He nodded and sipped the tea. Setting the glass on the table, he pulled some mint from his teeth. "It tastes like gum," he said, admiring the piece of green on the tip of his finger. "She grew stuff to eat, though. My mom." Kendrick flashbaced to hear Aunt Maye tell him gardens were more trouble than they were worth, and she could get everything she needed from the Piggly Wiggly.

"No flowers?"

"No. No flowers"

"Well, that was very smart of her and all, but flowers are what make gardening worth the effort. Like icing to a cake."

"I like icing. Chocolate especially."

She took a drink, and a light ignited in her crystal blue eyes. She put down her glass and leaned toward him across the table. "I have something to show you. Do you want to see?"

Kendrick shrugged his shoulders and followed her out of the room. She led him to the back stairs, her dress flowing behind in the slight breeze. They crossed the small back lawn and walked in between two stone pillars that led to a pea gravel path with old brick walls on either side. The walls were damaged, shedding pieces of masonry, but still solid.

They passed several openings on either side of the path, and he glimpsed plants and flowers and statues in each cordoned space. He wanted to stop and investigate but did not have time. Ms. Imogene Edwards set quite a pace, and Kendrick felt compelled to keep up.

She finally slowed and turned to him quickly, putting her red tipped fingers together in front of her torso. Kendrick was sweating again, but her face appeared dry under the hot sun. "Come here," she said and turned toward a solid wood gate, the only closed door Kendrick had seen on their walk.

Suddenly, a key was in her hand. From where she got it, Kendrick did not see. She opened the gate and walked in without waiting. He stood for a moment unsure of whether to follow. “Come on!” she called from out of sight, and Kendrick entered the garden.

The space was deceptively large. Beds of flowers guarded the four walls: zinnias, black-eyed susans, and azaleas all clamored for space. The beds in the middle formed the shape of a cross, with camellia bushes forming the vertical and horizontal lines. At their intersection was a figure of an angel, her head covered in thin green moss with eyes looking up and hands reaching out. A tip of one of her wings was broken off. The cross of camellias was surrounded by grass, and one wooden bench offered seating along the right wall, directly in front of the gate.

Ms. Edwards strode to the bench and sat. She patted the empty space next to her, and Kendrick took his place.

“This is my memory garden,” she said. “For people I have loved and who are no longer with me. This is my sacred place, Kendrick. You’re a special guest.”

She draped her arm around his shoulders, her touch light and hypnotic. Despite the temperature Kendrick felt a chill down his spine and goose bumps on his forearms. The wind rustled the trees nearby. A cardinal landed on the head of the angel.

“What kind of memories are here?” he asked.

“All kinds. Good ones and bad ones. Happy ones and sad ones. Joyful and scary. Sometimes, things you don’t want to think about. Things you have pushed to the back of your mind, hoping to forget. If you plant a memory garden, Kendrick, you have to be open to all sorts of recollections. You can’t be selective. You can’t choose your memories.”

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**Andrew Hamilton** is an Alabama native and lives in Washington, DC. He is a management consultant by day, aspiring novelist by night. While *The Memory Gardner* is his first published work of fiction, a personal essay appeared in *The Washington Post*. He loves fixing old houses, travel to Spain, and his dog, *Beauregard*.

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Free Verse Poem

SEEDING

Patrick Cabello Hansel

There are the shoes my father wore,
the size twelves I was ashamed of,
the white socks that glared from
the dull black oxfords. I nailed
them to the wall above the rake
and the half-eaten bag of cow manure.
Their toes point up, as if walking
to heaven is as simple as left—
right—left, the soldier's march,
the long grip on the rifle, the smokes,
the eyes never resting.

There are the gloves he wore
as he pushed the spade in on the first
warm day of spring: the crust
of moldering leaf and soot, the skin
shed by all living things. Here is
his trowel, his hallock and his long-toothed fork.
Here is the wind, ready to sow and to reap.
Here the seed I am, the seed I will never be,
and there, somewhere out there,
is his rhubarb poking its first shoots up
through the untilled soil, the bloodshot
eyes, the hands opening, the earth
drawn up into its crimson, verdant questions.

Patrick Cabello Hansel *has published poetry in Turtle Quarterly, Parachute, The Cresset, Sojourners, and Main Channel Voices, among others. He is a grantee of the Minnesota State Arts Board. His novella, Searching was serialized in The Alley News from 2009 to 2012. He serves as a Lutheran pastor in inner-city Minneapolis.*

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*Fiction*

# ***Morning Thunder***

**Richard Perreault**

Hade Pickett wasn't the only man in Calliope, North Carolina to wake up with a woman in bed beside him that Sunday morning, but he was most likely the only one trying to figure out what to do with the body.

He woke up that morning to find the woman sprawled diagonally across the gnarled oak bed he'd gotten at the Sisters of Mercy Thrift Shop shortly after he'd moved into the cabin on Stink Dog Creek. The bottom third of her tree-trunk legs jutted from beneath the shroud-like sheet, luminescent in the gray light of dawn through the never-washed windows. Her face, buried between two pillows.

Uncertain if he wanted to rouse the hulking figure beside him, he'd lain quietly, hoping the flotsam in his brain might settle, exposing at least a jagged tip of an explanation of who the woman was and how she came to be in his bed. When none of the mosaic pieced together, he'd cautiously nudged her exposed shoulder with the palm of his hand.

No response.

Harder. Then again, still harder.

Nothing.

He grabbed the shoulder to give it a shake, but recoiled at the iciness of the skin beneath his fingers.

Struggling to right himself, he'd located a mauled paperclip on the night stand, the meager paraphernalia he used to secure the remnants of charred roaches as he sucked out the last of their nurturing marrow. Steadying his aim he jabbed the tip of the unwound curlicue of metal into the woman's arm.

Still no response.

He'd lain for a moment longer, awash in the acrid smell of sweat, the tang of last night's alcohol, and a pungent must that might have been the early hours of decomposition, before freeing his legs from the sheets and swinging his feet onto the floor where they clinked against two empty bottles that had once been liters of Jose Cuervo Gold tequila. He assumed he'd done his part to empty the bottles, and figured it was the woman doing her own part that had done her in. Maybe the tequila along with something else she'd ingested. He'd seen a lot of stories on TV about how that could happen.

Not bothering to pull so much as a T-shirt onto his naked body, Hade shuffled into the kitchen and began fumbling with the coffee maker. He needed to think.

Calling the police was out of the question, and not just because he didn't have a phone. His daddy had done less than the full 20 years for killing Hade's mother because the judge decided it looked like it might have been sort of an accident maybe. Accident or not, Hade wasn't risking going up the river or down the drain for the woman in the bedroom.

With polluted blood thundering through his head, he struggled to reassemble the shards of the previous night. He'd made his usual Saturday appearance at the Down and Dirty just after 9:00. Jake, behind the bar, pulled a pitcher of Miller without being asked. By midnight Hade was using his third pitcher of beer to wash down tequila, a holy water notorious for inspiring religious experiences. More than once the golden elixir had conjured hallucinations in Hade's wobbling brain and left him on his knees, worshipping at a porcelain altar, praying for death, calling out the Lord's name, albeit in vain.

Hade started as a clap of thunder shook the cabin, rolling through the valley as though God were telling jokes and the Devil laughing. Hade may not have understood the punch line, but he was fairly sure the joke was on him.

That the woman wasn't a local was good. Nobody would miss her that morning at the House of the Prayerful People. That would buy him a little time. But a little time to do what?

Bracing himself on the edge of the counter, he bent down and looked out the narrow window above the sink. A gathering of sodden clouds roiled across the distant peaks off toward Burnsville. A boney, golden finger of celestial fire jabbed at the mist-shrouded forest, and the thunder pealed and echoed across the valley. Morning thunder wasn't all that common in the mountains, but so far nothing about the morning had been common.

At the head of the driveway the front end of his gray and red primer-colored truck was stove up on a large hickory, evidence of one of the many misjudgments he had apparently made the night before. There was no other vehicle, which probably meant the woman had ridden from the bar with him. If she'd left her car at the Down and Dirty, it wouldn't be long before somebody noticed, and some busybody would remember who she'd left with.

Hade ran an imprecise measure of water into the carafe then sloshed the contents into the battered Mr. Coffee 10-Cup Thermal Programmable Coffee Maker that had stopped being programmable long before it arrived at Sisters of Mercy where it was thrown in for free as an incentive for Hade to buy the oak bed.

Beside the coffee maker sat a purse, a tufted pouch of wool and wood reminiscent of the macramé bags his mother made in the days before his father had put a screwdriver through the top of her head after she'd told him for the third time that night the curtain rod still wasn't straight. As Hade recalled it, there had been whiskey not tequila at the root of what the family referred to as "the curtain rod incident."

Hade glanced over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being watched, though who might be watching him he couldn't have said. He pulled a faded leather wallet from the purse, flipped it open, and held it

up to the light. The glowering face of Matilda D. Scruggs stared back at him from the lower left-hand corner of a North Carolina driver's license.

With her weight showing as 220 pounds, Hade figured she probably was in actuality close to his 250. Everybody lied about their weight on their license, didn't they? Even a pixyish hundred-pounder he'd gone out with a couple of times had declared herself to weigh just 90.

If the birthdate were honest, at 37 she was three years Hade's senior. Her address showed her from Black Mountain, but that was down east of Asheville, a hell of a long drive from Calliope over narrow mountain roads. Hade doubted she'd come all the way from Black Mountain just to have a drink at the Down and Dirty. But where Matilda Scruggs had come from wasn't his concern. What Hade needed to figure out was where she was going next.

If Matilda Scruggs didn't weigh more than the 220 pounds her license professed, Hade thought he'd probably be able to get her out of the bed and move her to where he needed to. It would be a struggle, but he didn't see an alternative. If he left her where she was, sooner or later he'd have to let somebody know. Once somebody knew, computers at the sheriff's office would glow and whir and his probation from that bloody fracas in Raleigh would come to light, making him an even more likely suspect of wrongdoing—even if the whole Raleigh thing hadn't technically been his fault.

Outside, another round of thunder row-row-rowed down the valley, sending a murder of crows into a momentary cawing frenzy. A pale mist spritzed the hillside above the cabin, but the heavy rain, for the moment at least, was keeping its distance.

Wet weather would make the rocks above the waterfall at Stink Dog Waller more slippery than usual. If he could lug the body to the top of the falls he might create a believable scenario that she slipped from the escarpment while climbing to get a more advantageous view. What she

was doing up there on a rainy Sunday morning would be for the authorities to figure out.

Of course figuring out things like that was just what authorities were authorities at doing. He doubted the local lawmen had the savvy of either the Miami or New York CSI folks he watched on television, but they probably had access to files full of all sorts of stuff that would eventually help pin the whole thing on him.

Maybe it would be best if he found some way to dispose of the body all together.

Through the window Hade studied a copse of sumac shrubs, shrouded in fog, awash in October blood. Beside the bushes sat the wood chipper he'd borrowed from his nearest neighbor a mile down the road. He'd thought he might someday, before winter, clear the brushy clutter relentlessly encroaching on the cabin. Hade recalled a movie and a couple of television shows where a wood chipper had been put to macabre but effective use in disposing of bodies. He'd probably have to cut Matilda up to get her into the wood chipper, but he wasn't yet sure he wouldn't have to cut her up just to get her out of the house.

A chain saw would be easiest, but a handsaw would cause far less spatter. Either way, cutting up a body was bound to create a mess. The wood chipper might render the pieces unrecognizable to the untrained eye, but the splattered gore would go everywhere. He'd seen enough detective shows to know the tiniest incriminating particle of Matilda Scruggs could hang around and be found and identified by *forensic experts*. The cops, satisfied Hade had nothing to do with the woman's disappearance, would be about to leave when one of them would note a glob of sanguine matting in Hade's eyebrow or a fleck of something fleshy on the collar of his flannel shirt.

Realizing he was naked, Hade pulled his tattered thigh-length down jacket out of the closet by the front door and bundled himself against the

chill, a chill that seemed to have started in his insides and was working its way outward.

