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Thomas F. Monteleone
Contents

As its title implies, Borderlands contains fiction that resides out there on the edge, on the perimeters of what's being done in the field of contemporary horror, dark fantasy, and suspense literature (hereafter referred to as HDF). When I solicited material for what I hope will be the first of many volumes, I made it clear I didn't want stories that employed any of the traditional symbols and images of the genre. I wanted writers to expand the envelope, to look beyond the usual metaphors, and bring me something new.

Some fresh meat, so to speak.

The stories you now hold in your hands represent almost eight months of sifting through more than a thousand submitted manuscripts. I suffered through this editing ordeal for several reasons (besides needing the money, of course): the field of HDF needed a market for short fiction that took no prisoners, that did not precategorize its submissions, and that opened itself up to the new voices as well as those of seasoned masters. Let's face it--most of the anthologies which appear year after year have tables of contents that can almost be interchangeable with one another. The same list of slick, proficient HDF writers who are well known to most of us. Now this is not to say I don't

like what the Dark Brotherhood of Familiar Names writes (indeed, more than a few of them are contributors to this volume) ... it's just that I think the field of HDF needs a transfusion of new blood.

And like I said before, some fresh meat.

Each Borderlands story is unique, presenting a new vision or a new direction for HDF literature. If the authors chose to work with traditional material (werewolves, ghosts, serial killers, etc.), they explored these familiar mythologies from perspectives made fresh and exhilarating--maybe a little skewed, maybe a little depraved, but always in ways that remained intriguing and inventive.

Borderlands stories appear without restriction, prejudice, or taboo. I made certain there is no one "type" of story to be found here, so please, expect the unexpected. Tales of graphic violence, or "splatter," operate alongside internalized, brooding examinations of the human psyche in torment. There are some pieces of grim reality, twisted dreams, and even a few leavening touches of humor. There are stories by award-winning veterans and some by bold newcomers--each tale going its own way, seeking its own unique path to the

Outer
Banks, to the Farthest Shores, to the Gates of Terra Incognita.
The only common thread, the only true connective tissue among them all, is that
they are all extremely well written. You will be treated to a potpourri of styles and viewpoints and techniques. Some stories will dazzle, while others will quietly subvert, but they will all reach down and grab for the soft parts.
So come on now. Get ready to take a different kind of journey-- a trip to the places that lie beyond the mapped out regions of the imagination. The wind is starting to snarl and the light grows feeble.
A good time to begin ...
--Thomas F. Monteleone
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THE CALLING
David B. Silva
Dave Silva has, in the space of only a few years, established himself as a very
fine writer. His fiction displays sensitivity, a lyrical style, and imagery that
demands a powerful emotional response. Silva's work has appeared in many magazines and anthologies, including the prestigious Year's Best Horror Stories,
and he is the author of several novels. Although he's also well known for his editorship of an excellent magazine of features and short fiction, The Horror Show, David recently terminated the magazine so that he could devote all of his
time to writing.
A double-edged sword, that. We lose a valuable fiction market, but we'll be getting more stories from a young master of the genre. The following story, a chilling odyssey across the landscape of slow death and grim revelation, is Silva's best ever.
It never stops.
The whistle.
The sound is hollow, rising from a cork ball enclosed by red plastic. His mother
no longer has the strength to blow hard--the cancer has made
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certain of that--so the sound comes out as a soft song, like the chirring of a
cricket somewhere off in another part of the house, just barely audible. But there. Always unmistakably there.
Blair buries his head beneath his pillow. He feels like a little boy again, trying to close out the world because he just isn't ready to face up to what is
out there. Not yet. Maybe never, he thinks. How do you ever face up to something
like cancer? It never lets you catch up.
It's nearly three o'clock in the morning now.
And just across the hall ...
Even with his eyes closed, he has a perfect picture of his mother's room: the lamp on her nightstand casting a sickly gray shadow over her bed, the blankets
gathered at her feet. Behind her, leaning against the wall, an old ironing board
serves as a makeshift stand for the IV the nurse was never able to get into his
mother's veins. And the television is on. And the bars on the side of the bed are up to prevent her from falling out. In his mind, Blair sees it all. Much too

clearly.
He wraps himself tighter in the pillow.
The sound from the television is turned down, but he still thinks he can hear a
scene from Starsky and Hutch squealing from somewhere across the hallway.
Then the whistle.
A thousand times he has heard it calling him ... at all hours of the night ...
when she is thirsty ... when she needs to go to the bathroom ... when she needs
to be moved to a new position ... when she is in pain. A thousand times. He
hears the whistle, the soft whirring call, coming at him from everywhere now. It
is the sound of squealing tires from the street outside his bedroom window. It
is the high-pitched hum of the dishwasher, of the television set, of the
refrigerator when it kicks on at midnight.
Everywhere.
He has grown to hate it.
And he has grown to hate himself for hating it.
An ugly thought comes to mind: why ... doesn't she succumb? Why hasn't she died
by now? It's not the first time he's faced himself with this question, but lately it seems to come up more

and more often in his mind. Cancer is not an easy thing to watch. It takes a person piece by piece. ...
"My feet are numb."
"Numb?"
"Like walking on sandpaper."
"From the chemo?"
"I don't know."
"Maybe ..." Blair said naively, "maybe your feet will feel better after the chemo's over." He had honestly believed that it would turn out that way. When the chemo stopped, then so would her nausea and her fatigue and her loss of hair. And the worst of the side effects had stopped, for a while. But the numbness in her feet... that part had stayed on, an ugly scar left over from a
body pumped full of dreadful things with dreadful names like doxorubicin and dacarbazine and vinblastine. Chemicals you couldn't even pronounce. It wasn't long before she began to miss a step here and there, and soon she was having to
guide herself down the hallway with one hand pressed against the wall.
"Sometimes I can't even feel them," she once told him, a pained expression etched into the lines of her face.
She knows, Blair had thought at the time. She knows she's never going to dance
again. The one thing she loves most in the world, and it's over for her.
The heater kicks on.
There's a vent under the bed where he's trying to sleep. It makes a familiar, almost haunting sound, and for an instant, he can't be sure if he's hearing the
soft, high-pitched hum of the whistle. He lifts his head, listens. There's a hush that reminds him of a hot summer night when it's too humid to sleep. But the house seems at peace, he decides.
She's sleeping, he tells himself in a whisper. Finally sleeping.
For too long, the endless nights have haunted him with her cancerous likeness.
She is like a butterfly: so incredibly delicate. She's lying in bed, her eyes half closed, her mouth hung open. Five feet, seven inches tall and not quite

ninety pounds. The covers are
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pulled back slightly, her nightgown is unbuttoned and the outline of her ribs resembles a relief map.
She's not the same person he used to call his mother.
It's been ages since he's seen that other person. Before the three surgeries. Before the chemotherapy. Before the radiation treatments. Before he finally locked up his house and moved down state to care for her ...
She cried the first time she fell. It happened in her bedroom, early one morning
while he was making breakfast. He heard a sharp cry, and when he found her, her
legs were folded under like broken wings. She didn't have the strength to climb
back to her feet. For a moment, her face was frozen behind a mask of complete surprise. Then suddenly she started crying.
"Are you hurt?"
She shook her head, burying her face in her hands.
"Here, let me help you up."
"No." She motioned him away.
He retreated a step, maybe two, staring down at her, studying her, trying to put
himself in her position. It occurred to him that she wasn't upset because of the
fall--that wasn't the reason for the tears--she was crying because suddenly she
had realized the ride was coming to an end. The last curve of the roller coaster
had been rounded and now it was winding down once and for all. No more corkscrews. No more quick drops. No more three-sixties. Just a slow, steady deacceleration until the ride came to a final standstill. Then it would be time
to get off. The fall ... marked the beginning of the end.
It had been a harsh realization for both of them.
He began walking with her after that, guiding her one step at a time from her bedroom to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the living room, from the living room to the bathroom. A week or two later, she was using a four-pronged cane. A
week or two after that, she was using a wheelchair.
Everything ran together those few short weeks, a kaleidoscope of forfeitures, one after the other, all blended together until he could hardly recall a time when she had been healthy and whole. ...
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She's going to die.
Blair has known that for a long time now.
She's going to die, but ...
but...
how long is it going to take?
It seems like forever.
A car passes by his bedroom window. It's been raining lightly and the slick whine of the tires reminds him of that other sound, the one he's come to hate so
much. He hates it because there's nothing he can do now. There's no going back,
no making things better. All he can do is watch ... and wait ... and try not to
lose his sanity to the incessant call of the whistle.
He bought the whistle for her nearly two and a half weeks ago in the sporting goods section of the local Target store. A cheap thing, made of plastic and a small cork ball. She wears it around her neck, dangling from the end of a

thin
nylon cord. Once, when it became tangled in the pillowcase, she nearly choked on
the cord. But he refuses to let her take it off. It's the only way he has of keeping in touch with her at night. Unless he doesn't sleep. But he's already feeling guilty about the morning he found her sleeping on the floor in the living room. ...
When he went to bed--sometime around 1:30 or 2:00 in the morning--she'd been sleeping comfortably on the couch, and it seemed kinder not to disturb her. Seven hours later, after dragging himself out of the first sound night's sleep
in weeks, he found her sitting on the floor.
"Jesus, Mom."
She was sitting in an awkward position, her legs folded sideways, one arm propped up on the edge of the couch, serving as a pillow. No blanket. Nothing on
her feet to keep them from getting cold. And to think--she had spent the night
like that.
He knelt next to her.
"Mom?"
Her eyes opened lazily. It wasn't terribly rational, but he held out a distant
hope that she'd been able to sleep through most of the night. "I'm sorry," she
said drowsily. "I couldn't get up ... my legs wouldn't..."

"I shouldn't have left you out here all night." He managed to get her legs straightened out, to get her back on the couch, under a warm blanket, with a soft pillow behind her head.
That afternoon, he bought her the whistle.
"When you need me, use the whistle. You got that?"
She nodded.
"Night or day, it doesn't matter. If you need me for something, blow the whistle." He paused, hearing his own words echo through his mind, and a cold, shuddering realization swept over him. He didn't know when it had happened, but
somewhere along the line they had swapped roles. He was the parent now, she the
child.
"What if I can't?"
"Try it."
Like everything else, her lungs had slowly lost their strength over the past few
months, but she was able to put enough air into the whistle to produce a short,
high-pitched hum.
"Great."
That was--what?--three weeks ago?
Blair sits up in bed. The streetlight outside his window is casting a murky blue-gray light through the bedroom curtains. The room is bathed in that light.
It feels dark and strangely out of balance. He fluffs both pillows, stuffs them
behind him, and leans back against the wall. Across the hall, the light flickers, and he knows the television is still on in his mother's room. It seems
as if it's far away.
He shudders.
Let her sleep, he thinks. Let her sleep forever.

Sometimes the house feels like a prison. Just the two of them, caught in their life-and-death struggle. The ending already predetermined. It feels ... not lonely, at least not in the traditional sense of the word ... but ... isolated.

Outside these walls, there is nothing but endless black emptiness. But it's in here where life is coming to an end. Right here inside this house, inside these walls.

The television in her room flickers again.

Blair stares absently at the shifting patterns on the bedroom door across the hall. He used to watch that television set while she was in the bathroom. Sometimes as long as an hour, while she

changed her colostomy bag ...

"I'll never be close to a man again," she told him a few months after the doctors had surgically created the opening in the upper end of her sigmoid colon. The stoma was located on the lower left side of her abdomen. "How could anyone be attracted to me with this bag attached to my side? With the foul odor?"

"Someone will come along, and he'll love you for you. The bag won't matter."

A fleeting sigh of hope crossed her face, then she stared at him for a while, and that was that. She hadn't had enough of a chance to let it all out, so she kept it all in. The subject never came up again. And what she did on the other side of the bathroom door became something personal and private to her, something he half decided he didn't want to know about anyway.

If he had a choice.

"How're you doing in there?" he asked her late one night. He'd had to help her out of bed into the wheelchair, and out of the wheelchair onto the toilet. That was all the help she ever wanted. But she'd been in there, mysteriously quiet, for an unusually long time.

"Mom?"

"I'm okay," she whispered.

"Need any help?"

More quiet.

"Mom?"

"What?"

"Do you need any help?"

"I've lost the clip."

"The clip?"

"For the colostomy bag. It's not here."

"You want me to help you look for it?"

"No. See if you can find another one in one of the boxes in the closet."

"What does it look like?"

"It's ... a little plastic ... clip."

He found one, the last one, buried at the bottom of a box. It had the appearance of a bobby pin, a little longer, perhaps, and

made of clear plastic instead of metal. "Found one."

"Oh, good."

He pulled the sliding pocket door open, more than was necessary if all he had intended to do was hand her the clip. The bathroom was smaller than he

remembered it. There was a walker in front of her, for balance if she ever had to stand up, and the toilet had metal supports on each side to help her get up and down. It seemed as if the entire room was filled with aids of one kind or another.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

She was hunched over, leaning heavily against one of the support bars, her nightgown pulled up around her waist. Her face was weighted down with a weariness he'd never seen before and for the first time he understood how taxing this daily--sometimes three or four times a day--process had become for her. When she looked up at him, she seemed confused and disoriented.

"Are you okay?"

"I can't find the clip." She showed him the colostomy pouch for the first time.

He couldn't bring himself to see how it was attached to her. Partly because he didn't want to know, and partly because that would have been like checking out her scars after surgery. Some things are better left to the imagination. More important, there was a woman in front of him whose ribs were protruding from her chest, whose face was a taut mask stretched across her skull, whose fingers were frail sticklike extensions of her hands; and this woman, looking so much like a stranger, was his mother. God, this was the woman who had given him birth.

"I've got the clip right here."

"Oh." She tried a smile on him, then glanced down at the bag in her hands. The process was slow and deliberate, but after several attempts she was finally able to fold the bottom side of the bag over.

Blair slid the clip across it. "Like this?"

She nodded.

And he realized something that should have occurred to him long before this: it was getting to be too much for her. As simple as emptying the bag might be, it was too confusing for her to work through the procedure now.

"Okay, I think we've got it."

"Oh, good."

"Ready to get out of here?"

"I think so." She whispered the words, and before they were all out, she started to cry.

"Mom?"

She looked up, her eyes as big as he'd ever seen them.

God, I hate this, he thought, taking hold of her hand and feeling completely, despairingly helpless. I hate everything about this.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Her crying seemed to grow louder for a moment.

"Mom?"

"I didn't want for you to have to do that."

Lovingly, he squeezed her hand. "I know."

"I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about. It's not a big deal." He pulled a couple of

squares of toilet paper off the roll and handed them to her. "Things are hard enough. Don't worry about the small stuff. Okay?"
By the time he got her back into bed again, she had stopped crying. But he'd never know if it was because of what he'd said, or if it was because she didn't
want to upset him anymore. They were both bending over backwards trying not to
upset each other. There was something crazy about that.
The whistle blows.
At least he thinks it's the whistle. Sometimes, it's so damn hard to tell.
There's that part of him, that tired, defeated part of him, that doesn't want to
hear it anyway. How long can this thing drag on? Outside, all of thirty or forty
feet away, a man jogs by with his dog on the end of a leash. People who pass this house don't have the slightest inkling of what's going on behind these walls. A woman's dying in here. And dying right alongside her is her son.
He pulls the covers back, hangs his feet over the edge of the bed.
For several days, she hasn't been able to keep food down. That
15
memory comes horribly clear to him now. ...
"Feel better?"
She shook her head, her eyes closed, her body hunched forward over the bowl.
Then suddenly another explosion of undigested soup burst from her mouth.
He held the stainless steel bowl closer; it felt warm in his hands. This had been going on for nearly three days now. It seemed like it might never stop.
"You've got to take some Compazine, Mom."
"No."
"I can crush it for you and mix it with orange juice."
No response.
"Mom?"
No response.
"It'll go down easier that way."
"No."
"Christ, Mom, you've got to take something. You can't keep throwing up forever."
"The pills make me sick."
"Sicker than this?"
"They make me sick."
The whistle.
Blair slips a T-shirt over his head, pulls on a pair of Levi's. He tries to convince himself it'll stop. Maybe if he just leaves it alone, the sound will quietly drift into the background of the television set, and he'll be able to go
back to sleep again. ...
"It'll stop on its own," she tried to convince him. "But if it doesn't, you'll
dehydrate."
At last the vomiting appeared to have run its course. At least for the time being. She sat up a little straighter, taking in a deep breath. When she opened
her eyes, they were faraway, devoid of that sparkle that used to be so prominent
behind her smile.
"Please, just take one Compazine."
"No."
Her skin began to lose its elasticity a few days later. The nausea
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stopped on its own, just like she'd said it would. But now, the only liquid she

was taking was in the form of crushed ice, and there was the very real fear that
dehydration might eventually become too painful for her.
"We can try an IV," the visiting nurse told him. "It won't help her live longer,
but it'll probably make her more comfortable."
"Her veins aren't in very good shape."
"I've done this before."
They had to lean the ironing board up against the wall behind the headboard of
her bed, because they didn't have an IV stand. The nurse hung the solution bag
from one of the legs, and it seemed to work well enough. Then she tried to find
a vein in his mother's right arm. It wasn't as easy as she'd thought it would be.
After several new entries, he turned away.
His mother began to whimper.
"The needle keeps sliding off." The nurse switched to her left arm, still
struggling to find a workable vein, still failing miserably.
"That's enough," he finally said. "Let's just forget it."
"Her veins are so--"
There was a tear running down the cheek of his mother, and her mouth was twisted
into a grimace which seemed frozen on her face.
"I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to hurt you."
She rolled over, away from him. ...
He's standing at her bedroom door now, and she's in that same position: with her
back turned toward him. He can see the black cord of the whistle tied around her
neck, but the whistle is out of sight.
"Mom?"
The television flickers, drawing his attention. The scene is from Starsky and
Hutch, shot inside a dingy, gray-black interrogation room. There's a young man
sitting in an uncomfortable chair, Starsky standing over him, badgering him. It
seems faraway and unimportant, and Blair's attention drifts easily back to his
mother.
"You need anything?"
He moves around the foot of her bed, stops alongside her, the stainless steel
bowl on the floor only a few inches away from his

feet. "Mom?"
Her eyes are closed. She looks peaceful. Her nightgown is partially open in
front. There's a thick tube running up the right side of her body and over her
collarbone, running underneath the skin--like an artery--where the doctors had
surgically implanted a shunt just a few short weeks earlier. Inside that tube,
flowing out of her stomach, up her body, and back into her bloodstream, there's
an endless current of cancerous fluid the tumor has been manufacturing for
months.
In her left hand, wrapped around a long, thin finger, she's holding the nylon
cord. He can almost hear the whistle's highpitched hum calling to him from
somewhere else. Sometimes it sounds as if it's singing his name--Bl-air--and

he
wonders if he'll ever be able to hear his name out loud again without being swept away by the strange concoction of resentment and helplessness that overwhelms him.
He touches her arm.
For a moment, everything is perfect: she's sleeping soundly, the house is quiet,
the whistle stilled. Too good to be true.
"Mom?"
He places the palm of his hand over her chest, not believing what's going through his mind now. No intake of breath. No beat of heart. Instead, she feels
cool to the touch, and ... and absolutely ... motionless.
"Jesus ..."
"I don't want to talk to anyone."
"You sure?" he asked, holding his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone.
"They'll want to visit."
"Maybe not."
"I don't want anyone to see me like this."
It had happened so gradually: first the phone calls, then the visitors, finally
the mail, and before he had realized what had happened, they had isolated themselves from the outside world. It was just the two of them, alone, inside the house, waiting for the cancer to run its course. ...

One more time, he places the palm of his hand ever so lightly across her chest.
"Mom? Please, Mom."
The wall above her bed flickers with the light from the television set, reflecting dully off the underside of the ironing board. He glances up, staring
at the IV tube still dangling from the leg of the board, remembering too clearly, too vividly how much pain she went through the night the nurse had struggled to find a good vein in her arms.
"I never should have let her do that to you."
It feels cold inside the house. The room seems darker, smaller, a lonelier place.
He stands next to the bed, careful not to disturb her, though somewhere in the
back of his mind he's already aware that she's finally at peace now. She's lying
near the edge, her legs bent at the knees, her arms bent at the elbows. She looks as if she's praying. For a moment longer, he stares, failing to remember a
time when the flesh wasn't pulled taut like a death mask across her face. This
is the way he'll always remember her. It's all he has left.
The television draws his attention again, and that tiny distraction is somehow
enough to stir him. He turns toward the door, wanting to be out of the room, thinking it can't be over ... he doesn't want it to be over ... maybe if he comes back later ...
Then he hears it again.
The whistle. A soft, echoing sound. Calling him.
Bl-air.
"Mom?"
He expects different when he turns back, but he finds her eyes still closed, her
chest still motionless. The nylon cord hangs loosely around her neck, the whistle lost somewhere inside her cotton nightgown. He sits on the edge of

the
bed, studying her, suddenly feeling like a little boy. It's a lonely feeling.
Bl-air.
It sounds again.
The whistle.
With care, he unwraps her finger from around the black cord. Then he opens
the
front of her nightgown and follows the cord
19
down ... down there ... down to where the whistle is softly blowing, to where the cancer has been growing. The incision from her last surgery is open, the tissue curled back, and inside the cavity--ash gray and darker, pulsing--the cancer is wrapped like a kiss around the mouthpiece of the whistle, exhaling
a
soft humming song--
Bl-air.
It never stops.
The cancer never stops.
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Scarlaris, June 28th
Harlan Ellison
After all this time, what new can I add to the ongoing saga that is Harlan Ellison? Because he stands hip deep in charisma, it's hard to talk about Ellison-the-writer without commenting on his personality. Abrasive,
outspoken,
articulate, brilliant, clever, incisive, caustic, vengeful, impassioned, whimsical, warmhearted. Harlan is all of the above. If you are truly his
friend,
I believe he would do just about anything for you; and if you're his enemy, well, watch out. ... He is the original no-bullshit kind of guy. You will
always
know where you stand with Ellison, and these days, that's refreshing.
To wrap things up, I need only say this: Harlan Ellison is the best fantasist
we
've got. When he's on top of his game, nobody does it better.
They chased him through the woods and brought him back and lynched him. Their sheets making it awkward to kick him, they used the sawed-off ball bats and a tire iron to bust him up pretty good before they threw the chain over the
sweet
gum.
21
They secured the chain around his neck with the tow hook and pulled it so
tight
the links broke flesh. Then six of them got on the other end of the chain
and,
calling him a fuckin' nigger-fucker, they gave the chain a sharp, mean yank
that
sent him jerking so high his head hit the thick branch overhead. They slung
the
chain around the bole of the sweet gum and looped it fast. Then they stood
back
and watched.
His pale white face went almost black with mottled patches of trapped blood.
His
mouth opened and his tongue bulged past his lips. Rafe offered a pack of Marlboros around the group. They all lit up, and Wes Kurlan puffed on his
pipe,
his hood held loosely in his left hand. Above them there was prolonged
jerking
and trembling, and they commented on that. Several of them, exhausted from

the
crashing run through thickets, sat down and breathed deeply. Wes Kurlan inquired
with concern about John Porter's condition. John had had a mild stroke only four
months ago. John said he felt okay; a little winded; but okay.
They hung around for half an hour.
Then they retraced their steps back out to the road, stopped to pick up the body
of Ansel Lomax, put it gently into the bed of the lead truck, and drove back to
town. The wind caught the pants legs of the man on the sweet gum, and he swayed
gently, as if from a heavenly breath.
He had been shooting Klansmen with a 30.06 hunting rifle, from the concealment
of the woods that ran deep from the edge of the road to the river. He had been
working with the Deacons, a militant black group in Alabama, for about three
years. He had been sending money for longer than that, but had finally decided
he wanted to be involved in a little hands-on activity in aid of equaling the odds.
The Deacons--sharecroppers, furniture factory hands, two postmen, a dentist, and
three Viet Nam vets--had discovered, more than twenty years earlier, that the
nicest target on a bright night with a full moon was the long, white, stupid
sheet worn by a moron standing high on the flat-bed of a truck, whooping like a
demented night owl and waving a Louisville Slugger over his head. Nice target,
perfect target: pale white and clear as a light against the
22
woods.
He had put the crosshairs of the Bushnell scope flat on the center of that
peaked white hood, tracked the truck as it passed on the road, and squeezed the
trigger of the big game rifle slowly, sending the pencil-thick, three-inch-long
expanding slug on its way. It hit Ansel Lomax in the left cheek with a muzzle
energy of 2930 foot-pounds and blew his head apart. His body lofted and went
over the side of the truck. Now the hood was black, and filled with bloody soup.
He slid eleven feet.
The three Deacons with him had escaped, but he was from Chicago and didn't know
his way around scrub growth and mud pits. They chased him through the woods and
brought him back and lynched him. Then they drove back to town with what was
left of Ansel Lomax.
The white man from Chicago hung in the darkness for two hours, swaying gently in
the pleasant northern Alabama breeze.
Then he reached up, grabbed the chain, and pulled himself to a point where he
could unclip the tow hook. He hung on to the chain for a moment, then dropped
the fifteen feet to the muddy ground.
He leaned against the tree for a while, massaging his throat, and then, spitting
blood, he turned to look toward the road. After a few minutes he scuffled his
way back to the road and walked in the opposite direction the trucks had

taken.
In the breeze, the chain clinked against itself, making a small sweet sound in
the night.
He was not in Chicago; he was not in northern Alabama. He was in Beloit, Wisconsin. He stared down the dingy, ratty length of Fourth Street, at the bars
and men's rooming houses encrusted with the soot and pulp refuse from the Beloit
Coron factory on the other side of the street. The Beloit Corporation was famous: it manufactured paper-making machinery for the world.
The man from northern Alabama had come into town on 57. He had stopped at several bars on the way. In Beloit, they were usually called "lounges," not bars
or taps or pubs.
He wandered down Fourth, stopping for a tequila, lime and salt

at La Tropicana; a shot of J.D. with a Bud back at the coconut Grove; an Arrow
schnapps at Granny's; and finally came to The Werks. As he came through the door
into the blue smoke, he took note that it was a workingman's oasis, and made sure he was wearing a blue chambray shirt, twill pants, and an old, cracked leather bomber jacket with a fur collar against the cold.
He picked out a man in his middle forties sitting alone at the bar working on a
bottle of Ten High. As he poured his shot glass to the line from the bottle, the
man from northern Alabama saw that the drinker was missing the thumb and little
finger of his right hand. He walked to the bar and took the stool beside the drinker. The man looked up only momentarily.
"Hi," the man from northern Alabama said.
The drinker looked up from under thick eyebrows, nodded to the stranger, and mumbled, "Right."
They sat silently for a few minutes, till the bartender wiped the mahogany into
their area. "What can I get you?" he asked.
"I'll bet you've got a secret bottle of George Dickel down there someplace," the
man from northern Alabama said, firing off a winning grin. "Why don't you just
bring the bottle and a couple of water glasses for me and my kid brother here. I
figure he must have some kinda death wish sittin' here going at that Ten High straight. If you can't put a little good Tennessee sour mash sippin' whiskey into your kid brother, what the hell's it all about, right?"
The stranger beside him had looked up as the words kid brother were spoken. And
he realized he was, in fact, sitting beside his older brother Yernon, whom he hadn't seen all week because Vern had been on the road with the cartage company
van. Now he smiled and allowed the bartender to remove the bottle and empty shot
glass. "You must of got paid."
"Couple of Sonys fell off the loading dock. Carson told me to take 'em, he'd line 'em out as smashed on the invoice. Gave one to Ma and sold th'other one over to Janesville."
Then he made that goofy face that had always made his kid brother laugh when they were growing up.

"So. How's it goin'?"
Vernon shrugged, said, "Ah, you know, the usual. Gettin' tired
24
of drivin' interstate, though; I'll tell you that, Bobby. Sometimes I just
get
cranky as hell and begin to think it's never gonna end. You know, workin',
driving, tryin' to forget Bea and the kid."
Bobby nodded. They sat silently. Then, after a while, when the George Dickel
had
come, and they'd poured generous amounts into the tall water glasses, and
were
sipping like bluegrass Colonels, Bobby said, "You remember when Pa was
workin'
in the wet end?" He inclined his head to indicate the big Beloit Corporation
factory across the street. "Remember he used to come home some nights and go
straight upstairs and lay on down ..."
Vern said, "... and put his arm over across his eyes ..."
"Yeah, and he'd stay up there till supper, and when he come down he always
looked pulled up tight, and he'd say ..."
"... did you ever get the feelin' you'd lived too long, past your time, and
just
wanted to sleep forever?"
Bobby sighed. "That was it."
"Yeah, well, I'm gettin' to feel like that, too," Vern said. They sat
silently,
working at the secret bottle.
"I got a headache," Bobby said.
"You drink too much."
"Horseshit."
"You do. You drink too much. You're gonna die young, like Pa. They'll take
out
your liver and send it over to the college for the medical department. Famous
example of an organ that ate a man."
Bobby grinned his brother's grin. They looked a lot alike. "Fry it up with
onions, real crisp."
"I think," Vern said, slapping his hands together, "that what you need is
some
adventure! Somethin' to sober you up and put a spring in your step, m'boy"
"Hold it, Vern. I'm not goin' on one of your redneck trips. No Alpo contests,
no
wet-T-shirt bars, no pool cue brawls. Not again. Denise says she'll divorce me
I
come in torched like that again." He was serious. His hands were out flat in
the
air between them, a barrier to mischief.
His big brother (and he had no big brother, had been one of four children,
the
other three girls) laughed and leaned in to hug
25
him. "No, absolutely not! I agree. Nothin' like that. But I got somethin'
special. Somethin' I heard over to Janesville."
"Like what?"
"Like, that Nicky Pederakis messed himself up good and finally died. Of
diverticulitis."
"Of whatl What the hell's that?"
"Don't matter. But he didn't go to the doctor for a while, and his bowels got
obstructed and a fistula formed, and they operated on his colon, and he died
on
the table."
"Where the hell did you learn that kind of stuff?" Then he paused and a grim

smile froze his lips. "Good. The lousy motherfucker. He used to beat the shit out of me every day back in school."
Vern said softly, "I know."
"So that's good. Goddam it, I outlived the sonofabitch."
Vern laid a hand on Bobby's shoulder. "Come on, we're goin' over to the funeral."
His brother stared at him. After a few seconds he let the lupine smile fade, and
his face grew serious. "Yeah."
And they went outside after Vernon had paid for the fine, rare George Dickel, and there was a 1980 Mustang at the curb that hadn't been at the curb when the
man from northern Alabama had entered The Werks.
And they got in; and Vernon drove; and they went the twelve miles to Janesville;
and Vern turned into the parking lot at a funeral home Bobby didn't know, because it wasn't the one that had handled Pa's service; and they got out and went inside.
There was a ribbed black velvet directory board on a slim tubular steel stand in
the foyer. Small, tasteful plastic letters and arrows had been pressed into the
ribbing, indicating that the Kessler service was in Parlor A and the Pederakis
service was in Parlor C, the former to the left, the latter to the right.
Vernon and Bobby walked slowly toward Parlor C. There was a line of people entering the room, a dark-suited employee of the funeral home, wearing a pink carnation in his lapel, holding the door open so visitors would not get hit by
the door. He smiled bravely at Bobby and Vernon, who smiled back as bravely. They

got in at the end of the line, and moved slowly forward.
When they had paced the length of the aisle, after twenty minutes, they came at
last to the front of the parlor and found themselves looking down into the placid face of Nicky Pederakis, a dead man no longer in his middle forties, but
rather his final forties. Life had not dealt sweetly with Nicky Pederakis. Despite the refurbishment of funerary cosmeticians, or perhaps in part because
of their attentions, he looked like a cross between someone who had had his kisser regularly bashed in barroom encounters, and one of a thousand clowns exploding from a tiny car in a center ring.
Bobby stood looking.
Vern watched the family. Two men in cheap black suits, their faces younger stampings of the death mask now worn by Nicky Pederakis, were pointing at Bobby
and whispering agitatedly. They separated and turned to the people on either side. They whispered much louder now, jerking their thumbs over their shoulders
to indicate Bobby, still staring raptly into the open casket, leaning over with
his hands on the anodized pastel blue metal lid panel. He seemed unable to get
close enough.
"Hey!" One of the younger Pederakis boys was pointing at Bobby. "Who the hell are you?"
The room went silent. The knots of visitors humming condolences opened, everyone

stopped talking, and they stared first at the pointing finger, then at Bobby. It took a moment for the silence to register on Bobby, and when he looked up, still leaning over the open section at Nicky's face, he saw the room's attention
on him. He stood up. Vern moved closer. "You know me," he said to the family.
"Yeah, I know you," the other brother said, almost snarling. "You're that creep
Nicky used to kick ass alla time. What the hell you doin' here? Nicky hated your
guts."
"Just wanted to make sure the cocksucker was really dead," Bobby said, moving fast toward the side door exit. Vern was right behind him.
They got halfway through the first open row of chairs before the brothers and their friends exploded across the neat rows,
27
knocking chairs in all directions. The one who had done the pointing caught up
with Vern, reached out, and snagged the collar of the bomber jacket. Vern pivoted and hit him in the throat. The brother fell back gasping, into the crowd, and Vern picked up a folding chair and smashed him in the head with it.
Bobby grabbed Vern by the arm and pulled him through the exit door he'd pushed
open. He was screaming, "The lousy bully got what was comin' to him! I hope he
suffered like a dyin' shit, an' he's goin' straight to Hell!"
Then they were in the side-hall and Vernon grabbed a plush chair and wedged it
under the doorknob and they ran like crazy men out the back entrance of the funeral home, got to the Mustang, and left skid marks exiting the parking lot.
When Vern dropped his kid brother off at the house, he leaned out of the window
and said to Bobby, "Maybe there's still some good stuff to get, bein' alive! Whaddaya think, Bobby?"
His brother leaned in and kissed the man from northern Alabama on the lips, grinned hugely, and whooped. "Better high off that goddam minute starin' at that
sonofabitch croaked in his fuckin' baby-blue coffin than all the whiskey in the
world!"
"Remember that," the man from northern Alabama said, and drove away into the night, knowing that if there was a memory that would last, it would be of the lesson in the moment; not of an older brother who had never existed.
Across the aisle an elderly black couple, deep into their fifties, were trying
to spoon-feed their mentally impaired daughter. To the man from Beloit she appeared to be in her middle thirties. He tried to ignore the General Six Principle Baptist minister in the middle seat beside him, apparently a vegetarian or simply finicky beyond belief, who kept trying to give him foodstuffs off his flight tray. "Are you sure you wouldn't like this nice bit of
roast beef?" the Reverend Carl Schrag said. "I haven't touched it. Here, you can
take it with your own fork if you're concerned."
The man from Beloit turned away from the sight of creamed asparagus drooling from the side of the girl's mouth to smile at the minister. "No, thank you very
much. I have the fish. I don't eat meat."
28
The minister's face lit with camaraderie. "I agree absolutely completely!

Flesh
of the beast. Poor things. Stand all day and all night in tiny cubicles, in the
dark, just fattened and fattened, all their color leached out, till they're slaughtered."
"Just like the women in the whorehouses in Kuwait," the man from Beloit said, noticing with impish pleasure the look of the affronted, the look of the doltish, the look of the utterly appalled that blasted the minister's composure.
"What did you say?!" he demanded, fork trembling an inch from his mouth, speared
baby carrots now forgotten.
"Oh, I'm awfully sorry," the man from Beloit said, "I certainly didn't mean to
offend. It's just that the hideous parallel you drew ... but perhaps you're unaware of the slave trade in white women that continues to this very day in many of the southeast Arabian sultanates ..."
The minister's eyes rolled in his head. He had lost control of his motor functions. The man from Beloit reached over and gently pressed Carl Schrag's wrist. The minister's hand, bearing fork, slowly lowered. Transfixed, he simply
stared.
The man from Beloit continued eating, and continued talking. "Yes, you see, slave-holding is still practiced in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Muscat, Buraimi,
Kuwait, even Ethiopia. Oh, of course, in some of those places the practice has
been legally and publicly abolished, yet in most of them the slaves have never
been freed. In most of them, slave-buying, selling, holding, whipping, violating--perfectly acceptable by local law. Your food is getting cold."
The minister took a mouthful, continued to stare disbelievingly, like a bumblebee at the end of an entomologist's straight pin. What was this man saying
to him!
Across the aisle, the young woman was trying to wrest the spoon from her father's hand. The elderly black mother wore an expression of stunned acceptance. They had been at this chore for at least half of their lives. The man from Beloit recognized the slope of shoulders, the caring and determination
and futility in eyes and expressions, the practiced maneuvering of hands and implements around flailing body.