He knelt beside the hearth, but thought better of kindling a flame, for the moment at least. If it came to it, he could cut Matilda into pieces and burn her a chunk at a time, or even stuff her whole body up the chimney. He'd have to remove the flu, then seal it off to keep the stench from permeating the cabin. Of course, he'd need to buy some mortar, and the police could trace the receipt like they did when domestic terrorists bought fertilizer for homemade bombs. They'd eventually figure out what he'd done. He'd have accomplished nothing for all that work.

Whatever the solution, it couldn't include buying anything.

Hade rose from the hearth, snugged the jacket around himself, and headed back to the bedroom. Maybe looking at the body would help him visualize a workable plan. Besides, before deciding what to do, he needed to know just how heavy Matilda was.

The floor creaked beneath his feet. In the distance the mountains groaned and growled conspiratorially. The mist turned to rain, pelting the windows, priming the leak at the corner of the bathroom door.

There had been a storm the night Hade's mother died. "Dying weather," his Uncle Wilfred had called it. "Don't you mean 'killing weather?'" his Aunt JoNelle who had never cared a damn about anybody on the Pickett side of the family, had said.

Hade stepped into the bedroom and flipped the light switch, splashing the hulking figure on the bed in a garish white glow. He studied the sheet-cloaked lump, a hibernating bear beneath a blanket of snow. *Two twenty ain't even close.*

Hade figured if he kept Matilda's body wrapped in the sheet, he could use it for leverage and more easily drag her to wherever it was he decided she needed to be. Wrapped up, the body was also less likely to leave telltale traces of DNA for the investigators to find with their magic dust that turned invisible things a spooky blue.

Battling reluctance, and more than a hint of nausea, Hade knelt on the edge of the bed and unsuccessfully tried to tuck the sheet beneath the beached-whale frame of Matilda Scruggs. He lifted, poked and prodded, but managed to wedge no more than a few inches of fabric under the body.

Swinging onto the bed like he was mounting a horse, Hade straddled Matilda and forced his hands beneath her shoulders. With a grunt, he lifted her upper torso but lost his grip when he reached with one hand to slip the sheet underneath.

Hade positioned himself for better leverage, again worked his hands beneath the body, but before he could work up a second grunt and lift, a muffled sound from the bedclothes stopped him cold.

“Not now, Hun,” the lump beneath him murmured into the pillow. “I got to have my coffee first. Then we can have some more rumpity bumpity.”

Hade didn't move, didn't speak, and until he thought to do so, didn't breathe.

A large, meaty hand swung up from beneath the sheet and firmly grasped his rear end. “You got coffee in this dump, don't you?”

He freed himself from Matilda's grip and stumbled toward the kitchen, neither bothering nor daring to look back.

Hade lifted a dirty mug out of the sink and filled it with coffee. He'd only made enough for himself but thought it best he give it all to the woman calling to him from the bedroom.

“Rustle us up some breakfast while you're in there,” her voice rumbled down the hallway.

Matilda sounded like the kind of woman who'd take her coffee black and probably her toast too. He'd hold off on the cream and sugar. It would be a lot easier to add something to the coffee later than it would be to take something out.



“Bacon, eggs, grits, and biscuits would be good,” Matilda called out. “Ham and sausage if you got it. And a pancake or two. If you don’t have real maple syrup, just some Aunt Jemima will do, as long as it’s not that sugar-free shit. I’ll go to the store later and get us something for dinner.”

Hade could feel the vibration of the storm working its way across the valley. He closed his eyes and leaned against the sink. It looked like getting rid of Matilda Scruggs was going to be even harder than he had originally thought.

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**Richard Perreault**, *the author of **Toto Too, The True Story of What Happened Over the Rainbow***, has previously received short fiction awards from *Gulf Coast Writer’s Association, Appalachian Heritage Writers Symposium, and Alabama Writer’s Conclave*. *Richard lives in Atlanta and on Hilton Head Island.*

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Not Our Kind

Rose Marie Stutts

The stranger's skin was the color of the sky at midnight. Silver hair flowed in curls and waves to his shoulders. His shining lavender eyes seemed to see everything as he walked slowly through the crowded Stardust Hotel lobby. The beautiful staff he carried seemed to change colors and carvings as he walked.

Gathered magicians frowned. The man's worn jeans and tee shirt were out of place in their beautifully dressed company of in costumes, tuxedos, and silk-lined capes. This homeless man must have wandered in from the street to interrupt their conference coffee break.

"If you want a hand-out, go the back door of the kitchen," said one magician, sniffing as if the stranger had a bad smell.

The dark man smiled pleasantly. He walked to the registration table.

"Only members of the Magician's Guild are allowed here," said Magnifico, the registrar.

"My name is Suleimon (Su-LAY-mon). I have pre-registered," the stranger said. His voice had the deep mellow tone of an alto saxophone.

"Are you a magician?" asked Magnifico (Mag-NIF-i-co) "I've never seen you on stage."

"I have not performed for years," Suleimon smiled. Suddenly, a nametag disappeared from the table and reappeared with his name on it. The lavender-eyed man picked up the nametag up and pinned it on his shirt.

A man with a turban and handlebar mustache strode to the table. His nametag said Alakazam (Ala-ka-ZAM) the Great, President, in bright red letters.

"Magnifico is there a problem here?" he asked importantly.

"This person says he's a member. I've never seen him," complained Magnifico, with a sniff.

"Mr. ahh..." the President leaned forward and peered at Suleimon's nametag, "Sully-man, I know every member of the Magician's Guild. I've never met you. You must be one of us to stay here. We're not accepting new members."

"Check your membership list," Suleimon said, waving his hand above the book on the table. "You'll see that I'm a Charter Member."

Magnifico and Alakazam looked through the pages. According to the records, Suleimon had been a Member-in-Good-Standing for one hundred years. Neither could remember having ever seen a magician with his black skin and lavender eyes. Somehow, they didn't think it was unusual for a man with a young, unlined face to be more than one hundred years old.

The company of magicians hushed in anticipation. The stranger was about to be roughly tossed out the door. There was about to be a little bit of cruel entertainment for them. Most of the people in the lobby didn't notice two things. Suleimon was not holding his staff. It stood by its self an inch above the floor. The beautiful staff also changed its carvings from birds to butterflies.

"If indeed you are a member Sir," said Magnifico, importantly. "I would like to see an illusion. I remember the style of every magician's performance."

Suleimon smiled and spread his hands. Rainbows stretched from palm to palm. He shaped the colors into a spear and tossed it. As the spear arched through the air, it exploded into fireworks. The crowd of magicians applauded in cold politeness.

"Ah!" shouted Alakazam. "I've heard of the Rainbow-Spear Trick but never seen it done. I'd love to see what props you use."

Alakazam had never seen such a wonderful illusion. He was envious and wanted to learn Suleimon's secrets.

Suleimon smiled. His oddly colored eyes seemed to shine with a light of their own.

Alakazam turned to a thin man in a Bellman's uniform and snapped his fingers. "Boy!" he shouted, though the man had not been a boy for many years, "Get Sully-man's equipment and props."

The Bellman's eyes flashed with anger, at the way he was treated, but he smiled broadly and said, "Yes Sir!"

Suleimon guided the Bellman toward the patio door. After the two men got outside Suleimon stopped and turned to the man.

"Jorge, (Hor-hay) I have no equipment but, here is a tip for your trouble," Suleimon said, smiling and pressing five hundred dollars into the man's hand.

The Bellman fingers did not close to take the money. Suleimon traced a glowing symbol in the air.

"I was watching you while I gave my little demonstration. What did you see?"

The Bellman hesitated. The light of the Suleimon's symbol touched his lips. The man found that he had to speak what was in his heart. The words tumbled from his lips almost in one breath. The accent he only used at home gave his voice a beautiful Spanish lilt.

"I can't accept so much money! How did you know my name? I didn't see you do anything except move your hands. The rainbows came from your staff.

"I see what is in your heart. And, you see more than you think," Suleimon said gently. He shook hands with Jorge. "This money will pay for the rest of your day. Go to the table under the purple umbrella. There are refreshments waiting for you. No one will miss you inside. Other people will join you. I will explain everything soon."

Suleimon returned to the lobby. He joined a group of magicians who were taking turns demonstrating slight-of-hand tricks. Coins, balls and cards appeared, multiplied or disappeared as the magicians flexed their fingers and demonstrated their pride. When it became Suleimon's turn, his fingers flickered with tiny sparks and flames. Butterflies sprang from his fingers. The group clapped as if a silly child had just done a childish trick. The magicians hated this strange looking poorly dressed man. He did illusions more beautiful and mysterious than they had ever seen. In their hearts, they hated, feared and envied him.

One woman could not seem to understand why everyone thought Suleimon had performed. "Why, he only wiggled his fingers!" she thought. "The staff is doing the work. I wonder how that happens."

"You are right. Please, go and have some refreshments on the patio, with Jorge. I will come and explain, soon." Suleimon whispered inside her mind. He traced a glowing design in the air. When the design touched her, going outside seemed like the right thing to do.

From group to group, Suleimon wandered. Magicians sipped their coffee, nibbled cookies, chatted and performed for each other. They either coldly accepted the stranger or ignored him.

"Not OUR kind," they murmured to each other as he performed little feats of parlor magic for each group. Most of them saw what he or she wanted to see. Since they didn't believe in true magic, they saw none.

Suleimon wandered quietly throughout the hotel from conference to kitchen to garden. One by one, people left the hotel to join the Jorge outside.

The purple umbrella was in an out-of-the-way corner of the patio. No one seemed to see it although all the other umbrellas were yellow. Gradually the group of mystified people, in the comfortable purple shade, at the table grew to five. No one inside the hotel missed them. No one outside the hotel saw them.

The food and drinks on the patio table did not come from the hotel kitchen. The Stardust did not make such wonderful sandwiches, cookies and cakes. Each person's cup never seemed to be empty. They talked among themselves marveling at the strange but wonderful refreshments. Their curiosity grew as they wondered who Suleimon was and he had chosen them.

The lavender-eyed stranger finally joined the little group of five. With a laugh and a whoosh of breath, Suleimon sat in a chair that suddenly appeared behind him. The staff only pretended to be propped against his chair since it did not touch it and hovered two inches above the ground. Suleimon picked up the pitcher from the table and poured for himself. The liquid changed from pink to silver as it flowed. Mint scented smoke curled out of his cup and down the sides.

The others saw the change and looked at their own cups. Each of them had poured from that same pitcher but none of them was drinking the same thing. Jorge was drinking berry juice. A woman had lemonade and, yet another person had hot tea. They all began to ask questions at once.

"Why did you send us here?"

"Who are you?"

"Why is your staff standing by itself?"

"Where did you come from?"

Suleimon's silver curls bobbed as he laughed. He held his hands up for silence. I am Suleimon. I am a graduate student at the College of Magi at Skyvale University. My companion, he gestured at the staff, is Kridakorn. She is my teacher. Today I look like a black man with lavender eyes. I look very different in Skyvale. Kridakorn chose to look like a staff, for today, since she wanted to observe what happened here without being obvious. We came to find you.

"Why did you want to find us," asked Jorge. "We are just ordinary people."

"Oh, you are far from ordinary. You were chosen to join us under the purple umbrella because you are special." Suleimon smiled.

"What makes us so special?" asked the woman. "I'm just a helper in a magician's act."

"I'm only a dish washer who barely speaks English," said the tea drinker.

Suleimon smiled gently. When he sipped from his cup, the fragrant steam flowed and drifted around his head like smoke.

"Each of you can separate reality from illusion. You saw that my little tricks were, in reality, nothing but hand waving. You saw that Kridakorn was actually performing the little feats of magic for the foolish pretenders in the hotel. You are honest enough not to pretend to see what is not there. Also, none of you judged me by my skin color or clothes."

Suleimon held his hands together, palms up. "Look! See, true Magic!" A huge soap bubble appeared on his palms. The bubble became a mirror-ball. The members of the little group gasped in delight.

"Look into the Mirror-of-Truth. Tell me what you see," Suleimon cried, with a joyful laugh.

"I see myself with fire for hair," breathed one man.

"I'm wearing earth for a robe," whispered a woman.

Still another said, "I'm riding the wind like a horse."

"My body is made of water," said the fourth person, a man, staring at himself in the mirror-ball.

Jorge, the Bellman, was silent for a long time. "I don't understand! My body is water yet I ride the wind. I wear the earth, and have fire for hair!"

Suleimon clapped his hands together. The mirror-ball vanished. The group members looked at him in astonishment.

"You saw the truth about yourselves and the talents you each have for true Magic," said the silver-haired stranger. You do not need the

fakery those so-called 'magicians' inside use. You need only to learn the use of your own ability.

Every now-and-then the College of Magi chooses a new group of students. Kridakorn and I actually came to search for you, Jorge. Your gifts have great power.”

Suleimon turned to the other four in the group. “We were fortunate to find you others with such wonderful talents also. I want to invite you all to join us at the College of Magi.”

Jorge became the spokesperson for all of the others when he said, “Where is this College of Magi? Who are you? How can we leave our families and jobs to go to some school?”

“All of you have read folk tales and fairy tales, right?” asked Suleimon. The group members nodded but looked puzzled.

Suleimon continued, “Every culture has its stories about the Hidden Folk. Fairies ogres, dragons, elves, brownies, witches, magicians and many other wonderful people truly do exist. We call ourselves the Hidden Folk. We live in Skyvale. “

“Dragons and elves!” exclaimed Jorge. “You expect us to believe fairy tales are real? Where is this Skyvale?”

A brown face with green eyes appeared on Kridakorn. “I am a wood sprite, she said. She laughed merrily and continued, “Stop looking like you are about to run away. We do not want to scare you. We want you to believe in us Hidden Folk and join us. Let Suleimon finish telling you about our home.”

“Skyvale exists beside, inside and around this world,” Suleimon explained. Imagine the sheet and blanket on your bed. They are separate yet they move and shape together in all the folds and wrinkles a bed can have.

A cookie lifted from the table and came to Suleimon’s hand. He took a bite of the cookie and a sip from his cup and continued. “There have been stories of fairies, werewolves, dragons, elves and hundreds of

hidden folk for centuries because we are a part of every culture on earth. To many people they are just stories for we are not real. There is no place for Magic in *this* world. All the folk of your stories live in Skyvale where Magic truly exists. The stories come from people who believe in Magic and have seen us when we traveled back and forth between both worlds.”

“How do you do that?” asked Jorge.

“There are doors and secret ways that allow people from both worlds to travel back and forth, if they know how,” said Kridakorn. Her designs changed from butterflies to flowers.

“Each of you is a misfit in this life,” said Suleimon. “You have low paying jobs where you are not appreciated. The Hidden Folk would like to offer you the chance to live where your talents and gifts for true Magic can be developed and treasured. You can bring your families. No one will force you. You may visit Skyvale and take as long as you wish to decide whether to join us. The choice is yours.”

Five golden bracelets appeared on the table, one in front of each person. Each bracelet had a dragon with lavender jewels for eyes, carved on it.

“These bracelets can only be seen by you five. You can wear them feely and no one will see,” said Suleimon. “When you have questions or want to visit Skyvale, rub the dragon and call my name. I will come to you. Kridakorn and I will leave now. We will wait to hear from you.”

Suleimon, Kridakorn and the purple umbrella with its table vanished. The five someday Magicians found themselves sitting on chairs under a yellow hotel umbrella, holding golden bracelets.

“Jorge, what do you think just happened to us?” whispered the woman. Her hands shook as she held the bracelet.

“I think we have been offered new lives in a better place,” said Jorge. “I’m going to talk this over with my family. Our house was foreclosed and we are living with relatives. We will visit this Skyvale and see what is there.”

The dishwasher stroked his bracelet. “I wonder if this dragon on the bracelet is a clue to what Suleimon really looks like. I think our new story is just beginning, he said with a smile.

Rose Marie Stutts, Ed.D., founded the Freedom Chess Academy, a 501(c)3 charity in Tuscaloosa. Because of the demands teaching chess and working with charities put on her time and creativity, she stopped writing for about twelve years. Now retired, she still teaches chess but she has also returned to writing.

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*Nonfiction*

# ***All I Need to Know, I Learned From a Cowboy***

**Carolyn Clingan O'Brien**

By the time I was nine years old I had already seen the inside of Parchman State Penitentiary in Mississippi. Not the business office or what they show school kids on a field trip; the part where they take all of your belongings, search you, and then lock you in. It wasn't my first time on the wrong side of a cell door, though. I had already visited my big brother in jail many times.

I have no memory of a family life at home with my brother prior to jail visits. He was twelve years old when I was born and had already run away from home at fourteen, when I was only two years old. My earliest memory of him was this bigger than life handsome hero cowboy who swept in and out of my life bringing excitement and chaos into an otherwise mundane family existence.

An eight by ten picture of my brother, taken when he was about five years old, hung in our living room. He was decked out in full cowboy regalia and sat astride a small paint pony looking as if he had been born there. Even as a toddler Mother said he would hear the milk wagon approaching, the clip clop of the horse's hooves in the distance brought him flying to the window where he waited for his first ecstatic glimpse of the horse. "Whoa, horthey whoa," he would say in a calm, low voice. Not a shout as you would expect from a small child, but as if he already knew the proper way to handle a large animal. Mind you, this was before there was a television in our home and all he knew of cowboys was the big orange book of cowboy stories (which I still have) that our parents and grandmother read to him daily because that was the only book he wanted to read.

The first time my brother ran away from home he was found working on a ranch in Texas. He had lied about his age, something you could still do and get away with way back before government had wormed their way into all the private parts of our lives. The second time he bolted he was sent to a reform school for a spell. Now I can't help noting the irony that he was criminalized for doing something that would have been admired and even expected if he had been born about thirty years earlier. An earlier time when a man was a man when he took on responsibility for himself, and not for a birth certificate to decide.

Even after reform school my brother was still wholesome and bright. He was a part of our household for a time and I vaguely recall a job, a 1949 baby blue Ford, a few girlfriends and endless noisy confrontations with my parents as they struggled to jam him into the narrow mold of our lives.

Then one morning I got out of bed and went into the kitchen and he was sitting there in jeans, barefoot, no shirt, leaning over a dishpan between his feet. He was clutching a bloody towel. At some point during the wee hours of the morning he had come home after catching a knife with his forehead. I never knew the details, I rarely did. I was too young to be told.

Next thing I knew my brother was in a reform school in Oklahoma. We all piled into the family 1955 Plymouth and drove out to see him, once in the bitter cold of winter and again in the blistering heat of August. I remember the month because we were there on my birthday and my parents bought me my first Barbie doll.

The only thing I remember about either visit with my brother is that the first time we saw him he seemed wary and uncertain (as close as he would ever come to showing fear), but wearing a false bravado like a pair of jeans that don't fit. When we went back that summer he had changed. I remember being afraid to approach him until his pale blue gaze fell on me, and a smile split his tan handsome face. I launched

myself into his arms, but at the last minute noted that the smile had never made it to his eyes. He was no longer uncertain in his surroundings. He was now confident in what he was—a criminal.

When he finally came home from Oklahoma he resurrected his passion for all things western. He was country, as the song goes, when country wasn't cool. Even in a town the size of Tupelo, Mississippi he had to mail order the kinds of shirts he preferred, plaid with pearl snap buttons, as well as his cowboy boots and hat. The Wrangler jeans he wore all his life were made right there in a local factory. Almost no one else dressed like this in Tupelo at that time. He soon became known as Cowboy.

He taught me things. Sly and useful things that I probably did not need to know but I am glad he did. He taught me to play poker when I was five years old. By the time I was six I could beat him at least half the time. He tried teaching me to shoot craps but I didn't care for that, except for the lingo, which I used with gusto any chance I got. He taught me a cunning intuition that serves me to this day, though I can't name the time and place of the lesson. His teaching came in a hundred ways, almost telepathically. Sometimes he would just look intently at me across the dinner table and I somehow knew there was information in the conversation going on around me and I absorbed the lesson. I learned to emulate his self-reliance.

Tested, he was found to have a genius IQ. He was smart, but not quite smart enough. Clever, but not clever enough to keep from being caught at whatever he did to get sent to prison. Stealing, though I never knew exactly what, only that the penalty seemed excessive for the crime. Mother told me later it was because the D.A. was furious that Cowboy wouldn't rat out his friends for their part.

For the next seven and a half years my family drove to Parchman, Mississippi about once a month to visit my brother. When we would leave Batesville and our car plunged into the endless flatness of the Missis-

sippi Delta I would frequently have a nosebleed. My nose never bled any other time. I think it was caused by nerves. I missed my big brother and wanted to see him but I hated going there.

In those days Parchman was still a working farm and the inmates chopped or picked cotton all day every day except Sundays. Inmates were frequently beaten for the smallest infraction, or none at all. Cowboy was interned at Camp 5, which was home to some pretty rough characters. We would go in to visit, everyone together in the great big dining hall. Sitting at tables scarred with hundreds of names and initials, some still legible under so many coats of paint it is a wonder the table didn't collapse from the weight of it. I never understood why anyone would want to be immortalized in such a place as that.

I heard some stories I should never have heard. I guess the adults thought I was too young or too busy playing with my doll (a female guard had kindly allowed me to keep) and didn't hear. I heard. Never once have I written or spoken aloud some of the things I heard and probably never will.

I finally reached an age I refused to go back. Twelve or thirteen I think. I felt angry toward Cowboy. Angry at the choices he made that took him from my life and made me have to spend so many bright sunny days locked up with him.

Looking back I realize this was a pivotal age in our household. Cowboy had started running away at this age. My next older brother started having juvenile offender issues at about this time. I suspect just trying to copy his older brother. Never so dramatic as Cowboy, though he did eventually end up in prison as well.

Though we didn't know at the time, later I would come to realize our mother was bi-polar, something they knew very little about at that time. Now I see that we probably all inherited a tendency toward this sort of erratic behavior, or maybe just learned from growing up with it. So about the time I began to rebel against going to Parchman to visit

Cowboy I started noticing this black, writhing thing in me. A sort of depression, but not the kind that makes you want to stay in bed all day, but a kind of hopelessness that would strike out of nowhere and make you want to do something outrageous—something self-destructive. But I had already seen enough of the wrong side of cell doors and knew I wanted something drastically different for myself. My mind churned with possibilities and I strained against the restrictions my parents placed on my life, but I simmered just short of the boiling point because underneath it all I knew I was smarter than the smartest man I knew. Cowboy. I could beat him at poker and I could be better at this life thing too. It was then I picked up my pen and paper.

*I saw my dream in a mirror staring knowingly back at me*

*I reached out*

*It disappeared*

*The glass was golden and warm where it had been*

*In anger I struck the glass*

*Now all that is left is*

*Broken dreams*

*Broken glass*

*And blood*

The first few poems I wrote shocked my teachers and they quickly called my parents to warn them I might be suicidal. I was, but not in the way they were thinking. I was in an epic battle with my two inner selves and as my light side drew swords against my dark side I wrote of its destruction. Now I know the dark side just needed to be whipped into submission. It was not the side I wanted controlling my life.

Every angry, outrageous, rebellious thought poured onto my paper and pages became notebooks. By high school I was recruited to write for the school newspaper. News writing was not of particular interest to me

but I gained much satisfaction in doing it better than some of the students who planned to make journalism their career.

I was a chip off the old block. Maybe I didn't have a genius I.Q. like Cowboy but I was twice as clever. He had wielded a moment of power and ended up in a cell, not even with the freedom to choose what he wanted to eat for dinner. I wielded my power, my words, and doors opened, possibilities sprang up and my choices were endless.

Cowboy finally got out of prison and went west to work on ranches on and off for the rest of his life. He would disappear for years then pop back into my life for a time then he'd be gone again. Over the years he was in and out of jail, ran from the law and hid from the Mafia. For all his lawless ways he had a peculiar integrity about some things. He never had any children because he knew he wouldn't take care of them and he would not put that burden on anyone else. He never asked anyone for anything, but always took care of himself physically and financially.