"But for the harems and brothels of these countries," he said to the minister,
though still watching the people across the aisle, "Western women are highly prized. Blondes, redheads, Nordic types with incredibly long legs and blue eyes
like cool fjords. Some of them are lured to the Middle East through ads in newspapers, Variety, that sort of thing. You know, 'Wanted: Dancers and Showgirls for chorus lines in Road Shows. See far places, high pay, exotic companions,' that sort of thing. And they just vanish. Or they're kidnapped right off the streets in European cities, often Marseilles. Next time you see them, they're at a slave auction in Yemen."
The minister was gasping. "Why, I've never heard of such--"
"Oh, yes, absolutely," the man from Beloit said. "Very common. And many of them
are sold into these harems, or dens of sexual fleshliness, where they're kept in
pitch-black cells on soft mattresses, and they're fed a lot of carbohydrates

to
fatten them up--apparently these Arab potentates lust after pale pale suety vessels for their disgusting pleasures."
Rev. Schrag had gone the color of his glass of milk.
"And once they're kidnapped, well, that's it," the man from Beloit said, as he
finished his fish in sauce. "We have almost no extradition recourse in such places; and the United States government, well, you can forget it; they can't chance offending one of those oil barons. You can imagine what value they place
on some nameless eighteen-year-old farm girl from Iowa, stolen while visiting Berlin, as against the cost at the pump of higher gas tariffs."
He wiped his mouth, took the last sip of coffee light, and smiled sadly at the
minister. "So you see, it was the awful parallel you drew with the roast beef."
Rev. Schrag was bereft of response. "And what takes you so far from home, I presume you're going on somewhere after Paris?"
They were on a jet liner out of New York, bound for Paris, with connections to
Jeddah, Riyadh, Cairo, and Dubai.
Across the aisle, the girl in her middle thirties was mumbling to herself, playing with her hair and trying to figure out the swing latch that lowered the
tray-table. Her mother was looking out the port; her father was trying to mop up
baby food from the seat and
30
the girl's dress.
The minister was having difficulty righting himself. This man in the aisle seat
beside him seemed to be spiritually kin, but in the name of Jesus what horrible
obscenities! He tried to convince himself that it had been innocently spoken; he
was always willing to give the benefit of the doubt. The man was very likely unsaved, but if we were to cut off all social congress with the
less-than-righteous, why, we'd never be able to snag anyone from Satan's claws.
He mustered a smile and replied, "I'm going to the Holy Land. I had several weeks I could have taken anywhere and, well, I've been meaning to do this journey for so long. ..."
"I understand perfectly," the man from Beloit said. "And where are you from? Where is your parish?'
"Senatobia, Mississippi," the minister said.
"Ah!" the man from Beloit said, with familiarity.
"Do you know it?" the minister asked, pleased now that he had given him the benefit of the doubt.
"Northwestern part of the state? Between Memphis and Oxford? Near Lake Arkabutla, isn't it?"
"Why, yes! You do know our little place!"
"No, sorry," the man from Beloit said, unbuckling his lap belt and standing. "Senatobia. Must be very small." He turned and went aft to the lavatory.
When he came back, ten minutes later, he walked past his row, noticing that Rev.
Schrag was trying to work the crossword puzzle in the airline giveaway magazine,
and he stood in the service alcove as the stewardesses racked and sent below the
used dinner trays. He stood there and pretended to be selecting a magazine

from
the rack, but he studied the elderly couple and their child.
They had hooked her up with a Walkman, the earphones tied with a ribbon under her chin so she could not inadvertently knock the little gray foam earpieces loose. She was rocking back and forth, licking her lips, her eyes closed. Her mother and father were trying to complete their own meals, the food long since
grown cold. He watched them and felt a great sadness take him. After a while, he
returned to his seat.
Carl Schrag looked up as the man from Beloit buckled in. "That was in very poor
taste, sir," he said. Stiffly.
31
"I agree" was the reply. "But let me ask you something. Just as a matter of theoretical surmise."
The minister closed the inflight magazine on his prolapsed traytable, marking the crossword's location with his ballpoint pen. He sighed with resignation, turned halfway in his seat, and fixed his traveling companion with a look that
had often commended rectitude to his parishioners. "Yes, and what would that be?"
"You believe in God, no doubt," he said.
"Are you serious?"
"Yes, yes, of course. I ask that only as a point of departure. I can see you're
a man of the cloth, and so I know the answer is yes. But what I want to ask you
is about gods, other gods, not God as we know Him."
"There is but one God, and His Son."
"Yes, I understand; and I agree absolutely. But let us for a moment consider those poor, benighted helots of heathen beliefs. Egyptians who believed in Ptah
and Thoth and Amon; Mayas who worshipped Pepeu and Raxa Caculha', the Thunderbolt; Vikings with their Odin and Loki and the rest; the Yellow River peoples and Kuan Ti, the god of war, and Kuan Yin, goddess of mercy; Altijira and Legba and Kwatee and Kronos. Gods, all of them. Strong gods, personable gods, effective gods. What about them? What do we do with them, now that their
times are gone?"
Rev. Schrag stared at him evenly. He was on firm footing now. "I have no idea what you're talking about, sir. As I said: there is but one God, and Jehovah is
His name; and His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. All the rest of
this is primitive demonology, cheap superstition. Pagan idolatry."
"Yes, of course," he said, reaching into the aisle to retrieve and hand back to
the elderly black man the soft, frayed "blankie" his daughter had thrown to the
industrial-strength carpet. "But let me have the benefit of your thinking on this, as a theologian, as a man of God who's pondered about such things. I need,
well, some guidance here; some clear thinking, if you get my meaning.
"Take, for instance, the transition from Graeco-Roman polytheism to medieval Christianity. When we read of this momentous watershed in the history of the Western World, there
32
is such a smug sense of triumph, whether we encounter it in Christian historians

like Eusebius of Caesarea or Christian apologists such as Augustine, who got sainted for being a flack for Jesus--"
Reverend Schrag's eyes popped open, he tried to speak, coughed; he made inarticulate sounds; he foundered on a sound that was the fuh-fuh-fuh beginning
of flack; and the man from Beloit made small of his abashed behavior, dismissing
it with an impatient flutter of his hand and by continuing in the same tone: "We're men of the world here; we needn't pussyfoot around it. Augustine was nothing more nor less than a p.r. man for the politics of orthodoxy. These days,
the belief that the elevation of Christianity to the position of an official state religion, instantly embraced, brooking no competition, was total, complete, immediate ... well, it's monolithic. But it wasn't, as I understand it. I mean, even as late as 385, the emperor Theodosius was having a rough time
interdicting belief in the pantheon of gods--"
His words had been coming so fast, so smoothly, that only now was the Rev. Schrag able to interdict the rococo syntax.
"Paganism! That's all it was! Ignorant savages sloughing through darkness toward
the light of Jesus Christ!"
"Ah, yes certainly, no question about it, I agree absolutely wholeheartedly," the man from Beloit said, slicing through the minister's fustian so coolly it was as if Schrag had taken a breath mint rather than having popped his eyeballs.
"But you see how driven you are to use the word 'paganism'? Which was not, at least in the first instance, a concept that the 'pagans' applied to themselves,
but one that evolved as a way of distinguishing the non-Christian survivals after the gradual Christianization of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine
and subsequent ..."
"These were barbarians ... barely able to tie their shoelaces ... they painted
their fundaments blue and ripped out each other's hearts and danced around campfires naked and ate each other's entrails... pagans... bar-bare-ians!" His
voice had spiraled to a level that was drawing attention from other passengers.
The man from Beloit smiled awkwardly at the elderly black man across the aisle,
but his attention could be held only an instant: his

daughter was singsonging, over and over, "Ma'y tinkle, ma'y tinkle, ma'y tinkle."
He turned back to Reverend Schrag and said, "Well, there is certainly no condoning such behavior, particularly the part about painting their asses blue,
but when you call them barbarians, I'm not sure you're aware of all the facts."
"Whuh-what facts?"
"Well, for instance, archaeologists working in Peru at sites such as Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke and Sechin Alto, ten thousand freezing feet above sea level in
the Andes, have found a culture that predates the Mayas by 2000 years and the Aztecs by 3000 years.
"Huge U-shaped temples ten storeys high; an enormous warehouse, bigger than a baseball field, it served as a food storage complex; the buildings gorgeously decorated with painted friezes of jaguars, spiders, serpents." He leaned in

and
whispered, "Their vivid colors preserved intact by the dry cold of the Andean atmosphere. Why do you think they would settle at that altitude, build a sophisticated civilization at the same time the Egyptians were building pyramids
and the Sumerian city-states were flourishing, in such a grossly hostile region?
"Perhaps to get closer to the gods they deified? Do you think that's possible?
What do you think about that, dropping the 'paganism' business, ass-painting notwithstanding? What do you think?"
"Will you kindly stop saying that!"
"Which part of it, the paganism?"
"No, the other."
"Oh, you mean the part about how they painted--"
"Yes! Yes, that's the part."
"Well, I don't mean to be contumacious, Reverend, but I was discussing alternative deities; it was you who brought up how they ..."
Rev. Schrag crashed back into the conversation. "There never were any such deities," he said quickly. "Until the True Word was revealed, pag--uh, heathens
believed many strange and impossible things."

"Mmm, I see. So we can assume that such 'heathen' martyrs as Hypatia of Alexandria died for nothing. But let me ask you this--" and he sneaked a glance
across the aisle where preparations to ma'y tinkle were proceeding apace, "--what if you were one such as these, one of these obsolete gods. And all your
believers were gone, all the Hypatias had been properly stoned to death by good
Christians, no more worshippers, except perhaps a random diabolist here and there, corrupt individuals trying to bring you back so you could pick winning lottery tickets for them. What do you do then?"
Stiffly, Schrag said, "I have no conjecture on that, sir."
"No idea at all?"
"None."
"You don't think maybe Hera went off in a snit and took to drinking too much mead and became a bitchy alcoholic?"
"Don't be ridiculous!"
"Maybe Jizo sank into a funk and contemplated harakiri?"
"Who did what?"
"So let me get this straight. What you're saying is that you don't think maybe
possibly Jupiter kept right on existing after Constantine bullied all the Romans
into converting, and after a while with nobody praying to him, not even one daub
of blue paint on a backside, he just got bored with it all and, say, just put a
pistol up to his Olympian forehead and blew his beatific brains out?"
The minister stared at him, growing angrier by the moment. Then he settled himself facing stiffly forward, took up the magazine, opened it, and went back
to the crossword puzzle.
"Sixteen down," the man from Beloit said idly, "an eight-letter word for 'neutral': middling."
The minister said nothing; and he did not look up as the man from Beloit unbuckled and rose, following the elderly black man as he aided his daughter toward the rear of the plane and the lavatories.

He waited as the father spoke softly to the girl, saying, "Now you go on in an'
make tinkle, Evelyn. You know. The way you do. That's a sweet child." And he
opened the door for her, saying, "Now don't touch the door, don't mess with the
lock, just go in an' make tinkle, all right? I'll be right here."
35
She went in, and he closed the door, turning to smile awkwardly at the man
waiting behind him for the cubicle next in the row.
The man from Beloit sidled past, entered the lavatory that shared a bulkhead
with the cubicle in which Evelyn was slowly and carefully pulling down her
panties, then the absorbent cotton incontinence liner. He closed his eyes for a
moment, made a small sound, and then reached through the bulkhead to touch
Evelyn's head. She closed her eyes.
"Sleep, good child. They love you so. Their time is so short. Let them live."
And he formed the aneurism, and he made it explode, and she made a gentle
sound,
and fell.
He flushed the toilet, left the cubicle, and edged past the open door of the
next stall, where the elderly black man was kneeling half in the aisle, calling
to his daughter.
He returned to his seat. The mother gave a start as one of the stewardesses
from
the rear leaned in to speak quietly to her. In a panic, she tried to get out of
her seat, found herself still buckled, pulled and pulled at the device till the
stewardess helped her, and then they rushed back up the aisle.
The man from Beloit closed his eyes and feigned sleep. He didn't think there
would be conversation with the Reverend Carl Schrag before they landed at De
Gaulle, but he wanted to repose in privacy and darkness for a time. Repose and
think clearly of the moment of relief that would come to the old people before
they began to deal with their grief.
The sky was very clear, and far below the clouds went on their way.
The man from the jet liner stood on the edge of the cliffs, staring out past
Thasos, across the Aegean. "Levendis," he murmured. "Levendis." He sighed
deeply, plucked three pebbles from the ground, and hurled them into the sky.
They flew up toward the sun, spreading their wings for a moment, white herons
that formed an ancient design with their flying forms; then in an instant they
rolled and dove, feathered shafts that struck the water, pierced the sea and
vanished, plummeting toward the distant floor littered with broken stones.
Enormous broken stones. Cyclopean blocks bearing praises to a god whose name
had
not been spoken on this
36
earth since the long night of hungry waters that had wiped an entire
civilization from the land, and from memory. Intricately carved broken stones
now merely accretions of limestone, barnacles, and anemones, acrawl with
crustaceans and small, blind fish. Softened shapes of fractured statues
hundreds
of meters in height when they had stood against the sky, before the night of
ash
and flame. The pulverized Great Temple in which the sacred ethmoid crystals
had
been kept. Down and down the heron shafts went, into a darkness never

suspected,
much less penetrated. They went to wreckage.
In anguish, he called out across the water; but the wind died and the day was silent; and all who might have heard would not understand the tongue in which he
spoke, for it had not been spoken in thousands of years.
"Stranger, can I soften your pain?"
The man from the jet liner turned at the sound of the voice behind him. It was
an old man, as blind as the fish that swam among a million mosaic tiles.
"Did you see that?" the man from the jet liner asked.
"Did I see you throw pebbles into the air?"
"You did see, then."
"No. I see nothing. I heard them click in your hands. I heard them as you threw
them. You aren't Greek, are you?"
"No. Not Greek."
"Where are you from, stranger?"
"From a land that no longer exists."
"You sound lonely."
"I was lonely, for a long time."
"For your people?"
"Yes. But they're gone, and I haven't heard my name spoken for much too long. And why are you here, sir? What brings you to this empty place?"
"I come here to worship."
The man from the jet liner drew a deep breath. "What god do you worship here? Nothing ever stood here."
"Not here. Out there." He waved a hand toward the sea, and beyond to the greater
ocean. "I hear the voices of the children of Poseidon."

"They were not Poseidon's disciples. You hear the lamentations of an older race.
Nobler and more accomplished than any other. They never had the time to claim their inheritance."
The old man laughed lightly. "So you say."
"There were worlds and lands and peoples."
"I think you are dreaming dreams that make you an empty man," he said. "Perhaps
you should return to your homeland, no matter what name it now bears. Home is where you go when there is no place else to go. You can know it again through the words of your poets."
"No poets wrote of my land. Plato had a few words ... but I gave him those words. If I go home, it will only be to sleep." He paused, and added, "To rest."
The old blind man spoke softly. "Too much rest is rust."
"Why did you think I might be Greek?"
"Because you knew our word, levendis. But I was wrong."
On the Bahnhofstrasse, amid crowds entering and exiting the five-level "everything store" called Jelmoli's, Zurich's answer to an American department
store with a basement storey of drugs and groceries, the man from Greece, hurrying to the Icelandic Airlines ticket office, bumped into Gwen Fritcher, a
Californian on detached duty with IBM's Swiss affiliate.
She had gone to Jelmoli's to get a few cans of American product--Dennison's chili, Campbell's tomato soup, Durkee's french fried onion rings, Pringles--because she was certain that one more meal of schnitzel, spaetzle, and
cabbage, submersed in sauce as appetizing as Elmer's Glue, would send her

over
the brink. She had begun having fever dreams, as sultry as sexual fantasies, herself entwined with packages of Nabisco ginger snaps and (shamefully) Spaghettios.
She was also having terrible menstrual cramps, and there had been literally a crying need for Panadol.
When he blindsided her, and the bag of groceries rocketed from her grasp, she gave a small croak of despair. "Hey, I'm awfully
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sorry," the man from Greece said, stooping to retrieve the still-rolling cans.
"Oh, really, I'm sorry ... I wasn't watching where I was going ... the crowd, you know ...
They gathered everything, repacked it, and stood. He smiled his best smile, and
she looked embarrassed at even having thought the things she'd thought.
"American?" she asked.
"Once upon a time," he said. And added, "I really am sorry I'm such a klutz."
And he touched her forearm, and smiled again, and said, "I'll be more careful."
And he strode away into the crowd.
Gwen returned to the tiny apartment IBM had secured for her. The company suites
were all filled, and they had taken a three month lease on this little flat, in
hopes she would have completed her transference survey by that time or, failing
that recourse, they would be able to move her into a company-owned residence.
She set the bag of groceries on the kitchen counter, fished around till she found the small plastic-wrapped box of Panadol, and carried it into the bathroom.
With a fingernail, she slit the price tag and bar-code sealing the Panadol box,
and tore off the protective plastic wrap with some difficulty, fumbling interminably and cursing the mythical children who were thus guaranteed all protection against taking too much menses medicine. She finally got the box open
and dumped out the two sheets of caps, each shrouded in a plastic bubble.
There was a folded slip of paper between the sheets. She laid it aside, pressed
the back of one of the plastic bubbles, popped out a capsule, then repeated the
maneuver. She took her toothbrush from the water glass, ran it half full, swished the water, poured it out, refilled the glass halfway, and took the two
Panadol.
She sat on the closed toilet, letting the analgesic start to do its work, smoothing the waves of pain. She thought for just an instant of the attractive
man who had bumped into her on the Bahnhofstrasse. Idly, she picked up the piece
of paper that had been folded inside the plastic-wrapped box. She opened it and
looked at it, expecting an advertisement in at least three languages.
Handprinted in pencil on the slip of white paper were the words YOU'LL BE DEAD
BY MORNING, GWEN. For no good reason, because this was clearly some kind of stupid
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thing that might have to do with an idiot advertising campaign, she felt her

heart thump heavily. She was, in an instant, and inexplicably, terribly frightened.
She dropped the note as if it had come from enemies.
There was a knock on the apartment door, and then the doorbell rang twice. She sat where she was. Thinking through the fear.
She was an employee of a multinational corporation. Could this have something to do with international terrorism? Had they somehow tapped into the computer, run the personnel records, and selected her at random? She knew it couldn't be personal. She had been in Zurich only three weeks. She knew almost no one. Was there, on the other side of that door, a pair of ski-masked and blacksuited kneecappers from the Red Army Faction or the IRA? Beneath their masks a young man and woman, pockmarked skin, anthracite eyes, teeth in need of polishing, sworn angels of death sent by Carlos or Abu Nidal?
The doorbell chimed.
A spurned lover. Someone she'd known in New York, during that crazy summer before AIDS came to the world, when she was answering personals in New York Magazine? One of the more than a few men she had seen in the nude? The one she had laughed at, had been forced to use a kitchen knife to hold off till she could gather up her clothes and flee? Traced her, followed her, come to quench some psychopathic thirst for revenge?
A voice called from the other side of the door.
"Fraulein, Miss, Lady ..."
She went to the door, put her ear against it. No sound. Finally, she said, "Yes, who is it?" And then she quickly stepped to the side, in case the serial killer fired through the door, or cleaved the center panel with a fire ax.
"Ah! Guten Morgen, Fraulein Fritcher ... ich binder ...
"I don't speak German! Who are you? Speak English, please; I speak only English!" She heard the panic in her own voice.
"Ah! Ja. Ich, uh, that isz, I ... yes, I am the taking-care-of man. Nein ... vhat isz that I mean ... I am der superviszer ... der superintendent, ja, das ist ... yes, I am der janitor!" There was a note of almost desperate relief in his voice as he found the correct word.

And she listened as the crazed silk-stocking strangler advised her that the incinerator in the hall had gone geflunkt or some similar word, and that it would not be available for trash and paper dumping till after six that evening.
Then he went away.
Gwen wandered back to the kitchen, certain now that there could have been no way in which such a message could have found its way into that sealed box. Not at the factory, not in the grocery, not any way at all. There had been no signs of tampering, no pinholes, inviolate, untouched.
Yet the message had been there, and she knew, now, that it had been supernatural creatures. Beings from the other side, the souls of those she had done harm in her previous lives. They were warning her, and there was no escape. By morning, she would be dead.

She sat at the kitchen table and began to cry.
I haven't lived nearly long enough, she thought. And I'm on the management track.
She reached across to the counter and pulled down the thick cylinder of Pringles, husking breath so deeply that her chest hurt; and she pulled the plastic strip from the container, popped off the metal lid, and took out a potato chip. It didn't help at all, not even the taste of the world and the life
she had left behind. She thought hopelessly that she didn't want to die in a foreign land. She ate another Pringle.
Lying atop the third chip, nested perfectly with the other slim forms, was a slip of folded paper. She opened it with utter terror consuming her, and read IGNORE PREVIOUS MESSAGE.
She received only two pieces of mail that day in the IBM courier pouch from New
York. One was an announcement of Nancy Kimmler's shower two weeks hence. The other was contained in a plain white envelope with no return address, and the single sheet of neatly typed message was this: "The life which is unexamined is
not worth living." Beneath, were two words in pencil: Plato and bang.
He stood now, the man from Zurich, where he had never set
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foot before. He had rented a car in Reykjavik two days earlier, the 26th, and driven to Bu'dhir, where he had taken a room and given sight to a man
blind from birth. In truth, he hadn't needed a car; no more than he had needed a
castle, a brigantine, an arbalest, a flat-bed truck, a 451-barrel Vandenberg Volley Gun, an ethmoid crystal, a 1980 Mustang, or an Icelandic Airlines DC-8 ZurichReykjavik. No more than he had needed special equipment to breathe the water of the Aegean, centuries before it had borne that name.
But he had wanted to see the riot of colors, the ecstasy of moss growing in volcanic cinders deposited by the eruption of Mount Hekla in 1970 along a rivulet on the edge of Thjorsa'dalur; he had wanted to go as a man, to stand before the black ash cliff at Langahlidh and marvel at the tenacity of the exquisite, delicate white flowers that grew toward the light from inhospitable
fissures. He wanted to have the time before the kalends of July to contemplate
how long, how far he had wandered; to think back to what had been and what was
now; to reconcile himself to the end of the journey.
He had come much farther than from Chicago or northern Alabama, Quito or Sydney,
Damascus or Lioazhong or Lagos on the Slave Coast. He had been far afield, traveling through immense lightless distances; pausing to pass the time with a
telepathically garrulous plant-creature; spending time unmeasurable observing hive-arachnids as they slowly mutated and grew toward sentience and the use of
tools; taking a hand in the development of a complex henotic social system that
united water and fish and the aquicludes that had ruled as autarchs since the silver moon had fractured to form Murus, Phurus and Veing. He had returned, weary beyond the telling, having seen it all, having done it all, come full circle through miracles, wandering, loneliness and loss.
There had been centuries of despair, followed by centuries of acrimony and deeds
too awful to recall without unbearable pain and guilt; centuries of sybaritic indulgence, followed by centuries of cataclysmic ennui; and finally,

centuries
and years and days reduced to odd moments now and then, of wonderful, random, unpredictable kindness. That were no more satisfying or lasting
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than all the acts of all the centuries that had preceded them.
He was alone. Since the long, terrible night of ashes and screams, and the closing over of the waters, he had been alone. There were, of course, diabolists
and fools who believed; but their belief was product of insanity or delusion. No
descendant of those who had come to the Great Temple walked this world. Nowhere was there to be found a true believer.
And at last he had come to know that he must return, to the place that had brought him to existence, and there he must go down alone to find eternal rest.
He could wander no longer. He simply didn't have it in him to continue.
So he had come by way of Reykjavik and Naefurholt and Brun, in a great circle across the island of volcanoes, as June came to an end, the last June he would
ever see. Came, at last, to stand here on Sunday the 28th, the last day but two
of the month, with a sudden change of wind and a new moon that had brought salutary weather, the sun pouring its beaming rays to the very bottom of the crater.
Snaefellsjokull.
In Icelandic, all volcanoes bear the name of Yocul, and it means glacier, for in
the lofty mountains of that region the volcanic eruptions come forth from icebound caverns. Snaeffels means snow mountain. There it towers on the western
peninsula, and can be seen from Reykjavik, a great urban capital of the sophisticated modern world. Even in Reykjavik the mountain is known to possess
great power, some say psychic power.
He stood on the edge of the crater and smiled. Not even in Reykjavik, where they
could feel the power, could they guess the enormity of Snaefellsjokull's secret.
To a height of five thousand feet.
In Snaeffels Yoculis craterem, he thought, in dog Latin, kem delibat umbra Scartaris Julii intra caiendas descende, audus viator, et terrestre centrum attinges.
He laughed lightly, and the metallic wind picked at his clothing, ruffled his ash-gray hair. Would anyone recognize those words without the fictional lines the writer had added for the story's benefit? Kodfeci. Arne Saknussemm.
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Above him the blind spire of Mount Scartaris, black as the eclipse on that night
of screaming stones and hungry water, rose in expectation of the movement of the
sun. Waiting. Poised to aim its finger of shadow across the thighbone peninsula,
passing across the fjord, swinging fast to cancel the flood of sunlight pouring
into the center of the crater.
Snaeffels had been quiet since 1219. He remembered now, with another small smile, how it had been that the writer had come to expose the secret--while concealing it the more in tall tale--and he could see, even now, the face of the
Franciscan monk as the words burned themselves into the illuminated

manuscript
as he sat with quill poised. That had been during one of the centuries of antic
foolishness for him.
Each hillock, every rock, every stone, every asperity of the soil had its share
of the luminous effulgence, and the shadow of Scartaris fell heavily on the
soil. The shadow of the spike that penetrated the sky was marked and clear, and
moved rapidly as high noon approached.
He watched with the first genuine tickle of anticipation he had felt in a dozen
millennia. The shadow slid, roiled, faster and faster, and the sun came to rest
with a gasp at its highest point, and the shadow fell upon the edge of the
central pit in the heart of the crater. It rushed down the wall, across the
caldera, and ink poured over the edge of the central pit in the heart of
Snaeffels. Forsaking all others, the shadow of Scartaris formed the road sign he
had come across eternities to read.
Descend into the crater of Yocul of Snaeffels, which the shade of Scartaris
caresses, before the kalends of July, audacious traveler, and you will reach the
center of the earth. I did it. Arne Saknussemm.
He went down into the crater and stood at the lip of the central pit. It
measured about a hundred feet in diameter, three hundred in circumference. This
tremendous, wondrous shaft, its sides almost as perpendicular as those of a
well, a terrifying abyss more than eight hundred and fifty meters deep, which
had come to be called Saknussemm's Chimney by those who had been fooled through
the writer's misunderstanding of words in an ancient manuscript that

had been manipulated under his gaze.
The time was ended for tricks and make-work.
Even gods can learn. Given enough time.
Even gods forgotten, gods without disciples, gods whose times and lands had
vanished before memory had formed in those who had come to claim the world.
He stepped into the shadow, leaving sunlight for the last time, and began his
descent. There was only one answer to what a god can do when everything has been
taken from him, and he knew at last what that answer was. Not sleep, not
immolation, not descent into final darkness, never to emerge. No, the answer lay
beneath him: to recreate. To reify. To cause it all to come again, stronger and
mightier and more golden than it had been when chance and disaster had wiped it
away.
And one day not that far off, perhaps only a few centuries hence, his people
would arise, bringing with them a certain inheritance all others had debased. As
they had long ago created him, he would recreate them.
And on that day they would go once more to the Great Temple, to sing his name,
and to thank him for growing bored and foolish and for trivializing himself with
the lives of those now vanished and themselves turned to myth.
But he would keep the name of the place, and the moment in which he had
learned.

Scartaris, June 28th.
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Glass Eyes
Nancy Holder
Although Nancy Holder is a fairly new light in the HDF firmament, she's really a grisly (actually, she's very attractive) veteran of the Publishing Wars. After selling her first novel, a young adult romance, in 1981, she went on to write innumerable romances under a series of pseudonyms--seven of which spent time on WaldenBooks' romance bestseller list. Her books have been translated into a dozen languages, including Serbo-Croatian (how many of us can make that claim?), and her latest novel, Rough Cut, a "women's mainstream fiction," recently appeared from Warner Books.
She currently lives in San Diego with her husband, Wayne, hard at work on a horror novel. Her recent appearances in some of the best horror and dark fantasy anthologies mark Holder as a writer to watch. The following story, full of visceral panic and disorientation, will show you why.
Going blind.
Reeling out of the doctor's office, a skylit aerie latticed with Wandering Jew,
Dot trembled from the reverb in her head:
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Glass eyes, glass eyes, going blind going blind, going blind or going to die; why why why and why the fuck not.
She staggered over the sidewalk as if it were the deck of a pitching ship: leeward, grab the street lamp; windward, smash against the pet shop window; mayday, jagged crack dead ahead, collision with the pavement imminent.
She stumbled hard, hugged the mailbox. The seaport town pitched and yawed--something about her inner ear, the pressure on her brain, the liquid in her eyes.
The tears on her cheeks.
Dot was a painter. She catered to the tourists, did seascapes and sailboats, crests and froths and scudding waves. For fun, for sheer delight, she painted naked men, had a show at the Women's Art Collective, called "Cupidity: Shafts and Hearts."
Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. Maybe she could trade it in, get paralyzed instead, paint with a brush between her teeth and they'd make a goddamn movie about her. Music by Bernard Herrmann. Screech screech screech and the knife comes down as she stabs herself in the throat after they tell her they're gonna have to pull her teeth, too, and she won't be able to paint anymore unless she figures out a way to stuff the paint-brush up her goddamn nose.
A tooth for a tooth, an eye for an--
Blind.
So what? So the fuck what? Do the Beethoven trick. Do the one-legged waterskier trick. Do the Screwed by God but Bounced Back polka. Braille painting.
No eyes. Gonna grab that scalpel and screech screech screech (that was where she'd get the knife for the throat trick), gonna, er, ah, ahem, excise them--cut 'em out, slice 'em open and let the stuff dribble out, just like Luis Bunuel. Very arty, gaping sockets. Gotta get some Blades sunglasses. Some Ray-Bans.

Hell, her Medicare would cover a few dozen pairs, wouldn't it? Rows and rows of protective lenses (a little boy shrieking "Mommy! That lady! That lady don't got no, don't got--" and puking up the dog biscuits he'd snitched from the St. Bernard's bowl while his mom waited for him in the car, checking her eye makeup in the rearview mirror.) Protective lenses.

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(And some well-meaning man, possibly one of her stud models for the Cupidity exhibition, pushing her down on the bed and easing apart her legs and murmuring, "I don't care, Dot. It doesn't bother me at all.")

Not one socket's worth. Love is blind, as his vitreous good humor gushes black inside her.

Glass eyes. Of course. The doctor said something about that. You can't tell the difference these days. Blue--azure, cerulean, French ultramarine; burnt sienna, neutral gray; or perhaps something in green (her contacts were tinted green to go with her curly red hair)--bright aqua green, chromium oxide green, sap green, emerald green.

He showed her the videotape about the woman who'd been shot in the head, lost all her vitreous humor, and they had to replace her eyes. He made her look at the woman's plastic ones (very ordinary hazel), hooked up to her muscles. The woman swiveled up, down, around. Did not stare blankly into that dark night. Did not look like a fucking freak.

He said they weren't glass anymore, but made from acrylic. That nearly drove her crazy then and there, because she painted in acrylics. Same stuff they made false teeth out of. Her glass eye man was a master, had learned from the guy who did Sammy Davis, Jr.'s, eyes. Top Gun Eyeball Man.

Did she care? Did she give a good goddamn? He said her anger was normal. Fuck him. Fuck him! What the hell did he know about having his eyeballs cut out of his head?

He also said something about cancer. Something about that was how come the excision. Or had he said, "exorcism"? That was it. It was the eyes, her evil eyes, that could Kill her. And if thy right eye offended thee, well ...

Well. This must be a bad dream and she was going to wake up, take her subtly green contacts out of the cooker, pop 'em in, and get back to work. Scuds or studs, ocean suds or dudes sans duds. In acrylic.

Same stuff they made dentures out of.

Dot let go of the mailbox and staggered down Seagull Street, toward Seaview Lane, and home. Glass eyes. One--no, better make

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that two--for each outfit. A Marcos collection. Faberge eyes. With rhinestones in the middle, so they sparkled when she blinked. Blue, green, hazel, brown. Kaleidoscope tears.

Going blind.

Getting lost.

In her stupor, her torpor, terror, Dot had steered by the wrong set of jagged cracks, and now she drifted thick in the Sargasso Sea of the town's bad side, and she was getting scared.

Men were looking at her, sizing her up. Tall, dusky men with their hands in their pockets, hair nets on their heads, pulled down so the V pin-holed the center of their foreheads. Third eyes of malice. Women in black polyester sauntered past, narrowed their lids. Everyone stared with their perfect, bloodshot, eyes. Dot stomped down the street as if she knew what she was doing.

But what she was doing was getting lost, and part of her was astonished at how frightened she was about it. With each step across each trough of jagged crack, her heart pumped faster, brave little propeller muscle. Her stomach tightened, a stomach that had already become a hard, round clam, hiding inside itself. She was a distress beacon, announcing to all around her, all who wondered what an obviously middle-class honky Anglo woman was doing in the barrio-project-ghetto in the late afternoon, that she was vulnerable, and defenseless, adrift without food or water. Up the friggin' creek without a friggin' paddle.

The sun dipped. A black dog with a running sore on its back trotted beside her, whimpering in tune to her heartbeat. "Shoo," Dot said, and her voice was wimpy and baby small.

Lost. Mugged. Cut up real bad. Raped. Jesus God, blind girls tell no tales. Blind women talk of smells and sizes. White cane, black glass, might as well the fuck be naked with a glass eye bull'seye painted on her crotch. No, officer, I don't know how tall he was or what color he was but he had a low voice and his dick was well, let's see, about two-thirds the size of yours.

Three young Oriental boys in neon shorts and surfin' T-shirts wandered by, made comments, hooted, and chuckled. After they

rounded the corner, Dot covered her mouth with her hand, fighting down the waves of panic. Trade it in, get her legs cut off. Motorized wheelchair, balloons fluttering saucily behind, marching in the parade for the rights of the disabled: that gal's got spunk!

The row houses cantilevered over the streets like English Tudor monuments (her favorite naked man portrait: doublet, no hose, a feathered porkpie hat. Such eyes. Cobalt-dancing, shiny; in their way, erect.) The paint peeled off salmon stucco walls like rolled-up parchments. Broken windows bled the spray-painted hex signs of rival gangs. The stinks of garbage and urine, rotten fish and fuel sat on her chest like a quartet of demons. The dog barked, raised his leg against the corner of a chain link fence, peed.

A door opened, slammed shut. Someone knocked from the inside--

Knock knock.

Who's there?

You'll never know, will you, bitch? Once you lose sight of sight.

Shadows drifted across her ankles. Dot swallowed hard and resisted the urge to stop walking and get her bearings. Better to look like she knew where she was going; better yet, that she was late for a very important date. She imagined herself as Eleanor Lance in one of her favorite movies, The Haunting: prim in

her whipped cream and tweed, raising her nose in the air at the caretaker of the
evil old haunted mansion and informing him, so stupidly, so ignorantly, so blindly, "I'm expected."
Expected at the hospital tomorrow. Tomorrow! Shit, it was because she'd worn jeans to his office. She hadn't been respectful enough, in her sloppy sweater and silly red high-tops. Keds of deep brilliant red, so that with her green eyes
she looked like a thin, tall leprechaun. When she was a little girl, she'd been
stuffed into ruffly frocks for the periodic visits to the pediatrician. But big
Dot, adult Dot, Dot on the brink of blindness, that Dot had been in a hurry, finishing up a fireplace edition of Hurricane Bay, complete with pines and sunset. Pulled off her paint-stained sweatshirt, noticed the time, said, "Oh, shit," and left on the dribbly jeans. While Dr. Maxwell shone light in her eyes,
all she could think about was the brown paint on her knees, and would some of it
rub

off on his nice ivory slacks?
As fucking ignorant as Eleanor Lance. Expected. Fuck. And lost now, lost worse,
so lost she didn't even know if she could turn around and retrace her steps. And through the grim, grimy sky, the second-rate sun was blurring down behind a
turquoise apartment building, and the broken Red Train bottle off her starboard
bow turned gray. The dog whimpered again and trotted off. She reached out a hand
to it as if it were a life ring. Two black men came out of a grocery store and
looked at her. One whistled and said, "Hey, baby." Marching past, she stared without seeing. Old trick, new meaning.
Off to see the wizard, off to see, oh, please, Mr. Wizard, if she only had some
eyes. If she only had her sight. Screech screech screech she would do it. She would fucking really do it why not why the hell not. What was her life without
brown paint, and cyan and tangerine and her good buddy, plain old daisy egg-yolk
yellow?
Tears formed again. She wondered if people without eyeballs cried. And if they
did, did the tears go into the sockets? Did the tears slide down someplace in back of your cheeks? Did you swallow them behind your face? Or were the glass eyes like shields or bulwarks or dikes that prevented all that? Why hadn't she
asked the doctor? She would have to call him this instant, call him up and ask
him if she would be able to cry, because, because ...
because of the wonderful things tears does.
Shit. If she found a phone, she should call a cab.
And what was all that thick, rich, twenty-foot-deep bullshit anyway, about tumors and cancers and growths in her brain? If he wanted money that bad, why didn't he just do a hysterectomy--
Trade it in, yes; who needed children? Hell, how could a blind woman take care
of a toddler, anyway? Hey, doc, take the ovaries and the fallopians and the

hoo-hah units. Fill those dripping surgical gloves with squishy lady globs and keep the sockets loaded with cornea. Leave the eyes, oh please, oh, God, let's do some more tests now, right now.