Always a lean, fit and handsome man, I began to see a difference in Cowboy along about the time he hit forty. He seemed to sag and crumble and his eyes lost that feral brightness. His years of smoking *Camel* no filter cigarettes, along with his alcohol and drug use caught up with him like a runaway train and flattened him. He was dead by the age of fifty.

A few years ago Robin Whitfield, a core artist with Communities in Schools Greenwood Leflore approached me about bringing my art into our local alternative school. I quickly declined—I have never been interested in teaching nor qualified to teach. I was assured it was not a teaching job. "Just take your craft as you know it and do it and share it with the students," Robin said. That was something I knew I could do. I talked to poet Grady Hillman who had incorporated creative writing programs into state prisons all over the country. Creative writing and visual arts were found to have rehabilitating effects on prison inmates. After talking with Grady I knew I was committed. I could only think of my brothers, two brilliant young men who made a few bad choices that left



them no choices at all. I thought of the great big gaping holes in my life that should have been filled with big brothers. And all the broken-hearted women, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, sweethearts, even teachers who are left to hold together the tattered remnants of families, because it is ultimately the women who shoulder the greatest burden.

I believe in the rehabilitative power of creative writing because I have seen the evidence in my own life. First, when I hit that hard time in my teens, then again when my son was killed in a car wreck and I wrote of my grief right up to the edge of my very sanity. As the dark side of me that had remained dormant all those years rose up with a vengeance, I gathered all my words around me like an impenetrable armor. Proving, once again, that the pen is indeed mightier than the sword—and a gun, an Uzi, a tank—even the H-bomb. Because after we are slammed to our knees by our own destruction the only way to truly rise up is to create again and again and *again*.

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**Carolyn Clingan O'Brien** *owned a bookstore in Grenada, Mississippi before moving to Fairhope, Alabama in 2011. Publications include essays in Mississippi Magazine, newspapers, and a review in a restaurant guide. She served as creative writing core artist in a school for at risk kids through Communities in Schools of Greenwood-Leflore.*

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Church Folk

Jeff Sparks

Ralph McDermott stood for a minute, sweating, behind the large oaken pulpit, which dwarfed the small sanctuary over which it looked. He picked up his Bible and had to take two full steps to slide around to the side of it. There he leaned against the pulpit and read from Acts, which he followed with a brief flowery discourse on the devotion of the early church. His words were sincere and assuring. He was delivering a decent sermon, which was somewhat of an uncommon occurrence; a fact he would admit if pressed. The Lord was shining down on him this morning, he thought, and as he continued alternating between fiery proclamations of His want for justice and gentle pleas for the devotees of the Gentle Cove Baptist Church to repent, he noticed fewer were stuck in that familiar stoic fashion, head down, as if following in the text.

He had been serving this congregation in interim for nearly a year, and by now they knew him well enough to proactively lower the thermostat of the sanctuary by the time the Interlude began. He was a little hot natured, he would say, and that it sure would help. But the only man in the church with a key to the locked thermostat box had gone home ill during Sunday School, and had forgotten to mention it to anyone. Members squirmed in their pews and waved their bulletins like fans. As he looked out over them from the pulpit, it was as if the congregation had been replaced by a flock of geese, trying to escape. It was distracting, he thought; in the pauses in the sermon he fought the sensation of trying to convince them to stay.

A sturdy breeze blew through, which caused some to stir. He noticed the touch of cool on the back of his neck due to the evaporation from his soaked white collar. The little respite gave him a sudden spark,

from which he drew to generate the climax of his message. Just as the tip of the index finger on his right hand hit its apex raised well above his head, his alto voice climbing fiercely upwards toward the balcony and pinching the delicate eardrums of Mrs. Earnestine Mason, two recent attention-payers in the back row yelled, "Amen!" in agreement, as if to compensate for their nodding off. A rare performance indeed, the preacher so surprising himself that he suddenly proclaimed an alter call. Not until the deacons rose did the faithful begin to rustle, and although it took nearly five minutes, and one extended rendition of "Come As You Are" by the Ladies Ensemble, for the pressure to pry some of the members from their pews, nearly the entire congregation came forward and knelt for prayer.

Earlier in his tenure they had mentioned to him that the newly formed Worship Committee, composed of a dutifully serving member of each Sunday School department from the Young Adult Unmarrieds on up to the Methuselahs, had decided he should stand and greet the congregation in the vestibule after the Benediction, and made it clear that he position himself on the right hand side of the large door, and not the left. Some had taken issue with the long line generated when the previous interim pastor, who served only one solitary Sunday, parked himself outside the smaller side door of the sanctuary, which clogged the exit and made folks late for lunch.

During the Benediction, a lovely vocal number offered softly by Mrs. Mason who had come down from the balcony, Brother McDermott headed toward the side aisle, gauging he could turn sideways if need be to fit his girth. Mrs. Mason eyed him from behind the microphone as if to say, "This is an appropriate volume, pastor." He managed, and as he passed each pew tried not to make eye contact with those more curious than pious. He planted himself in the center of the vestibule, just as he was told, and waited. He confirmed that his top suit button was fastened

and removed his handkerchief from the inside pocket of his coat. He wiped his brow and in preparation, his hands, and replaced it.

He felt proud of his sermon, and began to see things in the church differently. His eyes jumped around the small room. Two large limestone columns protruded by half from the wall shared with the sanctuary and stood imposingly across from him. A transfigured Christ looked down from the stained glass atop the wall behind him, throwing red, blue, and green light across the marble floor. He became aware of the echo of the tapping of his freshly shined Balmorals, which he stopped immediately.

The sanctuary doors opened after what seemed like an eternity, and only later was he informed that one of the more exuberant members, Ms. Mary Mainsail, had got the Holy Ghost right there in her seat while the man she was hoping would court her, Winston Wallace, finished his rather long-winded Benediction. Turns out, Mrs. Jolene Berry, a member of the Methuselahs, felt as though all services should end with a prayer, no matter how pretty the singing. Having stood up and said so, she asked Winston on the spot to offer a proper closing prayer. The singing was nice and all, he was informed later by Mrs. Berry, but this church was affiliated with Southern Baptist Convention, and did things a certain way.

The first to come through the door did so rapidly, muttering salutations while nodding their heads. Miss Mary entered the foyer next, still harboring remnants of the spirit. “Preacher that was a mighty fine sermon. Sure did enjoy it. Tell me, you ever seen a little one as pretty as this?” She reached around and led by the arm a child covered head to toe in white lace. Her French braided pig tails erupted from the bouquet arranged about her shoulders which supported, seemingly on a cloud, a face bearing eyes like blue ice.

“Oh she sure is. Hello my dear. And how are you this beautiful Lord’s day?”

“Fine, sir.”

“Well you are just as cute as a button. What’s your name?”

“Ellie.”

“Well that’s a pretty name. How old are you, Ellie?”

“Seven. How old are you?” Brother McDermott flinched, then Miss Mary darted in.

“Now Ellie, that is not polite. A young lady doesn’t ask the age of her elders. Tell the pastor you’re sorry.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Quite alright, Miss.....”

“Mainsail. Mary Mainsail. You know I’ve been a member of this church a long time and Lord help me if I can remember a sermon so fine. And by the way,” she leaned over close and spoke, “didn’t mean to alarm anyone back there in the service. A body can’t help but let all that out, what when the Holy Ghost takes over. My word, what a time. Must mean I’m a doing something to please the Lord.” She finished and straightened up, and as she led the girl out and down the steps, she looked back toward Brother McDermott. He had moved on to the next in line, and her great big pleased smile went flat.

“Good morning, Brother McDermott! How you doing?” It was John O’Sullivan, who was wearing his plaid wedding suit from 1955, which he proudly mentioned to at least one person at church each time he wore it, on alternating Sundays.

“I’m doing just fine, John, thank you.”

“You know, preacher, I got me one of those ear microphone things for the service and now I can hear you.” For the hearing impaired, the church offered small radios fitted with ear pieces that received the local broadcast of the service.

“Good! I’m sure that’s much better for you.”

“Well, I can say your sermons are a lot better than I thought they were,” he deadpanned. Both men shook hands and laughed, and John donned his matching tan fedora as he headed out the door. The pastor

continued after he noticed the line backing up. The succinct fate of his predecessor hung ever present in his mind after each service, and he quickly stuck out his hand and greeted the next one, whom he didn't recognize.

"George Peabody. Beautiful sermon pastor. Just beautiful. And stern, too. I always thought a good sermon ought ta have a little a both. Sooth the soul but don't let it rest. Keep'em on their toes I always thought."

"Yes, there's a lot of truth to that, sure enough."

"Yes, sir, your preaching's been a sight better than that fella we had before. Man just up and left, but I don't think many folks minded. Anyway..."

"Well, okay. Pleasure to meet you Mr. Peabody. Have a nice day." And so it went. Some wanted to talk; some just grinned, offered an encouraging handshake, and kept walking. Just when the preacher couldn't seem to puff his chest out any farther, Mrs. Mason creaked through the back of the sanctuary and into the vestibule. She seemed to have hung back intentionally, and eyed him as she approached. "Well hello Mrs. Mason. That was a beautiful song you offered this morning," he said.

"Thank you, pastor, but I have something to say. A certain decorum is expected during the worship of our Lord in this sanctuary," she said in a distinctive south Georgian drawl. "A benediction may be sung, just as easily as it may be spoken. In fact, you can just have a look at the bulletin. It says 'Earnestine Mason', not 'Winston Wallace.' She finished with a snap of her chin in the air. "I would appreciate it if you would speak to Mrs. Berry, pastor."

"Yes, Mrs. Mason. I understand. But you know, Mrs. Berry has a right to worship in her own way, too."

"Well, I nevah!" She stormed out. Brother McDermott just grinned and shook his head.

The church had provided the parsonage for him to live. As he walked in the front door of the old stone-walled cottage after the service, he felt as though he were in the midst of a high end flea market, or possibly a community museum. It was as if each room had been adopted by a different family, whose privilege it was to maintain, and who felt little apprehension, it seemed, in placing family pictures and keepsakes on the walls and atop end tables, dressers, and even certain places in the bathroom.

Brother McDermott was restless that Sunday evening. He flipped through several books, then feeling hungry, cobbled together a pot of soup from accumulated leftovers. Feeling energized by the tidier refrigerator, he began to rifle through his chest of drawers. He started with the sock drawer, from which he tossed several pair that looked as though he had slid them over the barrel of a shotgun, and fired. Once emptied, he noticed a piece of paper flush against the back panel of the drawer. He peeled it away from the wood and unfolded it. The nervous script read:

Dear Future Pastor,

Take comfort that you have found this note in time. Soon, they will be after you. The spirits which captivate this house and this church are relentless. They fill you first with the fire of the Lord, or so it seems. Gradually accumulated effects manifest as esteem among the congregation. But beware, for soon they consume your heart and mind, and seem to speak for you. And one last thing: avoid Ms. Mary Mainsail. The woman seeks to destroy.

Sincerely,

Dr. William W. Williams

He let his hand fall down by his side, astonished. He thought back over the year and looked for signs. His mind raced, then froze. Today. Just then, he heard a knock at the door. He passed through the bedroom, and there, through the window pane to the side of the front door, lit by the porch light, was Ms. Mainsail, suggestive lace leaking out from the neck of her trench coat.

Jeff Sparks and his wife, *Lindsey*, live in *Huntsville* where he works as a chemist at *EGEN, Inc. in the HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology*. An avid reader and beginning writer, *Church Folk* is his first published story.

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# **Grandma's Garden**

**Debra H. Goldstein**

My grandmother told me rain makes flowers grow, beach warning flags are changed from white to red by elves, and “your father loves you.” It took me years to figure out her lies.