She walked off the curb, and a motorcycle almost hit her. The driver, in a silver baseball jacket and silver helmet, held a gas can in his lap that he waved at her as he yelled, "Watch it, bitch!" For

a moment she was afraid he was going to slosh her with gasoline. But he revved his engine and sped around her.

She exhaled, hard, moved on.

Where was she? And as for more tests, who was she kidding? Dr. Maxwell was the end of the long, unwinding, daisy-egg yellow brick voyage to the bottom of the sea. He was her specialist's specialist's great-grand specialist. He was the last word in eyeball problems. Diseases. Fatalities. When he said cut, the surgeons excised up to their elbows. They drowned their arms in blood and loosened organs.

A TV antenna pierced the sun's eye; black flowed over the horizon in inky clouds.

And she was lost worse.

And just as her heart began a major panic polka, and the fleeting thought--hell, if she did get mugged, maybe they'd have to postpone the surgery and they'd find a cure, a mixup in the lab results, St. X of the Eyeless would take pity on her and no way, no way did she want to be hurt tonight, because tomorrow afternoon, she'd be hurting plenty--just as that thought flashed through her mind, something made her stop dead and turn her head.

A flash lit up the sky. It burst soundlessly across the horizon, shot straight up into space, a brilliant, searing white. Light struck her like a slap, smashed into windows, vaporizing them, melting fences. Light, but no heat, bright and tinted yellow and white and a color that was no color but a sensation of intense, harsh, destruction.

Dot cried out and flung her hands over her face. She saw her finger bones. As her legs buckled and she sank to the sidewalk, she thought, the Big One. Surgery will be postponed because the Russians have just nuked the hospital. Thank God, thank God, thank--

And then she screamed and shut her eyes tightly. Because, although it was impossible, the light intensified.

Duck and cover. That was what they used to sing. Duck and cover. She bent over, covering the back of her neck, and sobbed.

The Big One. Dear God, would it hurt? Would she sizzle or just evaporate? And then float above the blackened earth and the

rubble, and glide down some tunnel--

Walk toward the light. That's what happened next when you died, the white light, and someone who loved you, waiting. Some mystical white light.

After a long time, she opened her eyes. Searing white, too bright for her to

endure. She closed them again, hard. Okay, maybe dead. A good trick. An okay trick.
Jesus, no! It was not okay. The screech screech screech was just a joke, all right? She'd thought about it because she was scared. Because it wasn't fair. She cried, tears bundling around her eyeballs and spilling down her face. Wasn't
up to her anyway, was it? If she was dead, she was dead. Trade made. Done deal.
What a load of crap, she thought, and opened her eyes.
The night was pitch-black around her. Mars black, ivory black. It was so dark she couldn't even see her knees, her fingers, the cracks in sidewalk.
She listened. No sound. She licked her lips and gingerly straightened back up. The peeling walls, the chain link fences, the dirty windows. Everything was gone.
Or swathed in the night.
Or she really was dead.
Or else she had just gone blind, prematurely.
"Oh, God," she moaned, and touched her eyes. Two round, big grapes. Still there.
Her sigh of relief was a scream of protest, because tomorrow they would not be,
and now that the game was over (what had it been, a factory explosion?) she understood that she had no choices.
And then she saw the house.
It loomed across the street, an immense, wooden Victorian of perhaps five stories. It was difficult to tell how tall it was; gingerbreaded gables poked at
odd angles and heights. In perfect, new condition, it was painted white and beige and permanent green, and she could tell all this because the walls were packed with windows, like the dozens of little mirrors on a sixties-style purse
or blouse from India. Each window blossomed with happy

daisy-yellow light, and they were all exposed, without curtains or blinds.
A round porch studded with carved posts grew larger as she got to her feet and
walked toward it. Large green flower boxes of orange flowers hung from the railing.
Dot reached out a hand and said softly, "Hello?"
She heard a strange click behind her, almost a hiss, accompanied by a low, threatening voice that said, "Gimme your purse," at the exact same time that she
looked through the oval glass in the center of the front door, and saw a man in
a white terry cloth bathrobe raise an axe over his head.
At his feet, a naked woman held her hands out in a pleading gesture.
"God!" Dot shrieked.
The woman brought her hands beneath her chin and doubled forward. The man arched
his back, began the arc--
"No!" Without thinking, Dot ran to the front door and pounded on it with her fists.
The man froze. So did the woman. They posed like wax figures, the axe almost to
her neck.
Dot banged on the door. They did not move. She rattled the knob, kicked at the
glass.
They did not move.
"Jesus!" Dot called. "Jesus!"

She turned around, saw no one, heard a rustle in the bushes against the front of the house. "Hey!" she said, then remembered a sharp sense of danger, a voice, a hiss-click.

She backed away, escaped to the porch.

The woman screamed. There was a chunk--

Dot ran the length of the porch, shrieking.

The rowlets of windows sparkled, blurred. She searched through them for one large enough, looked in. A room painted mint green, with no furniture, no pictures, nothing. The floor gleamed, bare wood. Another scream. God, she had to do something. She had to help--

What, go in there and be axed? Screech screech screech, the axe trick? Trade for that?

Didn't matter. Wouldn't happen. Couldn't. She curled her

fingers under the bottom rail and pushed. The lower sash moved easily, sliding upward without a sound. There was no screen.

The woman screamed again. Dot swallowed hard and climbed into the house, into the bare room.

Her feet made rapping noises on the floor as she ran toward the door; the sounds seemed out of sync with her steps. She glanced down, stumbled, and knocked her elbow against the wall.

Chunk.

Her breath came hard, hot. She wrapped her hand around the doorknob and bit her lower lip. Christ, what the hell was she doing?

Eyeballing the situation.

Chunk.

She opened the door.

The man stood on the other side. Someone had dropped a bucket of naphthol red paint over his head--

Jesus, God, no, no, no--

And his hand clutched the axe. Something pink and long and pulsing was wrapped around the business end.

"Welcome to the eye of the storm," he said warmly.

Dot yanked the door shut. He stopped it with his foot, grabbed the knob, grabbed Dot's wrist. His hand was sticky, viscous, strong.

She tried to speak, to move, to do anything. He dragged her down the hall. The walls were covered with mirrors; she saw herself a hundred times, shambling behind the ghoul, the man who was smiling with red teeth and red lips.

His eyes were washed with red. His eyes were filled with blood.

Blood streamed down his cheeks like scarlet red tears.

Dot swayed. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she felt herself going, going; she stopped herself, forced herself back into consciousness, and trailed behind him. She stared with horrible fascination at the axe. Was that the last thing she was going to see? The swipe of a blade? A true-life screech screech screech!

"Oh, dear," she moaned, and it sounded so stupid, so banal, that she found herself dissolving into hysterical giggles.

The man towed her around a corner. To port, a flight of stairs carpeted in sea
green; to starboard--
Dot threw up, all over her own forearm, as the man lowered
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the axe to the top of his bloody shoe and nodded with satisfaction.
The woman lay at his feet. Her abdomen was sliced open, and everything lay strewn at her feet like jetsam on the beach.
When she was finished vomiting, Dot stood trembling. Her mind raced, trying to
think her way out of it. But it was too busy quarreling--this isn't real. Yes,
it is. No. Yes--to be of much use.
So Dot stood helplessly beside the man, certain that she was drowning in fear,
because she couldn't breathe.
"Why don't you try it?" the man said. He let go of her wrist and held out the axe. "Give it a good, hefty swing."
She stared at him, unable to make sense of his words. He shook the axe.
"Give it a go," he urged. He looked as though he'd been skinned--sticky red, even his hair, slicked down as if it had been painted on.
"Nnnn," Dot said, and yet, and yet ... Her mind flailed, splashed.
Take the fucking axe, she thought at last, and bash his fucking head in.
Wordlessly, she accepted the bloody weapon from him. She gripped the handle with
both hands, blood sticking to her, took a breath--
And then he stepped behind her and put his hands over hers as if he were teaching her to play golf. He smelled of blood; his arms were frigid. His bathrobe parted and his penis fit between her buttocks.
"We'll do one together, okay?" he asked. His breath was fetid, the odor of rotted tissue.
Bile rose in her throat. She heaved once, twice, had nothing more to throw up.
"Please, I don't ... I'm having an operation tomorrow," she blurted out. "I have
to get back."
He laughed. "You don't want to go."
"Yes, I mean ..."
"No, you don't want to. Because you'll die on the table."
She jerked, tried to look at him. He captured the side of her head between his
jaw and shoulder. "What are you ... what?"
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"Your eyes have cancer in them," he said, "and they want to cut them out. But you'll die anyway. You'll die from the anesthetic."
"How do you know?" She stared down at the woman, shut her eyes tight. His body
was all around her. His penis nudged against her. She'd gone crazy, that was it.
It started with the flash. She'd gone crazy at the flash. Imagined the flash. Blinding light.
The man gestured to the woman. "Go on. Climb in."
Dot shook. The man let go of one of her hands and wrapped his arm around her waist. Blood smeared over Dot's blouse, straight across her abdomen, in the same
place the woman had been butchered.
"Make a trade?" the man whispered.
Dot's head lolled back against his chest, her neck arched and exposed. With one
clean whack, he could behead her, if he wanted.
She swallowed hard. "Who are you?"

"I think you know." His voice bubbled with amusement. "Cuz I know what you want."
She shook her head.
In another room, a window slid open. She heard the sound as clearly as the man's
sigh of happiness. Heard footsteps on the bare floor.
"I've got a gun!" a voice called, and it was the same voice that had murmured,
"Gimme your purse," outside in the dark. "Hold on, lady! Keep fighting!"
"Oh, Jesus." Dot's voice quavered as the man tightened his grip on the axe.
"One for practice," he said, "and then you take care of the others. Then we can
go in. If you want, we can eat her heart first." He nudged the dead woman with
his shoe.
The footsteps drew closer. "Lady, are you okay?" the other man shouted.
"He isn't armed," the axe man assured her. He lifted Dot's limp arms above her
head. The axe hovered above them both. Gore dripped onto the crown of Dot's head.
Dot whimpered. "No, no, no--"
Whoooooowahsssh.
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"See? It's very sharp. It cuts very clean." The man kissed Dot's temple. "You did a good job."
"I... I..." Dot's entire body convulsed. He held her firm.
"The trade. You want to know about the trade. " He gestured to the windows on the other side of the room. "You saw in, you can see out. Look."
And she did look.
In an instant, all the windows shifted and sparkled. Light danced off them.
Green light. The room glowed with undersea jade, with shimmering, beautiful green.
A city appeared, green castles with spires that jittered and rippled, perched on
a hill carpeted with lush grass and tall verdant trees. Fields of orange flowers
sprouted. And the windows of the city glanced with light, green light, like jewels, like big green jewels, like--
The mirrors danced and pirouetted, opened and closed like lenses.
Dot trembled. "You're the devil."
"Lady, where the hell are you?" called the other man.
The axe man kissed her again. "Don't be silly." He nuzzled her. "Here he comes.
He thinks he's so brave."
"Why? Why do you want to make me do this?" Dot demanded shrilly.
The man let go of her. She dropped the axe and ran without seeing, slamming into
the bannister on the side of the stairway. Stunned, she held on to the rails as
if they were prison bars.
The axe man inclined his head and said, "Listen."
"Help," called a new voice, the high-pitched falsetto of a young boy.
"Kid? Is there a kid in here? Jesus!" the other man bellowed from somewhere in
the house. "Kid, hold on! There's a bad man in here! He's got an axe!"
The boy began to cry. "Mommy, I want my mommy."
"They'll keep coming," the man said to Dot. "The little people. There will be more. And it'll get harder for you. The trick will become more and more difficult."
He wiped the blood from his eyelids, then reached into the

sockets and yanked out his eyes. His scream echoed down the halls, mingled with
Dot's. She flew around him and headed for the door.
"Trade! Trade!" he shouted at Dot, following her with his outstretched hand. "Do
it, Dotty!"
"Lady!" the other man cried, closer still, and the child's sobs grew louder. "Lady?"
The door was locked.
"Everything's locked," the eyeless man said. His gaping sockets dripped. The eyes in his hand stared at Dot. They rolled in his palm, the irises a vibrant,
unbelievable green.
"Pick up the axe."
"No," Dot said, flattening herself against the door. "No."
He paused, sighed. "Then I will." Casually, he flung the eyes over his shoulder--they rolled into the shadows--leaned over, and hefted the axe.
"Cold-hearted orbs," he said. "Nothing more."
And then he stalked her, raising the axe over his head. "I am the great and terrible, I am a wiz of a--"
And suddenly, more than anything, she wanted glass eyes; it was all right to have glass eyes; it was wonderful--
Acrylic, yes, and three fittings by the apprentice to the Eyeball Maker to the
Stars--
please, Mr. Wizard--
"I was joking! she shouted. "Joking!"
He walked toward her slowly, deliberately, drawing the axe over his right shoulder, finding his grip. "I'm not."
She would wake up, wake up, wake up
--on the street outside
--in the hospital
--in bed, at home on the farm, oh, Auntie Em, and discover she was only a girl,
and this was all a dream--
Dot wept soundlessly.
"Crocodile tears," the man said. "No tricks, now. None. You can't melt me, you
know. I was expecting you."
Glass eyes glass eyes, going blind and going to die. Why why why and why the fuck not.
"Help!" the boy screeched as he flew into the room. He wore overalls and a plaid
shirt, and his eyes were cornflower blue. He

saw Dot, and the axe man, yelled and doubled back, only to run into a tall man
behind him, a gaunt, bearded man with long, blond hair. The stranger held an opened switchblade in his left hand.
The eyeless man ignored them. He stood so close to Dot she could smell what he
was beneath the blood. And what he was, was emerald green death.
"Windows of the soul," he whispered. The shadow of the axe fell across Dot's face.
Then he turned the axe head sideways and swiped it like a sickle. Dot saw the blade head, saw it coming, saw it coming, screaming, saw--
White light. Green light. Her eyes, burned to glass.
And then a world of green, all green, as she hurtled in a whirlwind toward the

green-jeweled city, screaming at the stars overhead, the shards of glass, the jagged cracks in her eyes.
White light.
Screaming, as a blade sliced open her stomach and in the space that was made, the man with the switchblade and the little cornfield boy pushed up her guts and
climbed into her abdomen, stepped down into her bowels, their footsteps loud and
echoing.
White light.
And she looked up and saw that she was flying upward, into a sea of green that
pulsed, pulsed, with the rhythm of a heart.
And the pulse thundered all around her, throbbing, bleeding into her, cascading
down her throat, behind her eyes, her glass eyes.
Her throat of glass, her eyes of glass, her heart of glass-- hattered.
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The Grass of Remembrance
John DeChancie
John DeChancie is well known as a writer of science fiction and fantasy, but his
contributions to the HDF genres have been very infrequent. If you ask him why,
he's likely to tell you it's because he really doesn't like horror and doesn't
really understand it as a literary form. He wrote a book with me (Crooked House,
Tor Books) that was kind of an experimental haunted house novel, and the entire
time we worked on it, he claimed he didn't know what he was doing. Most people
who read the book felt he knew exactly what he was doing. John can be a very funny guy--even when he's not into his Rodney Dangerfield routine.
Born in 1946 in Pittsburgh, he is a second generation Italian-American. His family name was DiCiancia until his father had it legally changed. Still living
in the city where the three rivers meet, he is currently working on a new fantasy series. Of the following story, I think it's the only piece of short fiction he's ever published. But "The Grass of Remembrance " is so totally original and so purely a horror story, you're going to wish this guy has taken
more journeys into HDF territory.
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When Ted Kirby saw the brown UPS truck creeping down the street toward his place, he knew it had something for him. He was expecting delivery of the "miracle" grass seed any day now. In fact, he had been waiting impatiently for
months.
He was kneeling by the dead azaleas near the concrete front walk, struggling with the intractable taproot of what had been a sprawling ugly weed. He had cut
off the top of the plant and exposed the enormously thick root enough to grasp
it tenuously with a thumb and two fingers. He was tugging at it, gently and steadily, not wanting to break it off near the surface and have the demonic thing regenerate its leathery dark green leaves and bilious yellow flowers yet
again. This time he'd get it all. The ground was sodden after a week of rain, the soil nice and loose, and if he were patient enough ...

"That's it, baby. Easy does it."
He looked up, continuing to pull on the root. The UPS van had stopped about five houses down, the driver peering out into the bright afternoon sun, looking at house numbers.
"Over here, pal. I'm the one you want." He spoke not nearly loudly enough for the driver to hear. "Come on, baby," he said, looking down again, his voice ironically sweet and cooing. "Easy does it. Come to papa." He was losing patience quickly, as he usually did. He wiped his hands on his faded jeans, scrunched the brim of his baseball cap down, and tried for a better grip. "Come to daddy, honey. That's it." Then, his voice turning bitter, he began yanking on the thing. "Come on, come on ... no good, lousy, stinking, rotten, filthy prick weed BASTARD!"
With a snick, the root broke, but an astonishing foot and a half of it came slithering up, a yellow white, tapering, waxen rope. Kirby half expected to see magma welling up from the hole.
"Son of a bitch must go halfway down to hell," he muttered. Sighing, he threw the root aside and levered himself to his feet. He looked around at his lawn. Wrong. Couldn't call it a lawn. Couldn't call a good three quarters of an acre of clay, gravel, raincarved ruts, hordes of thriving weeds, and occasional sickly clumps of burnt-out grass a lawn. A weed arboretum, maybe.
He had tried everything. The last three years had been a titanic struggle of one homeowner against the worst soil upon which any

developer had ever plunked a tract house down. The "topsoil" the landscaping contractor had supplied, a pungent hash of mine tailings and cow manure, had washed away in a heavy rain shortly after Kirby and his wife had moved in. With good topsoil going for thirty dollars a small truckload, Kirby had called the contractor and had demanded a new lawn.
The contractor's reply: "Hey, talk to the man upstairs. We just throw the dirt down and plant. Rain ain't our department."
So Kirby spent the next few weekends raking and loosening the hard subsoil, then replanted. Nothing. He watered more. Nothing. He watered less. Nothing. He tried every conceivable seed and seed mixture: Kentucky bluegrass, perennial rye, red fescue, Chewing's fescue, red top, Merion blue, velvet bent, creeping bent, meadow fescue, annual blue, white clover ... even the zoysias and other exotic strains. Almost none of it came up, and that which did never lasted a summer. He lavished the ground with all manner of fertilizer and chemical nostrum. Commercial concoctions were useless. He top-dressed with sifted compost, hardwood ash, bonemeal, cottonseed meal, superphosphate, and tankage, all to no avail. He spread the excreta of various animals--cow, chicken, horse, sheep, and goat. He had the soil tested, found it to be slightly acid, and spread lime. No luck. Muriate of potash--same result. Nitrate of soda--ditto. Mono-basic potassium phosphate, potassium nitrate, calcium nitrate, magnesium sulfate,

iron
sulfate, ditto, ditto, ditto, ditto, ditto. In a fit of exasperation, he bought
a Rototiller, chewed up the entire plot, and remade the lawn. It came up as
before, only to choke and wither and die. The struggle became an obsession. He
fought on. His wife got to the point where she cringed when she saw him put on
his garden clothes and go out to the garage. Outside, he would grumble and curse
and mutter continually. His wife couldn't stand to hear it, shutting herself in
the bedroom or flying out of the house on needless shopping trips. He had
carried on the crusade three summers running, and spent winter nights reading
books on gardening and lawn care. Last winter he had tried the technique of
sowing seed on top of the snow. Came spring, and the earth broke open with
moist, pale green shoots--which strangled and shriveled when the dry season
came.

He flew into a rage. Half berserk, he ripped out all the shrubs, even the
rhododendrons that were doing passably well. Afterward, he regretted the
outburst, and apologized to Jenny. She was beyond being mollified, however, and
threatened to leave him, suggesting that he seek professional help. It wasn't
just the lawn, she said. It was everything. He had changed. Did he know that he
was always talking to himself? Always, swearing darkly in that half-intelligible
dyspeptic murmur of his. She was frightened.
"Goddamnit, then leave!" He stalked into the garage. She left, finally, about a
month later.
Kirby stood on his sorry lawn as the van pulled in front of the house. He was
tired, and felt useless. Two heavy blows last week. He had been furloughed at
the plant--and him with a white-collar, middle managerial position. "Things are
going to hell in a fucking hand basket," is the way a fellow employee, also a
victim of the axe, had put it. "When they don't have paper for us to push, you
know it's getting bad." And his suit against the developer and the landscaping
contractor had been thrown out of court. Also, he had had cold comfort in
Jenny's lawyer telling him that she didn't want the house. Nobody wanted the
goddamn thing. "She wants half the capital gain when you sell," the lawyer had
said. When he sold. He had Jaughed.
His gaze was drawn to the stacks and spires of Poseidon Chemical jutting above
the low hills to the east. He had a resume into Poseidon, but they weren't
hiring. Who was? Besides, chemicals wasn't his business. Steel had been ...
Chemicals. Maybe somewhere, he thought, somewhere there's a company that puts
out a real miracle growing formula. Just a matter of the right molecules. Little
things, molecules; like PingPong balls, arranged in various configurations. Just
the right combinations, and--
"Kirby?"
It was the UPS driver, yelling from the van.
"Yeah, right here."
Kirby crossed the lawn to the truck, absently kicking at rock-like clumps of

clay.
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"Somethin' for you," the driver said, handing over a large cardboard box, then
passing him a clipboard. Kirby fumbled with the bulky box, put it down, then
scrawled his signature on the clipboarded delivery list.
"Okeydoke!" The driver gunned the van's engine and pulled away.
Kirby walked back to the open garage, reading the label on the box. This was it,
the fancy experimental grass seed. Probably another rip-off. Another failure. He
couldn't even make out the name of the company. "Os ... Os-wee-kim?"
The label read OSWIECIM HORTICULTURAL PRODUCTS, OSWIECIM, POLAND. He hadn't
ordered anything from Poland. Oh, here it was--IMPORTED EXCLUSIVELY BY GRANT
IMPORTS, PASSAIC, NJ. Right. Polish grass. Sounded like a bad joke.
In the garage, he took a hunting knife to the reinforced strapping tape and
ripped the box open. Inside was a large clear plastic bag full of fine seed.
Some literature as well. He took out a small brochure and looked at it. It
consisted of one short paragraph repeated in several languages--French, German,
Italian, English, and others he couldn't identify--and photographs of plots of
grass.
"Great."
He read the English.
Plant this seed with a grieving heart, and it will grow where other grasses will
not. It will cover that which cannot be covered-- shame, despair, tragedy,
cruelty, and sin. This is the Grass of Healing. The wounded earth will take it
to its bosom. Do not bother to nurture it, for it will grow if the earth has
received that which has bled in innocence. This is the Grass of Remembrance.
"What the hell is this crap?" Disgusted, he crumpled the brochure and threw it
into a corner.
Stooping, he cut open the plastic bag and ran his hand through the seed. Didn't
look unusual; just ordinary grass seed, a pale beige in color. He had nothing to
lose. He lifted the bag, carried it to the Scottspreader, and dumped the entire
contents in. It was late June, possibly the worst time to plant, but what the
hell.
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Later, Kirby slouched in the ersatz Eames chair in the living room, sucking
absently on a can of beer while he half watched the eleven o'clock news. He was
mostly thinking. With one ear he heard the anchorman talking about trouble at
the Poseidon works. An employee had blown the whistle on shoddy safety measures
at the plant. A controversy had ensued.
Abruptly, he got up and turned the set off. Had he heard something? Yes, down
the street a child was screaming. Laughing?
He sighed and looked out the curtainless picture window. Jenny had made off with
the curtains--why, he'd never know. She'd made them herself, probably. He peered
out into the night. Something had been making him feel strange all afternoon, an
edgy, antsy feeling. From being alone, most likely. He wasn't used to it yet.

Outside, crickets clicked and chirped, cicadas buzzed in the brush covering the vacant lot next door. From far away came the disconsolate howl of a dog. He didn't like the way he was feeling; not at all. What the hell was wrong with him?

The crap in the brochure. The cryptic phrases had echoed in his head all afternoon. Even now. The Grass of Healing. Crazy stuff. The wounded earth will take it to its bosom ... What could it all mean? That which has bled in innocence. Why would someone write junk like that in advertising material for grass seed? He couldn't get it out of his mind.

He went down to the game room and rewrote his resume.

Kirby was still unemployed two weeks later (and still lacked a firm invitation to an interview), but the grass came up spectacularly well. He had not even bothered to water it. It hadn't rained either-- unless he was badly mistaken; the two weeks were a timeless alcoholic blur to him. The ground was parched and cracked, but thick, vibrant shoots were poking through all over, oasis green and resolute. Bare patches missed in seeding soon filled in, colonized by aggressive underground rhizomes snaking from neighboring plants. Weeds shriveled and died all over the lawn, and the dry husks of dead grubs surfaced, crowded out of their hibernation chambers like slum tenants displaced by urban renewal. The grass grew only so high--about two and a half inches--and stopped. Kirby fired up the Sears riding mower once, for form's sake, and

mowed dutifully, but by late August, the grass had gone untrimmed for a month. There was not much remarkable about the way it looked.

Kneeling, Kirby tore a tiny plug out of the thick pelt of turf around him and examined it. Over time, he had become something of an expert. The stem and blade of the individual plant looked like any northern-climate bent grass, but at work here was an auxiliary above-ground growth mechanism--stolons, also called creepers--that made the plant extremely prolific. In this it was no different from the zoysias and other southern varieties such as St. Augustine grass, but those and others had failed here completely, and bluegrass, which utilized a similar stratagem, had barely held its own.

Around the first of September, the lawn's growth curve seemed to reach a point of diminishing returns, and stabilized.

Then it began to die.

But not before Kirby started dreaming about Nazis in the vacant lot. The dreams started in mid July.

"I don't want to dream about fucking Nazis again. Please, God, don't let me dream about them again."

Kirby was reduced to whimpering, slumped in the Eames chair with an all-night cable movie station on the tube, buzzed out of his brain on Jenny's prescription diet pills, an old half-full bottle of which he had chanced across in a kitchen drawer among the balls of string and bits of aluminum foil and other oddments (Jenny had taken most of the culinary utensils). But the beer would finally get

through to him, and he would nod off and again dream about the fucking Nazis standing out there in the tall grass of the vacant lot, black-helmeted, black-coated statues of Aryan manhood, the red of their armbands like open wounds upon their souls. They would stare at him, questioning him. He would be working on the lawn, usually reseeding by hand, scattering fistfuls of seed angrily into the wind, sweat running in ticklish rivulets down the back of his neck. They would stand out there, occasionally moving from side to side, now and then stepping forward toward the lot but never coming out of the weeds to step on the grass. And he would yell, his throat constricted and burning, "What do you want? What do

you want from me?" And one of them would answer, "Wo bin die Unschuldeigen Kinder?"

"Say it in English, motherfucker!"

"Where are the innocents?"

"Get out of here! Get out!" Still casting grass seed at them as if engaged in some exorcismic ritual, he would walk toward them until he came close enough to see the death's-heads on their collars, insignia of the Totenkopfverbande.

"Wir mussen ... we must guard this ground. It is our duty."

And he would wake up with his arms twitching and electric shocks convulsing his body, half paralyzed and unable to scream.

He did not have the dreams every time he slept; if he had, Kirby's developing psychosis would have swallowed him in very short order indeed. As it was, the disease process, already considerably advanced by the time Jenny left him, was merely accelerated.

First to have some intuition that Kirby's condition might well be clinical was Jim DeLuca, a friend who dropped over one evening to see how Kirby was getting along. Over beers, they bullshitted awhile, and DeLuca got the unmistakable and disconcerting impression that he was talking to a man who was gradually losing his handle on things. Although he did not have a catalog of symptoms to refer to, he had done enough general reading to be disturbed by Kirby's free flight of ideas, his short attention span, his abrupt mood shifts. And even if he couldn't go by symptomatology, the horrible mess of the house, Kirby's haunted eyes and cadaverous general appearance were clues enough.

Still, DeLuca wasn't altogether sure. At this point, Kirby still had protracted moments of rationality.

"There aren't any jobs out there, Jim," Kirby lamented, shaking his head. "There always used to be jobs. What's going on?"

"It's called industrialization.'" DeLuca gulped from his can of Miller's, and belched loudly. "That's what's going on, Ted."

"I call it screwing the little guy. That's all it is. Just another way to fuck over people."

DeLuca nodded--and when he got home that night he tracked down Jenny's number

and called her. Jenny agreed that something was wrong but didn't know what to do. Kirby's parents were dead,
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and he had one brother in California, but Kirby hadn't seen him in years and he
had an unlisted phone number. There was little that anyone could do, at least for now.
In the August heat of the house, the M16 was cool in his hands. The rifle had been easy enough to purchase, even though sale and ownership of this fully automatic model was totally illegal. A friend of a friend dealt in them and in
other contraband weaponry. Could this friend of a friend interest Kirby in a good deal on a reconditioned WWII-vintage army-issue Thompson submachine gun? Yes, he could, though Kirby had blown his already-depleted savings account on the M16 and didn't know where the money for the tommy would come from. Didn't care. At that point Kirby just wasn't thinking.
He had forgotten about the lawn. Didn't care. It was dying and he didn't care.
Fixations are variable. Other things were bothering him: his life, the shape and
contour of it, the substance of it. He didn't like it. It is difficult to describe exactly what he was feeling. His mind was a flux of half-formed thoughts, a tarn of halfcongealed emotions.
The Nazis still bothered him too. Particularly unsettling was their appearance
in the daytime as flickering images at the edges of his vision, vanishing when
he looked at them directly. He would turn his head away and they'd be there, standing guard in the vacant lot, black scarecrows in a field of weeds--and still those questioning eyes, eyes blue and steely, set in faces creased with the sorrows and pains of hell, eyes that spoke: Why are we here? There is nothing for us here.
Kirby decided that Greenfield, the owner of the Tudor splitentry across the street, would be the first to get it. Kirby had the back of his neighbor's Adidas T-shirt in the sights of the M16 as Greenfield sprayed the tied-down silver maple in the front yard.
This was shortly after Kirby had screamed at some airhead of a clerk at an employment agency who, over the phone, had the tactlessness to use the phrase "a
man of your age" when telling Kirby how difficult it would be to find him a job.
Kirby shot white heat into the receiver, informing the clerk in so many words that
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the age of forty did not necessarily signal the onset of senility. He slammed the receiver down and cracked the ivory plastic of the pretty little Princess phone.
Maybe not Greenfield. What was it the Nazis kept asking? Where are the innocents? How about this group of kids on bikes coming down the street? Unschul-something kinder. Kinder. Didn't that mean children? These looked like
them-whatever-the-fuck-it-was children to him. He swung the barrel until he was
tracking the kids. There were five or six of them, furiously pedaling bikes with
smallish wheels and oversize handlebars and plastic colored streamers flying from the handgrips. He tracked them until they flew past the house, then ran to
a window of the family room to pick them up again. They raced on down the road--and here a strange thing happened.

It is said to happen usually when a person is drowning or is close to death. But in Kirby's case, it came at a critical decision point in his life. His life didn't actually pass in front of his eyes. It was more like this: the entire geography of his life appeared to him, laid out on a detailed map in bas-relief, viewed from an aerial perspective. Here he was at this set of coordinates, in this house-- go back three years and he and Jenny were in the house on Delia Street, into which they had moved shortly after marrying--go back from there ...

The map showed everything clearly. Here the small town of his boyhood in Michigan; there the Air Force base in Texas where he had undergone basic training, then had been discharged because of a recurring peptic ulcer; there the small college in northern Pennsylvania where he had taken his BA--here was every place he had spent time in, all the physical points of his life, all connected by dotted lines drawn in orange Magic Marker. Parallel to the lines lay red arrows pointed in the direction of forward time. And now as he crouched in the sweaty interior of his empty house (Jenny's brother had come and trucked away most of the furniture--Kirby hadn't protested), the last orange dotted line left the barrel of the M16, leading directly to the kids. A huge floating red arrow swung with the line as it moved in a broad arc ...

... until one of the guards stepped into his line of fire, holding up an admonishing palm, shaking his onyx-helmeted head. His eyes were preternaturally sad.

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Kirby screamed and fell backwards, sprawling on the parquet floor. He left the dropped rifle and fled into the basement. In a few minutes he was busy mixing paint--he had been meaning to whitewash the exposed concrete block in back of the house--the incident having failed to leave a mark on his mind, running from it like ink on waxed paper.

No, Kirby didn't fire his rifle until the day the whistle-blowing Poseidon employee (long since terminated by direct order of the board of directors) was proved undeniably right.

Kirby was dozing in one of the spare bedrooms on the only bed Jenny's brother had left him. Sirens, shouting, and general commotion startled him to full consciousness. A loudspeaker was blaring somewhere--a distorted voice announcing something unintelligible. He had lain down shortly after lunch, feeling weak and slightly nauseated. Up to that point, he had been feeling a little better, had been drinking less, and had run out of the pills he had driven into the city to buy on a street corner in the ghetto. He hadn't seen or dreamed of the Nazis in two weeks. It was mid September, a Saturday afternoon, and the lawn was completely brown, though temperatures had been keeping to the mid seventies. He sat up and knew he was very ill, his stomach inverted and ready to erupt. He found it difficult to breathe. He got up, tottered to the bathroom, and threw up. After rinsing out his mouth, he went to the open sliding window in the family room.

Outside, the world was in the process of turning upside down. People were running everywhere. Volunteer fire trucks raced up and down the streets. A neighbor woman a few houses down was standing in her front yard, screaming, holding the limp body of her three-year-old daughter. He could hear the loudspeaker now. The voice was saying something about the necessity for immediate evacuation.

He noticed a film of yellow powder covering the windowsill. He ran a finger through it and rubbed his thumb and finger together. The stuff felt oily and burned slightly. He rinsed his finger off under the kitchen faucet. Something told him to get the M16.

Outside, he stood on the concrete slab porch and watched with a curious detachment. Many people were visibly ill, staggering out

of their homes, some already collapsed on lawns, driveways, and in the street.

Kirby saw that the yellow powder was everywhere, showing up plainly on the concrete of the walk and driveway, less so as a light dusting on the grass. The air had a slight yellowish cast, carrying a rank vinegary smell.

A wave of nausea passed over him, and he bent his head over until it passed. Straightening up, he saw a helmeted figure rushing toward him. It was in fact a local policeman wearing a gas mask, but the midnight-blue uniform and the mask made him look enough like one of the dream-figure Nazis to make Kirby take a step back and raise the rifle.

The cop stopped in his tracks and threw his hands up, looking sideways out of the goggle-eyes of the mask.

"Are you crazy?" he yelled. "Haven't you heard?" The voice was muffled, and Kirby couldn't quite make him out.

"Go away," Kirby told him.

"The plant--there's been an accident. This stuff is killing people! You've got to get out now! Is there anyone else in the--?" The cop put a hand to his chest and coughed.

"You people have to leave me alone," Kirby said.

"Drop it! Drop the gun!"

Kirby shifted his eyes to the right. Two more cops in masks had him covered, crouching behind the doors of a squad car.

"Drop it! Now!"

Kirby stood there, statuelike and implacable.

The tableau lasted until the first cop doubled over and fell to his knees. He ripped off the mask and vomited on Kirby's brown lawn. Kirby watched.

The cops fired two shots each, three going wild, one creasing his back and shattering the glass of the storm door. Ignoring the searing pain along his shoulder blades, Kirby emptied half the clip on full automatic at the squad car.

He lowered the rifle and looked, not bothering to take cover. The cop on the near side of the car was down. He couldn't see the other one. The first cop was writhing on the lawn, thin bloody foam dribbling from his lips. Kirby turned and went into the house, shutting the front door.

In the kitchen, the shakes hit him. Bracing himself by holding on to the front of the sink, he waited until the seizure passed, then

picked up the rifle and lurched out the back door.