Grandma was not like a touch of soft fabric or the smell of just baked cookies. The scratchy feel of her cheeks was similar to her mothering. I've come to realize it couldn't have been any easier for her to raise a scrawny kid in the condo my father stuck us in than it was to trade her garden for window boxes sitting on a cement patio. Back then, watching her cook, clean, or get me ready for school, it was hard for me to associate her with Dad. Housedresses and jogging suits never quite matched the red-carpet tuxedoed pictures of him I cut from magazines. Maybe that's why he didn't visit often.

He did give us everything we needed. Food, a beachfront condo, and open charge cards let me grow up loving sunrises and sunsets, running in the surf, and having a perpetual tan. Unfortunately for Grandma, the combination of sand and cement meant there wasn't good soil for her garden. Before Dad moved us in together at the beach, she had a real yard in which she grew tomatoes, sunflowers, and herbs in a design layout only she understood. Neither he nor I paid much attention when she explained how her plant placement was tied to sunshine, shade, and how the slope of the land puddled rain. To us, it was a hodgepodge.

We were in the condo a week when we received a Homeowners Association notice that condo regulations prohibited planting in the patch outside our door. We received a second cease and desist letter complaining about the window boxes Grandma attached to our front

windows. Dad called after his secretary received a copy of our third citation. Grandma assured Dad she would take care of the situation and then went and made herself a cup of tea. She was sitting on our patio when she decided that if no one objected to outdoor chairs, tables, or grills, the watchdogs couldn't complain about window boxes sitting out there. They didn't.

Grandma planted, weeded, and even staked tomato plants, but I was the watergirl. Twice a day, I checked each box to see if the soil was moist or sunbaked. Because she didn't like the concentrated pressure from hose water, if the soil was too dry, she made me take her metal watering can, fill it, and sprinkle from high up so the plants would think it was rain.

"Plants don't have brains," I said, trickling water on a new flat of pansies. "Why try to fool them when they can't figure out the trick?"

"You're not tricking them. They know what you're doing." She turned a box exposing its other side to the sun.

"Wouldn't it soak everything better if I use the hose?"

"Maybe," she said, pushing back her sunhat, "but think about how petals sip each free falling droplet when it rains."

Until April's hurricane swept the patio clean, I kept Grandma's garden growing. Now, standing on the beach near the building's debris watching a lifeguard change a red flag to white, my tears fall like rain.

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*Judge **Debra H. Goldstein** has won awards for her fiction and non-fiction. Her debut mystery novel, **Maze in Blue**, received a 2012 IPPY bronze regional ebook award. She lives in Hoover, Alabama. For more information, check out her website <http://www.debrahgoldstein.com/> and blog <http://debrahgoldstein.wordpress.com/>.*

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The Secret of Greatness

Joan Leotta

On a narrow, winding street in Rome is the restaurant of Alfredo, a GREAT chef. How did Alfredo become the GREAT? I will tell you.

Everyone said Alfredo's food was very good. This did not make Alfredo happy, because he wanted to be called a GREAT chef. Alfredo's father or uncle or brother had all won Rome's December GREATEST CHEF contest at one time or another.

"I want to be GREAT too!" Alfredo said. "To be GREAT, I need to win the contest!"

Alfredo entered the contest and decided to make chicken soup. He bought fresh chicken and fresh vegetables at market. He picked herbs from his own garden. "Herbs are the secret to GREAT chicken soup," said Alfredo. He thought about GREATNESS all the time.

One icy December evening, the Mayor and his wife came to judge the contest. Alfredo sat them at a table set with fine blue china and shiny silver spoons.

He poured soup into their bowls. They carefully sipped its steamy goodness.

"MMMMM"

"Ahhh"

The Mayor said. "Alfredo, your soup is very good"

Alfredo was happy they liked the soup but sad that they did not think it was GREAT.

That night same night, he began to plan a dessert for next year's contest.

Winter melted into spring and red geraniums poked their heads out of the window box on his house. Alfredo didn't notice. He could only

think about sugar, flour, and butter, fruits and chocolate for desserts. But one April day in the market, he *did* notice something else.

About to sample a big red raspberry, Alfredo looked down into the dark eyes of Angelina, the fruit seller's daughter. She smiled. Alfredo smiled. Over the next few weeks Alfredo discovered that Angelina was as sweet and smart as she was beautiful.

One moonlit night, they walked along the Tiber River. Alfredo told Angelina about his wish to be GREAT.

Angelina looked up at him. "I think you would make a GREAT husband." Alfredo and Angelina were married that very June.

From the wedding day until December's contest day, Alfredo talked only about desserts.

On the contest day, Alfredo brushed delicate sheets of pastry dough with butter. He baked each sheet to a fine gold and grated chocolate onto the warm pastry. As chocolate oozed into the crisp layers, Alfredo spooned on soft vanilla custard, put another crisp pastry sheet on top and then plunked three perfect plump, juicy raspberries on that!

Alfredo served his new dessert on a fine porcelain plate edged in gold. "How beautiful it looks," exclaimed Angelina.

"MMMMM, wonderful flavor!" said the Mayor.

"Ahhh, I like it very much! Delicious!" said the Mayor's wife.

"Very good, Alfredo," said the Mayor. "Very good, but not GREAT." Alfredo sat down. He was happy that the Mayor and his wife liked the new dessert, but sad because they did not think it was GREAT.

Angelina sat down beside him. "Don't be sad. You are a GREAT husband and I know you will make a GREAT father."

"A father? I am going to be a father?"

Angelina smiled. "Twice! We are having twins."

Alfredo jumped up and began dancing around the room.

For the next few months, he did not have time to think about contests.

Alfredo and Angelina could think only about babies. They read about babies. They talked about babies. They even dreamed about babies! In early September, just after the nursery was painted, the babies arrived!

They named the boy “Angelo” because he smiled like his father. They named the girl, “Aria” for her opera-voice cry.

“I love being a father, this is GREAT!” Alfredo told everyone he saw.

In October, Alfredo’s mind and arms were still full of babies. He held Angelo while Angelina gave Aria a bath. He held Aria while Angelina fed Angelo. They brought both babies to watch them work at the restaurant. Everyone who came to the restaurant admired the twins.

November rolled into Rome in a fog so thick that it hid the walls of the Coliseum! The fog’s damp chill slipped under doors and into rooms. Even the heat of Alfredo’s big stove could not chase it away. Angelina, Angelo, and Aria got the flu. They were very sick.

The doctor said to Alfredo, “Make some of your special chicken soup for them—even the babies.”

Alfredo closed the restaurant to take care of little Angelo and Aria and Angelina. He took over the tiny kitchen in their apartment above the restaurant, making soup for the family.

By December, the babies were well, but Angelina was not. One day in mid- December, she stopped eating. She would not even sip soup from her favorite silver spoon.

Alfredo was very worried. Angelina needed to eat to get well. He tried making her favorite desserts, pastas, and rice. She looked at the food on the fork or spoon, but she would not even taste them. She sipped a little water but that was all.

After three days of this, Alfredo had an idea. He went down to the restaurant kitchen. He mixed sweet cream, grated parmesan cheese, and a dash of fresh nutmeg into a sauce. He poured that sauce over fresh,

steaming fettuccini noodles, Angelina's favorite pasta. He rushed a small plate of this new creation upstairs to Angelina.

"MMMMMM, it smells good." Angelina said and then she nibbled a little from the edge of a fork as Angelo fed her.

"This is GREAT!" she cried out with all of the strength she could put into her voice. Slowly, Angelina began to eat more. She ate the entire small bowl of this new pasta dish. Alfredo was so happy that he almost didn't hear the knock at the restaurant door and the Mayor calling up to him.

"Alfredo, Alfredo, why is your door locked?"

Alfredo had forgotten to cancel his entry into the contest. They had come to judge his food!

Alfredo rushed down, opened the door and brought them upstairs into his small home kitchen.

"Please, please, sit down."

The Mayor and his wife sat down at Alfredo's tiny kitchen table. The Mayor smiled at Alfredo. "You did not mark down what you were entering this year. We thought it was because you wanted to surprise us."

Alfredo smiled at them. His entry would be a surprise to him too. He did not want to send the Mayor and his wife away hungry on a cold night. So, he put a candle on the kitchen table and set out two clean napkins and plates.

Alfredo looked around for something to serve them. All he had was the rest of the new pasta dish he had made for Angelina. Alfredo scooped that out onto their plates, grabbed forks for them from the kitchen drawer.

"MMMMM." said the Mayor as he took a bite.

"Ahhh." said his wife. "Delicious."

"This is GREAT!" announced the Mayor, waving his fork, "You win! This is the best pasta I have ever eaten."

The Mayor's wife nodded in agreement and added, "Please tell us what you call this wonderful dish so we can order it when we come to your restaurant."

Alfredo did not know what to say. Angelina, in her robe and slippers, a baby under each arm, poked her head around the corner of the kitchen wall and said, "I call it, Fettuccini Alfredo."

Only what is done for love is truly great

Joan Leotta's motto is, "Encouraging words through pen and performance." Her books include **Massachusetts** (Scholastic), **Christmas Gift** (Warner), **Complete Guide to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia** (Norton) and **Giulia Goes to War** (Desert Breeze). She also performs one-woman history shows. With husband, Joe, she collects seashells in Calabash, NC.

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# ***Walking to Whatley***

**Annell C. Gordon**

The walk so far had actually been an easy one. However, in their boys' imaginations, it had been fraught with danger. To the two intrepid adventurers, a rise in the dirt road appeared alpine and required scaling and hoisting. A slip of the foot and a mountaineer could plummet to certain death on rocky crags hundreds of feet below, his body washed out to sea never to be found amongst crashing waves. The high clay banks lining the dirt roads of Crane County, Alabama, seemed alive with imminent danger. Black panthers, eyes glowing gold, lurked within velvety green kudzu vines. Sinuous, hissing snakes coiled in the undergrowth to strike with venomous fangs. Bears lumbered through the pines, claws and teeth sharp and menacing. Stebo and Dee saw themselves as unsuspecting wayfarers in a land of dire peril.

Devane Lawrence—Dee to his friends—and Steven Williams, nicknamed Stebo, had decided earlier in the hot July day to walk the dirt road five miles from the town of Lofton in Crane County to the tiny village of Whatley in Coburn County. Ecstatic with their freedom from sixth grade, they spent the first month of the summer of 1961 playing baseball, cooling off in Lofton's swimming pool, actually the Graham family's fish pond, and flicking marbles across circles drawn in the dirt. They also attended Bible school at the Methodist church, and shot BB guns in Mr. S.P. Oliver's pasture. Having exhausted their repertoire of summer entertainment and inspired by afternoon matinees at Finch's Theater, they hit upon the idea of an epic quest for adventure. They would journey by foot along five miles of dusty road across a rickety wooden bridge high above the Bean River, which served as the county line, and into Whatley. The boys would spend the day wandering around



Whatley, watching trains roll through. They would sip icy water that flowed from an artesian well into a massive holding tank beside the railroad tracks, and then visit Stebo's Aunt Sue, the best cook in Alabama.

One would think that these two adventurers would have put together a kit of necessities for their journey: a canteen of water to slake the inevitable thirst created by stifling heat, hats to thwart the July sun's unrelenting rays, and shoes to protect even the toughest of feet from the heat of the baking road. In their young minds, adventure loomed large; however, their preparations were small as they stepped onto the dusty road and headed east.

Thirsty and hatless, more importantly, shoeless, the skinny, freckled, crew cut boys, clad in white T-shirts and cut-off jeans, had covered two miles of their journey fighting off wild animals—panthers, snakes, and bears. They conquered geological difficulties—torturous mountains and mysterious abysses. After a dizzying walk across a swaying, dilapidated bridge, they forded the treacherous Bean River that raged far below. Nevertheless, the barefoot wayfarers could never have imagined the tribulation that lay ahead. Had they known about such matters, they would have blamed their troubles on the evil machinations of the Coburn County Road Commissioner.

“What the...?” muttered Dee, spitting dryly on the sparkling gray gravel that covered the road, a road that formerly had been smooth, dry red clay. He wiped sweat from his face with the hem of his grimy T-shirt. “When did this happen? Gravel? Gonna eat our feet up all the way to danged Whatley!”