The surviving cop was waiting for him, and this time the cop's aim was

better.
He dropped Kirby with one shot to the upper back.
Facedown in his lawn, Kirby noticed an amazing thing before he died. The bottommost parts of the grass stems were green! The grass wasn't dead; it was waiting. It hadn't died after all! It made him happy.
The substance released by the minor explosion at Poseidon Chemical was so toxic
that cleanup efforts were hampered. They never did get all the bodies out. The
three-square-mile area, pronounced "semipermanently nonutilizable" by the bureaucrats whose job it is to be creative with language, became the final repository for some 2500 unrecovered corpses.
A five-year-long investigation began. Why had officials at the plant delayed three hours in reporting the incident? Why had safety procedures been so laxly
adhered to with the plant so near a heavily populated area? Why had warnings been ignored? Who was responsible?
It seemed that everyone had just been following orders.
One mildly interesting note: the cleanup crews marveled at how some of the lawn
grass around the houses had survived. Everything else had died--forests of trees
stood bare limbed and gray, scrub brush had died to the ground, even the lowliest weed had refused to germinate. But in one area a patch of healthy grass
was spreading outward year after year. No one knew what to make of it, and no one had a clue to why the grass looked as if someone were cutting it. And nobody
bothered to find out why except one scientific team from the agriculture department of the state university, who went in to get samples. But they got the
hell out of there fast and never came back.
The guards saw to that.
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On the Nightmare Express"
Francis J. Matozzo
It is always refreshing to discover a story that takes an old idea or traditional HDF symbol and turns it inside out. Something that really rips up all the tired old cliches. Good stories always do this-- provide the reader with
a new way of considering the seemingly familiar. Not only is "On the Nightmare
Express" by Francis J. Matozzo very well written, but it also does a dance number on a couple of HDF's hoariest icons. I won't tell you what they are because I don't want to defuse the power of Frank's tale. Don't worry, you'll know what I'm talking about when you get there.
Frank Matozzo (he pronounces it "muh-tah-za" even though we Sicilians would say
"muh-dotz") lives in a small Pennsylvania town with his wife and three-year-old
son. He says he's been writing for "quite a few years and my progress has been
slow." With recent sales to Pulphouse and Modern Short Stories, and now Borderlands, I think Matozzo is ready to make a profound impression upon his professional peers. I'm not saying this just because he's a good Italian boy. This guy is a writer, friends.
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We sat quietly on a wooden bench outside the Jenkintown train station waiting for the 7:15 from Philadelphia. Joe had taken the precaution of wearing a thick

wool sweater beneath his raincoat and, unlike the others waiting on the platform, he was quite warm and snug. It was unseasonably cold for October, and the below-freezing temperatures had caught most people by surprise.

As we sat, a tumbling circle of leaves swept along the wooden planks in front of us, driven by the wind. I watched them dance along the boards and float off into the shadows--they had a hypnotic effect. My nervousness about taking Joe out faded and I began to relax. I closed my eyes and, despite the cold, dozed off.

Instantly the dream came--the black steam engine rose from some dark corner of my mind, breathing smoke and fire like some terrifying iron-clad dragon. Behind the engine the swaying flatcars stretched to infinity, carrying thousands of naked bodies and the choking odor of decaying flesh. It was an exhibit of death in all its horrendous variety. Bodies were shot, slit, shredded; dismembered and disemboweled, hacked-off pieces dripping from the barbed wire fencing that enclosed each overstuffed car.

Down the tracks the real train appeared, its shrieking whistle cracking the cold night air, and I awoke in terror, heart pounding. As the crowd surged forward to board the train my dream slowly faded, like a fog bank rolling out to sea, leaving behind faint wisps on the shores of my consciousness.

Although the train was crowded, Joe and I managed to sit together. A man in front of us was smoking a pipe, and the fruit-scented odor of tobacco permeated the car like fresh cherries. There was little conversation among the passengers.

Everyone was simply enjoying the warmth of the train ... everyone except me. My nightmare had left me chilled to the bone and strangely lightheaded. I felt so weak that I was afraid I was going to faint.

Breathing slowly, I tried to focus on the people around us to distract myself but succeeded only in transposing their faces onto the dead bodies in my dream.

Only the woman sitting across the aisle interested me enough to take my mind off the nausea.

I had seen her on the platform waiting with the others. She was a striking young woman, tall and slender with long black hair that hung below her shoulders. She was leaning forward, drawing in a sketch pad. Her face was partially obscured--I could see an ear, a smooth white cheek, white neck, delicate hands. The sight of her drawing brought back memories of art school and my own miserable endeavors in that area. She appeared young, though not so young that I imagined her a student. She was dressed in tight designer jeans and a soft white blouse that was visible beneath an unbuttoned black leather raincoat. Her legs were lifted slightly, the tips of her white sneakers touching the floor, enabling her to

balance the sketchbook on her knees. As I watched, she paused to scratch her ankle. A woolen sock was nudged down and her long fingers lingered on the smooth
flesh. Then she was drawing again, the ankle left uncovered, sock crumpled.
I heard Joe's heavy breathing next to me. He had seen the woman also. For him the train and everyone else in it ceased to exist. Only the girl remained--the
black hair, the delicate hands, the glimpse of naked flesh. The sickness inside
him began to grow like the invading tendrils of some obscene plant, and the evil
filled his veins. He loved the thrill of meanness, the rush of adrenaline that
savagery gave him.
The conductor called the names of towns and junctions in a deep, operatic voice.
Slowly, the train emptied. By the time we reached Lansdale there were only a handful of passengers left. Lansdale was her stop.
She left the train with a half dozen others, then walked by herself to the lone
car parked at the end of the lot, her raincoat billowing out like a cape, reflecting the yellow light from the overhead lamps. Tucked under her right arm
was the sketchbook; a red satchel was slung over her opposite shoulder. She walked smoothly, her steps long but unhurried. The others that had departed the
train wasted no time getting out of the cold. Car engines roared in an almost simultaneous overture. By the time she reached her car, the lot was empty, the
last car disappearing down the driveway of the station. Silence returned to the
lot, broken only by the jingling of her car keys.

When she bent to open her door, Joe attacked.
He pulled a long silver knife from the folds of his raincoat and placed it against the softness of her throat. Wrapping his powerful arms around her body,
he swiftly carried her off into the woods that abutted the station. There he threw her to the ground. The sketchbook and satchel were torn away and discarded. Joe put the knife in his mouth, holding it between strong teeth, tasting the hot metal. With both hands he tore at her pants as she watched him
with a silent, expressionless face. The tight denim caught at the swell of her
hips dragging her forward in the dirt. She hissed like a snake as he violently
yanked, his nostrils quivering with the scent of damp leaves and soil, the pungent aroma of leather. The zipper burst, scraping her tender flesh; pants and
underwear came off like a layer of skin.
Joe's heart pounded at the sight of her translucent legs and the musky dark region of her crotch. His hands crawled up her legs like spiders, squeezing the
softness of her thighs, the hardness in his groin aching against the confines of
his clothing. Unzipping his own pants, he released himself to the cool night, stiffly poised above her unresisting body.
The wind carried an abundance of scents--the grass, the pine from the woods, the
sweat from his body--everything but the scent of fear that he wanted from her.

She wasn't frightened. Angered, Joe spread her roughly and lowered himself. She reached up for him instantly. Her long arms pulled him down, her supple legs thrust upward to meet him. Startled, he tried to pull back, but her grip was like steel. He opened his mouth in wild protest and the knife dropped, the serrated edge biting into his sensitive, weakening member. He cried in agony. Hot ruby dots dripped from his penis and sprinkled her thighs.

The woman laughed, then growled. Her fingers clamped coldly around the tender bleeding shaft, pulling it to her mouth. Her tongue stabbed outwards, long and dewy, and she drank.

Joe's mind became a brilliant constellation of exploding red stars. He leaned over her, transfixed by the feral expression on her face, wanting her to stop ... yet not wanting. His blood, his life was being sucked into the cold fire of her voracious mouth.

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The bright moonlight reflecting off his knife caught his eye and brought him back. With his last bit of willpower he scooped the knife up and in a single furious motion buried it deep into her chest. There was an explosion of blood.

Thick and viscous, it left crimson ropes on his bare legs. The woman screamed in true fear and Joe grinned--this was the way it should be.

He dug for her heart, twisting the handle of the knife, opening a wider hole for the blood to gush out, wanting to empty her as she had tried to do to him. The blade sliced neatly through body tissue, scraped off the bones of her rib cage, and punctured her frantically palpitating heart. He pulled the knife out and swiftly drove it in again, delighting in the firm yet giving flesh. It was a sensation that flowed from the handle of the knife to his forearm, to his tingling elbow. It drove him into a glorious rage. He hacked repeatedly at the red body, long after her screams had faded, stopping only when the gushing blood turned into weak trickles that seeped slowly through the ribbons of her skin.

Immediately the body changed ... the skin became wrinkled, the eyes sunk into deep sockets, the hair turned spotty and white. The entire body withered away until what lay before us in the dirt was no longer recognizable as the young woman from the train but someone much older, someone ancient. The body continued to deteriorate, crumbling to dust before my horrified eyes.

In the distance a train whistle blared crisply on the cold night air. Joe gathered himself, wiping the drying blood from his legs with the woman's discarded jeans. The echo of the train faded, replaced by the softer sound of flapping wings. I stared into the night expecting a giant bird to appear, then lowered my eyes and saw the sketchbook lying next to the tracks, pages fluttering in the wind.

Sickened by all that happened, I walked unsteadily to the tracks, gathering the book and woman's red satchel. I sat down at the base of a tree in an area illuminated by splinters of moonlight. Opening the book, I studied the pencil drawings within--portraits and landscapes done in a vivid realistic style. Even in the moonlight I could see that the woman, whoever or whatever she was, drew with the ease and grace of a master. When I came upon the last drawing,

the one she'd been working on on the train, I froze--an insidious worm of terror
crawled up my spine as I stared at the perfect straight lines. I brought the
book closer to my eyes. There was no mistake: the death train of my dreams, the
very same, was spread before me.
Aurora DiGiovanni--the name danced like sweet poetry on my tongue. I repeated it
to myself, aloud, in silent thought, in my dreams. I was haunted by the name,
the face, the meager clues I possessed. In the safety of my apartment I pored
over her belongings. I studied the strangely blurred photo license that placed
her age at twenty-five; I held the pens and pencils that were her tools, turning
them in my hands, imagining that the creative spark she gave them still lingered
within the inanimate matter. I stared at the keys and wondered what connection
there was between the beautiful artist on the train and the crumbling monster in
the woods ... for she was a monster. To this Joe attested. There was no need for
him to show me proof of the macabre act she performed that night. I knew what
she was, yet I was still infatuated with her.
Joe had also become infatuated, but not with Aurora. After his very first taste
of killing he longed ... no, lusted for more. He talked about killing every day,
describing the most brutal acts of torture and mayhem in simple loving detail.
The immense gratification he took from these sick ravings repulsed me more than
anything he described. For him there was nothing more erotic than brutality. He
would work himself into a frenzy of sexual desire that would culminate with him
kneeling half naked over the toilet, the veins in his forehead pulsing as he
spilled his awful seed into the brackish water. Night after night he begged me
to go out, to ride the night trains. Night after night I refused him.
He threw tantrums--screaming at me, cursing me. Because of my preoccupation with
Aurora he accused me of wanting to fuck the dead, then gloated that only he was
man enough for her. In the end he would shrivel on the bathroom floor, crying
like a child, knowing that I would not let him out.
My dreams of the death train, once a nightly terror, abruptly stopped. Did I
have Aurora to thank for the cure? Had the

transference of my dream to her sketchbook, the exact transposition of my
nightmare, somehow succeeded in erasing it from my mind? I was unable to leave
such questions unanswered for long. Only ten days after Aurora's death I was
again waiting for the night train to Lansdale. Waiting with her sketchbook under
my arm, her keys jingling in my pocket, and Joe waiting ever anxiously by my
side.
The address on Aurora's license turned out to be a dismal brick warehouse which

squatted like an ugly toad on a slope overlooking a freight yard. It had been a warm day, Indian summer weather, and the night wind was mild--a far cry from our last visit. We rode a cab from the train station and a talkative driver dropped us at our destination within ten minutes, a short crosstown haul. To alleviate any suspicions, I pretended that we were entrepreneurs surveying a site to renovate and open as a restaurant. "This place could use some new blood," the driver said as he pulled up to the warehouse. "Hasn't been anyone in that building for ages."

"I see," I said and paid him the fare.

Joe said nothing. He'd been silent our entire trip, staring out the window of the cab as we rode, preoccupied with his thoughts. I knew he felt this a foolish venture, yet he would have done anything to escape the confines of our apartment--to be out among people again. His silence frightened me.

A light rain began to fall as we stood outside the building, dampening our clothes. The entrance was a small wooden door, barely large enough to fit a grown man.

What did I really expect to find? As I fished for the keys, I reviewed my excuse for being there should I be questioned: to return the sketchbook to its proper owner.

After a moment of searching I found the right key, and we entered the building.

Immediately a musty, oppressive odor reached out from the dark interior, as if anxious to devour the brief rush of fresh air filtering through the open door. I could smell the dampness from the concrete floor and, once the door closed, felt entombed by the darkness. Only the sound of the increasing rain outside, sizzling against the building, anchored me to reality.

I felt along the wall hoping to find a light switch, but my fingers

encountered nothing but cold brick. Then a shaft of light pierced the darkness--Joe with a flashlight, prepared as usual. I watched his shining eyes above the circular yellow glow, wondering what other tools he carried. Finally I located a switch. A dim overhead bulb was coaxed into service.

The place was filled with art. They were stacked like boxes of dry goods along the walls, two and three rows deep. Painting after painting, numbering in the thousands. Stored, discarded, forgotten. Oils, watercolors, temperas, sketches; scattered like debris throughout the warehouse. I picked up one of the framed oil paintings that was lying on the floor. It was a scene from a nineteenth-century picnic--a man and woman eating beneath the shade of a huge oak tree. Although the colors had faded and mildew was encroaching upon the corners, the canvas scene breathed with life. I could almost taste the red wine from their romantic toast, could almost hear the rustle of green nature around them and feel the desire for the buxom young woman in the man's glazed stare.

The signature of the artist was nestled in the lower right-hand corner--as it was, I soon discovered, incredibly enough, on every single piece of artwork

in
the room--"Aurora DiGiovanni."
By the time I finished browsing through the stacks I felt as if I had known Aurora my entire life. She called to me from the lines and swirls of the paintings, speaking from the faces of the people-- musical, loving, and kind. She was a master of realism, of subtle romantic nature, yet equally adept at portraying the surreal. No matter the style, a degree of optimism showed through
every painting. Indeed, even in depictions of evil--in the brief flashes of war,
the glimpses of death, cruelty, and economic strife--there was always a life-affirming center. It was impossible to look upon her work and not feel a wonderful surge of artistic inspiration.
Joe did not care for Aurora's work; he stalked the warehouse like a caged tiger,
impatiently flexing his hands, his mind flooded with images of brutality. Yet these images were tempered by something unusual in him--a strange sense of remorse and nervous apprehension. I knew that we must move on.
Along the back wall of the warehouse was a service elevator leading to the next
floor. We entered and began our ascent. As soon

as we reached the second floor, I knew we were not alone.
Through the elevator cage I could see a sparsely furnished living area--a table,
two wooden chairs, the arched back of a sofa, all revealed in the faint glow of
a lamp that rested on a sturdy end table. From somewhere in the room came a low
moan. Sliding the cage door open, we entered.
A sharp intake of breath came from the vicinity of the sofa. I stood outside the
elevator, listening, the familiar scent of oils and paints permeating the room.
Then, faintly, someone whispered.
"Aurora..."
"I'm a friend," I answered, carefully moving forward.
A figure stood up from the sofa and turned to face me. I could see long blond hair falling around a pale face and resting on thin, delicate shoulders. It was
a boy, a teenager, no older than eighteen. He wore faded dungarees and a plain
white shirt the sleeves of which were rolled up to just below the elbows, exposing smooth, slender arms. He appeared malnourished and could barely open his mouth to speak.
"Who are you?" he asked in a painful rasp.
"I brought something. I brought Aurora's sketchbook." Speaking slowly, I moved
to the end table and stood with the glow of the lamp in my face.
"I asked you a question."
"I already told you. I'm a friend."
He coughed loudly for a few seconds. "Aurora has no friends."
"I'm an admirer then. I want to know more about her. About her work."
"Where did you get the book?"
"I found it in the woods. Close to the railroad tracks."
The boy's face knotted into a grimace of pain, cracked lips pulling back to display rows of crooked, coppery teeth. Then he relaxed, the spasm gone, dark green eyes resting in black sockets that contrasted sharply with the rest of his
white, bloodless face. "Give it to me. Give me the sketchbook."

"But I have questions."
"Give me the book and I'll try to answer them." Another coughing spell shook his
fragile body. I handed the sketchbook
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over, wary of any sudden motion, and he took it with the shaking hands of a drug
addict. Immediately, he looked through the pages as if to confirm that none were
missing.
"She was so talented," I said. "That last drawing. Of a train. I had a dream exactly like that."
The boy stiffened, his eyes studying the last page, the drawing torn from my dreams.
"It's amazing. She captured every last detail of my nightmare."
"You bastard. You killed her!"
He stared at me, his eyes like stilettos. He made no move forward, yet his body
suddenly seemed infused with coiled power.
"I knew it as soon as I saw you," he said in a low, menacing voice. "You have the look of a predator. You killed her and stole the book."
"I killed no one."
"You were close enough to her that she could read your dreams. Now you're here,
with her sketchbook."
"Read my dreams?"
Suddenly he lunged towards me. I braced myself, waiting for him to strike, but
he stumbled and wavered. As suddenly as the rage had come, the life drained from
his eyes. There was a wheeze, a groan, and he dropped to the floor.
"Help me," he gasped, lying at my feet, hands kneading his stomach. I reached down and pulled his frail body onto the sofa.
"What can I do?"
"Feed me."
"What?"
"Aurora fed me ... I haven't learned yet. Please!"
I stood there, motionless; it was Joe who understood perfectly what to do. Who
took his knife and neatly sliced a straight red line down his forearm. Who offered it, compassionately, to the writhing creature on the sofa. And it was Joe who cried softly as the boy's cracked lips touched the shimmering red stream
and drank.
Aurora painted dreams. Everything I had seen below were copies of other people's
dreams. In over two hundred years she
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had never painted an original piece.
"Aurora believed that a dream was a work of art," explained the boy, who told us
his name was Victor.
"A dream is a painting with symbols and hidden meaning. The dreamer is an artist," he continued. There was life in his eyes again, color in his gaunt face. "I was her dreamer for a long time. She used my dreams exclusively. In return she made me like this ... it's what I wanted. Now she's dead. You've killed the artist but what about the dreamer?"
"I told you. I killed no one!"
"You're a predator," said Victor. "And I say that without malice."
"If that's true then I'm no worse than you. Where does your next meal come

from?
What innocent person?"
"I'm a novice; I pose no threat to anyone. Even Aurora, with the knowledge and
strength of centuries, posed no threat to anyone in this day and age. We feed
off each other and those who are willing to cross over. But you? You're the
product of this age, the true horror of the night--the monster."
I waited for Joe to attack; for him to tear out Victor's tongue with his bare
hands, but he was strangely silent. He kept moving away from us, fading back
into the shadows of the room. I wanted desperately to call him, to hold him and
keep him with me but the words never came.
"We do share something else in common," said Victor, gently placing his hand on
my shoulder. "We share our dreams."
"My friend could kill you," I snapped, twisting from the chill hand.
"Yes. And I could kill you. Very easily. But why kill? I want to show you
something."
I was led to another section of the room where a long wooden table stood. The
table was covered with jars of paint and brushes-- Aurora's workshop. I felt a
burning urge to pick up the brushes and follow the old movements again. Opposite
the table was a gigantic canvas held together in three sections by scaffolding.
Two stepladders were placed at either end for access to the top. It was quite
obviously a work in progress. The finished section around

the top of the canvas depicted a gray horizon infused with dark storm clouds.
From this fragmentary beginning I detected a desolate air, a sense of dread
unusual in her work.
"This is what she was working on," said Victor softly. "She was uncertain about
the centerpiece."
"This looks so dismal."
"I failed her," replied Victor, frowning. "I ran out of dreams. She waited for
weeks, but there was nothing for me but bits and pieces. Whatever it was she was
looking for, I couldn't provide. So she went out one night among the people, to
give her powers free rein. Oh, she hated going out. Imagine, if you will, a
crowd of images battling for space inside your head. Imagine that for a single
week, then multiply it by two hundred years. It's why she boarded herself in
seclusion throughout her life. Living in warehouses, cabins, obscure towns.
Supporting herself by selling a few paintings to local galleries, moving on. But
that night she needed inspiration." He paused and pointed back to the sofa where
the sketchbook was propped against the pillows. "She went out and found your
train. Unfortunately, she also found you."
I have no recollection of movement or conscious thought, only that suddenly I
found myself with my hands around his throat. I wrestled him to the ground, my
face hovering above his. I felt rage, terror, monumental confusion. "I didn't
kill her!"
"Of course you did," he said calmly and with little effort, he twisted away. The
strength in my arms evaporated. He stood above me, looking down.

"Joe killed her."
"No, it was you. How many others have you killed?"
"It was Joe!" Wildly, I looked around the room. "Joe! He'll tell you himself. He
loves killing."
"There's no one here but us."
"He was here. He's gone now, but he was here. He fed you, don't you remember? You drank his blood."
"Look at your arm."
My eyes focused on a narrow line of congealed blood running down my forearm. But
the arm wasn't mine, couldn't be mine--it was Joe's. I had seen him cut himself
just there; had seen the blood.

From my kneeling position, I looked up at Aurora's massive canvas. The unfinished portion seemed impossible to fill, a black hole swallowing all that
approached it. It had swallowed Aurora, driving her outside her artist's tower
to meet her fate. Would it also swallow me?
"You owe it to her," said Victor, as if he could read my thoughts. "Aurora said
that the difference between the artist and the monster was the difference between life and death."
Abruptly he walked away. He seemed tired again, his energy spent. I heard the quiet rustle of cushions as he settled back on the sofa. I looked back at the painting. A sound came from beyond the walls of the building--a distant train blaring its lonely, mournful tune through the night corridors. Fading slowly, echoing, vanishing forever.
I was alone with the canvas, the brushes, and the odor of the paints.

THE POUNDING ROOM
Bentley Little
When I read the following story by Bentley Little, I knew it was a Borderlands
story before I even finished it. Although I'd read (forgive me) little by Bentley, 1 had always liked the way his stuff tends to always be a little skewed
from the reality most of us know so well.
Little has published his short fiction in the small press and also genre magazines such as Night Cry and The Horror Show. His first novel, The Revelation, appeared in 1990. He says he is a faceless bureaucrat who wears a beard working in a large southern California city. I'll have to see if I can spot him next time I'm out there.
Thumpthump ... thumpthump ... thumpthump ... thumpthump ...
I hear it even now, the pounding, like the amplified beating of my heart. But it
is not my heart. And it is not the pulse of blood rushing through my veins, though it does come from within me.
Or maybe it comes from without.
It's hard to tell.

I like to think that it arises from that portion of my mind which is my memory,
but it is more immediate than an ordinary remembrance, and I hear it much more
often.
When I arrived for work that first day, I did not know what to expect. I'd been

interviewed the week before in the corporate boardroom on the fourth floor and
was hired on the spot, with hearty shakings of hands all around. I was given to
understand that I would have an office, but how big that office would be and
whether I would be provided with a secretary had not yet been decided. In fact,
not a whole hell of a lot had been decided. My official title was corporate
liaison, but it was an entirely new position and the job description was
necessarily vague. My duties would be better understood by both myself and my
employer once I'd begun working and gotten a handle on the situation.
So I really had no idea what I would be doing.
The corporation manufactured computer parts; not the microchips and high-tech
components but the simpler and more practical housings and frames. It was one of
the largest companies of its type on the West Coast, and the parking lot alone
was gigantic. I went through the gate and told the man in the booth that I was a
new employee. He checked my name against a list on his computer screen and waved
me on. It was not yet eight, but the lot was almost full, and I ended up parking
out in the cheap seats and hiking it in. A blonde bimbo in a red Fiat sped down
one of the rows and almost hit me, slamming on her brakes only at the last
moment when she saw that I would not cross her path in time for her to miss me,
and I vowed that the next day I would come early and get a decent parking space.
The facade of the main building was fake Deco, and though I saw other employees
entering through a side door, I decided to go through the lobby in the front. I
had not been told where to report, and I thought it would be best on the first
day to behave conservatively. I pushed open one of the double glass doors and
entered the huge lobby, approaching the receptionist, an attractive black woman
wearing a phone headset. I cleared my throat. "Excuse me," I said. "I'm Charles
Nichols, the new corporate liaison."

The woman looked down at a mimeographed sheet in front of her, then smiled up at
me. "Glad to have you with us," she said. "Mr. Gibbonz will be out in a moment
to take you through your orientation."
"Thank you," I said.
She pushed a button on the console in front of her, then gestured toward one of
the cool pastel couches which rimmed the lobby. "Have a seat."
I moved toward the closest couch. Mr. Gibbonz. Out of the four board members who
had interviewed me, I liked Gibbonz the least, though there was no concrete
reason for my feelings. He was a short, almost squat man with a thin pointed
nose and the clothes of a dandy. He had a condescending manner and a smug, bored
voice to match. I sat down on the couch, but before I could even pick up one of

the magazines on the adjoining table, Mr. Gibbonz was walking through the doorway behind the receptionist.
He shook my hand heartily. "Welcome aboard," he said. He smiled, revealing white even teeth.
I returned his smile and said, "It's good to be here."
Gibbonz led me past the receptionist and through the doorway into a wide hall lined with photographs of computers and computer parts. He waved at the business-suited men and women we passed. "I'll bet you're wondering what we have in store for you today," he said.
I nodded. "It crossed my mind."
"Well, the particulars of your position haven't been ironed out yet, but we have plenty of things to keep you busy in the interim." He stopped in front of an unmarked door and opened it. A well-lit stairway led down. "This way."
I followed him down the steps. The light dimmed considerably as we rounded the corner, and the remainder of the stairwell was quite dark. From below, I heard a ragged, rhythmic, muffled pounding.
Thumpthump ... thumpthump ... thumpthump ...
A slight feeling of apprehension passed through me, but Gibbonz was unmindful of both the noise and the darkness, and I followed him down into the gloom.

"As liaison," he continued, "your first assignment will be to interface with the--"
But I did not hear the next word for we had reached the bottom of the stairs and he had pushed open the wooden door.
The room before us was dark and small, not much larger than an average office.
The floor was earthen, the bare walls and ceiling were constructed of old unpainted boards, and the stifling humid air reeked of human perspiration. In the center of the room was a long black table around which sat sixteen or seventeen men. The men were all shirtless, their sweaty torsos glistening even in this dim light, and over each of their heads was a brown paper sack in which were cut two crude eyeholes. The men were pounding stones against the top of the table in an even rhythm, gripping the small rocks in their hands and bringing them down in time on the black wood, and it was clear that this was the source of the noise.
Thumpthump ... thumpthump ... thumpthump ...
Gibbonz walked around the table, and I followed him. The men continued to pound on the table, as if they did not see or notice us, their beat not wavering. Behind those holes in the sacks eyes may have watched our progress, but the sacks themselves turned neither one way nor the other. At the front of the room, on a small raised platform, was a dingy throne, covered with faded red velvet.
Gibbonz gestured toward the throne. "This is your office," he said.
"Is this a joke?" I demanded.
He shook his head, and I could see from the expression on his face that he did not understand my reaction.

"I'm sorry," I said, backing up. "I was hired as a corporate liaison, and this
is not... I didn't think I'd be ...
"We told you this was a new position, Mr. Nichols."
"Yes, but you led me to believe I would ... I mean, I outlined the type of position I was looking for--"
"Mr. Nichols--"
"I thought it would be a normal job!" I glared at him. All this time, the men had continued to pound on the table. The rhythmic thumping was starting to give
me a headache, driving a wedge into my brain, and all I wanted to do was run out
of the room and back up the stairs. I turned around to look at the men. Their positions had not changed. They remained entirely unmoving save for the
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synchronized pumping of their arms. The top of the table was unscuffed, I saw,
despite the constant battering of the stones. I glanced up at the ceiling. A single small bulb in the shape of a flame peeked out from a knothole in the wood.
"Sit down," Gibbonz said gently. He laid a hand on my arm, and there was something in that touch that prompted me to ascend the platform and sit down on
the throne. Below me, I could see all of the men, the sacks over their heads, the unceasing pumping of their arms. I wriggled a bit, trying to get comfortable, but the seat of the throne was hard and lumpy as if under the padded material there were rocks.
Gibbonz handed me a short kingly scepter--tarnished brass with a head of the same faded red velvet as the throne. "Hold this," he said. I took the scepter.
"You will get a fifteen-minute break at ten and three, a half-hour lunch at twelve."
"I don't have a--"
"I will inform you of the time," he said. He turned and began walking toward the
stairs. "Good luck!" he called back.
The door shut.
I was alone with the men. Though it was daytime, though we were in the midst of
a large modern corporation, I was afraid. The pounding did not grow louder--it
remained constant, as always-- but my perception of it changed. Without Gibbonz's presence there to deflect it, all my attention was drawn to the scene
before me. The unnaturalness of it, its incomprehensibility, put me on edge. I
felt like a little boy, constantly on alert, knowing a monster is going to jump
out but not knowing where or when. I did not really think anything was going to
jump out at me, but I felt that same fear, experienced that same feeling of expectant nervousness.
Thumpthump ... thumpthump ... thumpthump ...
I tried to think about something else, tried to concentrate on my apartment, on
a movie I had seen the day before, on anything other than the room in which I was sitting, but my attention was drawn back to the bizarre tableau before me. And the pounding, pounding, pounding. This must be what it is like to work in the engine room of a ship, I thought, or to work with a jackhammer. I did not understand how anyone could be around such constant noise for any length of

time. It was deafening,
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all-encompassing. My thoughts, my inner words, took on the rhythm of the pounding, coming to me in bursts of two, separated by a pause.
Thumpthump ... thumpthump ... thumpthump ...
I don't know why I did not just get up and leave. Perhaps I thought that Gibbonz
had locked the door. Knowing that the door was locked, having this fear confirmed would have been far worse than the suspicion. Or perhaps I thought this was a joke, a prank played on first-day employees. Or perhaps I thought this was all part of some elaborate psychological test to gauge my reaction under stressful circumstances and that my behavior was being filmed with a hidden camera. I do not really know what I thought. But I know I was afraid to
leave the dais, afraid to stand up from the throne, afraid to let go of the scepter.
There were eighteen men. I counted them. Nine on each side of the table. Only I
was not sure they were men. I could see their sweaty torsos, but their heads were hidden under the sacks, and I had the horrible feeling that if I looked under those sacks I would not find human heads. I thought of talking to them, of
yelling at them, but something stayed me. I was afraid to speak to the men. I was afraid they would not answer.
I was afraid they would answer.
It was horribly hot in the room, and already my underarms were soaked. I could
feel my shirt sticking to my wet back. Rivulets of sweat poured down the sides
of my face from my uncomfortably damp hair.
And still the pounding continued. Never ending. Never changing.
Thumpthump ... thumpthump ...
The pounding must have hypnotized me somehow, lulled me to sleep, because after
that I stood up from the throne and set the scepter down. I stepped off the platform. Moving slowly, as if underwater, I reached the man at the end of the
table and grabbed with both my hands the sack over his head. I could feel the coarse fibery paper between my fingers. The man's arm continued to move up and
down, the rock solid in his clenched fist, unmoving, unchanging, as I slowly pulled the sack from his head.
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It was my father. His face was grayish yellow, his eyes closed, a fine white powder on his mustache. He looked exactly as he had when he died. The old face
grafted onto the sweaty body would have been ludicrous, almost comical, were it
not for the fact that the head was dead and the body, arm pumping strongly, was
undeniably alive.
My cold hands were trembling, but I moved on to the second man and pulled the sack from his head. It was my mother. Her skin was sallow, her thin face at rest, her eyes and lips closed. The sack had apparently been supporting her, and
when I pulled it off, her head lolled limply on her right shoulder. Her hand, clutching her stone, continued to beat on the wooden tabletop.
I put my hand to her forehead, and her eyes suddenly popped open, burning with a
red intensity.

Then I was on the dais again, on the throne, clutching my scepter, staring down at the men, all of whom still had sacks over their heads.

The door opened at the far end of the room, and I wondered if it was time for a break yet. It couldn't be, I reasoned. Gibbonz had just left a few moments ago.

He walked toward me. "Five o'clock," he said. "Time to call it a day."

I stared at him. This had to be a joke, but it wasn't funny and I could think of no possible punch line.

"You just left a few minutes ago," I said.

He laughed. "Time flies when you're having fun. Come on." He took the scepter from my hand, placing it on the wooden platform next to the throne, and I followed him across the room, out the door, and up the stairs. As I walked back into the real world, leaving the hot hell of the dark room behind me, I saw that other people were indeed leaving as if it was time to go home, small groups of men and women putting on jackets, taking out keys, checking purses as they walked down the hall toward the exit. I looked around for a wall clock and saw one nearby.

Four fifty-nine.

Where had the day gone? What had happened to me?

Though I was out of the room and in a modern well-lighted

hallway of the company, I felt a shiver run down my spine. I turned to Gibbonz, trying to keep my voice as nonchalant as possible. "I thought you were going to tell me when it was time for break and lunch. You left me in there all day."

He looked at me, puzzled. "What?"

A passing woman turned to smile at me. "Charles," she said, nodding.

It was a greeting, an acknowledgment from one acquaintance to another, but I had never seen the woman before in my life. The confusion must have shown on my face, because she laughed. Her laugh was tinkling, musical. "Judee," she prodded. "Lunch?"

I nodded, pretending I understood. Apparently, I had met this woman at lunch. What the hell had happened to me?

Gibbonz held out his hand. "Good first day," he told me. "You'll fit in well. See you tomorrow."

I shook his hand but said nothing. I had no intention of coming back here ever again. I walked out to the parking lot alone, got into my car, and drove home.

That night I lay awake, thinking of that hot sweaty room, hearing the pounding, seeing the unmoving bodies of the men with the sacks over their heads, and I knew I had to go back again. I could not leave everything as is. I would spend the rest of my life wondering about that room, those men, that corporation. I had to know who--what--those men were, what was under those sacks. I wanted to discover that there was nothing out of the ordinary at all, that tomorrow I would arrive to find that it was all a test, a joke, an initiation rite, and that I was now the proud owner of a nice new air-conditioned office. But I knew that was just wishful thinking.

I reported the next morning to Gibbonz's office. He did not seem surprised to see me, and he did not act as if anything out of the ordinary had occurred the
day before. He simply shook my hand, said hello, and led me down the hall, through the door, down the stairs to the room.
Everything was unchanged.
I was tempted to ask about the duties of my job again, but it would have been pointless. I had no intention of staying here any
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longer than necessary. He handed me the scepter, I climbed the dais and sat down
on the throne.
Thumpthump ... thumpthump ...
Gibbonz left without a word, and I was alone with the men. The table on which they were pounding seemed newer than it had yesterday, and the single candle bulb seemed dimmer than before. But it was probably just my imagination.
I was scared, but I forced myself to put down the scepter and step off the platform. My heart was pounding, and the sweat was pouring down my face. I slowly approached the first man, and I stood there for a moment, staring at his
glistening muscles. I knew he was big enough to easily beat the crap out of me,
but somehow that was not something I worried about. That possibility did not frighten me.
The stone in his hand came down on the table in hard even strokes.
I took one step closer. The man made no attempt to restrain my hands as I put them on the top of the sack. He neither flinched nor yielded, in no way acknowledging my presence, his untiring arm coming down in jackhammer strokes,
striking the table.
I pulled off the sack.
On top of the large brawny shoulders sat a tiny shriveled-apple head onto which
was stamped an expression of wide-eyed youthful terror. The small mouth opened
and closed spasmodically, gasping like a fish drowning in air, and then the eyes
closed, the head drooped onto the left shoulder. The pounding arm slowed, then
stopped, the stone falling from the unclenching fingers.
The pace of the other men's pounding increased, as if to make up for this loss,
but they did not turn to look at me, did not deviate in any way from their ritual. The sack moved neither one way nor the other; the bodies remained in place, unmoving save for the piston like arms.
I touched the body of the de-sacked man. Had I killed him? Was he dead? The sweaty skin was warm and spongy to the touch. I looked closely at the tiny head.
Although it was wrinkled and shriveled, its features were vaguely familiar, as
if this were someone I should know but could not quite place. I stared at the face for a long time.
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Then it came to me.
Franklin Roosevelt. The face looked like that of Franklin Roosevelt.
I quickly pulled off the sack over the head of the adjacent man's head. The shriveled visage of Albert Einstein gasped bug-eyed for air, then expired.
The tempo of the pounding increased as I pulled off other sacks.
Winston Churchill.
W.C. Fields.

They were all famous men, many of them powerful world leaders. Finally, there was one man left, at the head of the table. His arm was pumping fast and furious
at an inhuman rate, the sound of the single stone striking the table at this speed sounding like a flat drumroll. I walked toward the man, ready to pull off
the sack, but something held me back. I was filled with a fear more profound than I had ever experienced before or have experienced since. I stared at the sack and thought I saw, pressing lightly against the coarse brown paper, the outline of a ridged head.
From underneath the front of the sack protruded a single fern frond.
I left without looking back. I knew I would wonder afterward what had been under
that sack, but I knew also it was not something that would keep me up at night.
Some things it was better not to know.
I walked up the stairs, down the hall, and out of the building.
I never went back. I never even drove down that street again, and a few months
later I moved out of the city.
In the years since, I have often wondered what it all meant, or if indeed it meant anything. If I had read of such an occurrence in a novel, short story, or
other work of literature, I could have analyzed it in terms of symbol or metaphor, I could have placed meaning on the individual elements of the room and
on the events which occurred there. But this was no work of fiction, there was
no correspondence between what I experienced and some higher meaning.
Yet...
Yet I wonder what did happen. Were those robots or genetically

engineered creatures? Had the corporation somehow cloned or resurrected famous
people? Were those men going to be used for something? As part of a publicity campaign or a plot to take over the world? I didn't know then, and I still don't
now, but somehow none of those explanations seem adequate. I can't help feeling
that those ... things ... were in some way an integral part of the company, as
necessary to its function and operation as labor or management. I do not think
they were human, but I do not think they were man-made either. I wouldn't call
them supernatural, but that description is closer than any other.
I still think about my one day and one hour on the job, and I can see the nightmare contours of the room as if it were before me now. I can hear the rhythmic pounding, pounding, pounding. Sometimes the noise intrudes upon my life, coming up from the depths, growing louder, superimposing upon the here and
now, and I wonder if I simply dreamed it all and am going crazy. Or, far more frighteningly, whether I am still in that room and have never left, whether I have been lulled into slumber and have dreamed everything that subsequently happened, whether I have been hypnotized by the pounding and can never leave the
room.
Thumpthump thumpthump thumpthump ...

Peeling It Off

Darrell Schweitzer

When I created the concept for Borderlands, I worried about getting enough stories I could honestly proclaim unique or bizarre or thoroughly strange. This fear became exacerbated as I waded knee-deep through submissions that ran through the same tired HDF shticks. Gradually, the really odd pieces began to surface, and I felt better. One of the first stories to give me such reassurance was Darrell Schweitzer's "Peeling It Off" and even though I asked him for several sets of revisions, I always knew I was going to buy it.

In his late thirties, Schweitzer's been a professional writer since he was twenty-one. He's worked as an editor of both magazine fiction and books of criticism; had stories in most of the genre magazines and anthologies; has had several story collections published, in addition to a handful of novels. He lives in Philadelphia, where he continues to write and work as coeditor and co-publisher of the latest incarnation of Weird Tales.

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"I've done something to Joanne."

"It's worse than life and death," Sam Gilmore said, and I believed him.

I had to. It was something about his intensity, the way he said it, the way he leaned over the table and stared right through me, the way he had begged me to meet him now, tonight, here in a ridiculous East Village bar called the Yuppie Upper despite the lateness of the hour and the foul February weather.

But I was his friend, so there I was. We went back a long way together, to childhood, and in a city as huge as New York you cling to anyone who isn't a stranger.

I glanced around at the decor--everything that the name of the place implied, a hideous caricature of the young-and-loaded image, clashing neo-fifties chrome, neo-thirties Art Tacko, a whole wall dominated by a Warholesque portrait of Marilyn Monroe in pale green--and reflected that in other circumstances this would be one of Sam's little jokes. We would both be laughing now.

But even before I'd sat down, when I found him in a back booth nursing the remains of some tall drink that came with a pair of cheap sunglasses wrapped around the stem of the glass--even then I could sense that something was terribly wrong. Sam could try to be silly to stave off the most wrenching despair, but it never worked and it wasn't working now.

I stood there in front of him, shaking the water off my coat.

"Sam, goddamnit, this had better be good."

And then he went very pale, and his lower lip was trembling. I thought he was going to break down then and there.

"It's about Joanne."

I sat down. A waiter came over. I ordered a whiskey sour just to get rid of him.

"Sam," I said, "you'll have to get over her. You're divorced now, like God knows how many other people. Something a lot of people have learned to live with."

"It's not just that. I've discovered I--"

I tried to be as firm as I could without upsetting him. "I hope you aren't going to say you still love her. It's a bit late for that."

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He sipped his drink. The straw made a gurgling sound.

"No, Frank," he said. "Quite the opposite. I have discovered that I truly hate

her."
"Put that out of your mind," I said. "Just forget it. That kind of thing can eat
you, like a cancer."
He toyed with his glass, twirling it in his hands.
"You haven't been there, Frank. You don't know. It was actually a comfort to realize, at last, that I hated her. It wasn't just the culmination of a long process of insults and tantrums, rejections and sneaking unfaithfulness, though
it was all those things. It wasn't even anything like Poe's 'thousand injuries
of Fortunato,' but some vast and inexorable force working on me, like tectonic
plates grinding inside my mind. And then, when I knew that I hated her, those plates were in place, and there was no more grinding, and I felt only' relief."
"This is sick. It's bad for your head. So quit it!"
"I wish I could," he said. "But, you see, I didn't call you here tonight just to
tell you about my little miracle of self-discovery. No, it's something else, something I've done."
"Something you've done?" I felt the first tiny shiver of fear then.
"Will you listen to all of it? Just listen? Be a friend and--?"
"Yeah, sure, Sam. I'll listen," I said. "Because I am still your friend."
He ordered another drink. It wasn't a silly one either, just whiskey and soda.
He sat quietly for a while, sipping it. The bar was completely empty now, save
us and one waiter. The music had been turned off. I could hear the faint sound
of the television in the far corner.
"I went to see Joanne again, two days ago," he said at last. "She's still in the
old apartment. I went there, and, you know, for a few minutes I couldn't bring
myself to go up. I just stood in the lobby. But then I saw the label on her mailbox. It said JOANNE GILMORE, 4D. She hadn't even gone back to her maiden name. For a second I wondered if it might mean there was one final tie she refused to break--but then I dismissed the possibility it could mean anything at
all. It was, instead, the final straw. I hated her just a bit more then, and it
was enough.
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"I took my time walking up the stairs. My heart was racing the while. When I rang the bell again and again at 4D and there was no answer, I was only too ready to leave. I was looking for an excuse, an out.
"But then there was movement inside. The peephole flickered.
"Joanne opened the door a few inches and peered out. She was in a bathrobe and
slippers, her hair up in a towel.
"'Sam!' she all but hissed. 'I told you never to come here again! Do you need a
fucking court order?'
'"But I wanted to see you, dearest,' I said. I rammed my shoe in between the door and the jamb, then put my shoulder to the door and shoved my way inside.
"That was more than she had been expecting, even after everything that had happened between us. She just stood there, her hand to her mouth in amazement. I
closed the door behind me and turned toward her in the narrow hallway.

'"What the hell do you think you're doing?' She was furious, but whispering. There has never been anyone else who could put such venom into a whisper. 'Get
out of here before I--"
'"Before you scream?" I grabbed her by the shoulders and slammed her against the
wall, holding her there. The towel started to come loose. She jerked her head to
get it out of her eyes. "No one will come,' I whispered back at her, 'even if they can hear you. This is New York, home of the late Kitty Genovese, remember?"
"She was getting scared by then, I could tell. But she controlled herself. Her
voice was icy calm.
"'So now you're here. Now what?'
'"I just wanted to talk to you again, Jo--"
"She was almost crying then. 'There's nothing left to say. Just leave me alone
and get the fuck out.'
"'Profanity, my dear, is the last recourse of the fucking inarticulate, and you
were never inarticulate, so why talk to me like that?'
"I reached up to gently caress her cheek, and she slapped my hand away with real
repugnance, as if I were covered with lice or something. That hurt. That, more
than anything else, strengthened my resolve.

'"My God,' she said, in tears now, shaking all over. 'Your barging in here like
this only makes me sure I did the right thing getting rid of you. If I ever had
any doubts about you being a creep and an asshole, I don't now.'
'"I don't either,' I said. I grabbed her by the throat with my left hand and lifted her till she stood on tiptoes against the wall. She tried to kick me in
the balls then, but I just stepped aside. I held her dangling there, but just for a second--"
"Jesus Christ--Sam! You didn't--?"
I felt sick then. I held on to the edge of the table hard. All I could do was think to myself, Oh shit, Oh shit--
But Sam held up his hand.
"Frank, please. It's not what you think. You promised you'd hear me out."
"Okay. Yeah. I did."
"She barely managed to gasp, 'Sam, don't--do--anything stupid ..."
"I couldn't wait any longer. It was time to let her in on my secret.
"I sank my fingers into the side of her face, slipping under the skin by her left ear. The underside of her face felt like putty, and it was wet in there, and almost scalding hot.
"I don't think Joanne was quite conscious then. She seemed stunned, somehow paralyzed, and she didn't make the slightest sound or motion as I slowly pulled
outward and her face came away in my hand. For a few seconds I held it drooping
over my fingers like half-melted cheese. Then it was no heavier than a cobweb,
and a few seconds after that, my hand was empty.
"I let go of her then, and when I saw the raw, red place where her face had been, I was violently sick. I ran into the bathroom and puked my guts out. Then

I came out and walked slowly into the living room. I sat down on the sofa and just stared at everything, taking inventory, looking for nothing in particular
but looking for it with desperate urgency. Nothing. That was the key. For all Joanne and I had lived here for twelve years, there was nothing left. The prints
on the walls, the stereo, the furniture were all different. Even the tennis trophy we'd won together in college--I'd left her that
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when she'd asked for it--was gone from the shelf. The room told the story of a
stranger's life.
"Then I heard her sobbing softly out in the hall. I stood up. It was time for me
to go.
"The woman sitting in the hall, the one wearing Joanne's bathrobe and slippers,
was no one I had ever seen before. I stopped and studied her face for a minute.
The cheekbones were higher, the nose longer, the eyes brown instead of hazel, the eyebrows thicker and more arced. Her expression was that of someone who has
suddenly stepped into life without any bearings, unsure of who she is or how she
got there.
"The very unfamiliarity was comforting. I left the apartment without a word. Downstairs, I scraped my ex-wife's name off the other woman's mailbox."
The truly terrifying part was that Sam Gilmore clearly believed every word he said. I was trapped then, completely unprepared, and yet I had to do something,
as surely as I would if I had come across a man bleeding to death in a back alley.
"Sam," I said, very deliberately. "Listen to what you're saying. This is ... crazy. I mean, you know, you really know, that people's faces don't come off like Silly Putty."
He folded his hands on the table.
"But they do, my friend. They do. You have been my best friend all these years,
but there's one secret I've been keeping from you all this time. They do. I know
it."
I was only stalling for time then, desperately, until I could come up with some
sort of plan.
"Okay. They do."
"I learned that when I was six years old, Frank. It was one morning a couple days after Christmas. I was hunting Injuns in the living room, crawling around
under the furniture with my coonskin cap and Frontiersman cork rifle. You remember, Frank? You had one too."
"I remember," I said.
"Well, it was barely dawn, much too early for me to be allowed up, and there I
was. Suddenly the door to the guest bedroom
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opened, and my grandfather stepped out. I froze where I was, afraid he'd see me
and tell my parents. But he just stood there in the doorway, fully dressed, with
a suitcase in hand, staring into space as if he were trying to remember

something.
"Then he crossed the living room and went into the kitchen. I put my gun down gingerly and crept out a way to see what he was doing.
"It was real, Frank. I was wide awake, not dreaming. Grandpa put down the suitcase, then reached up behind his head with both hands as if he were fumbling
for the string to take a Halloween mask off--that was the image that came to me,
even then--and he peeled his face away. It just came off But he had his back to
me and I didn't see--I mean, I only saw when he held up the mask of flesh to the
window. It was translucent in the pale light for just an instant before it vanished with a hiss, the way a thin slice of bacon will fizzle away into nothing on a hot grill.
"When he turned back toward the living room, he was someone else, an older man I
didn't know.
"I wanted to scream, Frank. I bit my fist hard to keep myself from screaming. At
the same time, I think I was more consciously afraid of being caught up too early than anything else. My mind rejected what I saw. It was impossible, I told
myself. Just what you'd say. A little kid doesn't have a real good grasp of what's possible and what isn't, but there are limits, and that, even for a six-year-old, was too much.
"I must have let out a little moan, because then he saw me.
"'No,' I whimpered softly. 'Go away.'
"Our eyes met, and for just an instant it was still Grandpa there, gazing at me
out of that stranger's face--angrily, sadly, I couldn't tell--and then he did indeed go away. Whatever there was, in the eyes, in the face, that remained of
Grandpa was gone, and the stranger shrugged, picked up his suitcase, and left the house.
"I lay there for a long time. Mother found me eventually. She thought I was sick. I'd wet my pajamas. I got a scolding and was put to bed, and she never understood, never suspected, and for years afterwards that scene came back to me
in nightmares or just popped up in the middle of a train of thought, and I tried
to figure

it out. I was much, much too young. Kids can't understand that adults are real
people too, with their own feelings and vulnerabilities. He was just Grandpa. He
visited. He brought me presents. I couldn't imagine what frustrations, what little agonies he must have gone through before taking that final escape route.
"And sometimes I wondered: was it because of me? What if, instead of 'Go away,'
I'd said, 'Please stay. We love you'? But I didn't. I didn't say anything at all.
"And that's how I found out my little secret."
We sat there quietly for what might have been five minutes. The last customers
and even the waiters were gone, so we were alone but for the bartender in the corner by the television.
There were lots of times I thought I would just get up and bolt, but I was

afraid to. And Sam Gilmore was my friend, and friendship is a little like marriage--in sickness and in health--so I had to stay.
"Sam, what did you do to Joanne?"
He swirled the ice in his glass, gazing into it, seemingly oblivious of me.
"I didn't want to hurt her. I just wanted her gone, out of my life. Then it would be over."
"It isn't that simple, Sam, and you damn well know it. People are going to wonder what happened to her. The police are going to start asking questions--"
I stopped then, waiting for his reaction. Perhaps I had gone too far by mentioning the police.
There were tears on his cheeks now. He put his elbows on the tabletop, covered
his eyes with his hands, and sobbed.
"It's not like you think, Frank. No cops ever came looking after my grandfather.
He was gone, like a stone thrown into a lake, and after a while the ripples just
smoothed out. Grandma and my parents never mentioned him. He made a graceful exit. But, Frank, you're right. It's not that simple for me. That's why you're
here tonight. I called you not merely to tell you about what I did, but because
I need your help with something that is still going on. There has been, you might say, an unforeseen complication."
"I don't understand," I said.

"It's Joanne. It's different with her. She keeps coming back."
That was when the plan occurred to me. I grasped at it with quiet, desperate deliberation, because I had to do something, and this, at least, was something.
I stood up and put my coat on.
"Come on, Sam. We gotta get out of here."
He put on his coat.
"Okay..."
I took him by the arm and maneuvered him past the cash register. He was too befuddled then. I led him like a child or a very, very old man. I had to leave a
twenty of my own to pay for the drinks.
Outside the wind howled, and the stinging sleet was turning into stinging snow.
"Where are we going?" my friend shouted.
I just dragged him along. There were no taxis in sight so we made for the subway
entrance.
"We're going to Joanne's apartment," I said. "We're going to settle this crazy
thing once and for all."
He yanked me to a stop, but I held on to him. He glared at me, teeth chattering.
"It won't do any good. She's not there anymore."
"Sam, you may be my closest friend, but you're going to have to show me."
He didn't resist then as I led him down the stairs into the subway, steadying him. I dropped two tokens into the farebox and steered him out onto the empty platform. I was more scared than ever. The waiting was the terrible part. We were alone, with nowhere to go and nothing to do for I didn't know how long, and
live rails just off the edge in either direction. As long as I was moving, doing
something, it didn't seem so bad, but waiting was another matter entirely.
We would find the truth. That was the plan. If Joanne was in her apartment,

then
I would have to direct Sam, gently or otherwise,
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into the care of a psychiatrist. If she wasn't, it was time to go to the police.
At last the train came. I sat Sam down between myself and the window. As we rattled through the darkness he just stared out at the concrete walls weaving past. Then, after a while, he began to speak, but to himself, not in conversation, but just babbling aloud.
"I couldn't sleep that night when I got home. After I did it... I felt like ...
like a murderer. I was waiting for everyone in the building to start pounding on
the walls and on my door and shouting 'He's the one! There!' But I only lay still in the darkness, listening to the ticking of my alarm clock. It sounded like thunder. I listened to my own heartbeat too. I could hear it, as if my senses were all suddenly heightened, because ... because I knew ... like Roderick Usher. I looked at the clock once and it was half past twelve. Then I
rolled over again and looked once more, and it was a quarter to four. I hadn't
felt any interval in between. It was like that, like a whole part of my life, all the years of my marriage, had been ripped out, destroyed. Once I was twenty-four. Now I am thirty-six. And there's nothing in between. Nothing.
"After a while, there was another sound. There was someone in the kitchen. I heard a cabinet open. Pans clinked. I thought for a moment that it was burglars,
that I would die the archetypal New Yorker's death, knifed in my own apartment
just after I had ...
"But it was someone fixing breakfast. I looked at the clock again. It was almost
six.
"And I heard, quite distinctly, Joanne's voice. I knew I was not dreaming, even
as I had been certain when I saw Grandpa that time. But it was not the way Joanne had sounded in years. She was almost a little girl again and was singing
an old song she had been fond of. I used to ask her what it meant, but she never
knew:
"'How many miles to my love's grave?
Just three score and ten.
Can I get there by candlelight?
But never back again.
Never back again.'
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"I slid out of bed as quietly as I could, wincing as the bedsprings or floorboards creaked. I didn't know what to believe then. I was past all believing.
"I rushed into the kitchen, but there was no one there. However, a frying pan was on the stove, and Joanne's blue bathrobe hung draped over a chair.
"Even that wasn't the end, Frank. No, it was just the beginning, the first onslaught. I went to work that day as if nothing had happened, but she was ...
everywhere. It's not that I actually saw her but... one of the girls at the agency suddenly decided to wear her hair exactly the way Joanne did. And another
had a ring that wasn't like the one I had given Joanne on our first anniversary--it was that ring, even down to the scratch it got later. It was

all
I could do not to start screaming and yank it off her finger. But when she, that
particular copywriter's assistant, turned to me, I saw something in her eyes--hazel, like Joanne's--that sent me back into my office without a word. That afternoon I found one of Joanne's old love notes in a file of photos. It was from before our marriage and it said simply, I'm yours. Now those photos were for a brand-new project for a brand-new client, so how do you suppose that
note got there? How?"
The train came to a stop, then lurched into motion again. We were in the Fifties
now. It wouldn't be long.
"I don't know, Sam. Really I don't."
"I'm being haunted by details, Frank. That's how it is. She comes back--in a sound, in a ring, in a note, little things. When I got back to my own apartment
that night everything was arranged just a little differently. Some of the books
on the shelves were not mine, but hers. That was when I knew that it would only
get worse and worse, until... well, I couldn't just wait until the end, and so I
thought of you, and I called you."
The subway had reached our stop. I helped Sam to his feet. He seemed weak, almost limp, but he wasn't drunk. I think it was despair. He was giving up.
"Come on, old buddy," I said, all but hoisting him outside and up the stairs. When we reached Joanne's apartment building, he hung back, but I dragged him inside. We stood in that very lobby with the
108
mailboxes. Joanne's sticker had indeed been peeled off.
Sam tried to be jovial again.
"Say, Frank, old chum, let's you and me just ... forget the whole business. Whaddaya say? It's all been a big joke. A practical joke."
As usual, it didn't work. I knew he was trying to offer me, and himself, an escape. But it was long since too late for that.
"Come on," I said gently. "We have to go up."
There was an elevator, but, as he had two days previously, we climbed the stairs.
"You may be wondering," he said as we went, "... I mean, there is an element of
logic missing ... so why didn't Grandpa come back and haunt us, like Joanne has?
I think I know why. Because he wanted to go. It was his time to leave his body
and become somebody else. He knew that. But I forced Joanne. It wasn't right, and I have to pay for what I have done."
We reached the fourth floor. I rang the bell of 4D and waited. I rang again, feeling some of what he must have felt, that first time, the desire to find some
hasty reason to avoid going through with what we had come to do.
Maybe nobody is home.
That would have helped him a lot, two days previously, but now it would be no help at all, for either of us.
This was the totality of my plan, to ring the bell, to confront the truth, to find Joanne living there and discover that my friend had lost his mind, or even
to find her corpse ... I was ready for that... and to admit that he was a murderer.
But I wasn't prepared for the one thing that did happen.

A stranger came to the door. She fit the description Sam had given, darker, with brown eyes and arced eyebrows. She was, I think, a little taller than Joanne, and her hair was longer, straighter.

When he saw her, Sam put his head on my shoulder and cried softly. The woman stared out at us through the partially opened door, nervous, ready to slam the door in our faces.

All I could say was, "Excuse me, Miss, but does Joanne Gilmore live here?"

She shook her head and closed the door partway.

"I don't know no Joanne Gilmore."

"Well then, did she live here? You must have just moved in. Do you know the name of the previous tenant?" She glanced at me, then at Sam, then back at me. "I don't know nobody by that name. What do you want?" "Let's get out of here, Frank," Sam said. "Nothing," I said to the woman. "Sorry to have disturbed you."

Sam was pulling me toward the stairs.

"So you see?" he said. We stood in the frigid air, huge flakes of slushy snow whirling around us.

"No, I don't see. Someone else lives there now, that's all. Where is Joanne?"

He turned to me, hurt, shocked. "You still don't believe me. I haven't been lying to you, Frank. It's all true. Everything I told you is true."

"Sam, I'd like to believe you. But you know I can't."

He began to walk briskly toward the subway entrance.

I ran after him.

"I want you to come to my place," he said, a trace of anger in his voice. "You'll believe me then."

That was the one hope I had left to cling to, that Joanne had for some reason moved back in with Sam and was living with him now, in the other apartment in Brooklyn. Maybe she had done it out of pity, as she saw his mind crumbling, and he, in his madness, had developed this whole fantasy as a defense mechanism in the aftermath of their particularly messy divorce. It wasn't a comforting notion, that my best friend was having serious mental problems, but it made some sort of sense.

On the corner by the subway entrance was a newsstand. An old woman was buying a newspaper.

"There!" Sam shouted to me. "Look! There's proof!"

"What?"

Before I could react at all he had snatched the lady's change purse out of her hands and come back to me, breathless.

"Here. You see? It's another thing of hers. Joanne's. I gave her this purse once. See the initials--"

The initials were unquestionably J.G., as in Joanne Gilmore, but I didn't look very closely because the old woman was screaming and the man inside the newsstand had stepped out, an iron bar in his hand. I grabbed the change purse from Sam and threw it back to its owner.

Then I hurried Sam down the subway steps. The tunnel was like a maze. It seemed to go down and down forever.

"There!" Sam screamed.

He broke away from me again. We had come upon a bag lady, a thing of tatters and filth, like an animate heap of rags knee-deep in trash as she pawed through a half-empty trash can, stooping over, picking, eating. Sam lunged at her, wrestled her to the ground, screaming, "No! Not like this! No!"

I tried to pull him off but only succeeded in hauling both of them to their feet. The bag lady grunted like a pig, her mouth full of half-eaten garbage. She clawed at Sam's face, and for a horrible instant I believed the whole story and was certain his face would suddenly peel off.

Sam snatched a mother-of-pearl comb from the bag lady's matted hair and turned to me while the three of us wrestled.

"It's hers. It's Joanne's."

The bag lady shrieked and began to vomit great gouts of filth.

"Sam! Stop it." I hit him on the back of the neck as hard as I could. But for all he had been weak in his despair, he was now enormously strong in his frenzy.

He flung me aside with one arm, so hard that I hit the opposite wall and fell down stunned.

When I looked up, he had the bag lady down on the ground. He was kneeling over her, gently peeling her face off. He held it up to me like a soiled rag. Then it was gone, and he was leaning low, speaking gently to the bag lady. All I could see of her face was a clean, pink mass.

She spoke back in a voice I almost knew, but faded into the whimperings of a frightened child, then into completely inarticulate mewlings.

Right there. Right there my own sanity snapped, my whole, lifelong conception of what is and isn't possible, what is real and unreal shattered completely. I couldn't judge my friend Sam

anymore. I couldn't say he was crazy or not. These things were no longer sane or insane. They merely were.

Sam helped me to my feet. I looked over to where the bag lady lay still amid the spilled trash, but he turned me away.

"Joanne was there. I couldn't let her live like that, not even for a few seconds."

"I thought you hated her," I said.

"Come on. We have to go."

Now he was leading me. Now I pulled away from him and stood there shaking all over. I was afraid of him for the first time. The only thing I could think was that he would peel my face off. I only wanted to run away, to escape him forever.

But he asked me in an almost pathetically hopeful tone, "You will come along and help me now, Frank, won't you?"

"Yeah, old buddy," I said.

He went into another of his monologues on the ride to Brooklyn. I just sat there helplessly, gazing at one face after another as passengers got on and off.

Nothing made sense anymore. I concluded, at last, that Sam wasn't crazy. No, he was the only one who was sane. He understood.

"I saw my grandfather one more time. Did I tell you about that? No, I didn't. It
was when I was fifteen and I went to some sort of music festival in Washington
Square. I don't remember why you weren't along. I don't remember what kind of
music it was, either. That is not the point of this remembrance.
"An old man in a rumpled coat sat on a bench in the middle of the square. He
hadn't come for the music. He was one of those people who roost there every day,
like the pigeons. The scary part was that I knew him. He was a complete
stranger, yet the way he moved his hands when he rolled a cigarette, and
something about his posture and the angle of his hat--all these were a secret
code, details of a message for me alone.
"I stood there for several minutes, gawking, and very, very slowly the face
became more familiar, as if someone were surfacing from deep inside this man's
body. Like the way your face slowly becomes visible if you press it against a
plastic tent and stare through.
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"And I wanted to scream again, just like when I was six. I bit my fist, hard,
and the shock of recognition--recognition of the gesture--made it all the worse.
Everything came flooding back. It was that dim morning nine years before all
over again.
"Grandpa was there and everything, all the secret details and codes seemed to
say, If only you'd called out. If only you'd cared--
"I tried to speak. I tried to explain it all to him, then and there, to make him
understand at last that it wasn't my fault because I was so afraid. I wanted to
ask his forgiveness, but the words wouldn't come. All I managed to do was step
nearer and say, 'I-- I--"
"But the old man looked up sharply, scowled, and said an obscene word. Our eyes
met. There was a flicker of something, but in an instant whatever I thought I
saw was gone and there was just this utter stranger angry at this kid for
intruding on his privacy.
"I didn't go to the music festival. I just ran and kept on running for blocks
and blocks."
When we stood on the sidewalk outside Sam Gilmore's apartment, the lights were
on. It sounded like a party. There was music playing, the sort of sixties folk
music Joanne had always liked but Sam had never cared for. I couldn't make it
out clearly, but close to the window someone was singing along:
"How many miles to Babylon ? Just three score and ten. Can I get there by
candlelight? Aye, and back again. Aye, and back again."
Sam turned to me, and once more it was he who was trembling and afraid, and I
was the one who had to be strong.
"Will you help me?"
"Yes," I said.
We went up. The door was unlocked. The apartment was not as I had seen it the
last time I had visited Sam. Joanne's things were everywhere, the posters, the
furniture, the bookcases, the paintings on the walls.
113
There were four women waiting for us in the living room. One of them was black.
I had never seen any of them before, but all were about Joanne's age, all

attractive in one way or another, all of them wearing what I recognized as Joanne's clothing.
Sam sank down into a chair. I just stood there. The record finished, but no one
went to lift the arm. The needle went on scratching.
"I'm here," one of the women said. Her voice was distinctly Joanne's voice now.
There could be no mistaking it. "I've been thinking about us a lot," said another, the voice seeming to travel from one mouth to another, as if the speaker were running down a corridor, shouting out a series of windows. "I'm lost," said the third, "but if I try," said the fourth, "sometimes I can find my
way part of the way back, for a little while." The first sighed and said, "Sometimes I wake up in another place and I don't know who I am or how I got there, and then I begin to remember, and sometimes I want to kill you. But sometimes I remember how it was for us in the beginning. Things were good once.
I can remember that."
Sam was crying like a baby now, clawing at his forehead and cheeks.
"Please," I said. "Sam, don't."
But he wasn't talking to me.
"Jo--tell me what to do. Please tell me."
She didn't answer. She was gone. I began to understand then, that somehow her soul swam up from some unimaginable abyss toward the light, and for a few moments she could look out of a stranger's eyes. Then she would sink down again.
It must have taken all her strength to bring these four women, these four strange bodies together--four because she didn't have enough control to focus on
just one--and hold them there until Sam and I arrived. But that was all she could do, for just a few minutes, and as I watched every trace of whatever had
been Joanne Gilmore faded from those four faces. I was even less certain that the four women were wearing Joanne's clothes. All of them stared around the room, as if awakening from a trance. They filed out of the apartment like sleepwalkers. I was sure that very soon there would be four puzzled ladies outside, wondering how they had gotten to Brooklyn on this bitter night at such
an extreme hour.

Joanne was like a stone in a pond, trying to swim. She had barely rippled the surface, but that was miracle enough.
Sam turned to me, his cheeks streaked with tears.
"Will you help me, Frank, for friendship's sake?"
"You know I will," I said.
"I'm ... I'm not as brave as my grandfather. I can't do it myself."
I reached out toward him with both hands. He nodded slowly.
And I stood over him and I slid my fingers into his cheeks, into the scalding wetness beneath his skin.
Later, after he had gone into the darkness in search of Joanne, and a complete
stranger sat with me in the silent apartment, I understood one final thing, that
Sam Gilmore was a pathetic liar, that his whole story had been a fabrication to
the core, an excuse, a feeble Band-Aid over a terrible and mysterious wound.
He had been lying, even to himself.
He had never, never hated Joanne. I was sure that he would realize that someday,
in some strange place, when he finally found her again.

115
The Raw and the Cooked"
Michael Green
One of the really wonderful things about editing an anthology is the occasional chance to make a "discovery," to peel back the wrappings on fresh talent and know you're one of the first people to realize this new writer has got what it takes. Michael Green's story came out of a pile of unsolicited manuscripts that totaled more than a thousand. A complete unknown. His chances were literally one out of a thousand. But his story was so striking, and so incisive, I knew it was something I wanted for Borderlands. I kind of see it as a stinging allegory that examines what the fast-food industry is doing to our children, but it is also a gut-churning good read, and that's what it's all about, right.
Michael is in his mid-thirties, married with three kids, and works part-time as a librarian in a small town in Vermont. He specifically asked that I not reveal the town's name. Weird? Yeah, I thought so. When informed he would be part of this anthology, he wrote: "I hope everything goes smoothly with the book, and that by next year we're still around to enjoy it." Yo, Michael... my kind of guy.
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Harry hadn't gone more than two miles before he spotted the girl. Slowing the van to match the speed of her bicycle, he took note of the bright green swimsuit, the long blonde ponytail, the limbs so bare in the afternoon sun. He accelerated for a moment and then abruptly pulled over to the curb. He shut off the engine, grabbed a prepared syringe from his kit, and quickly climbed out of the van. Standing on the sidewalk, Harry watched the girl approach.
When she tried to escape by riding across the nearest lawn, he chased after her and knocked her to the ground. Holding her down firmly, he slipped the needle into her upper arm and depressed the plunger. As he waited for the child to lose consciousness, he spoke to her quietly. There were tiny chips of sky reflected in each of her frightened eyes. "Shhh ..." he said. "Time to rest, honey. Time to rest."
Eventually, she slept.
Harry lifted her in his arms and carried her back to the van. He slid open the door and placed her on the carpeted floor. Her small chest rose and fell steadily as he checked her pulse. Her pretty face was peaceful, unscarred by the world, without evidence of corruption or sin. Removing the handkerchief from his pants pocket, he dabbed at the fine thread of saliva leaking from the corner of her mouth.
As he started the van, Harry congratulated himself on his good fortune. Often he had to search for an hour or more before locating such a suitable child.

Considering how far behind schedule he was, finding this little girl so promptly had certainly been a stroke of luck.

He drove out of town along the state highway. It was a thirty-minute ride to his next stop. He enjoyed working this part of the coast, where his assignments weren't so close together. The land was still uncluttered here, still mostly unspoiled.

Harry lit a cigarette and turned on the radio, looking for a ballgame. The girl moaned once, but softly--so softly that Harry almost didn't hear.

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"Mr. Mack," the manager greeted him. "How are you?"

Harry glanced at the tag on her blouse. "Fine, May. Just fine."

"I spoke with the main office yesterday," she said, "and they informed me that you would be arriving earlier this afternoon, before the evening rush."

"Well, May," Harry replied, "something came up during the installation this morning. An unforeseen complication."

"Ah," May answered. "I see."

They were standing just outside the building's rear entrance. Off to the right, a steady stream of cars crept past the drive-through window, each vehicle pausing to receive a small white bag or two of food and a cardboard tray of assorted drinks.

"Can I get you anything?" May asked. "Coffee? A Jolly Burger?"

"Thank you, no. I'd better get started here and tend to our friend."

May smiled. "Very good, Mr. Mack. Then I'll speak with you later."

Harry turned away. He walked across the parking lot and climbed into the back of the van. He handcuffed the still sleeping girl to the rack of shelves bolted to the wall and then he gagged her. Beneath her head he placed the embroidered pillow that his wife had made for him on his last birthday. Near her hands he set the stuffed bear that some previous child had left behind. Then he grabbed the wire brush and half a dozen sheets of sandpaper from the topmost shelf, and stepped back outside.

He wasn't too surprised to discover that the play area was fairly crowded. Kids were going up and down both slides, climbing in and out of the giant Jolly Sandwich, and riding all three french-fry seesaws. Several others sat at the tables arranged along the front of the building, picking through the few remaining scraps of their children's meals.

Harry made his way toward the corner beyond the infants' swing set. Once there, using the master key on his ring, he opened a small wrought iron gate and entered a fenced-off section of the playground, a space barely ten feet square.

Just inside the gate, on a low brick pedestal, with his right arm upraised in a cheerful salute, stood Mr. Wally, the jolly clown.

118

Harry thought he seemed to be in pretty poor shape, considering the fact that the last installation had been only six months ago. Mr. Wally's grinning face was rusty in several places, especially near the lips and eyes, and every button on his suit was chipped. Also, the blue toes of his overlarge shoes were cracking badly. Harry estimated that the work would take at least an

hour--first
brushing and sanding, and then touching him up with some paint.
"Mr. Wally," Harry said, rolling up his sleeves. "With your permission, I'll begin."
Exactly one hour later, he applied a final bit of purple to Mr. Wally's lapel and stood back to admire his work. Even after fourteen years in this business,
Harry still occasionally felt a certain swelling of pride in his chest when he
successfully completed this portion of his duties.
As he resealed the paint cans and gathered his brushes, Harry realized how late
it had become. Except for five kids and two young women, the play area was now
empty. The supper time rush was long over. The lights were on inside and the parking lot quiet. Harry looked west and saw that if he hoped to finish before
sundown, he would have to hurry.
The little girl was awake when he reached the van. Harry put all the paints away
on the proper shelves and placed the brushes to soak in a jar of fresh turpentine. Then he retrieved his logbook from the front seat and removed the gag from the girl's mouth.
He asked her several times what her name was, and her age, but she refused to answer. And so, next to that day's date in the ledger, right below the information he had entered concerning the morning job, Harry wrote: Name: ? Sex:
F Age: 8(?) Place: Freeport. Installed: Haverhill. Comments:
But he couldn't think of anything to add right then, so he closed the book and
turned back to the girl.
"I'm going to give you something that will make you sleep," he told her. He opened his kit, took out a syringe, and gave her a second shot.
"Please don't worry," Harry said to her. He knelt beside her and wiped a tear from her cheek. Gently he touched her hair. "Everything's okay, honey. Don't worry."
119
When she was finally unconscious, he removed the handcuffs, spread the rubber sheet out on the carpet, and got to work.
As he stripped off her swimsuit, he noted once again how truly beautiful she was. Carefully, he brushed away the few grains of sand that clung like powdered
sugar to her belly. Then he began rubbing the scented oil onto her skin, until
every part of her was slick and shiny, front and back.
He took the pair of red W-shaped barrettes from her hair and put them in his pocket, thinking that his granddaughter might like to have them. As he shaved the girl's head, he wondered how his wife was feeling, and he reminded himself
to be sure to phone her as soon as he had finished here.
Harry put the girl's shorn tresses and her swimsuit in the large plastic bag that already held several days' worth of clothes, shoes, and hair. Then he sat
down beside her and lifted her head onto his lap. Now came the worst part, or so
Harry often thought. He would have preferred to skip this step, but it was something that couldn't be avoided.
Starting with her lower left molars, using the hooked probe, he separated the gum from around each tooth. He worked rapidly and with considerable skill, tearing at the gum pockets until every root was at least partially exposed.