Stebo, normally calm and cool, now tired, hot, thirsty, and shoeless, realized they were facing a painful challenge—an unforeseen foot-bruising trial to be endured by the two friends. Sticking his hands deep into the pockets of his raggedy cutoffs, he moaned, “Why didn't we wear our shoes, Dee?”

“Shoes! How was we s’posed to know that danged Coburn County was gonna gravel the danged road?”

“What we gonna do, Dee?”

“Well, we done come this far. I say, let’s do it! Life’s an adventure, buddy! We’re tough. We’re men!” Dee lifted his warrior’s spear, actually a crape myrtle stick, and thrust it toward the sky, defying the gods of lower Alabama. “Onward, I say!”

“Onward!” Stebo’s smile was tentative as he stepped gingerly onto sharp, hot rocks that stretched down the road as far as the boys could see.

After a half mile of agonizing struggle, each footfall a careful placement across hot coals of cutting gray gravel, the boys heard approaching from the west a grumbling motor accompanied by loud clinking sounds.

“Stick out your thumb, Stebo. It’s the milk truck...we gonna hitch us a ride. Old Man Crawley’s a mean old turd, but he might give us a lift.” Dee’s butch-cut brown hair glistening with sweat swirled over two cowlicks in the center of his splotchy sun-burned forehead. The boy stood in the middle of the road, waving his stick, jumping aside as the truck ground to a stop in a cloud of grey dust.

“Where you boys headin’?” Mr. Crawley leaned through the window fanning dust with his meaty hand. His bushy black brows rose above beady blue eyes as he surveyed the boys’ bleak situation.

“We walkin’ to Whatley, Mr. Crawley. We didn’t know Coburn County’d graveled the road.”

“Couple of morons walkin’ on this here new gravel without shoes. Where the hell’re your shoes?”

“We kinda forgot them...been goin’ barefoot all summer....” Stebo shaded his squinting brown eyes with his hand, hoping he looked pitiful enough to evoke pity from the milkman. Something about the fat man’s yellow grin and mean eyes raised doubts in the boy’s mind.

“So, y’all needin’ a ride. That it?” The boys’ hopes rose as Mr. Crawley drawled, “I’d say, ‘Hop on in...’” The man paused and shifted into first gear before roaring off and yelling, “but company policy won’t let me pick up scrawny little idiot hitchhikers!” Dee and Stebo listened to his mocking laughter fade into the distance.

“Danged hateful turd!” Dee picked up a chunk of gravel and hurled it after the white truck and its boiling cloud of gray dust. Stebo sat down in the middle of the road and cradled his sore feet.

“C’mon, Stebo. I got a idea. Mrs. L., the lunchroom lady at school, don’t live but a little piece up this road, right around that next long curve. She’s got grown boys...maybe she’ll lend us some of their old shoes.” Dee pulled Stebo up and handed him the crape myrtle stick. “Use this to take the weight off your feet for a while.”

“Reckon she’d give us a glass of iced tea, Dee? I got a real dry throat.”

Dee couldn’t help but laugh at his friend as he eased down the gravel road leaning on the crooked stick. “You look like your Paw Paw Williams...’specially with that gray dust settlin’ in your butch wax!”

Thinking they were too dirty and sweaty to go to the front door, the boys limped around the woman’s ranch style brick house to the back door and were dismayed to see the milk truck parked in the backyard. They stood behind a wall of shrubs waiting for the hateful Mr. Crawley to make his delivery.

“Well, dang, Stebo. Been fifteen minutes. Why ain’t he left yet?”

“I don’t know. Let’s leave, Dee. This ain’t feelin’ right to me.” Stebo brushed a biting fly off his arm before picking up Dee’s stick. “Let’s go.”

“Danged if we settin’ foot back on that hot road without shoes. I’m gonna knock on that door.” Dee walked to the back screened door and peered in. What he saw caused him to turn wide-eyed back to Stebo.

“It’s Mr. Crawley. He’s putting Mrs. Lynch’s milk in the fridge.” Dee whispered.

“So? Ain’t that what he s’posed to be doin’?”

“Not in nothin’ but his danged undershorts...he ain’t!” Stebo stopped scratching the bite on his arm and scurried to crowd in behind Dee where they watched the nearly naked fat man stowing milk and sour cream in Mrs. L.’s refrigerator. Mrs. L. sat at the kitchen table laughing and smoking a cigarette in her negligee.

Racing back across the front yard and onto the gravel road, the boys limped for a while in silence, afraid to give voice to their conclusions about the scene they had witnessed. After a quarter of a mile, Dee turned to Stebo and blurted, “That fat old fart!”

Stebo snorted and both boys began laughing so hard that they collapsed on the ground. As their hilarity waned, they saw a truck approaching from the east. Stebo and Dee struggled to their tender feet and hobbled to the side of the road. The truck stopped, and the driver rolled down the passenger side window.

“Where you fellas headed? Road’s kinda rough on them bare feet, I bet.” The man’s brown eyes crinkled as he smiled down at the footsore boys.

“We was trying to get to Whatley, sir. But if you’re not wantin’ to turn around, we’ll be glad for a ride back to Lofton.” Dee looked at Stebo, who nodded in agreement.

“Climb in, boys. You got yourself a ride.” The man opened the door so that first Dee and then Stebo could clamber in.

“How you boys like the new road? My name’s Ray Lynch, Coburn County Road Commissioner. Been up to Montgomery for a few days—meeting for county commissioners. Thought I’d swing through Whatley and see how she rides. We been working all summer to get this old pot-holed road slagged for paving next month. This little project’s gonna get me re-elected next fall!”

“We woulda liked it fine if we’d known it was here. We ain’t been this way for a spell and didn’t know it’d been slagged and well...” Dee

muttered, shooting an angry sidelong glance at the man while holding up his sore blistered feet.

“Put it like this. We woulda wore shoes if we’d a known.” Stebo frowned and showed him the bottoms of his feet as well.

The truck slowed as it passed Mrs. L.’s house, and the man commented, “If I didn’t have you two passengers, I’d a stopped at that house and said howdy to my wife. She ain’t expecting me today. I thought I’d be gone ‘til tomorrow but the meetings broke up early. I’ll scoot you and your aching feet on home first.”

Dee looked slyly at his now wide-eyed buddy and said, “Ain’t it a small world, Mr. Lynch? We just now left your place. Stopped by to get us a cool drink of water...seein’ as how Mrs. L. ... er, Mrs. Lynch is our lunch lady and all, we thought she wouldn’t mind.”

Dee nudged Stebo who added, “Yeah, we didn’t get no water though. We kept waitin’ for the milk man to leave. I don’t reckon I ever seen a milk man take that long to deliver milk.”

Mr. Lynch was silent for a long time. Dee watched the muscles in the man’s jaw clench and unclench.

Crossing over the Bean River Bridge, the truck rattled and bumped so loudly that Dee had to almost shout, “Yep, Mr. Lynch, I believe that milk man’s truck is still parked in your backyard.”

“Hot damn! I knew it!” As the truck skidded to a stop in a roiling of red dust, the man growled at the boys, “End of the line, fellas. Get outta the truck. You can walk the rest of the way home!”

Dee and Stebo stood in the middle of the red clay road and watched through the haze of red dust as Mr. Lynch turned around, gunned it, fish-tailed and then straightened up to tear down the dirt road toward his house, Mrs. Lynch, and Mr. Crawley.

“My feet hurt.” Dee grinned at Stebo.

“I’m thirsty, and I’m hungry.” Stebo smiled smugly at Dee.

“Life’s an adventure, ain’t it, buddy?” The boys strode triumphantly barefoot down the dirt road toward home.

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**Annell C. Gordon** *is a retired math and English teacher, who lives near Grove Hill, Alabama, with her husband Steve. She writes a monthly column Books & Whatever for the Clarke County Democrat, has won several prizes in the AWC contest, and is a member of the Grove Hill Writers Group.*

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Free Verse Poem

Dirge

Jane Sasser

A mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.
Walt Whitman

No one taught you how to die.
It was in you all along, like rummaging
for food, like burrowing through straw.
Clutching still the frail tendril of life,
you linger longer in your nest, days
blooming shorter and dimmer
like your eyes. Drifting into dreams,
you float through the gloaming
on an oak leaf raft, your body so light
scarcely your breath remains.
Oar then into dusk, small sharecropper.
Understand that the farm is bought,
the rope at its end, the candle snuffed.
Let Night close his great wings around you,
no predator after all, only softness like
nest feathers of home. Listen now:
it was always lullabies the stars sang,
your name the sweetest syllables they know.

Jane Sasser is a lifelong lover of stories. Her poetry has appeared in *The Sun*, *The Atlanta Review*, *The North American Review*, *Appalachian Heritage*, and other anthologies and publications. She has published two poetry chapbooks, **Recollecting the Snow** and **Itinerant**. She lives in Oak Ridge, TN.

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# ***THE RIVER AND ITS MERCY***

**Patrick Cabello Hansel**

My daddy liked to call himself a mutt. “A little Irish”, he’d say. “A little Seminole. An African-born grandfather that bought his way out of slavery. The kiss of New Orleans royalty and Sicily thrown in.” He never gave us names for his ancestors, other than grandpa Nico and grandma Florence, his parents. Who seemed to have disappeared somewhere between the Mississippi Delta country and our little paradise by Two Rivers. When pressed, he would tell stories that were long on drama and short on real fact. When you’re running from something, you don’t keep a list of names on your person.

My mama said that she was “Gypsy born and Gypsy bought”, whatever that may mean. Sometimes she put on the whole outfit—mostly to raise the prices on the herbs she sold to townsfolk. She’d put on the scarves and the long skirt with the tassels, and the apron, the earrings and the necklaces of Roman coins. But she always told me: “When regular people look for Gypsies it is usually for trouble: trouble because they’re already in it, or trouble because they want to bring it to you.” She counted healers and princes among her forebears, stowaways on ships crossing the oceans, petty thieves and child brides. In other words, she was everything and nothing all together. I heard so many stories about this ancestor and that one, so many fanciful tales of where my mama had been, by boat and by horse, in this encampment and on the edge of that city, that I began to doubt if even she was real, or just a spirit that came to charm us.

One thing was for certain: we were part of Two Rivers, and it was part of us.



There is a way to own land, and there is a way to inhabit it. The people of Two Rivers were born out of a world where everyone shared the toil and the harvest, but were born into a world where walls and fences had taken on the force of Providence, a Providence determined to mine the earth and map it off into sections that could be devoured.

The official history of the county states that “Two Rivers was settled after Austin, but soon grew to rival it in numbers of people and in goods produced.” Settled. That is one thing Two Rivers has never been. Unsettled would be more like it; people moving in and out, everyone welcome, the rivers abundant in fish, the land in berries and game, and yet under it all, a mystery that outsiders saw as craziness, but for those of us who grew up there, it was life itself.

First the Osage and their Lakota brethren passed through, peoples to whom this land was considered for centuries a sacred place to be born, and once the white man came, a terrible place to die. If you listen carefully at night, especially during a waning moon, you can hear their songs, which inhabit the rocks and the hills, the rivers and the very trees that move in the wind. My “uncles” from those tribes would pass through now and then, telling us about the old ways, how they tried to hold to them, how life got worse the further west they got pushed.

There were French trappers that came through, but left nothing more than an occasional child. A few Swedes, who liked the challenge of chopping down trees and clearing the land. Then Irish and Italians from New York’s back door slums. Escaped slaves and deserting soldiers from both the Union and the Confederacy. Singers, dancers, people with no known history. Medicine women. Blind seers. You name it.

In fact, the first people to live here may not even have been people, as we know the meaning of the word. There are carvings on the big rocks, now submerged at the junction of the rivers, that my father said could not have been made by human hands. There are stories of spirits drowning spirits and strange creatures being born out of the waters.