Then, taking the curved elevator, he forced its point down between each root and the jawbone, twisting his wrist up and back until he felt something give. Using any one of three forceps--the universal, the hawk's bill, or the cow horn--he would then simply dig deep with the instrument beaks, grip the roots, and pull.

The work proceeded quickly. If a tooth shattered, he just left the attached fragment in her mouth. He put all the extracted teeth together in a Mr. Wally SuperSize cup, and then spent a few minutes pressing at her gums with cotton swabs, stopping the worst of the bleeding--although baby teeth don't bleed very much at all.

Then came the painting of her face--the lopsided orange smile, the blue diamond tears, the big black circles around her eyes--a la Mr. Wally.

Finally, she was ready. Harry found the camera and photographed her in the required poses, which was something new that the main office had just started.

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As he carried her across the play area, all the kids became still and the two remaining mothers fell silent. Standing directly in front of Mr. Wally, Harry waited a moment before speaking. The clown's raised right hand seemed to be reaching out to arrest for an instant the actions of the entire world.

"Mr. Wally," Harry recited, "Thou art the savior of mankind. We live on thy breath, and we subsist on the flesh of thy body. Take this child, O Thriving One, into thy bosom. Accept this offering from thy humble servants."

He brought her around to the other side of the pedestal and set her on the ground. He also put down the Styrofoam cup that held her teeth. He inserted a key into Mr. Wally's left shoulder, and the back half of the statue swung open.

He picked the girl up again and stood her inside Mr. Wally, fastening several straps around her chest, waist, and thighs, until she was securely in place. Last of all he adjusted the neck brace, so that her face fit snugly against the inside surface of Mr. Wally's face, her eyes peering out through his eyes, her mouth open inside his smile.

"Daughter," Harry said, "ye have eaten and drunk. Go forth, go forth."

He set the cup of teeth near her feet, and closed her in.

The chaste maidens who tended the temple's grills and perpetual fires would remove the girl's body soon after she died.

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His Mouth Will Taste of Wormwood

Poppy Z. Brite

The award for the most intriguing name among Borderlands' contributors has got to go to Poppy Z. Brite. Born in 1967, Poppy writes with a maturity and control not often found in young writers. Her stories move and writhe in silky, snakelike rhythms, embodied with a dark sensuality, loathsome yet attractive. She has appeared in Silva's The Horror Show and Ptacek's Women of Darkness II, and she has recently completed her first novel.

Currently living in Athens, Georgia, Poppy has spent her time not writing as a candy maker, short-order cook, an artist's model, and an exotic dancer. Among her interests, she lists Siamese cats, American cars of the forties through the sixties, and burial customs of different cultures. Somehow, I get the feeling this lady's not exactly your basic girl next door. ...

"To the treasures and the pleasures of the grave," said my friend Louis, and raised his goblet of absinthe to me in drunken benediction.
"To the funeral lilies," I replied, "and to the calm pale bones." I drank deeply from my own glass. The absinthe cauterized my throat with its flavor, part pepper, part licorice, part rot. It had been one of our greatest finds: more than fifty bottles of the nowoutlawed liqueur, sealed up in a New Orleans family tomb. Transporting them was a nuisance, but once we had learned to enjoy the taste of wormwood, our continued drunkenness was ensured for a long, long time.
We had taken the skull of the crypt's patriarch, too, and it now resided in a velvet-lined enclave in our museum.
Louis and I, you see, were dreamers of a dark and restless sort. We met in our second year of college and quickly found that we shared one vital trait: both of us were dissatisfied with everything. We drank straight whiskey and declared it too weak. We took strange drugs, but the visions they brought us were of emptiness, mindlessness, slow decay. The books we read were dull; the artists who sold their colorful drawings on the street were mere hacks in our eyes; the music we heard was never loud enough, never harsh enough to stir us. We were truly jaded, we told one another. For all the impression the world made upon us, our eyes might have been dead black holes in our heads.
For a time we thought our salvation lay in the sorcery wrought by music. We studied recordings of weird nameless dissonances, attended performances of obscure bands at ill-lit filthy clubs. But music did not save us. For a time we distracted ourselves with carnality. We explored the damp alien territory between the legs of any girl who would have us, sometimes separately, sometimes both of us in bed together with one girl or more. We bound their wrists and ankles with black lace, we lubricated and penetrated their every orifice, we shamed them with their own pleasures. I recall a mauve-haired beauty, Felicia, who was brought to wild sobbing orgasm by the rough tongue of a stray dog we trapped. We watched her from across the room, drug dazed and unstirred.
When we had exhausted the possibilities of women we sought those of our own sex, craving the androgynous curve of a boy's

cheekbone, the molten flood of ejaculation invading our mouths. Eventually we turned to one another, seeking the thresholds of pain and ecstasy no one else had been able to help us attain. Louis asked me to grow my nails long and file them into needle-sharp points. When I raked them down his back, tiny beads of blood welled up in the angry tracks they left. He loved to lie still, pretending to submit to me, as I licked the salty blood away. Afterward he would push me down and attack me with his mouth, his tongue seeming to sear a trail of liquid fire into my skin.
But sex did not save us either. We shut ourselves in our room and saw no one for days on end. At last we withdrew to the seclusion of Louis's ancestral home near

Baton Rouge. Both his parents were dead--a suicide pact, Louis hinted, or perhaps a murder and a suicide. Louis, the only child, retained the family home and fortune. Built on the edge of a vast swamp, the plantation house loomed sepulchrally out of the gloom that surrounded it always, even in the middle of a summer afternoon. Oaks of primordial hugeness grew in a canopy over the house, their branches like black arms fraught with Spanish moss. The moss was everywhere, reminding me of brittle gray hair, stirring wraithlike in the dank breeze from the swamp. I had the impression that, left too long unchecked, the moss might begin to grow from the ornate window frames and fluted columns of the house itself.

The place was deserted save for us. The air was heady with the luminous scent of magnolias and the fetor of swamp gas. At night we sat on the veranda and sipped bottles of wine from the family cellar, gazing through an increasingly alcoholic mist at the will-o'-the-wisps that beckoned far off in the swamp. Obsessively we talked of new thrills and how we might get them. Louis's wit sparkled liveliest when he was bored, and on the night he first mentioned grave robbing, I laughed.

I could not imagine that he was serious.

"What would we do with a bunch of dried-up old remains? Grind them to make a voodoo potion? I preferred your idea of increasing our tolerance to various poisons."

Louis's sharp face snapped toward me. His eyes were painfully sensitive to light, so that even in this gloaming he wore tinted

glasses and it was impossible to see his expression. He kept his fair hair clipped very short, so that it stood up in crazy tufts when he raked a nervous hand through it. "No, Howard. Think of it: our own collection of death. A catalog of pain, of human frailty--all for us. Set against a backdrop of tranquil loveliness. Think what it would be to walk through such a place, meditating, reflecting upon your own ephemeral essence. Think of making love in a charnel house! We have only to assemble the parts--they will create a whole into which we may fall."

(Louis enjoyed speaking in cryptic puns; anagrams and palindromes, too, and any sort of puzzle appealed to him. I wonder whether that was not the root of his determination to look into the fathomless eye of death and master it. Perhaps he saw the mortality of the flesh as a gigantic jigsaw or crossword which, if he fitted all the parts into place, he might solve and thus defeat. Louis would have loved to live forever, though he would never have known what to do with all his time.)

He soon produced his hashish pipe to sweeten the taste of the wine, and we spoke no more of grave robbing that night. But the thought preyed upon me in the languorous weeks to come. The smell of a freshly opened grave, I thought, must

in its way be as intoxicating as the perfume of the swamp or a girl's most intimate sweat. Could we truly assemble a collection of the grave's treasures that would be lovely to look upon, that would soothe our fevered souls?
The caresses of Louis's tongue grew languid. Sometimes, instead of nestling with me between the black satin sheets of our bed, he would sleep on a torn blanket in one of the underground rooms. These had originally been built for indeterminate but always intriguing purposes--abolitionist meetings had taken place there, Louis told me, and a weekend of free love, and an earnest but wildly incompetent Black Mass replete with a vestal virgin and phallic candles.
These rooms were where our museum would be set up. At last I came to agree with Louis that only the plundering of graves might cure us of the most stifling ennui we had yet suffered. I could not bear to watch his tormented sleep, the pallor of his hollow cheeks,

the delicate bruiselike darkening of the skin beneath his flickering eyes. Besides, the notion of grave robbing had begun to entice me. In ultimate corruption, might we not find the path to ultimate salvation?
Our first grisly prize was the head of Louis's mother, rotten as a pumpkin forgotten on the vine, half shattered by two bullets from an antique Civil War revolver. We took it from the family crypt by the light of a full moon. The will-o'-the-wisps glowed weakly, like dying beacons on some unattainable shore, as we crept back to the manse. I dragged pick and shovel behind me; Louis carried the putrescent trophy tucked beneath his arm. After we had descended into the museum, I lit three candles scented with the russet spices of autumn (the season when Louis's parents had died), while Louis placed the head in the alcove we had prepared for it. I thought I detected a certain tenderness in his manner. "May she give us the family blessing," he murmured, absently wiping on the lapel of his jacket a few shreds of pulpy flesh that had adhered to his fingers.
We spent a happy time refurbishing the museum, polishing the inlaid precious metals of the wall fixtures, brushing away the dust that frosted the velvet designs of the wallpaper, alternately burning incense and charring bits of cloth we had saturated with our blood, in order to give the rooms the odor we desired--a charnel perfume strong enough to drive us to frenzy. We traveled far for our collections, but always we returned home with crates full of things no man had ever been meant to possess. We heard of a girl with violet eyes who had died in some distant town; not seven days later we had those eyes in an ornate cut-glass jar, pickled in formaldehyde. We scraped bone dust and nitre from the bottoms of ancient coffins; we stole the barely withered heads and hands of children fresh in their graves, with their soft little fingers and their lips like flower petals. We had baubles and precious heirlooms, vermiculated prayer books and shrouds encrusted with mold. I had not taken seriously Louis's talk of making love in a charnel house--but neither had I reckoned on the pleasure he

could inflict with a femur dipped in rose-scented oil.
Upon the night I speak of--the night we drank our toast to the
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grave and its riches--we had just acquired our finest prize yet. Later in the evening we planned a celebratory debauch at a nightclub in the city. We had returned from our most recent travels not with the usual assortment of sacks and
crates, but with only one small box carefully wrapped and tucked into Louis's breast pocket. The box contained an object whose existence we had only speculated upon previously. From certain half-articulate mutterings of an old blind man plied with cheap liquor in a French Quarter bar, we traced rumors of a
certain fetish or charm to a Negro graveyard in the southern bayou country. The
fetish was said to be a thing of eerie beauty, capable of luring any lover to one's bed, hexing any enemy to a sick and painful death, and (this, I think, was
what intrigued Louis the most) turning back tenfold on anyone who used it with
less than the touch of a master.
A heavy mist hung low over the graveyard when we arrived there, lapping at our
ankles, pooling around the markers of wood and stone, abruptly melting away in
patches to reveal a gnarled root or a patch of blackened grass, then closing back in. By the light of a waning moon we made our way along a path overgrown with rioting weeds. The graves were decorated with elaborate mosaics of broken
glass, coins, bottlecaps, oyster shells lacquered silver and gold. Some mounds
were outlined by empty bottles shoved neck downward into the earth. I saw a lone
plaster saint whose features had been worn away by years of wind and rain. I kicked half-buried rusty cans that had once held flowers; now they held only bare brittle stems and pestilent rainwater or nothing at all. Only the scent of
wild spider lilies pervaded the night.
The earth in one corner of the graveyard seemed blacker than the rest. The grave
we sought was marked only by a crude cross of charred and twisted wood. We were
skilled at the art of violating the dead; soon we had the coffin uncovered. The
boards were warped by years of burial in wet, foul earth. Louis pried up the lid
with his spade and, by the moon's meager and watery light, we gazed upon what lay within.
Of the inhabitant we knew almost nothing. Some said a hideously disfigured old
conjure woman lay buried here. Some said she was a young girl with a face as lovely and cold as moonlight
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on water, and a soul cruder than Fate itself. Some claimed the body was not a woman's at all, but that of a white voodoo priest who had ruled the bayou. He had features of a cool, unearthly beauty, they said, and a stock of fetishes and
potions that he would hand out with the kindest blessing ... or the direst curse. This was the story Louis and I liked best; the sorcerer's capriciousness
appealed to us, and the fact that he was beautiful.

No trace of beauty remained on the thing in the coffin--at least not the sort of beauty that a healthy eye might cherish. Louis and I loved the translucent parchment skin stretched tight over long bones that seemed to have been carved from ivory. The delicate brittle hands folded across the sunken chest, the soft black caverns of the eyes, the colorless strands of hair that still clung to the fine white dome of the skull--to us these things were the poetry of death. Louis played his flashlight over the withered cords of the neck. There, on a silver chain gone black with age, was the object we had come seeking. No crude wax doll or bit of dried root was this. Louis and I gazed at each other, moved by the beauty of the thing; then, as if in a dream, he reached to grasp it. This was our rightful night's prize, our plunder from a sorcerer's grave.

"How does it look?" Louis asked as we were dressing.

I never had to think about my clothes. On an evening such as this, when we were dressing to go out, I would choose the same garments I might wear for a night's digging in the graveyard-- black, unornamented black, with only the whiteness of my face and hands showing against the backdrop of night. On a particularly festive occasion, such as this, I might smudge a bit of kohl round my eyes. The absence of color made me nearly invisible: if I walked with my shoulders hunched and my chin tucked down, no one except Louis would see me.

"Don't slouch so, Howard," said Louis irritably as I ducked past the mirror. "Turn around and look at me. Aren't I fine in my sorcerer's jewelry?"

Even when Louis wore black, he did it to be noticed. Tonight he was resplendent in narrow-legged trousers of purple paisley silk

and a silvery jacket that seemed to turn all light iridescent. He had taken our prize out of its box and fastened it around his throat. As I came closer to look at it, I caught Louis's scent: rich and rather meaty, like blood kept too long in a stoppered bottle.

Against the sculpted hollow of Louis's throat, the thing on its chain seemed more strangely beautiful than ever. Have I neglected to describe the magical object, the voodoo fetish from the churned earth of the grave? I will never forget it. A polished sliver of bone (or a tooth, but what fang could have been so long, so sleekly honed, and still have somehow retained the look of a human tooth?) bound by a strip of copper. Set into the metal, a single ruby sparkled like a drop of gore against the verdigris. Etched in exquisite miniature upon the sliver of bone, and darkened by the rubbing in of some black-red substance, was an elaborate veve--one of the symbols used by voodooists to invoke their pantheon of terrible gods. Whoever was buried in that lonely bayou grave, he had been no mere dabbler in swamp magic. Every cross and swirl of the veve was

reproduced to perfection. I thought the thing still retained a trace of the grave's scent--a dark odor like potatoes long spoiled. Each grave has its own peculiar scent, just as each living body does.
"Are you certain you should wear it?" I asked.
"It will go into the museum tomorrow," he said, "with a scarlet candle burning
eternally before it. Tonight its powers are mine."
The nightclub was in a part of the city that looked as if it had been gutted from the inside out by a righteous tongue of fire. The street was lit only by occasional scribbles of neon high overhead, advertisements for cheap hotels and
all-night bars. Dark eyes stared at us from the crevices and pathways between buildings, disappearing only when Louis's hand crept toward the inner pocket of
his jacket. He carried a small stiletto there, and knew how to use it for more
than pleasure.
We slipped through a door at the end of an alley and descended the narrow staircase into the club. The lurid glow of a blue bulb flooded the stairs, making Louis's face look sunken and dead behind his tinted glasses. Feedback blasted us as we came in, and

above it, a screaming battle of guitars. The inside of the club was a patchwork
of flickering light and darkness. Graffiti covered the walls and the ceiling like a tangle of barbed wire come alive. I saw bands' insignia and jeering death's-heads, crucifixes bejeweled with broken glass, and black obscenities writhing in the stroboscopic light.
Louis brought me a drink from the bar. I sipped it slowly, still drunk on absinthe. Since the music was too loud for conversation, I studied the clubgoers
around us. A quiet bunch, they were, staring fixedly at the stage as if they had
been drugged (and no doubt many of them had--I remembered visiting a club one night on a dose of hallucinogenic mushrooms, watching in fascination as the guitar strings seemed to drip soft viscera onto the stage). Younger than Louis
and myself, most of them were, and queerly beautiful in their thrift shop rags,
their leather and fishnet and cheap costume jewelry, their pale faces and painted hair. Perhaps we would take one of them home with us tonight. We had done so before. "The delicious guttersnipes," Louis called them. A particularly
beautiful face, starkly boned and androgynous, flickered at the edge of my vision. When I looked, it was gone.
I went into the rest room. A pair of boys stood at a single urinal, talking animatedly. I stood at the sink rinsing my hands, watching the boys in the mirror and trying to overhear their conversation. A hairline fracture in the glass seemed to pull the taller boy's eyes askew. "Caspar and Alyssa found her
tonight," he said. "In some old warehouse by the river. I heard her skin was gray, man. And sort of withered, like something had sucked out most of the meat."
"Far out," said the other boy. His black-rimmed lips barely moved.
"She was only fifteen, you know?" said the tall boy as he zipped his ragged trousers.
"She was a cunt anyway."
They turned away from the urinal and started talking about the band--Ritual Sacrifice, I gathered, whose name was scrawled on the walls of the club. As they

went out, the boys glanced at the mirror and the tall one's eyes met mine for an
instant. Nose like a haughty Indian chief's, eyelids smudged with black and silver.
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Louis would approve, I thought--but the night was young, and there were many drinks yet to be had.
When the band took a break we visited the bar again. Louis edged in beside a thin dark-haired boy who was bare chested except for a piece of torn lace tied
about his throat. When he turned, I knew his was the androgynous and striking face I had glimpsed before. His beauty was almost feral, but overlaid with a cool elegance like a veneer of sanity hiding madness. His ivory skin stretched
over cheekbones like razors; his eyes were hectic pools of darkness.
"I like your amulet," he said to Louis. "It's very unusual."
"I have another one like it at home," Louis told him.
"Really? I'd like to see them both together." The boy paused to let Louis order
our vodka gimlets, then said, "I thought there was only one."
Louis's back straightened like a string of beads being pulled taut. Behind his
glasses, I knew, his pupils would have shrunk to pinpoints: the light pained him
more when he was nervous. But no tremor in his voice betrayed him when he said,
"What do you know about it?"
The boy shrugged. On his bony shoulders, the movement was insouciant and drop-dead graceful. "It's voodoo," he said. "I know what voodoo is. Do you?"
The implication stung, but Louis only bared his teeth the slightest bit; it might have been a smile. "I am conversant in all types of magic," he said, "at
least."
The boy moved closer to Louis, so that their hips were almost touching, and lifted the amulet between thumb and forefinger. I thought I saw one long nail brush Louis's throat, but I could not be sure. "I could tell you the meaning of
this veve," he said, "if you were certain you wished to know."
"It symbolizes power," Louis said. "All the power of my soul." His voice was cold, but I saw his tongue dart out to moisten his lips. He was beginning to dislike this boy, and also to desire him.
"No," said the boy so softly that I barely caught his words. He sounded almost
sad. "This cross in the center is inverted, you see, and the line encircling it
represents a serpent. A thing like this can
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trap your soul. Instead of being rewarded with eternal life ... you might be doomed to it."
"Doomed to eternal life?" Louis permitted himself a small cold smile. "Whatever
do you mean?"
"The band is starting again. Find me after the show and I'll tell you. We can have a drink ... and you can tell me all you know about voodoo." The boy threw
back his head and laughed. Only then did I notice that one of his upper canine
teeth was missing.
The next part of the evening remains a blur of moonlight and neon, ice cubes and

blue swirling smoke and sweet drunkenness. The boy drank glass after glass of absinthe with us, seeming to relish the bitter taste. None of our other guests had liked the liqueur. "Where did you get it?" he asked. Louis was silent for a long moment before he said, "It was sent over from France." Except for its single black gap, the boy's smile would have been as perfect as the sharp-edged crescent moon.

"Another drink?" said Louis, refilling both our glasses.

When I next came to clarity, I was in the boy's arms. I could not make out the words he was whispering; they might have been an incantation, if magic may be sung to pleasure's music. A pair of hands cupped my face, guiding my lips over the boy's pale parchment skin. They might have been Louis's hands. I knew nothing except this boy, the fragile movement of the bones beneath the skin, the taste of his spit bitter with wormwood.

I do not remember when he finally turned away from me and began lavishing his love upon Louis. I wish I could have watched, could have seen the lust bleeding into Louis's eyes, the pleasure wracking his body. For, as it turned out, the boy loved Louis so much more thoroughly than ever he loved me.

When I awoke, the bass thump of my pulse echoing through my skull blotted out all other sensations. Gradually, though, I became aware of tangled silk sheets, of hot sunlight on my face. Not until I came fully awake did I see the thing I had cradled like a lover all through the night.

For an instant two realities shifted in uneasy juxtaposition and almost merged. I was in Louis's bed; I recognized the feel of the

sheets, their odor of silk and sweat. But this thing I held--this was surely one of the fragile mummies we had dragged out of their graves, the things we dissected for our museum. It took me only a moment, though, to recognize the familiar ruined features--the sharp chin, the high elegant brow. Something had desiccated Louis, had drained him of every drop of his moisture, his vitality.

His skin crackled and flaked away beneath my fingers. His hair stuck to my lips, dry and colorless. The amulet, which had still been around his throat in bed last night, was gone.

The boy had left no trace--or so I thought until I saw a nearly transparent thing at the foot of the bed. It was like a quantity of spiderweb, or a damp and insubstantial veil. I picked it up and shook it out, but could not see its features until I held it up to the window. The thing was vaguely human shaped, with empty limbs trailing off into nearly invisible tatters. As the thing wafted and billowed, I saw part of a face in it--the sharp curve left by a cheekbone, the hole where an eye had been--as if a face were imprinted upon gauze.

I carried Louis's brine shell of a corpse down into the museum. Laying him before his mother's niche, I left a stick of incense burning in his folded hands

and a pillow of black silk cradling the papery dry bulb of his skull. He would have wished it thus.

The boy has not come to me again, though I leave the window open every night. I have been back to the club, where I stand sipping vodka and watching the crowd.

I have seen many beauties, many strange wasted faces, but not the one I seek. I think I know where I will find him. Perhaps he still desires me--I must know.

I will go again to the lonely graveyard in the bayou. Once more--alone, this time--I will find the unmarked grave and plant my spade in its black earth. When I open the coffin--I know it, I am sure of it! --I will find not the mouldering thing we beheld before, but the calm beauty of replenished youth. The youth he drank from Louis. His face will be a scrimshaw mask of tranquility. The amulet--I know it; I am sure of it--will be around his neck.

Dying: the final shock of pain or nothingness that is the price we pay for everything. Could it not be the sweetest thrill, the only salvation we can attain ... the only true moment of

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self-knowledge? The dark pools of his eyes will open, still and deep enough to drown in. He will hold out his arms to me, inviting me to lie down with him in his rich wormy bed.

With the first kiss his mouth will taste of wormwood. After that it will taste only of me--of my blood, my life, siphoning out of my body and into his. I will feel the sensations Louis felt: the shriveling of my tissues, the drying up of all my vital juices. I care not. The treasures and the pleasures of the grave?

They are his hands, his lips, his tongue.

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Oh, What a Swell Guy Am I

Jeffrey Osier

The following story is one of those rare ones that jumps out of the monstrous pile of unsolicited stories and refuses to take no for an answer. When I first read Jeffrey Osier's tale of total, literal disintegration, I was moved by the raw energy of the prose, by some of the unforgettable visual images, and by the sheer ugliness of human anger stripped naked. His work was totally unknown to me, but when I mentioned discovering his story to friends in the publishing business, I was told Osier's been making a fine reputation for himself in the small press magazines.

Born in Chicago in the mid-fifties, Osier has lived there most of his life. He's held a variety of jobs, all the while writing his personal, dark visions. He is currently employed as a writer, editor, and producer of educational films. Married, with two kids, Jeff plans to keep the stories flowing. Let's hope so.

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One week ago I left the house, Lisa and the kids, and moved into this shabby little studio apartment. Why?

I mean, whatever passed between me and Lisa on that night, whatever rift we widened and whatever shrill and hateful resolution may have come from it, it did not warrant my moving out and actually signing a goddamned lease on this peeling, hissing, festering little box of a room. And yet, here I am. Luckily.

Three days ago I went to lunch with Ellen and John, two of my staff--two of my more dependable, less decadent and spineless assistants. My treat. I tried to be light and glib, tried to be a friend, tried to let them know how much I depend on them to keep the rest of those incorrigible reprobates in line, and what happened?

I started swelling up. It was strange, because at first they just squinted at me and looked at each other nervously. Then I felt the pressure: the crease between my cheeks and eyes, the tingling across my brow ridges. When John told me I looked as though I was having an allergic reaction, I reached up to the place where my face was supposed to be, and instead my fingertips hit this swollen, numbed surface, like a water-bloated mask.

Once we got back everyone was all concerned because I looked so bad, and of course, when I finally looked in a mirror, I did look pretty bad. But when everyone started telling me to go home! or go see the company nurse! or go to the emergency room!--well, let's be honest. What would have happened if I had gone home? The place would have gone utterly to pieces, my staff would have degenerated into the free-spirited bunch of gypsies it threatens to become every time I shut my door or take a phone call or go to a meeting. And of course, Alan Wasserman, my own supervisor, would be taken off the hook through the knowledge that the man destined to replace him had screwed up somehow, which of course, I would have, had I left.

Which I didn't.

There was enough to do, of course, as there always is for anyone with vision, and I managed to map out my agenda far ahead of all foreseeable deadlines. I was in the office until 11 P.M., concentrating on the vision, not merely on my job, my image, but

rather on the sheer joy and power of being the one who propels everything forward. I did not touch my face. I did not bargain for the unusual body odors that I seemed to emit as the evening progressed. Oh, I fidgeted all over the place. I paced and paced the narrow confines of my office and I digressed--as I always tend to do--into fits of ... vengeful reflection, I guess you'd call it.

But I got the job done. Mine and a few other people's, in fact.

I had to call the security guard, Moe, to bring up the elevator when I finally left. I guess the first real harbinger of the coming weekend's annoying chain of events was Moe's reaction when the elevator doors opened and he looked at me. In the moment before he recognized me he shuddered, crossed himself, and

whimpered
a quiet prayer.
Was I so unrecognizable? When I got home I examined myself in the mirror--the facial edema and the peppered rash streaking across the creases between each individual swelling. I was sick. People get sick. People get well. So what? I felt fine. A few hours sleep, and I'd be as good as new.
And so it seemed. At first. The swelling was down in the morning--not gone, but
at least a little relieved. I showered religiously, trying to get rid of that nagging, nasty odor, and ended up baptizing myself in Old Spice, just to make sure I didn't offend all of my timid so-called co-workers.
I did all this for them. And then I went to work. ...
When I rounded that final corner into my department, there they were, all six of
them, just standing there, joking, laughing, sneering, talking about someone (I
wonder who), and posing like a bunch of those unemployed New York ethnic types
you always see in those blue jeans commercials. From the looks on their faces I
could tell that they hadn't expected me to come in at all.
It was a scene. Words were passed, on both sides. A crowd managed to gather. My
boss's secretary, Margaret, was watching. Complaints began to ripple outward from our little department. Ellen began to cry. Someone threatened me. Someone
on the other side of a bank of file cabinets heard that and began to applaud. Who? I've been giving that some thought, too. ...

I ended up back in my office, pacing once again. I had the door shut so no one
could hear the pounding in my head or on my face. I looked around at the clutter, at the crumpled kid's drawings I'd thumbtacked there years before, drawings I no longer seemed to recognize. Somehow my office, its clutter and even its geometry, no longer made any sense to me.
I finally sat down. The moment I did there was a knock at my door. It was Alan,
my boss, and Margaret. When they saw me, when they looked at my surroundings, they became shaken and unsettled.
They were both conciliatory. They understood the long hours I put in, the enormous pressure I put myself under, but even I could get sick. So sick, in fact, that it was better that I just go home and take a couple of days off to recuperate. Margaret said she'd call Lisa, explain the situation, and tell her
to expect me shortly. Alan wondered aloud why Lisa had even let me out the door.
I assured them that I could call Lisa myself. They proceeded to usher me out of
there with expressions of measured distaste smeared uncomfortably across their
faces. It was no better--in fact, it was worse--on the train ride home. Could I
possibly look or smell so bad? Was my rage, my embarrassment, my humiliation, so
obvious?
The first thing I did when I entered my shabby little apartment was check the time. It was only 10:30 A.M. The next thing I did was examine my face in the bathroom mirror.
I was almost unrecognizable. My cheeks, my lips, and neck were swollen and purple, shimmering and almost translucent except for the red, peppery patches

of
rash scattered across my face. My bloodshot eyes were almost swollen shut. My forehead was a protruding field of pustules. Every time I opened my mouth, a stringy mass of mucus appeared, as thick as a finger and as long as my mouth could open to accommodate it.
And there was that smell again.
I lay down on the damp and crumpled bed sheets and fell into a restless, vision-laden sleep. I don't know how long that sleep lasted. I was not in a clock-watching frame of mind when I finally awoke to find my room veiled in a special kind of darkness that had nothing to do with the world outside my windows. I stumbled

around the apartment, sometimes failing to recognize a wadded mass of my own clothes piled on a chair, or sometimes recognizing features in that luminous, deeply shadowed semidarkness that I should not have recognized at all. I looked
into the bathroom mirror once with the hot fluorescent lights on, but the figure
in that mirror was still draped in mist and shadow. All I could see clearly was
a head, which was far too large--lopsided and edged with creases and nodules. When I leaned in close to decipher the features, darkness swallowed the entire
face.
I watched television--a Friday night lineup of sitcoms and cop shows. I was unable to follow the dialogue or the plotlines, as though the events made no linear sense, as though I was hearing a familiar language I had never bothered
to learn.
I would occasionally run soft, fleshy palms over a bulbous, monstrous face, and
open my mouth to let out a whimper or a whine. The sound that came out was a long, fluttering wheeze that rose in pitch and shaped itself into a fragile, beautiful melody before hissing away.
The next thing I remember is the phone ringing. It was bright out. A quick look
at my hands and feel of my face told me I was no longer swollen.
It was Lisa.
"Donald? Is everything all right? Margaret Schuman called me last night to ask
how you were. I guess you haven't said anything to them about ... us."
"I... no, I haven't."
"Well, don't worry. I didn't tell her, either. She says you left work sick yesterday morning. She made it seem as though you were ... She paused. How much
would Margaret have dared tell my wife? Obviously my boss had put her up to this.
"As though I was what?"
"She seemed very concerned about you. Are you all right? You don't sound too good."
"What the hell do you care, anyway?"
"Listen, Donald. Are you so set on this? I mean, were things all that bad for you here? The kids miss you so much. Couldn't you even come home when you're sick?"

"Home." The word came out as a long, bitter snort. "Oh, God, Donald. Please. Don't be so stubborn. We need you here. The kids need you. I need you. We can get you out of that stupid lease. ..."
"No."
"Well, at least let me come over and visit you."

"Not a fucking chance, Lisa."
"I thought maybe I could talk you into going to that party."
"What fucking party?"
There was a silence. She was losing it. How much longer could she actually hold
out?
"Alan's secretary, Margaret. Remember? She's having a party. The one you--"
"Hey, look, sweetheart, I don't feel up to partying tonight. Why don't you just
go there without me?"
"Donald, they're your friends. Not mine. I couldn't go there without you."
"Friends, are they? Just because I work with them? Don't make me laugh! They all
hate my guts, do you know that? So you think they'd really invite me unless they
thought it'd look too obvious or uncouth not to invite me? They're no better
than you, you little pig. You and your fucking, overstuffed little kids."
I could feel the shudder of disgust over the phone. It thrilled me enormously.
"Okay, Donald. We'll talk about this later. You know ... I've put up with ...
Dammit! You love making me feel like a fool, don't you? What do you want me to
do? Cry? Beg? Listen, Donald, let's not talk about it. If you need someone to
talk to, just call your little friend, Margaret. Oh, and by the way, Donald, the
kids could care less about you not being here. I don't think they'd even notice
you're gone, except that you're not here to wake them up with your whiny little
tirades at six in the morning." Click.
Click. Hmmm. The bitch! I'd give her a while to reevaluate it all. See where you
stand in a week, Lisa! I collapsed back on the bed. I found myself thinking
about Margaret. So young and sweet and unattached. Suddenly a power surged
through me, emerging between my legs and bringing on a ferocious erection.
Without my freeing it or coaxing it, I ejaculated in a series of painful spasms,

doubling me up, sending convulsive chills through me, unhinging me from the
illusions surrounding me for just a few instants, depositing me somewhere
fundamental and very real. At least, that's what I think happened. I fell back
into the sheets.
I awoke several times throughout that day, though there's no way of being sure
how many times I actually did get up and how many times I merely dreamt that I
got out of bed. In retrospect I suppose it's possible that I had no dreams
whatsoever, and that even my most demented, impossible fits of wakefulness were
real events, in spite of the fact that my image in the mirror was inconceivably
distorted and my apartment had taken on an almost tropical, primeval appearance,
rotting away beneath plant growths that resembled nothing so much as the face in
the mirror.
And yet there were times when I'd awaken--almost afraid to open my eyes, and
find that the apartment was just as it had been all morning and that my image in
the mirror was as it had always been. A little pale and more haggard and

unshaven than usual ... but it was me. Within minutes of rising, going to the bathroom, drinking some water, pacing and trying to piece together thoughts, I'd flop back on the sheets and plunge back into that dreadful, purposeful sleep. When I woke up at 8:30 P.M., however, I knew that I was really awake, decisively awake. I took a long shower with some sinus-clearing deodorant soap. I got dressed and prepared myself for Margaret's party. Everything seemed clear--my mind, my vision, the geography of my apartment. I wasn't in the least bit swollen.

The only thing that nagged at me was my appetite. I was ravenous. I made bacon and microwave popcorn for dinner and still, I was unappeased. Suddenly, the cockroaches and centipedes scurrying from one hiding place to another attracted me enormously, and with startling, uncharacteristic reflexes, I was able to snatch at them and gobble them down. I could barely taste them, but I got enormous satisfaction from the feel of their living bodies thrashing about in my mouth.

It was 10:30 by the time I got myself out of the apartment and

onto an el train. As I rode toward Rogers Park I began thinking about Margaret, about Ellen and John, all the people who'd witnessed my disciplinary seizure the day before, all of whom would be at this party now, no doubt describing that scene in sidesplitting detail for the benefit of those poor souls who'd missed it.

I looked out the window at the cluttered stretch of night passing me by, tempted just to wander the streets and soak in all that sweet, autumnal darkness. Alone.

I don't know who let me in. There weren't more than twenty people there, and it didn't take long to spot her. Margaret smiled when she saw me. I measured that smile, the glimmering, featherlashed eyes. Until Lisa mentioned it I'd never taken Margaret's beauty ... personally. Now ... well, it's hard to describe. So I'll describe her, instead: thick black shoulder-length hair, big brown eyes, a little pug of a nose. Her nipples were riding prominently beneath a tight cotton shirt. She wore a short skirt, beneath which long, tanned legs strode toward me.

Her voice betrayed no contempt for me. She did not ask about my wife. She gave me a warm, close-range greeting and took my jacket. I watched the dance of her ass and thighs as she retreated and felt the saliva surge through my mouth and over my lips.

I looked up to see if anyone had seen. There was Russell, our college part-timer, looking at me. He nodded. Russell was the one person I knew at this party who hadn't witnessed the scene at work, so I went up to him with the most convincing life-of-the-party smile I could stretch out of that troubled face

of
mine.
He talked my ear off and I just listened, numbed by the tawdry, monotonous, and
otherwise wholly invented details of his life. I just shut up and took it. And
drank. Suddenly I had an enormous capacity for alcohol. I attempted to drink away the sound of Russell's voice, to silence all that stupid, politically correct Third Worldish music throbbing and scratching out of the speakers, trying to dull at least a little bit of the luminescence of Margaret's skin beneath her clothes. But there wasn't enough alcohol in all of Rogers Park to redirect me.
Eventually the crowd thinned. The music settled into an
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innocuous New Age drone. My drinking at least put me in a calmer, less hysterical frame of mind. I sat alone and watched the party wind down, and for a
brief time all desires, fears, and obsessions sat dormant within me.
When Margaret sat down next to me I looked up to find that I'd been dozing on the couch and that we were alone. There was no music. The lights were brighter.
As she talked I watched the skirt ride up her thighs, I saw glimmers and hints
of the treasures puckering in those shadows between her legs, and heard them calling out to me. I looked at that face, so inviting, so young, so unlike wizened, sharp-edged Lisa.
She asked about Lisa in a way I thought counterproductive to all the momentum we
were stirring. I explained our situation. That seemed to interest her. Didn't it? She asked about my health, made diplomatic remarks about my tantrum at work
the day before, and all the while, kept rubbing those thighs together.
When she touched my forehead with the back of her hand I grabbed her wrist. I pulled the hand down across my face, kissing it. I pulled her toward me, I moved
my hand up those clenched thighs and onto the lace of her panties, I took in the
warmth of that form that was suddenly, inexplicably fighting me.
She jumped to her feet, cursing.
"Donald, Donald, you ..." She rolled her eyes to the ceiling, shut them, and then rubbed the back of that same hand across her own forehead.
"You're looking very sick, Donald. Why don't you go home before there's trouble?"
"I want you," I said, in a voice so deep and resonant that I barely recognized
it.
She stalked away, talking about our respective jobs, about women, about men, cops, and all that ...
I was behind her. She led me into the kitchen and I began pleading or yelling or
crying or at least something that was meant to be persuasive.
There followed, then, several explosive, disconnected moments during which I heard two distinct sets of screams, felt my hands close around her forearms, and
saw her kitchen recede into a fog
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out of which there emerged a cramped, choking mass of vegetation, all rising before me, swelling and hissing.
There was a cold slicing sound, a surge of heat through my chest, and an explosion of light. The kitchen fell back into focus.

She was standing no more than three feet from me, her eyes bulging in horror--at my face, at my chest. In her hand was a large carving knife, dripping blood and thick with a reddish-brown mass that should have just plopped onto the floor, but instead seemed to pull itself up onto the blade, cling there, and then inch its way toward the handle.

Margaret, her shirt torn, her left forearm gouged and bleeding, looked from my chest to the knife, which she promptly dropped, and then at my face. She turned away screaming and melted to the floor, sobbing.

I ran out of the apartment, clutching at my chest, groping about my midsection, searching for a bleeding cavity, but my hand remained dry. I felt no pain. When the inner lobby door slammed behind me I realized I'd forgotten my jacket. I grabbed at the door. Locked. I couldn't have gone back anyway. I examined my chest in the lobby light.

It didn't look right. It wasn't ruptured, or even damaged, but it did not look right; it didn't look like me.

Through the glass door I could see only darkness and my reflection. My face had swollen up again. I stared deep into that transparent reflection, trying to see at least a glimmer of my eyes within the deep pits there, but my brows and cheeks buried them. It was only sight itself that assured me that I still even had eyes.

I staggered, whimpering, down the alleys for I don't know how long, arousing dogs into howling fits. An occasional hand to my face told me I was too horrifying to dare stand on the street under the full glare of a streetlight. I sat down in a nook between two apartment buildings, shielded behind a dumpster, trying to recollect myself, to reconstitute myself.

Perhaps I slept, because I jerked into consciousness with a sudden jolt. I stood up and felt my face. Although I did feel a deep cut beneath my left eye, I was no longer swollen. My fingers told me what a look in a car windshield confirmed:

I was my own,

recognizable self again.

Trying not to think of the implications of what had happened at Margaret's, I marched over to the Howard el station and got on a southbound B train. I got some strange looks from my fellow passengers, but this wretched late-night refuse didn't bother me at all. I ignored them, dismissed them.

There was a bug-eyed old black woman facing me across the aisle. She was staring intently at my face. I looked at the floor, at my hands, anything to avoid this gaze that would not go away.

My left eye was watering. Waves of needle itches pulsed down the cheek beneath it. I shut my eye, twitched that whole side of my face, but refused to raise my

hand, refused to touch my face. The old woman would not stop staring at me. The
roar of the train seemed to be engulfing me, pounding me into pulp from all
sides. I felt the water drip down my face. The itching was unbearable and
sharpening into an excruciating pain. I thought my left cheek was swelling out
of shape, when suddenly I felt a tremendous relief of pressure, a cool gust
against my face, and the itching vanished.
The old woman screamed. I looked up at her. She was standing, looking from me to
the floor and crying out in hysterics.
I stood and reached for my face. Where my left cheek had been, there was a deep,
jagged hollow. Down on the floor, at my feet, was a slab of wet, quivering meat.
Everyone was standing now, looking at us. I screamed. I ran to the train doors,
but we were between stations. I pounded on them anyway, cracking the glass, and
then ran across the car to the other doors and repeated these futile gestures.
My fellow passengers watched me like horrified vultures, clearing away only
during my runs from one end of the car to the other.
And then, as I pounded on the glass I heard another wave of screams. I looked
over and saw that the slab of meat--my cheek-- was inching across the floor
toward me.
I tried to scream, but what emerged was a deafening roar. I saw an impossible
reflection in the cracked glass, and then kicked the door away, diving through
the opening.
I hit wood and metal, and then bounced off the edge of the
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tracks and fell twenty feet onto the concrete below.
I was still conscious when I hit bottom. I could feel pain in every limb and for
a moment was sure I would now just die wherever I lay.
But the pain lingered and intensified. It electrified me. When I went to test my
limbs I found they were strong and unbroken. I stood and realized that my impact
had not killed or even damaged me. These were growing pains. As I looked about
me I felt taller, stronger, and more purposeful by the moment.
Above me was a starless indigo sky, and set within it, a full moon surrounded by
a soft glow. Within that moon was an intense and purposeful face, its frozen
expression locked onto me, judging me or maybe just watching my every movement
for its own sinister pleasure. I looked at the level plain around me. There were
no el tracks above me, none of the recognizable landmarks that lined the Howard
el line. It was a landscape sparse in detail and rich in horizons, spreading out
for three hundred sixty degrees. There were silhouetted monoliths in the
distance, things that might once have been buildings but which were now
singular, isolated ruins. All around were congested gardens of bulbous, twisted
plant growths, glowing with reflected moonlight. A low-pitched moan drifted down
from that swollen moon face, while whispered choruses hissed from the garden

patches.
There was a familiarity about this place. There were soothing breezes that settled my tortured skin, and odors in those breezes that told me that no matter
where I ventured across this plain, food would always be near.
So I wandered, occasionally looking up at that moon whose face was so similar to
my own, waiting for it to speak. I stopped once, sniffing at a garden beneath me, recognizing food by the salivation it spurred. I pulled up a thick strand of
the stuff and dug my teeth into it. The meat was sweet, hot, and juicy, but along its axis ran bone. I held it out at arm's length as I chewed. It was a long, shapely, hairless leg. I gasped and dropped it, spitting out the morsel in
my mouth. I started to run.
Scraggly tailed little animals darted past as I ran. I stopped and watched them
crisscross my path--all my possible paths. They

were bipedal rats with human eyes and short, expressive snouts. In their arms,
over their shoulders, they carried tiny objects, some of which looked like miniature furniture, some of which looked like the twisted, jagged carcasses of
dead birds.
The sky exploded with laughter. I looked up and saw the moon, its face thorned
and encrusted, with a wide, needle-toothed mouth and long, slashing tongue, shaking the earth with its voice, staring at me with red eye slits.
I cringed and felt myself shrink into the landscape. The scurrying rat things were nearly as tall as I now, and the gardens of bulbous, flesh-and-bone plants
were like dark, imposing forests.
I found a stone-ringed fountain, the center of which was filled with a glowing,
effervescent red fluid. I sat down along the ring and buried my face in my hands
as the laughter died away. I was safe and warm within the understanding shelter
of my own sweaty palms.
"Own up, buddy, you got somethin' for me, doncha?"
I looked up. I was seated on a bench. A silhouette loomed above me, backlit by a
street lamp.
"Excuse me?" croaked, my voice a deep, hoarse whisper.
"Come on, man, get yer ass up!" I saw a flash of light across his midsection. A knife. Another goddamned knife. An instant of panic was followed by an escalating appreciation of what had happened to me in Margaret's kitchen. So I
stood up. Gladly.
"What do you want?"
I could see the light in his face now. Pale skin, light brown stubble on his face, an asymmetrical shock of black hair shooting out of one side of his head.
The eyes were deep red and surrounded in black, painted shadow. But best of all,
he was a little on the plump side.
"Well, let's see ... how about my slippers and a good book ... a nice dinner, world-fucking-peace now that I'm on the subject, and, oh yeah"--brandishing the

knife before my face--"I

almost forgot: all your money."
"Uh, well, okay." I chuckled. My laughter sounded like the moon's. I wondered if
he recognized that. "Tell me," I said casually, as I reached for my wallet, "how
does my face look?"
"Huh? What do you ..."
Either he was just now looking at me for the first time or my face was changing
before his eyes, because his dominant sneer melted away and he let out a
girlish, whining gasp, leaping away, holding the knife between us.
"Stay back, man, or I'll open you up!"
I laughed at that threat, and lunged. The knife pierced my palm but I flung it
aside and tackled the guy--mangy, faggoty punk that he was--and sat over him as
he cried out. We gave each other a long, touching, soulful look and then I did
it.
I didn't leave much behind except the mess. The fellow was poisoned, polluted,
and I was left with that impure taint in my mouth that one is always left with
after a chemically treated meal. I was stuck somewhere in the wastelands of
uptown and sure that it was unwise for me to show myself in the glare of another
train station.
So I walked. And as I walked, I got to wondering: was what I had done so
strange? In the world we live in? We eat dog and horse meat all the time and
pretend we just don't believe it. And given what I'd just been able to judge for
myself, it seems fairly credible to assume that everyone, at one time or
another, has inadvertently eaten human flesh. But I had killed a mugger and
eaten him on the spot. Uncooked. Just how was I to justify this? I've always had
an instinct for taking correct, superior courses of action, even and especially
when the value of my actions went unappreciated or misunderstood. Surely there
could be a reason why this too was right and correct and perhaps even admirable.
But when I stumbled into my apartment just before dawn and stood before the
mirror, looking at this thing I had become, I knew I'd just been kidding myself.
And that's all. I spent all day Sunday drifting in and out of sleep. At one
point I even called Lisa. A big mistake, as it turned

out. At first I had to convince her that it was actually me by claiming that I
had a cold and sore throat. As the conversation "progressed" I found that I was
having to defend myself constantly--for my record as a husband, as a father, as
a son or son-in-law. It was getting harder and harder to speak all the time.
Words that seemed to overdrive through my head got all garbled up as I tried to
voice them, and quite a few unusual sounds seemed to punctuate and overpower
them. And as I grew more defensive and she got more accusatory--and as I

started
to wonder whether that little bitch Margaret had gotten to my wife--I got louder
and angrier and my speech became incomprehensible and, ultimately, physically
impossible. I found myself roaring into the phone, coating it with lumpy green
foam. The environment around me began pulsating in and out of shape and I felt
myself caught on a breaking wave. Only the dial tone brought me around again.
I've been thinking a great deal about work. About work, and about food. I wonder
what Margaret did or plans to do about that ugly misunderstanding Saturday
night. Of course I was the victim of circumstances. No one gives off scents like
that, makes gestures and strikes poses and focuses in on someone like that
unless she's ready to be taken on a long, fiery ride, and of course that's what
was happening and she knew it and I was only playing a part, wasn't I? She
backed out, looked at me as though I was some kind of a ... she stabbed me,
goddamn it! She tried to kill me. How could she bring me up on charges? How
could she get me fired? She tried to kill me and, shit, oh shit, of course, I
can see it all now! That was her plan all along, from the moment she called
Lisa. I wouldn't be surprised if my boss put her up to it. Why not? That
baby-faced little bitch, I ... God, am I hungry. I've got to get something to
eat.
It's 6 A.M. Monday morning. I've been awake since midnight, mulling all this
over and I can see the way things are, the way they will have to be. I am
surging with strength of a kind I never dreamed possible. I get up to look in
the mirror, when the place contracts enough for me to find the mirror, and I see
something great and beautiful. My red, razor-sharp crests, this face--so big,
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so wise, so expressive ... Look up there! The moon cannot set, because it can't
take its envious eyes off me even as the red sun sizzles away at its swollen
flesh. All around there are sweet-scented flying reptiles, all of whom wear my
visage. I could be like them, one of them. All it would take is a surge in the
right direction, at the right moment ...
Little rat things leave offerings at my feet. They leave me little wooden
ornaments, birds, their slaughtered off-spring ...
Thank you, little rat things, but my appetites are too great for your children
to satisfy. I could surge into a small form and fill up on them and walk among
you but, you see, there are things to be done. There is a place I have to go.
...
I have to eat. I need food. And then I have to go to work. There are hordes of
scheming, insignificant, back-stabbing little insects who need to be guided,
need to be made an example of, need to be herded. I must go down there, to poor
Alan, to John, Ellen, bless their poor, expendable little souls, to Margaret,
and bring them all to me, and all the rest as well, you see, because ... because
...
God, you sizzling moon up in the sky, because I'M HUNGRY.
Let them slice off their groping fingers on the razored ridges that surge up
through me like a spreading, newborn sea floor. Let them try to keep me off a

train. Let them try to keep me out of the building. Let them try to send me home, let them try to stop me from eating whatever I please.
Let them look up to the sun that throbs as deep a red as my red, armoured flesh,
to the moon who cannot stop laughing, that moon who wears my sweet, sweet swollen face.
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DELIA AND THE DINNER PARTY
John Shirley
John Shirley is one of those guys who never fail to make an impression--be it good or bad. And he's made plenty of both kinds through his outspoken columns,
his penchant for punkish music and ideologies, and his totally strange brand of
fiction. He broke into publishing back in 1979 with a novel called Transmanisoon. I guess you have to call what he was writing back then SF--but for speculative, rather than science, fiction. A succession of novels has followed and an impressive collection of short stories entitled Heatseeker. Shirley looks like a kind of dissolute William Hurt, has lived places as diverse
as Manhattan, Portland, Paris, and now Oakland. He used to be the lead singer in
a rock band, but now spends all his time writing imaginative fiction that defies
categorization. The following story gives a view of the world through the eyes
of a child--which we all know can be accurate, even if all the rules are broken.
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Delia watched from the upstairs window as the guests arrived. Two cars of them,
one couple per car, about ten minutes apart. There would be four guests here tonight, for her parents' dinner party.
"There will be six adults," said the Telling Boy.
She nodded. She went to the top of the stairs to watch the last couple come in.
"Hey, you guys made it!" Delia's daddy said, greeting the man with a handshake.
"How's it going, Jack?" the man said.
"Kinda weird until, oh, maybe two months ago now. I had to get a new agent--picked up on somebody good through Robert Longo--started selling paintings again. Three today to a collector in Chicago."
"That's great," the man said. Delia thought his name was Henry something. He was
a balding man in horn rim glasses and a turtleneck sweater; he was much taller
than her short, thick-tummied daddy. He was a man who wrote restaurant reviews,
she knew. She'd seen him before. And his plump, nervously friendly wife, Lucy,
in her neat dove gray and blue pantsuit. She was older than the others.
"She plays mother to Henry," the Telling Boy said. The Telling Boy wasn't consulting his book yet. He was talking off the cuff. He had the little book, which looked like one of those gold-spined Golden Wonder books for kids, tucked
under his arm. He stood there, stiff and formal in his jammies, six feet tall and wearing those jammies with the booties, wherever did he find them so big ...
?
The Telling Boy didn't look like a boy. He looked like an old man, in fact,

tall
and bent a little and age spotted and hooded eyed and sunken cheeked and gray haired. But the old man was called the Telling Boy anyway. You got used to it.
"I wish I had a cigarette," the Telling Boy said wistfully, as he did rather often.
She had tried giving him cigarettes, but he couldn't really touch things in the
world, and he could only look at them longingly.
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"Who's that spying on us up there?" Lucy said impishly, waggling a finger in cutesy accusation up at Delia.
Mama looked up at Delia and smiled wearily. Mama had dark hollows under her eyes
and thinning hennaed hair and a special padded bra because one of her bosoms had
been taken away by the cancer.
"Come on down and say hi, Delia," she said, with a resignation that was heard as
a certain flatness in her voice.
Another flatness came into Daddy's eyes when he saw her up there. They didn't like her to watch them in secret. Her daddy had gotten mad, very mad, when he found Delia hiding under the kitchen table watching him, and realized she'd been
watching him silently for a full hour as he puttered around the kitchen, taking
bites from things in the fridge and putting them back, reading the comics pages,
picking his nose, calling a woman Delia didn't know on the phone, talking to her
in a funny, hushed tone of voice. ...
Delia came down and said hi. Everyone sat around in the living room, listening
to The Gypsy Kings on the record player, drinking aperitifs, admiring Daddy's paintings on the wall and Delia's dress. The other guests, the Crenshaws, smiled
at Delia at first as if they meant it, but the smiles got more strained, after a
while, as they always did, because she didn't respond. Mrs. Crenshaw was a tall
and thin and very elegant black lady, skin more like creamy cocoa than black; she wore a tight red gown that showed a lot of cleavage, kind of dressy compared
to the others. She used to be a model, Delia had heard Daddy say, and had appeared in lots of ads in Ebony. Her husband, Buddy Crenshaw, was a white man,
shorter than his wife and stocky, with a neat little gray beard and a bald spot
on the back of his head. He was talking about trying Rogaine for the bald spot,
Rogaine was the baldness cure that he had helped promote, and what a rip-off it
was because it hadn't worked for him and it was really expensive, and how he was
going to do another promotional campaign for it. No one thought this was funny.
And they talked about the parking around here, on these steep streets in San Francisco, and how hard it was on a Saturday night because they were near North
Beach, but how nice a
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neighborhood, at least, to drive around in looking for parking, because you could "look at all the lovely Victorians."
The black lady, whom they called Andy even though that's really a man's name, tried to talk to Delia a little, and laughed when Delia told her how old she was.
"You're certainly a big girl for five years old," the Andy lady said, smiling indulgently, thinking Delia was joking. "Did you do a Rip Van Winkle sort of thing?"
"She's almost eleven," Daddy said, with a faint disgust in his voice. "She likes to pretend she's five. She believes it, too."
Mama gave Daddy a quick look of reproach. He was supposed to make light of all that, and he'd made it worse. Delia glanced through the door into the dining room and saw the Telling Boy there in his blue and white jammies, sitting awkwardly on the edge of the dining room table. How dirty the jammies looked in this light. They had something like mold on them in the crotch.
No one else looked at the Telling Boy. Even though he was staring at them. He looked at Delia and held up the book, tapped it. She nodded. Her mother frowned at her, puzzled and vaguely angry.
Dinner. Andy and Buddy were talking about having seen Nureyev's new ballet. Nureyev was choreographing, they said, instead of dancing now, and both Andy and Buddy chuckled over Nureyev's choreography. "He's really not a Renaissance man, should have stuck to dancing, but his ineptitude is taken as brashness and progressivity," Buddy said glibly, and everyone snorted and said, "God, Buddy, you're right, ballet critics are blind where Nureyev is concerned, they've all shared vodka with him."
Talk like that. Delia was glad when her mother said she didn't have to stay for dessert. "A little girl who doesn't like dessert?" Lucy chirped. "My goodness, where did you get this one? Mars?"
Daddy almost said, No, but sometimes we wonder ...
But he got a warning look from Mama and didn't say it. And he looked at Mama in a way that said, I told you this was a bad idea. We shouldn't try to have dinners here in the house.
Delia knew her parents very well. Thanks to the Telling Boy,

she knew them better than they knew themselves.
Delia went upstairs, supposedly to watch the Disney channel on her TV and go to bed, and the others went into the living room again for coffee and the expensive imported cookies that Mama was using as dessert.
The Telling Boy was waiting there, of course.
The old man dressed like a little boy for bed.
With the book open, waiting for her.
She had a feeling like a snake of excitement biting its own tail off. Its jaws, chewing slowly, were dread.
Today, Delia saw, the book was called Delia and the Dinner Party.
Delia turned out the lights.
The Telling Boy began to read, even though it was dark. A gentle light from

the
book lit his dry gray mouth as he read. The lips moved like a puppet's mouth. In
a voice that was old but not grandfatherly, he read:
"Delia was a little girl, or maybe not so little. If you think five years old is
little, then she was little. But maybe you are not yet five years old--and then
she might be a big girl to you."
Delia thought: I've been five ever since the first time the Telling Boy came to
explain things to me.
"One day Delia's parents had some people over for a dinner party. Delia didn't
feel like talking to them, even though her parents wanted her to. Delia was a
sad little girl. She didn't have any friends except a boy who lived in the attic.
"After Delia went to bed, she thought and thought to herself. 'Maybe I can make
friends with these people after all,' she said. 'I'll ask my friend the Telling
Boy.' So she went upstairs and asked her friend the Telling Boy. He was a very
wise little boy who wore wonderful magic jammies and could talk to all the
little creatures who lived in the attic. 'Delia,' he said, 'I don't know if you
can be friends with these people, or your parents either. The only way to be
sure is to go see them again and try to decide.' So Delia went along with the
Telling Boy into the Looking Tunnel..."
The Telling Boy tucked the little book under his arm, and gestured to say, After
you. They walked toward the corner of the

room that was nearest to the living room downstairs, and the lines of wall edges
that met in the corner seemed to extend themselves into a new depth, a reach
that extended beyond the wall and became a dusty road stretching into darkness.
They walked into the corner and down the road. In the sky were stars and
spiders, both glittering. There were cobwebby rafters up there, and there were
clouds. There was a cockroach crawling along the horned moon. The place smelled
of dust and mildew.
And then, on the road up ahead, was the living room. It was a box. A room-sized
box glowing gently in one of its corners from the light of its table lamp.
They walked up to the nearest wall of the translucent box, and looked through at
the dinner party. She could see them; they couldn't see her.
Daddy had broken out the Chivas. They sat sipping their liquor--Lucy taking hers
in coffee, becoming much more nervously giggly--and Daddy was drinking his on
the rocks.
Delia and the Telling Boy could hear what was being said, though it was a little
muffled. "I love that dress," Lucy was saying to Andy. "It's so assertive and
... I wish I could wear something like that but I'd look silly. I mean, you look
wonderful. ..."

"They seem very nice," Delia said. "Andy liked that. She's smiling."
"Let's go over here and see what Lucy really said," the Telling Boy suggested.
Delia followed him around the corner, and saw the same scene played again, with
the Telling Boy translating the dialogue. He read from his little book: '"I love
that dress,' Lucy said with a well-disguised sarcasm. 'Black people are always
ready to overdress, aren't they? I suppose if you were a black man instead you'd
have a big gold chain with a clock on it so I should be happy for small
blessings. All my senses are assaulted by your skintight red satin dress with
the neckline that plunges to your navel. I could never embarrass myself that
way.'"
But Delia hardly heard what the Telling Boy was reading; she was watching,
wretchedly fascinated, the Telling Boy's visual translation.
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In her bedroom she had a book she'd been given when she was three. It was called
The Magic Kids, and it was about someone who learns that their neighbor kids are
elves in disguise. And it had a special cover on it with a little plastic
see-through panel holding a picture of the Magic Kids. When you looked at the
illustration straight on they looked like ordinary kids; when you tilted the
book and looked at an angle, the picture shifted and revealed the little boy and
girl as elves with wings and pointed ears.
The living room box that the Telling Boy had shown her was something like that.
When you stood on one side and looked in, you saw the people in the room as they
looked "normally." When you went around the corner and looked, seeing it from
another angle, the image shifted and you saw what the box really held.
Mama and Daddy and Buddy and Andy and Lucy and Henry.
Monsters. Skin stripped away, red meat and blue white bone exposed and nastily
wet, teeth bared, fingers boneless and ropelike, barbed tentacles; black tongues
three feet long that whipped out like the tongues of lizards, tubular tongues
with lamprey-mouth tips. Bodies overgrown in some limbs, unnaturally tapered in
others.
Her Dad--she knew him by his clothes, they all wore their human clothes--had a
second face on the side of his head that was snapping its jaws at Mama like a
vicious little dog barely kept leashed. Mama's head was triple faced; the one
facing Daddy was angry and frightened, one of its eyes had been gnawed away.
...
Skinless dwarfish faces oozing pus and blood ...
Their genitals were repugnantly exposed, their clothes gone crotchless; Daddy's
penis was a two-headed lizard thing that hissed and twitched and then convulsed
with sickness, vomited sticky white fluid that fell sizzling to the floor.
...
Mama's vagina was a big hairy spider on its back with its belly cut open, waving
its bristly legs.
Delia looked away, her stomach twitching like a fly in a web. ...
The Telling Boy had prepared her for this. He had been showing her things for

many years now. He had given her glimpses. But
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never so clearly.
It's just a story in his little book, she told herself. That's really all it is,
in the end.
She watched the Lucy thing and the Andy thing; the Lucy thing lashing out with
its finger tentacles, slashing at the Andy thing's face, scoring it with bloody
grooves. The Andy thing recoiled. I love that dress. It's so assertive ... I wish I could wear something like that. ...
Delia was seeing the hideous underside of the conversation. The truth. Or so the
Telling Boy told her.
The Telling Boy said, "Let's go look on the other side again."
They went around the corner. It was both a relief to see them human again, and
disturbing. Knowing what was just one flicker behind the facade.
Daddy was saying, "How are things at the agency?"
"Kind of a bore, lately," Buddy said. "Getting to be a routine. You wouldn't think it would be the same-old same-old at an ad agency, since we're constantly
having new accounts, doing creative work, but--"
"Hey, I could believe it," Daddy said a little pityingly. "You uh ..." He picked
up his glass, smiled smugly as he sipped. "You find time to work on that novel
you were telling me about?"
"The novel? Sure, bits and pieces." Buddy's smile was false. "It's growing slowly but surely."
Lucy was unusually quiet.
The Telling Boy opened his book and read the translation.
'"How are things at the agency? Are you bored out of your head with the same old
rip-off manipulations of the public, the same old scams to sell unnecessary junk? Are you writing that novel you used to talk about? I doubt it. You're not,
are you? You're not that creative. Not like me. I'm an artist. I make my living
as an artist, and not a commercial artist either. An abstract artist. Artists are better than other people. So stay in your place, you little weasel, I'm the
celebrity in this house, I'm the artist, not you, your best hope is to follow me
around like a puppy dog, looking up to me. ...'"
"Was that what Daddy was saying?" Delia mused. "I don't
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know what he means by some of that stuff. Rip-off manipulations. What does an ad
agency do anyway?"
"They make TV and radio commercials," the Telling Boy explained.
"Oh."
"I'm sorry. I don't mean to go over your head. Sometimes it's difficult to put
things in terms a five-year-old girl can understand."
Delia was tempted to argue about being a five-year-old. She knew she wasn't really. But the Telling Boy didn't like her to talk about that.
They peered around the corner long enough to see that the Daddy monster was standing over the Buddy monster, its tongue sucking out one of the Buddy

monster's eyes; the Buddy monster was on its back, its arms and legs in the air
like a dog surrendering a fight. The Daddy monster's penis shot sizzling white
fluid onto the Buddy monster's exposed belly, so that he writhed in pain. ...
You find time to work on that novel you were telling me about?
Delia's stomach lurched again, and they looked back at the other side where Lucy
was saying, "I guess I'll go outside and have a smoke."
"Oh, you can smoke in here," Daddy said, "if it doesn't bother anyone else ..."
He looked questioningly at the others.
Andy said, a little stiffly, "No. It's okay. The occasional ambient smoke doesn't bother my asthma much."
The Telling Boy opened his book and read the translation. "And Andy replied, 'You may as well--you've already been offensive to me. Why not torment me some
more? You disgust me.'"
Delia knew what she would see if she looked around the corner: the Andy monster
chewing at some exposed place on the Lucy monster.
"Why don't you have your cigarette in the kitchen," Mama said, "while I'm giving
you that saute recipe you asked for?"
"If it's all right. That'd be nice," Lucy said, smiling icily at Andy. She got
up and followed Mama out of the box. Gone from sight.
"I'm glad she left the room to smoke," the Telling Boy said, sadly. "I sure would like a cigarette." He turned to Delia and said,

"If you ever grow up, don't start smoking. You never quite get over it even after you quit."
"Did you die because of smoking?" Delia asked him.
"They said it was lung cancer brought on by cigarettes," the old man in the jammies said. "And that was part of it. But it was also because my wife wanted
me to die, so I didn't try to fight it. I was hoping she'd feel guilty, afterwards."
Delia nodded. She understood. She'd learned a lot about people from the Telling
Boy.
Buddy was talking over something called stock options with Henry. "They are both
pretending they know about stock options," the Telling Boy said. "But they don't
know anything about them. They are bragging to one another by pretending to know
about the stock market. Do you want me to read the--?" He started to open the book.
"No," Delia said. She was watching her dad. He had gone with Andy to help her pick out a CD.
"Let me give you the benefit of my vast good taste, Andy," Daddy said, jokingly.
The Telling Boy read his interpretation from Delia and the Dinner Party.
'"Let's go over here,' Daddy said, 'where I can flirt with you and you can flirt
with me without anyone noticing.'"
"Oh no," Delia said. "He wouldn't do that."
Feeling really sick now, like she was going to cave in.
"You saw the monster," the Telling Boy said. "He might do anything. A

creature
like that."
They were flirting with one another. The woman was pretending to push him out of
the way with a sideways shove of a hip so she could get to the rack of CDs, both
of them giggling. Daddy picked out James Brown, the woman laughing at him,
saying he'll be playing rap records next; she picked out Bartok's string
quartets, and whispered teasingly, "James Brown, that's an example of that big,
hard organ of good taste of yours?"
"If you want an example of that--" he said, laughing. "I know a motel--"
"Oh, listen to him! Stop!" She laughed.
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"Seriously--what I would like to do is show you a painting in my studio--I just
feel like you could relate to it--"
"Oh, it's let me show you my etchings now!"
They both laughed, but she went along with him, downstairs, to his basement
studio. Andy just calling casually to her husband that she'd be right back. He
waved and nodded, scarcely looking up from his conversation. No wonder he was
losing her, Delia thought.
Delia felt cold. She looked around. Darkness, except for the translucent box
that contained the living room. She thought she saw a shiny blue black beetle
the size of a wheelbarrow crawling along upside down through a hole in the sky.
She shivered.
"I wish I'd brought a coat," she said.
"I wish I had a cigarette," the Telling Boy said grumpily.
"He's not going to do that thing with her in the studio, is he?" Delia asked.
"Do you want to see?"
She hugged herself. "No."
"It's what happens next in the book."
She looked at her shoes. "All right."
He turned and walked off into the shadows. She followed him. Something scuttled
out of their way. And then he was descending, walking down into the dusty and
infinite floor, down an invisible staircase. It looked like he was sinking into
the ground. Delia was used to this, too. She stepped down into the floor, where
it looked solid but wasn't, and found the steps with a probing foot.
The basement studio was another translucent box, in another shadow gallery. It
was shaped rectangularly, and had pipes pierced through it. There was a stack of
paintings and a table of paints and a big wooden stand that held a
twenty-foot-wide painting. She had seen it before; an abstraction that hinted of
iris shapes and orchids and parting folds of red velvet. Daddy was pointing to
one side of it, saying something about organic and inorganic shapes, and then he
took Andy's hand and led her to the other side of the long painting. And didn't
let go of her hand. Turned to her with a you understand, don't you? look.
"It's beautiful," she said.
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The Telling Boy said. "Come and see." He led Delia around the corner, where

the
image shifted.
The monsters were writhing against one another, copulating and rending, Daddy's
hideous animal penis smashing itself with suicidal fervor into the creature's vagina ... a vagina that was a sucking spiral of wet flesh lined with tiny flechettes, oozing coagulated blood: the mouth of an oversized leech. The two skinless creatures making sounds like lard in a garbage disposal, like fluid in
a tubercular chest, like a record being played backwards; gnashing at one another with random sets of teeth erupting from their chests; the woman's breasts were the teats of dogs; her butt convulsively spat feces, and his belched masses of clinging, squirming pinworms. They licked at each other's effluvia with their long black tubular tongues, licking and sucking, feeding, grinding, clawing. Not enjoying this, just doing it because they had to, for some reason.
The painting was changed too. It was revealed as an enormous, grotesquely photo-realistic image of a huge woman's vagina, spread open and nauseatingly displayed.
Gagging, Delia looked at the dusty, infinite floor and yelled, "Daddy stop it stop it stop it stop it get away from her stop it!"
She ran around the other side of the box, the side where her Daddy looked human,
where he was simply kissing the Andy lady. And Delia began to bang on the translucent wall, yelling, "Stop it stop being monsters with her!"
Daddy looked up. Not toward Delia but up toward her room.
"What is that girl doing up there?" he muttered. "Yelling that kind of shit. The
therapist told us to let her act out and not to make a big deal, but, goddamn it, she has to learn sometime--"
He was heading for the stairs. The Andy lady, breathing harshly, turned with embarrassment to pretend to look at the painting.
The Telling Boy said, "We'd better go back to your room. He expects to find you
there."
"Do we have time?"
"I don't know."
They hurried back the way they'd come. Found the stairs, walked up through a ceiling, hurried back along the shadow

corridor of the Looking Tunnel toward the entry corner of her room.
She could hear Daddy walking up the stairs to her room. She could see his silhouette, over there, off in the distance. Coming angrily. Losing his temper.
Reaching the door.
No. She wanted to get there first, before he found her missing.
She saw her room at the end of the Looking Tunnel, where three lines converged.
It was a box, translucent and far away, with another box glowing in it in one corner: the TV. In her room, Daddy was storming around, looking under the bed,
slamming open the closet door, looking to see where she was hiding; on TV, Donald Duck was making enraged sore throat noises as he chased a mischievous chipmunk around his cartoon fishing cabin.
Delia stood on the verge of the room, looking at her daddy poking through the closet.
"Go on, while he's not looking," the Telling Boy said.
She stepped through. Her daddy heard the noise and turned. "Where the hell have
you been hiding? Damnit, Delia--I'm sick of this bullshit. This kind of

acting
out. You're too old to play these little games. You're not five, you're eleven,
and this is five-year-old stuff--not talking to anyone, staring at everyone like
they're insulting you, screaming at us from up in your room and then hiding when
I--"
Mama was coming in. "What's going on?"
"Daddy," Delia said, "why were you being monsters with that woman in the basement?"
He blinked at her. "What?"
"Rubbing on her body and kissing and all that. That Andy lady."
Mama turned to stare at him. He worked up a convincing look of outrage. "Goddamn
it, Delia, now you've gone too far--making up this bullshit--"
"You were downstairs with her," Mama was saying. "You were."
"We were looking at my new painting--" Daddy yelled. Covering up by making a big
noise of it. His skin was fizzing.
Bubbling. Fizzing. Foam coming out on his skin. And then his skin sloughed off
him in patches, carried away on the yellow mucky bubbles of the fizzing. Mama was hissing at him, "God, this is

humiliating, you and that woman at a dinner party, for God's sake--"
And Mama was fizzing too. Her skin bubbling. Melting away. The monsters from anatomy charts--mixed up anatomy charts-- were coming out, right there in front
of Delia, without the Looking Tunnel or the Telling Boy. One of Mama's eyes popping out with centipedes. The big spider moving with horrible slow rippling
motions under her dress at her crotch, pushing its way out. Daddy's penis fighting to get loose. The little ugly extra faces growing on their heads. Ropy
fingers. Muscles and bone and tendons exposed and trimmed like something you saw
hung on a hook in the back of the meat section in Safeway.
Both of them snarling at one another; making gibbery, sputtery noises; snapping
many sets of jaws.
Delia finally screamed. A scream that had waited six years to come out.
They turned to her, angry at the noise she was making, coming at her. Red, oozing, snarling, snapping.
She felt a papery hand on her wrist, pulling her back.
Back through the wall. Into the safety of the Looking Tunnel.
She turned and saw that the Telling Boy had his hand on her wrist. And she could
feel his hand.
"I can feel you," she said.
"That's why," he said, pointing at the translucent wall.
She turned and looked into her room. Saw her mother and father, as humans, bending over her. Over Delia lying on her bed. Lying there staring. Not moving.
Breathing, but nothing more.
Her dad still angry, not believing this. Mama telling him to shut up. Seeing that the catatonia was real.
Delia and the Telling Boy turned away, walked back into the Looking Tunnel. As
they went, the Telling Boy read from his little book.