One of my earliest memories was of a drowning. It was about 10 years ago, so I must have been 5 or 6, and the time of the year must have been spring, for the waters were over the banks, and flooding the fields where our corn was to be planted. We heard a moaning coming from the big river right after supper one night. Mama was scraping and stretching hide for shoes. Papa was reading tales of pirates and warriors to me by candle light, while I held Teresa in my lap. My mother had to have been pregnant with Joseph, but I don't remember her being big in the stomach.

It had rained hard for 3 days and 3 nights, my mama told me years later. "People were tired of the rain, and began to question heaven," she'd said.

Our house was sturdy enough and no rain came in, save in the fruit cellar below ground. We were getting low on provisions, like most people do in spring, but Mama was making a few pairs of shoes for the nuns in town. They were cheapskates like everyone else, but it would be enough money to tide us over until daddy could get steady work on the farms. Even though we had been living on a lot of fried bread and beans, we never went hungry, as far as I can remember. Daddy had to be careful hunting and trapping now, because they were making laws about "in season" and "out of season", laws that weren't respected much by anyone, but if you got caught by the sheriff, he'd take out his resentment he had toward all of Two Rivers by locking you up and beating you up. Or beating you up and then locking you up.

After a while the rain stopped, and we could hear the drops dripping off the trees onto the roof. It was very peaceful then, all of us around the fire: me, Theresa, Mama and Daddy. It wasn't heaven, but it wasn't bad.

As the dripping quieted, we began to hear a strange sound. Something human, something lost.

“The spirit of the river is howling tonight,” my mother said, not looking up from her work.

My daddy stopped reading and listened for awhile.

“It isn’t just the river,” he said, after a long silence. “I hear a man in trouble. I hear him steadily approaching death.”

It was the first time I recall hearing that word, and I was about to ask what “death” meant, when a burst of wind blew open our door. I began to cry, but my mama grabbed me up and held on.

“They won’t hurt you, Graciela. It’s not for innocents they come this night.”

I failed to understand the full meaning of those words as well, only that I was safe in mother’s arms, and that something strange was about to pass. My father got up, put on his wading boots and longcoat.

“Are you planning to go see?” my mother asked him. Her eyes looked like cat’s eyes to me in the thin and piercing light of the lantern. As if she could see deep into the heart of things.

“I believe that I should,” he said. “Will you stay with the children?”

My mother laid down her hide work and stood up. She said, as slowly as she could:

“I think we should all go.” And she picked up Theresa, put on her long blue shawl, wrapped Theresa in it, and told me to wrap myself in the wool blanket my sister and I slept under.

Now, you may wonder how I could remember these things so clearly, being so young. I can’t say for certain that some of what I remember I heard later, when the story was told and retold. All I know is that my father and mother, usually people of many words, spoke those few so clearly that even now I can almost feel their breath on my neck.

We walked the path to the little copse of ash trees just above the big bend in the river. The moon was rising, and although it was one day shy of full, it gave enough light upon the river so that we could see the outlines of what was there clearly. My daddy and my mama were both

“seeing for seeing” as they called it, seeing beyond the outlines to both the substance of things, and their shadows.

“Look there,” my father said. “There is a man caught in the roots by the bend.”

“A man and a beast,” my mother said.

And sure enough, as our eyes adjusted to the moonlight, we could see a man caught up in the big water. He kept rising his head up above the waves, but we could tell he was losing the battle. His right leg was caught in the stirrup of his saddle, and something had hold of his left leg in the water. The horse was pulling on him something fierce, so that I wondered if his leg might snap clear off.

Papa had brought a chain of rope, which he tied to the biggest tree on our side, and told my mother, “Toss me the rope when I make it across.” Then he headed upstream to the ford.

“Mama, is papa going to be all right?” I asked.

“Yes, Graciela, don’t you worry. He knows what he does.”

I was silent for a while, and then asked her:

“Do you think the man with the horse is accursed?”

She looked at me with a strange look.

“Where did you learn that word?” she asked.

“Bobby Fuller’s mom said that about the new family that just lost their baby.”

She reached over and tussled my hair a little.

“Don’t listen to everything that Miss Fuller says,” she said.

I was not satisfied, so I asked again,

“But Mama, do you think that man is accursed, for being hung so in the river?”

She looked at me, with an even stranger look.

“Only God knows,” she said. And then raised her head and seemed to talk directly to the moon. She spoke softly:

“And some nights, I think that God hides that terrible knowledge even from himself.”

We heard my father’s voice from across the river.

“Naomi, throw me the rope!” he shouted.

My mother handed Theresa to me, wound the rope in a tight coil and flung it across the waters. My father caught it and tied it off to the big tree in whose roots the horse and rider were hung up. The horse was half-way in and half-way out of the water. The man was more in than out. When my daddy got to him, the man’s head was under the water, but you could see his free arm still thrashing.

Papa reached for the man’s shoulder and tried to lift him up. Once, twice, many times. Each time the man’s head came up, he would drag in as much air to his lungs as possible. My mama was praying, or enchanting, with the words only she and grandma understood. I stood with Theresa in my arms, watching.

Finally my papa unhooked the man’s foot from the stirrup, which caused the horse to try and grabble up the bank, and which caused the man to sink down into the water. Papa dove beneath the man, and freed his leg from whatever held him down. The man rose up, grabbed the rope, and as he did, the horse reared and kicked him straight in the head. The man seemed to hang there for a long, terrible second. Then he lost the rope and was swept downstream by the raging water.

I don’t know if a man could withstand such a blow to the head. Papa told us later that the man had a queer look on his face—he looked at my father, he looked at the horse and he looked up at the sky, and then seemed to choose to let go of the rope.

They found him about nine miles downriver the next day, on the big sandbar just before the Red Cedar crosses into Iowa. His pistol was still in its holster, and there was gold in his pocket. The law came out and questioned my dad, who told them the whole story. The lawmen said that he had stolen the horse from up near High Forest, and that he was

wanted in at least one other state. They never shared his name, least of all to me.

I didn't ask my mother again if the man was accursed, because the river answered that question that night. I don't know if God has mercy on a drowning man, if the man comes to the realization of what his deeds have done. I do know that there's three things you don't do. Steal a man's horse, steal a man's wife or steal a man's land. The man in the river had done the first. I have come to know several men who did the second. The last, and the worst, is a tragedy if you were the one being robbed. If you did the robbing, you called that Progress.

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**Patrick Cabello Hansel** *has published poetry in Turtle Quarterly, Parachute, The Cresset, Sojourners, and Main Channel Voices, among others. He is a grantee of the Minnesota State Arts Board and his novella, **Searching** was serialized in The Alley News from 2009 to 2012. He serves as a Lutheran pastor in inner-city Minneapolis.*

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Sorrow

Ann Phillips

Chapter 1

Lottie rose up and stretched her aching back. She had worked in the field of potatoes all morning, digging and putting them in bushel baskets. She licked the dust off her lips and wiped the dirt that had settled over her sweaty face with her sleeve.

At the sound of urgent, steady hoof beats coming up the road, Lottie ran home. The road dead-ended at their house, and the horse and rider arrived in a swirl of dust. Just as quickly as he came, he was gone. No hellos. No goodbyes. He had handed her a paper. Lottie had never received a telegram before and lived with a sense of dread should one come. The only person that she knew that had received one was her Papa. It was ten years ago, and informed her family that Asa, her older brother, had been badly injured in a fall from a train trestle just north of Asheville.

This paper was stained with sweat and smelled of dirt and body odor. Her hands shook as she unfolded it.

Owen dead (stop) You and Beck do what is right (stop) Papa (stop)

The paper shook in the breeze as she re-read the message. She sat down on the porch and leaned against a post. The paper dropped to the ground. Her lips quivered, and she threw her apron over her head and cried.

“Momma, what’s wrong?” Eight year-old August took her momma’s arm and shook it. She tried to pull the apron from her momma’s face.

Lottie’s shoulders continued to shake and there were bouts of low moans coming from beneath the stained apron.

Ten year-old Annie Mae dropped the sweet potatoes from her hands and ran across the field. “Who was that, Momma? What did he want?”

When Lottie didn’t answer, Annie picked up the paper from the ground and read it.

“Annie Mae, what does it say?” August tried to grab the paper from her sister’s hands.

“It says our papa is dead? Is it true? Is papa dead?”

Lottie took the stained apron off her head and used it to swipe at the path the tears had made as they ran down her dirty face. She stood. “I reckon so. Now get yourself back out there and pick up the rest of those sweet potatoes from the field and get ‘em in the cellar.”

Annie Mae and August did as they were told. It wouldn’t be wise to do otherwise. Not even with their papa dead somewhere.

August kicked at a clod of dirt. “Do you think Momma will take us to Papa’s funeral?”

“I doubt it. She told us a long time ago to forget him. She said that Beck was our papa now, and we just needed to get used to it.”

August stopped and put her hands on her hips. “I call Beck Papa here at home, but I told my teacher at school that I was not really a Radford. My last name is Thompson.”

Annie Mae looked back toward the house. “You shouldn’t ought have done that, August. Momma would be mad.”

August looked guilty for a moment, then stomped her foot. “Well I am a Thompson. The teacher looked at me real funny when I said it. You’re Thompson too. They can call us whatever they like, but it don’t make it so.

“Not anymore we won’t be a Thompson. Not if Mama marries Beck. I mean Papa.” She picked up a rock and threw it at the bushel basket of potatoes. “I don’t know what I mean. I go by Radford, and I guess I always will. But my blood *is* Thompson blood.”

“Mama told me it didn’t matter what blood we carried, we were all Radford children to this world and to her. Can her marrying Beck, make us have Radford blood?” She waited for Annie Mae to answer. Across the field their momma put her hands over her eyes and watched them. August knew it was best to get to work.

Four year-old Sheffield was asleep under a tree at the end of the row. Eleven year-old Brody was still digging at the last potato hill at end of his row. He stood up and asked the girls, “Who was that up there with Momma?”

“If you wanted to know, you should’ve come up there with us. So I ain’t telling.” Annie Mae stared at Brody.

“It was a telegram man. He brought Momma a paper that said Papa was dead.” August stuck out her tongue at Annie Mae.

“So papa is dead?” Brody stared ever harder at Annie Mae.

“That’s what it said.” Annie Mae picked up another clod of dirt and threw it over Brody’s head.

“Well, that’s that, I guess. He won’t be hitting Momma no more or beating on me.”

Annie Mae narrowed her eyes. She ran over and poked a finger in Brody’s shoulder. “He never beat you. You’re just saying that because I wouldn’t tell you what the wire said.”

“You must forget awfully easy, sister. Or else he never hurt you as much as he hurt me. It’s sad that he’s dead but can’t say that I’m really sorry.”

“You’re hateful Broadus Thompson.”

“Ain’t no Thompson. I am a Radford. Don’t you know what our last name is?”

Dust churned into a cloud again as another horse raced down the road. It was Beck, Lottie’s only protection from the life she had had with Owen. They had left Jackson County, North Carolina, when Owen had

almost killed her and the baby that she was carrying, which was Sheffield.

She didn't aptly know what to call Beck. The census taker last June had asked her if he was her husband, and she had said, "cousin", before she even thought. He wasn't her cousin at all. They weren't even blood kin. A woman at the General Store in Cosby had asked her the same question. "Some things are just nobody's business." Her answer came out a little harsher than she had intended, but it was true.

When she saw Beck coming up the road, August left the field and ran back to the house. "Papa is dead," she told him before her momma could speak.

Beck pulled the leather string loose and took his bag off the saddle horn, then reached and took his gun from behind the saddle. "Get back to the field and help your brothers and sister, August Radford. Right now."

Beck looked at Lottie's tears stained face. "Go on in the house, Lottie. Wash up and get dressed. We're going to town. It's time we married."

Lottie watched Beck and Bryden Conner as they signed the marriage papers. Bryden was Beck's boss on the farm and was a surety for the marriage license. She was now legally Mrs. Beck Radford. Not that it wasn't time. They had moved to Tennessee four years ago after the worst of her times with Owen. They had lived in Tennessee ever since—first in Sevier County. But Owen had found them and shot their cow. He knew they needed milk for the children, but he did it anyway.

They moved to Cosby for a time, but he found them again. This time he got Beck fired by telling people he was a horse thief. They had taken the horse Papa had given Lottie when she married, but Owen told them it was his horse and that Beck had stolen it.

Always running. Living in sin. They weren't able to marry and make things right like Papa wanted, as she was still married to Owen. She couldn't divorce him or he would know where they lived. And he didn't take kindly to being made a fool of. Not that she was making a fool of him, but he'd make it seem that way to everyone else.

Beck had once told her that Owen would be better off dead. That maybe somebody ought to kill him. She agreed, but that didn't seem likely. The Thompsons were business people in North Carolina, and everyone thought they could do no wrong. Owen's papa might have been an honorable man but Owen was not.

Lottie was sure she and the children were better off with Beck even though they weren't married. One thing for certain, Beck didn't hit her, and he tried to make a living for her and the children. She didn't know if he really loved her or just felt sorry for them because of how mean Owen was. He'd loved her a long time ago, when they were young, but things were different. Now, she thought he just felt responsible for her.

She walked to the mirror that hung over a table by the door of the magistrate's office and peered at her reflection. She'd felt beautiful when she was young. Sassy as could be, and she'd dreamed of finding love and making a family. But now look at her. She wasn't sure why anyone would want to marry her. Her nose was crooked from that last punch in the face by Owen. Her nose had oozed blood for two weeks after that. She had pushed the corner of rags up inside her nose each night to keep it from staining the pillow.

Lottie rubbed the scar on her upper lip. That was from the day Owen threw her against the wall when she was in the family way with Jacin. He had given her no time to get over the baby's death before she was in the family way again with Sheffield. They were even born the same year. Jacin in January and Sheffield in December.

She couldn't help but cry in relief because her oppression was finally over. Thankfully, her sweet baby Jacin wouldn't even have to see his

daddy after death. Owen was surely burning in hell right now. She couldn't help but remember the day Jacin died. It was as clear as if it was yesterday. The day that showed Owen's true character like no other.

Lottie's head had bounced and her bulging, pregnant body crunched and flattened against the wall. Blood ran into her mouth from the cut on her upper lip. The baby inside her gave one huge stretch and hardly moved again for the next four weeks until it was born. He had already arrived by the time the doctor stopped by. His face had reddened and he cried. Then he fell asleep and did not wake, even when Lottie's Mama washed him up.

The doctor took one look at him and shook his head. "He's dying Lottie."

"No he ain't. He's asleep. He cried when he was born. He's just fine." She narrowed her eyes in anger.

The doctor laid him on the table and raised both fists in the air. Lottie's body balled up into a knot in fear as the fists came down, hard, one on each side of his tiny body. The baby never flinched.

The doctor shook his head. "A normal baby would have flung his hands in the air and cried out. I tell you, he's dying."

Owen stood in the door and watched. His eyes locked with Lottie, and she was the first to look away. It would only make matters worse for her to scream at him, what with her Mama and the doctor there. If she let them know what he had done, there would be hell to pay when they left.

"Make funeral plans today. He'll be gone by morning." The doctor took the baby from the table and laid him in Lottie's arms.

She swaddled him in a tattered baby blanket and tucked him near her body, then turned to the wall and crumpled her face. She tasted blood as she bit her lips to squelch the scream. *I wish Owen was the one dead.* She hated him.

Owen opened the door wide and motioned for the doctor to pass.
“Thank you. We’ll take it from here.”

The doctor looked from Lottie to Owen. “I can give her something to help her sleep.”

“Nawh. She’ll be fine. It’s not like it’s the first baby we lost. It’s the third, as you well know. We got three more living ones to take care of. That’ll keep her mind off this one.”

Lottie bit harder on her lower lip, and her body shuddered. Tears ran down the side of her nose and into her mouth.

“I hardly think that could make her feel any better about this one.” The doctor squeezed his hands into fists and held them tight against his side.

“Well, don’t matter much how we feel, now does it? We have to get up and go on about our lives. Can’t lay in bed and wallow in our troubles.”

The doctor looked at Lottie lying with her back to them and shook his head. “Are you going to be alright?”

She nodded but kept her face to the wall. If she spoke, she knew she might tell him what a bastard of a man she had married. As if he couldn’t figure that out for himself.

Her baby lay beside her all night, and she never slept a wink.

“My little, sweet baby boy, Jacin.” Near midnight, she pulled his tiny body across hers and turned over to face the door, then laid him in the crook of her right arm.

It was about four in the morning when his breathing stopped. She didn’t call out to anyone. Her Mama had gone home to take care of her Papa. She wanted a few minutes more of peace with this baby that would never suckle her breasts and that she would never cradle in her arms again after today. She knew it was no use going any further with thinking about all the nevers for herself or for him.

Lottie thought back over that day. What made a man think that if you had other children that the death of a newborn would not be felt? It could not have been worse had it been her only one. Lottie had lived with it inside her belly for the eight months that she knew she was in the family way. She sang to it, talked to it, and thought about names-even had thought about its future.

That's the month that Beck came back into her life. Her childhood sweetheart.

Lottie had longed for this day that she and Beck could marry. She wanted to go home to North Carolina now that they were legally hitched, but Beck told her that it was not a good idea to go back right now. There would be a lot of speculation concerning Owen's death, and it would be best if they were living away.

The unhappiness and pain from Owen was now behind her. It was good that she didn't know the worst days of sorrow were still to come.

Ann Robbins Phillips resides in Chattanooga, TN and derives stories and characters from her North Carolina mountain genealogy research. "Revenge," her 2011 prize-winning AWC entry, is now **REVENGE**, the book. It is available at or www.amazon.com in Kindle and paperback. *Sorrow* is the first chapter of a novel in the **Revenge** series.

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*Traditional Poem*

## **Some Truth From Mary Warren**

Salem Massachusetts, 1692  
(Characters From "The Crucible" by Arthur Miller)

### **Jan Harris**

They claim that witchcraft is a mortal sin.  
We children knew the poppet weren't hers.  
Abigail Williams stuck the needle in.

Salem leaders are such stupid men  
to fancy evil in Rebecca Nurse.  
They claim that witchcraft is a mortal sin.

Goody Proctor counted me a friend.  
I gave the poppet to her with a curse.  
Abigail Williams stuck the needle in.

Abby led us children to condemn  
the blameless women, making matters worse.  
They claim that witchcraft is a mortal sin.

Goody Proctor had no plans to lend  
her husband John to Abby for her farce.  
Abigail Williams stuck the needle in.

It weren't well for Abigail in the end.  
Her love, John Proctor, placed his family first.  
They claim that witchcraft is a mortal sin.  
Abigail Williams stuck the needle in.

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**Jan Harris** is a neonatal nurse at the University of Alabama in Birmingham; married to a psychiatric nurse practitioner, Dan. They have one son, Matthew. Jan has written since the 1980's and published in literary magazines and journals. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama and has enjoyed membership in AWC since 1993.

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2012 AWC Writing Contest Winners List

FICTION – 2500 WORDS

1. Charles Farley	Dance All Night	Huntsville, AL
2. Richard Perreault	Morning Thunder	Chamblee, GA
3. Paul R. Lees-Haley	Virgin Falling	Huntsville, AL
4. Patrick Cabello Hansel	The River and Its Mercy	Minneapolis, MN

Fiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Deb Jellett	Mickey's at Christmas Midnight	Daphne, AL
Marilyn A. Johnston	A Piece of Me	Mobile, AL
Mark L. Rosser	Phthisis	Fairhope, AL
Margaret Truly	Auntie Teal and the Cat-Eyed Lady	Hoover, AL

SHORT FICTION – 1000 WORDS

1. Deb Jellett	Autumn Chill	Daphne, AL
2. Tom Glenn	Chris	Ellicott City, MD
3. Debra H. Goldstein	Grandma's Garden	Hoover, AL
4. Claudia Ware	Old Habits Die Hard	Morristown, TN

Short Fiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Sylvia Forbes	Revenge by Retriever	Fayette, MO
Terri French	Frog Giggin'	Huntsville, AL
Linda S. Safford	Down The Stairs	Madison, AL
Jennie Tudor	IFR	Loxley, AL

HUMOR – 2000 WORDS

1. E. Gail Chandler	Chasing a Halloween Hare	Shelbyville, KY
2. Deb Jellett	The Silver Fox	Daphne, AL
3. Jeff Sparks	Church Folk	Huntsville, AL
4. Annell C. Gordon	Walking to Whatley	Grove Hill, AL

Humor Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Debra H. Goldstein	The Rabbi's Wife Stayed Home	Hoover, AL
Gary R. Hoffman	Unimportant	Okeechobee, FL
Robert B. Robeson	A Saga of Surviving to Seventy	Lincoln, NE
Charles S. Walsh	Jack And Emma	Eufaula, AL

FREE VERSE POEM

1. Cindy Peavy	Manelli's San Pedro, Belize	Birmingham, AL
2. Lynn Veach Sadler	The Truth About Her Play	Sanford, NC
3. Patrick Cabello Hansel	Seeding	Minneapolis, MN
4. Jane Sasser	Dirge	Oak Ridge, TN

Free Verse Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Gail Denham	Past Trauma	Sunriver, OR
Emily Grimes-Henderson	Phonics	Pinson, AL
Ruth Hill	She (Ode to a Roadside Weed)	Chetwynd, BC, Canada
Joseph L. Whitten	Two Springs	Odenville, AL

JUVENILE FICTION - 2500 WORDS

1. Sandra Havriluk	From Cradle to Grave	Norcross, GA
2. Debbie Izzi	The Misery Eaters	Napa, CA
3. Joan Leotta	The Secret of Greatness	Calabash, NC
4. Rose Marie Stutts	Not Our Kind	Tuscaloosa, AL

Juvenile fiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

George M. Kelly, Jr.	Andy Rimsky Stole My Bicycle	Roanoke, VA
Kathryn Lay	Racing the Wind	Arlington, TX
Carolyn Madero	The Boy Who Couldn't Say His Name	Stamford, CT
Cindy Peavy	Ali Saves the Dragonflies	Birmingham, AL

NONFICTION – 2500 WORDS

1. Laura Loomis	To the People Who Bought the House at the End of My Court	Pittsburg, CA Huntsville, AL
2. Beth Thames	The Spaces In-Between	
3. Carolyn Clingan O'Brien	All I Need to Know I Learned From a Cowboy	Fairhope, AL
4. Annell C. Gordon	The Single Secret	Grove Hill, AL

Nonfiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Bonnie Faye Dunn	Them Two Boys	Healdsburg, CA
Debra H. Goldstein	An Open Line	Hoover, AL
P. T. Paul	Scattered Afternoon Thunderstorms	Spanish Fort, AL
Ann Phillips	Diacritically Identified	Hixson, TN

TRADITIONAL POEM

1. Joseph L. Whitten	Learning to Tell Time	Odenville, AL
2. Jan Martin Harris	Some Truth from Mary Warren	Birmingham, AL
3. Jerri Hardesty	A Southern Spring	Brierfield, AL
4. Catherine Moran	The Silver Moon	Little Rock, AR

Traditional Poem Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Joanne Cage	Southern Snow Dance	Leeds, AL
E. Gail Chandler	Thirteen and Counting	Shelbyville, KY
Linda Hudson Hoagland	A Dream Trip	North Tazewell, VA
Carolyn Madero	Twirl Baby Twirl	Stamford, CT

FIRST CHAPTER of a NOVEL

1. Michelle Lowery Combs	Daddy's Girl	Jacksonville, AL
2. Ann Phillips	Sorrow	Hixson, TN
3. Glen Wood	Awake the God of Day	Hixson, TN
4. Andrew Hamilton	The Memory Gardener	Washington D.C.

First Chapter Novel Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

N. Joan Blackwell	The Stillpath	Daleville, AL
Ramey Channell	Lovely, Dark and Deep	Leeds, AL
Larry Williamson	Muskogi Sunset	Tallassee, AL
Larry Wilson	A Lack of Reflection	Wetumpka, AL

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