"And Delia saw, then, for sure, that she could not be friends with anyone else
but the boy in the attic. So she went to live with him, and lived happily ever
after. The End."
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SUICIDE NOTE
Lee Moler
Stories distinguish themselves for different reasons. A great premise, a memorable character, an ingenious twist, a sip from the silver cup of true fear--these are all benchmarks of the well-wrought tale. But one of the rarest
ways a story can shine is by the pure force of its style. "Suicide Note" by Lee
Moler is one of those special tales that crackles with wit, self-confidence, and
a clear, clean voice of originality. You can't get past the first paragraph without recognizing Moler's gift--his style.
Born in West Virginia, Lee Moler now lives in the small town of Bel Air, Maryland, with his wife, Charlotte, and two young daughters, Caitlin and Stephanie. Just sliding onto the worst side of forty, Lee had a brilliant play,
Bop, produced by the Baltimore Playwright's Festival, and recently sold his first novel, a thriller called Hard Bargains. New stories and novels are in the
works, and that's the best news of all.
As the last flicker of life died in my wife's eyes I looked at my hands around
her neck and remembered that I was a religious man. Religion is
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about love, and I loved her even as I killed her but of course she didn't get it. If she'd gotten it maybe I wouldn't have killed her. I'll never know because
I agree with the group of particle physicists who say there's really no such thing as if. The things we do are just events in a multi-dimensional universe where everything we do here has an opposite and equal reaction in another unseen
but congruent universe. I'm not kidding. There really is a large group of reputable physicists whose study of the behavior of light quanta has led them to
that conclusion. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you? You're probably out of the same herd of one-dimensional cows as my wife. Not that I didn't love her.
Not that I don't love you. I love all you credit-wearing consumer units who trek
out each day to do the one meaningful act in your slot-track lives, which is ...
but you don't get the reference to slot-track do you? They were little powered
cars that raced around a preconstructed track in slots. They got their power and
direction from the slots, but I'm sure you didn't get the reference because they
haven't been hot in over six years and anything that happened more than three months ago is automatically erased in a consumer unit's mind. Because a consumer
unit's one meaningful function is to buy, and if your buying is to continue on
schedule you have to forget that anything is supposed to last, including wisdom,

truth, faith, or history.
That's why it will take most of you about a week to forget I killed my wife. That little fact will be erased by a blizzard of sitcom stars shining out at you from the supermarket tabloids that are your only memorable source of information. No? What do you think is the source of conventional wisdom? What do you remember, the fact that the latest space shuttle is going to carry forty-three pounds of plutonium on top of a liquid-fueled bomb that has a one in seventy-eight chance of exploding or that Rosanne Barr has become "difficult"?
The fact that forty-three pounds of plutonium is enough to give every person on the planet lung cancer or that the president didn't catch any fish while he was on vacation? Not that you'll remember who Rosanne Barr or the president is in a few years.
Remember this though, as you take your daily tabloid pill from Doctor Rather. It's something you might even be able to recall at

the end of the evening when Cosby's sent the kids to bed for you and you're tired of struggling through those long sentences in TV Guide. There's a darkness that doesn't need night to come because it's there waiting behind whatever it is you don't know you desire. And there is a witchcraft that doesn't need a full moon because the moon always orbits full around the dark side of any light you care to name, including television screens, including love.
And love is what religion is all about. Did I tell you I was a religious man? Religion: sin and redemption. That's what religion was originally about. Sin is a word you'll never see in the tabloids unless it's a quote from one of the wig-merchant preachers who use it as a crowbar to pry open the poor. And I know that to most of you redemption is a tax refund, but originally it meant forgiveness for your sins, and better yet, release from them.
That was the problem; I wanted forgiveness but not release because my sin was feeling like God. Redemption would have meant giving up that feeling, and I couldn't. God: I still capitalize his name; an affectionate gesture. He can't help it if he inspires emulation and I can't help it if I emulate. Can you see the bind I'm in? I still believe in God but resent him deeply for creating me in his image. That's what the Bible says, you know. He created us in his image. So what are we supposed to do about this potential for cheap imitation?
I mean just what the hell was I supposed to do after the first time Sella lay facedown across the motel bed, midnight hair spread to the floor, and said in her little tin growl, "You can do anything to me you want, anything."
That's what she said. Then she raised the short leather skirt, showing me the straps of the garter belt as they extended up the tightly flared white of her thighs like the tails of a lash. Then she rose to her knees and with a soft grunt pulled the skirt to her waist. She was small and thin, but her ass flared wide and pulsed outward like some giant white heart. It was shocking in its solid abundance, a secret thrill that only the favored could know. She raised it

higher and as it swayed there over her head the little growl in her voice was changed to a light shriek by the way her face was pressed into the mattress. "Anything," she said again. "Anything you want. You
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can hurt me. I like to be hurt. I like to be humiliated. I'll do anything you say. I deserve it."
I swayed on my feet as the blood rushed from my head to my groin and back again.
I felt like I was expanding in all directions. She meant it. She was giving me
power, Godlike power. Sure, it was a cheap imitation, like a little electric shock compared to a lightning bolt, but it was the closest I'd ever come. I know
a lot of you consumer units are thinking you would have refused, saved by the atheism of your dead imaginations. And maybe you would have. But that wouldn't
have saved you because any of you who've ever come but once would have asked yourselves why. Women too, if Sella had been a man, and she could have been, if
she wanted you to think so. And the question why is the thing that puts the first hole in the safety of your ignorance. It's the question that comes for you
when bad things happen, and they will. It's the question you'll ask if you meet
me, and you will, because I met Sella.
Through some helix of irony that now seems as fated as poisoned strands of DNA I
met her through my wife. My wife's name is, excuse me, was Marian. She was a tall honey blonde with a face like Meryl Streep's plumper sister and one of those big-boned Minnesota Swede bodies. You know, a hundred and forty pounds maybe but not fat, just big through the shoulders with cream-pie breasts and haunches instead of hips. She was about a half-inch taller than me and very attractive in an earthbound way. I admired her. She had intelligence and guts.
As I was strangling her, just as her face turned purple, she whacked me so hard
I had a bruise on the side of my face for a week. I don't say that to be crude,
just to illustrate one of her better qualities. If I was able I'd miss her, but
of course I'm no longer able. To miss her I'd have to imagine she was real and
people are just a collection of feelings, aren't they? When I killed her I took
those feelings which comprised the entity named Marian into myself. So she's just as real now as before. That's a concept I wasn't conscious of when I met Sella in the discussion group.
Marian was a sociology instructor at the local community college. She was heading an adult education seminar on modern
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mores or some such thing and asked me if I wanted to participate. I didn't, but
she'd been carping about me showing no interest in her career, so I agreed to sit in a few times just to see what she was up to. We decided to keep the fact
that I was her husband a secret so it didn't inhibit the group or me.
My eyes locked onto Sella as soon as I entered the room. She was wearing a black
sheath dress with black hose that matched the crow-wing sheen of her hair. She

had a long thin face that suggested an American Indian, or rather an Indian's idea of someone he might come across in a forbidden part of the desert: tomahawk cheekbones and a mouth so wide it made the rest of her face look like something it had kissed into existence. Her nose was a bit too long and had a cruel little hook to it that matched the one at the corner of her cunt-curl mouth. It was her eyes though that locked onto mine and sucked my brain to climax. They were as ice gray and hungry as those of an arctic wolf; tundra eyes reflecting the hiss of some winter sun that lay deep-gone over the horizon.

She said nothing in the session; an attitude souffle about honesty that was punctured every time Sella moved her eyes from my crotch to my face and back again. She flicked them at first and then did it slower, hungrier each time with a kind of tongue-lolling languor that made me feel like I was being licked all over. Sometime during the middle of all that she began showing me flashes of thigh, crossing her legs, slumping a little in her chair so the sheath rose higher, then uncrossing her legs. It took only a few minutes of that for me to realize from the black and white contrast of her upper thighs that she was wearing a garter belt and stockings. There may be a man over the age of thirty-five somewhere who isn't aroused by a garter belt and stockings on a pair of high-flow legs, but don't trust him because he's a liar.

When we were boys all women wore them and women is what we wanted. Girls knew it and wore them too. I spent untold classroom hours looking for that not-too-subtle tan-white promise I'd somehow seen in prepuberty fever dreams. That night in my wife's classroom with Sella I was doing it again; feeling overheated and dizzy, becoming more capable of rape by the minute. Ten

minutes before the end of class she crossed her legs one last time, took off one high heel, and used her architecturally arched foot to massage the back of her other leg up to the knee, down to the heel, slowly, tongue slowly. The slight buzz of nylon against nylon sounded as faint and plain as a zipper in a dark room. Five minutes before the end of class I left and waited at a far turn in the hall so I could catch her while Marian was collecting her papers.

Sella knew. I saw her wait until the rest of the class was almost to me before she started down the hall; her breasts small enough to move free inside the knit sheath; ram's-head nipples butting strong against rolling black circles. She had an insect-thin waist and a swaybacked walk propelled by an ass so mobile you could see it move from the front. The others were already out the door when she got to me. I was going to step in front of her but she stopped, turned, faced me with those ice-dog eyes and said in a voice like a fingernail on my spine, "Marian is talking about honesty with a student. She'll probably be about five minutes." Then she looked at my crotch again and up to my eyes, emitting something between a sigh and a groan as she did. It was that little tin shriek

that was to become so loud in the upcoming months that it was all I could hear.
I grabbed her by the upper arm and yanked her around the corner. She gave the little groan again but didn't resist. "Why?" I asked. "Why were you doing that?"
She turned so that one of her breasts kissed the back of my hand. "You mean trying to show you I wasn't wearing any panties?" she said in her little growl.
I released her arm and leaned against the wall, attacked again by fever dreams.
She stepped forward so that the rounds of her thighs hugged my legs. "You didn't notice," she said. "I tried to show you but you didn't notice."
"Why?" I managed to croak. "Why are you doing this?"
She rocked a little on my leg, raising the knit dress as she did so, bringing raw nylon in contact with the jeans I was wearing. "Because I can always spot a husband," she growl whispered close to my ear. "You're Marian's husband, and I like husbands."
"Why?"

"Because I'm bad." She whimpered a little, a sound that made me ashamed for her, and hard. "Because I'm bad," she said. "I'm so bad only a man who's being bad can give me what I need."
I almost walked away but I felt the wet breath of her sentence on my neck. "And what's that?" I asked instead.
She gave the tin growl as she rocked on my leg so hard that her dress slipped above the top of her stocking and I felt white thigh-fever against my leg. She leaned forward into my neck and slipped a piece of paper into my pocket. "Anything you tell me I need," she said. "And I mean it." Then she leaned back, looked at her watch, and said, "Five minutes, don't forget I mean it."
She went out the door in a way that made me wish I was a door and I was alone against the wall, dripping sweat onto my shirt, prostate fluid into my pants.
That night in bed with Marian I was like a lion on an antelope. I wanted to draw blood. I wanted to crack her spine. Our marriage had always included regular sex but the method was always what magazines with douche ads call "comfortable." Marian would lie on her back or, when she was especially passionate, on top of me and give out with a few oohs and a "that's nice" or two and then come with all the regularity and passion of the morning newspaper.
The night I met Sella Marian sweated like a boar and grunted like a sow. She thrashed and raked me and even tried to throw me off but I'd just flip her to a new position and drive on because my semen was boiling inside me and I wanted to make it hurt her as much as it was hurting me. She made birth sounds and came three times, but afterward she looked at me from the other side of the bed like I'd suddenly grown fangs. "You frightened me," she said in an apprehensive voice.
"You came three times," I answered in my defense.
"I didn't even know it," she said. "I was lost."
It was then that I felt the beginnings of the power, the thrill of subsuming

another person into your desires, making them a seed out of which your fulfillment grows. If she had only agreed to it things might have been different
but of course it was her fate to die rather than agree to it just like religion
tells us. You know,
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disobedience is sin and the wages of sin is death. It's right there in the Bible, you could look it up but you won't. You'll just go on reading douche magazines and believing in "relationships" that are "comfortable."
That's what Marian wanted to do. After a bout with Godlike sex during which she
came three times and couldn't remember two of them all she could say was that she wanted to know it when she came. Mind you, she didn't deny she came three times but said she wanted to know when, wanted to enjoy it. She went to heaven
but didn't like it because she couldn't remember the address. She wanted low-fat
no-cholesterol bite-sized safe sex instead of pigslop pleasure, and it killed her. Because then I knew. I knew I had to have Sella and once I had Sella I had
to have it all. If Marian had only submitted it might have saved us both. After
all, Abraham was willing to kill his son for God. All Marian had to do was be a
sex object. Not that I think I'm God. What a cliche. I don't even want to be God. I just want to feel like him. It's not my fault. I didn't make the world but if I had I wouldn't have told my children they were created in my image. I'd
have let them come without knowing it just like I did Marian. I tried to save her but she'd read too many douche ads to accept dirty love. So I had to find another way to love her. I learned that way from Sella.
"I know what you want," she said on the phone, and told me to name the time and
place, any time and place. I did. The next day I found myself in a room watching
Sella rock the garter-whipped purity of her veinless white ass against the darkness while begging me to hurt her. And I did. I whipped her. I told her to
stay in exactly that position while I whipped her with my belt and every time she moved I whipped her some more. When I saw her skin beginning to redden to the point of blood I stopped until it passed but I told her to stay in that position the whole time. She did. It was a transcendent experience. At first I
could see her whole body in all its pornographic glory as I vented my anger at
Marian on it. Sella's ass shook with each blow, sending ripples of force up each
side of her body to her breasts and down her legs where they straightened her toes. The more I whipped her the angrier I became at Marian for refusing to allow me to stop short of what I was now
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doing. Because I would never have whipped Marian, unless she'd asked me and of
course she wouldn't have asked me. Not that I'd have wanted to. She wasn't built
for it; too big, too unsegmented. It would have been as erotic as driving a mule
team.
I would have continued normal animal sex with her though, watching the sweat

splash as she flopped around the bed, but she wouldn't and that made me mad, which sent me to Sella who received anger like an offering, which after a while it was. Because after the first flush I got when I realized I was actually whipping her, after the first time I'd rested so she wouldn't mar the occasion by bleeding, I ceased to see her body at all. Rather I ceased to see her as a body. The blackness of her dress blended with the dark of the room and the white of her skin with the lightness of bed and bathroom beyond until I imagined myself alone in the room and her ass a blank page upon which I was writing a save-me note to the world. The more I whipped the more articulate I became, the tip of my belt landing just where I aimed and eliciting a different note in the continuous keening wail that came from Sella but which seemed to come out of my own screaming frustration at being locked onto two legs in a world that is mostly air. When I became aware of Sella's noises I stopped writing and became a musician. Every cry of rage or pleasure or fear or want I'd ever felt in my life I was able to bring to her lips through the instrument of my belt, and as it got more accurate and more intense there was no remaining difference between Sella, the room, and myself. I was creating a world through the mediums of pain and violence and I didn't stop until she became me and I was feeling the burn in my head more strongly than she on her skin and we were two poles of an electrical field so strong that if anyone else had touched the belt at that moment it would have killed them.

It was in that moment that I threw the belt aside, leapt onto the bed, and shoved into her like a coked-up angel sent by the Almighty to cuckold Lucifer, and the only way to cuckold Lucifer is to give his wife more of what she wants than he does. So I used myself as a weapon. I banged against the backs of her thighs so hard that her head drummed against the bedboard with the doomlike thud of the slave-master's hammer on a galley ship. I

bit her and slapped her and bent her into positions that made her nothing but an orifice with a body attached. And I used every orifice she had, finishing with the one Lucifer likes the most; the one that makes the cunt seem like a debutante at her coming out party, the one on the side of town where the lights never shine, the gateway to the gardens of perversion where the black roses of hubris grow out of wells of dark satin. And as I did it I could read her spine from the inside and it said, "Yours is the thing that writes the limits of my life. Yours is the alchemy that changes my pain to bone and my bone to come." And I did it harder and her wail swallowed itself into a muted roaring grunt so I could feel it sitting on the end of my spear, and as I came I could see the

limits of my life expand like the speed and reach of the universe. I could squeeze air and feel it run between my fingers. I could bite minutes and feel the seconds run down my chin. Afterward I couldn't remember coming. I was lost.

I don't remember exactly how many times I saw Sella after that, only that they were never enough and the times between felt like a fluorescent dream from which I wanted to awake. Each time I entered a shady motel room with Sella felt like balm to a burn wound and each time I came out I felt like I'd been singed all over and needed the balm worse than before.

Whatever I did she wanted more. I tied her hair to the top of the bed, wrapped a rope around her feet, and pulled her taut using the bathroom doorknob as a pulley. She spread her arms and called it flying through hell, and asked for more. I had her suck me until her neck was stiff and her jaws were sore and when I needed time to keep from coming I made her use that time to suck everything else in the room; table legs, doorknobs, bathtub fixtures, her own toes. She called it tasting exotic fruit and asked for more. I used appliances on her; an electric shoe shine machine, a slow-turning power drill with a sponge bottle washer attached, a wire attached to a tape-player's LED flashers so that small shocks were delivered in time to the music. She called it lips of fire and came until she cried, and asked for more.

And me? My days were like slow-flowing mud and my time with Marian like a sensory deprivation tank without the

hallucinations. I began taking time off from work to meet Sella. I bought leather outfits from Frederick's, whips and harnesses from feed stores, new appliances from hardware stores, liquor by the case, and drugs by the kilo because they all enhanced the erotic imagination and Sella wanted more. And as she got it Marian got less and noticed. She also noticed our dwindling bank account and my decreasing weight. I was getting quite thin and liking it because I was able to fit into the zipper front leather bikini underwear which never seems to come in husky sizes. She wondered about the porno films I rented for posture concepts and the two pack a day cigarette habit I'd picked up because they enhanced the drugs and were handy for inflicting controlled burns. She nagged about them all and said she'd think I was having an affair but I didn't have the look of love. She didn't know much about the look of lust so she chalked my behavior up to a mid-life crisis. Unintentional irony is, after all, the hallmark of the uninformed.

And it was an ironic statement because I was about to face the crisis that sealed both our fates and many of yours. It began when I met Sella at the motel we'd been using because it was fairly soundproof and had a bed that was anchored to the floor. She was dressed in the outfit she'd worn the first night I whipped her: leather skirt short enough to show the fasteners on her garter belt, black silk blouse sheer enough to show her nipple erections. The outfit summoned up a

wave of nostalgia in me and I decided to whip her again just like our first time
but this time she called it old and said it wasn't enough. She sat up, slithered
off the bed, sat at my feet, and said in a pouty little groan, "Ooh, I feel like
such a bad girl tonight. This just isn't enough to hurt it out of me. I need
something special, something very special."
I asked her what and she told me I had to be in charge, that it wouldn't do any
good for her to think of it. She asked me to go home and think of something
really special and then come back, without phoning in advance, walk in the room
and just do it, whatever it was, just do it. She said she'd wait there until I
came back, even if it was days or even weeks. That's how bad she needed me to do
it.
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On my way home I realized suddenly that God chose to be love instead of pain
because it's so much easier. All you have to do to love is just do it, just open
your arms and passively let it flow. Pain requires imagination, constant
innovation. And that is of course the reason why humans are only a cheap
imitation of God and Satan a very good imitation of humans. We're all in his
image and have a taste for it. But the only kingdom we can be masters of is the
kingdom of pain, which requires constant thought, which induces fatigue and
depression, which causes us to be tired and pitiable creatures which makes us
even easier to love. You can't win.
That's the state of mind I was in when I got home to Marian that night and she
started on me about money. The bank statement had come and she couldn't help but
notice the dent my last cocaine buy had put in our funds. She wanted to know
what all that money was for. And, by the way, why had the latest Frederick's
fall catalog come in that day's mail? She even hinted that I might be a
transvestite. I considered it for a minute but decided that wasn't what Sella
had meant by something special. Sella! What the hell did she want? How far into
cruelty could I go without rounding the bend into love? Then I realized that was
it, the most dangerous thing to Sella of all, a thing so cruel that it stopped
just short of love. I knew what she must want.
Marian was in my face, literally, leaning in, waving the bank statement under my
nose. I stared blankly at her face and thought of all the times we'd seen each
other through. Hard economic times when we were both still in school. Hard
emotional times when members of our families had died. I knew I loved her with
an intensity just short of hate. Ah hell, what are we to do about this capacity
for cheap imitation? And I was an imitator, a sincere flatterer, a man in
desperate need of something special, something to keep him from the land of the
ordinary. My blood now flowed too fast for me to go back to being God's navel or
the devil's fantasy. I needed something special to stay king in the kingdom

of
Sella. I needed something on the cusp of love and hate.
Marian was in my face, shouting for my attention, and I gave it to her. I reached out, hoping she would understand, and put my
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hands around her neck, just as an experiment at first, to see if I was on the right track. Then I started to squeeze. The more I squeezed the more I realized
it was what Sella wanted. They say hanged men die with a hard-on and I knew strangulation would give Sella the biggest orgasm of her life and that once she
had it there would be no repeating it so she wouldn't want to live anyway. And
without Sella I could never go back to Marian no matter how much I loved her. I
had the power over all of us at that moment and I took it, rather I thought I took it. Now I can see it took me. An imitation's not the real thing after all,
is it? But once I was squeezing I kept on, feeling myself emigrate permanently
into the realm of imitation power as I did it. I was still a religious man but
then so was Lucifer. Let me tell all you consumer units who only read the parts
of the Bible quoted in the elevator version of Bob Dylan songs that Lucifer was
an angel who became the devil when he decided to be equal to God. He became a real imitation rather than a fake original.
After killing Marian I raced to the motel, knowing that Sella would appreciate
it all, that she'd been waiting there for me to kill her. I could hardly wait to
hear her groan with pleasure when I told her. I was on fire with the thought of
finally uniting her and Marian in my hands, of squeezing my two great loves into
one.
But she wasn't there. All I found was a garter belt lying like a black corsage
on top of a pair of black bikini underwear. A white note lay in jarring contrast
on top of the small pile of nylon. I read the hooked scrawl: "As you can see I'm
not here, and I'm still not wearing any panties. As you know, witch rhymes with
bitch. Now you know I'm one. I'll leave it up to you to decide whether I'm the
other. I know we'll meet again when you become really special. Until then I'm always yours in pain. Sella."
So good-bye, kind world. This is my last note to you, and my only warning. Like
all religious men I know that there is only one sin God will not forgive and that is the sin of rejecting forgiveness. And sadly, I reject it because I have
discovered that Sella was the bitch but I am the witch. In using her as a window
to the caverns of pain where the fires of small power burn I cast a spell on myself.
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Now I sit in those vaginal halls on a throne of God's excrement beside a

river
of blood where I baptize myself daily in dreams of Sella's neck gripped in my hands as I squeeze in masturbatory pleasure. As she dies maybe the spell will be
broken and I can accept the forgiveness that lies just across the now impassable
membrane where love meets power.
The problem is though, that to find her I must remember her and I can only remember her through action. So, just as Marian did, the ones of you I select will in your final moments become Sella. I will love you as I loved her and some
of you will in those moments find that you love me. Yes, it's true, you will. Because you are consumer units and each purchase is nothing but a small and thrilling act of submission, a voyeur's ticket to the kingdom of pain.
So as you stare at your televisions each night, know that I am the dark moon that orbits full behind the piano key grins and the toy like wrecks of the expendable cars. I'm the darkness in the center of the mother's whispered douche
advice to daughter. I'm here, behind the tube, outside the window, and around any impulse you might have to leave fake reality for real imitation.
I wait for you.
I want you.
I need you.
I Love you.
And, to paraphrase that most romantic of songs: You always love the one you hurt.
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STILLBORN
Nina Kiriki Hoffman
When you edit an anthology such as this one, a kind of wide-open, no rules, no
theme kind of thing, you don't really know what type of fiction you want. (You
always know, however, what you don't want.) But every once in a while, as you work your way through the stacks of submissions, a story simply grabs you by the
frontal lobes and demands that you buy it. When I read the following piece by Nina Kiriki (isn't that a great middle name) Hoffman, I knew immediately she'd
written a Borderlands story--whatever that entity might actually be. ...
Nina's work has appeared in all the major magazines and anthologies over the past few years, receiving the critical acclaim she richly deserves. She lives in
what is one of the all-time great college towns--Eugene, Oregon.
Hugh found it in the shallow grave his mother had dug behind the house. He kept
it wrapped in cotton above a heat register in the attic, where the dry warmth would preserve it without rotting it. Once it had mummified, he locked his bedroom door
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and took it out to look at, nights after his mother had gone to bed. When he shook it, its brain rattled inside its tiny skull like a pea in a gourd. "Little
brother," he would whisper, staring into its sunken leathery face. "Little brother."
Whenever she yelled at him, he remembered he owned something that had known her
intimately, something she had cast out. He could stare at her with that knowledge behind his eyes, and nothing she said got inside him anymore. She yelled and yelled and he only smiled. When she slapped him, he thought of

reaching up inside her where Little Brother used to live. His hand would never
have to touch her; his thoughts touched her enough. With that knowledge behind
his eyes, he stared at her some more, until her face went dull red and she
turned away, her words gone. Sometimes she touched herself, low down, as if she
knew his thought-hand had touched her there.
The night in October when Little Brother first spoke to him was windy and cold.
The window in Hugh's room was a square of black. Occasional rain spattered it.
The goose-neck lamp by the bed cast an image of the room against the night.
"Elder brother," whispered Little Brother, though his tiny lips never moved.
Hugh laid Little Brother on the bed and took two steps away before turning to
look again. In the center of his cotton batting, Little Brother was small, dry,
and yellow brown, with tiny skeletal fingers clasped into little bony knots,
fleshless fists like curled-up dead spiders.
"What?" said Hugh, after a moment. Little Brother had not moved, hadn't shifted
position since the mummification.
"Elder brother."
The wind whipped tree branches against the side of the house. Below, Hugh heard
his mother scream something. Maybe it was the weather she was mad at, or maybe
it was the television.
"Elder brother."
"What," said Hugh, after a moment.
"Kiss me."
Hugh went down on his knees and inched closer to the bed. He stared at Little
Brother's face, the lids stitching the sunken eyes

shut, the nose a tiny bump in the yellowed flesh, the mouth a narrow slash that
had never smiled.
The voice sizzled through his mind, its words a whip. "Kiss me," it whispered,
stinging.
Hugh closed the cotton batting over Little Brother, pulled it tight, and tied a
belt around it. He put Little Brother back in his hiding place, behind the shoe
boxes on the shelf in the closet. That night his dreams were full of Little
Brother, and he woke to find Little Brother lying on his chest, free of cotton.
He threw Little Brother off, against a wall. He heard cracking noises, like dry
sticks being broken for kindling. He jumped up and ran from the room. After half
an hour in the bathroom, waiting for his shivers to stop, Hugh went back to his
bedroom. He couldn't let Mother come in and find Little Brother.
Little Brother's skull was half smashed in, and one arm hung loose, dangling by
its leathery skin. Without touching Little Brother, Hugh wrapped him in a
T-shirt. "I love you," he whispered. He took Little Brother downstairs and
outside.
It was early morning. Down the street beyond the houses there was a dirt road

that led to a horse pasture. Hugh walked through the dawn, hearing the birds calling as if this was the first day of the world, his hands closed around the T-shirt that wrapped Little Brother. "I love you," he whispered again. He slid between the bars of the horse pasture gate, slogged through the churned-up mud there, and headed for the stand of trees. Dew-laden grass pressed against his pants. The horses were on the far side of the pasture. They watched, but they didn't come near.

The trees were thick oaks, their knobbly finger branches wound among each other, wet black bark spotted with pale green lichens. Hugh pushed through the underbrush until he was in the middle of the stand. The trees were so close together the horses couldn't get in here. He put Little Brother up in the crotch of an oak tree, and slipped away again, the dew soaking through his sneakers and the calves of his jeans, burrs catching in his cuffs.

At home, she yelled at him for getting wet in the morning, for leaving the house without telling her, for rising too early; and he discovered his shield was gone, out in the pasture with Little

Brother. The things she said cut through him.

That night he snuck out to the pasture and brought Little Brother back.

"Kiss me," whispered Little Brother, three nights later.

Hugh, fortified with having survived another onslaught of words that afternoon, kissed the side of Little Brother's face that wasn't smashed.

"Eat me," whispered Little Brother.

Hugh left him in the closet for three months. Little Brother said the same thing in late January when Hugh took him out and opened his cradling cotton to look at him.

Hugh needed Little Brother's strength. His mother had found a new man, a man with a hand that hurt and a face that snarled and a tongue full of words that stuck under the skin and pricked like fishhooks.

"Eat me," whispered Little Brother. "Once I'm inside you, nobody can ever hurt you again. I'll be there to protect you."

In the morning, shivering, terrified, and strengthened, Hugh went downstairs to face his mother and her new man. Behind his eyes, other eyes watched, though their lids were closed. His first words that morning were a whisper. Mother and her new man leaned close to hear them, then away, their faces twisting, and after that, everything changed.

Ladder

T.E.D. Klein

Several years ago I cited Ted Klein as one of the most underrated writers in our field. He is the author of a handful of excellent novellas full of brooding visions of darkness and a large, ambitious, and highly successful novel called The Ceremonies. He has written a few short stories and articles, and that, friends, is it. Ted writes with a careful, measured style, and he takes his time

doing it. His writing is like that exceptional running back who displays the rare combination of both grace and power. Unfortunately, Klein is not a prolific writer, and we see far too little of his work on an annual basis. For all of the above reasons, I was therefore determined to have the first volume of Borderlands contain a T.E.D. Klein story.

And you should know: Ted didn't make it easy for me.

It wasn't until I was actually up in New York, turning in the book manuscript to John Douglas, my editor at Avon Books, that I actually added Ted's contribution to the volume he met me at Penn Station with a dot matrix

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draft printed on yellow legal pad paper. I'd been bugging him for the story for months and he kept telling me it was coming along and that I'd have it on time.

There were moments when I almost didn't believe him.

And yet he came through for me. The story which follows, "Ladder," is earmarked by Ted's usual precise prose; untypical because of its brevity, but typical because of its subtle cleverness. Klein's stories always have a dimensional density about them, an almost palpable reality, and given impetus by events which seem so oddly unique, it is difficult to imagine them not being real.

"When asked to identify the mood of our times, she answered, 'A desperate search for a pattern.'"

--Prof. Huston Smith on Rebecca West

Birth, I see now, was merely a rung on the ladder. Rather deflating, when you think about it; you live, you struggle, you learn and grow and suffer, and you realize, after nearly seventy years of searching, that your life has been nothing but a metaphor. It's not the sort of thing you see while you're living it, of course. It's like that Greek said, the one they used to teach in school: you can't judge whether your life is a success or a failure until its final moments. Though my memory's not so keen as it once was, I remember that remark; I suppose it must have stuck in my mind because, even as a very young boy, I was consumed with curiosity. How would my own life turn out? What would I judge it to be, as I lay dying? But now the question of its success or failure seems sadly beside the point--less important, anyhow, than the one raised by Dame Rebecca. The answer to that, too, has to wait until the end; you can't see the pattern while you're living it. And you certainly can't see it while you're busy being born, dragging that first chilly air into your lungs, already exiled, forlorn in the sunlight of a winter's morning, the damnable game already begun.

Though I have no memory of the time, the first thing my eyes beheld was probably the heath, with the icy waters shimmering behind it. ...

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And it will likely be the last.

The Firth of Lome, that was the waters' name; can you think of a starting place

more fitting? It was fit, at least, for me, who have never married, never fathered children, never stayed in one place long enough to make a lasting friend (except the holy man), never owned any property but the tiny bungalow where, lying on my cot, an old Navy pillow propped up behind my back, I'm now scratching out this memoir. The Lords of Lome once owned a third of Scotland; now the estuary that bears their name borders a region of deserted forts, ruined
castles, and roofless crofts, their stone portals tumbled down and half concealed by meadow grass, the families that built them long since scattered to
England or America or the other side of the world. Any of these houses, in their
years of habitation, might have passed for the one where I was born, near the coast between Kilbride and Kilninver. Its low ceiling, heavy beams, and whitewashed plaster walls afforded barely space enough for the three of us, but
as the beloved only child of two elderly parents, I was happy there. My father
was a minister's son from Glasgow, my mother a MacDougall, of the clan whose ancient stronghold, now little more than rubble, stands on the island of Kerrera
in Oban Bay. From the Esplanade at Oban, the region's largest port, you can still make out the ruins; as a child I liked to think of them as my ancestral castle. Beyond Kerrera lay the headwaters of the firth and, looming in the distance, the mountains of Mull. Steamers--they were called "puffers" in those
days--plied among the islands, from Mullto Lismore, Colonsay, Coll, and the Outer Hebrides. Other boys dreamed of sailing on them, to see more of the world
before they died; I was content where I was. I planned, in fact, to continue sheep raising like my father; we had a flock of black-faced Argyllshires whose
regular comings and goings from pasture to fold, daybreak to dusk, season to season, filled me with a sense of peace. Though we owned a car, our lives, by the standards of today, seem almost medieval in their simplicity. I remember doing schoolwork by lantern light, a single lantern for all three of us, and how
we'd try to keep one coal glowing all night in the stove to light the fire again
the next morning. It never
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occurred to me that the sight of glowing coals could ever be anything but precious. ... I loved the way the heath would change from green in spring to purple and gold in the fall, and how it gleamed like crystal in winter. I would
gaze across it every day as the rattling old bus, its windows leaking draughts
of icy air, drove us children to Church School in Kilninver. Over the doorway, I
recall, carved into the granite, were foot-high letters spelling out the opening
line of Saint John: In the Beginning Was the Word. I wasn't a clever student--I
had trouble seeing the connections between things, even then--but I worked hard
at pleasing my teachers. My parents were pious people, and I believed in a strict but fair Creator who, as they did, hid His kindly intentions behind a stern exterior. I remember how comforting it was to think of the Lord as a shepherd, and we His sheep. ... But then, one rainy night on the very eve of my

graduation, just as my parents were returning from Oban in their car after buying me a new wool coat, a suit, and a bound set of Youth's Companions, they were swept off the road by a freak storm; or perhaps it was the fault of a rainsmeared windscreen. The car, with their bodies, was discovered at the bottom of a glen. The coroner described it as "an act of God." Immediately my world changed forever. I was alone now. My father, I discovered, had not been as prudent as I'd thought; he'd borrowed over the years from a neighboring family of landowners and had left me in debt. I had to sell the farm to them--the house, the flock, the pastures. They offered to let me stay on, but I knew it was time for me to go. God, I told myself, had done this for a reason; He had plans for me. Sensing that I'd been thrust out into the world like a sheep from the fold, I packed my things, ready to submit to His will.

Forth I went, my new suit in a satchel beneath my arm, to seek what I thought was my destiny. I had already sold my coat. My Youth's Companions lay unopened amid the pile of books I was leaving behind; my youth was over. I would have to make my own way now, settle in a town, and learn a trade. I did know something about wool; I knew its grades, how to unkink it, how to make it take the dye. I was not, I told myself, entirely unprepared. Unlike my fellows, who dreamt of America, I had an idea that the course

of my life--the pattern, if you will--lay toward the east; something, I see now, was calling me in that direction, toward my eventual encounter with the holy man and the secret he revealed. Into the Lome flows the River Awe, cutting through the Pass of Brander from the Falls of Cruachan, and it was toward these magical names that I turned my steps. The heath was swimming in wildflowers, like foam on a choppy sea, as I walked to the highway and waited for a ride, wondering if I'd ever be coming back. Glen Mor, the Great Glen, lay ahead of me, sixty miles of waterway cutting across the highlands, from the Lynn of Lome beside me in the west to Inverness in the east, where Loch Ness meets the Moray Firth and flows into the North Sea. The region that I passed through was as picturesque as I'd once been told, with menacing crags and pine-shadowed valleys, ghostly waterfalls and scenes of ancient slaughter. The land here had seen its share of blood; but beyond it, I knew, lay the wide world.

Forts William (named for William in) and Augustus (for the Duke of Cumberland) stand guard on either side of the glen, their broad streets sloping toward the great Caledonian Canal. Fort William, the first I reached, was noisy, traffic-clogged, and, I thought then, highly exciting; it was the largest town I'd ever seen, with handsome white houses, hotels crowded with vacationers,

and
the grey granite mass of Ben Nevis rising up behind it, its top obscured by clouds. One look at the women in the shops, all of whom seemed beautiful, and I
resolved to go no farther; I would settle here. And I did ... for a time. I put
up at a cheap boarding house near the edge of town and found work in a tailor's
shop, fitting hikers with tweed suits--in those days one dressed up to hike--and
mending worn collars. I'd been employed there less than a month, however, when
one morning I arrived to find the street filled with shouting firemen and the shop a smoking ruin. I don't know if they ever found the cause. At the time I suspected the landlord's younger son, who'd had a dispute with the tailor; now I
suspect God, who has lightning at His command. It was clear to me, at any rate,
that I had to move on. I continued eastward, to Fort Augustus, at the foot of Loch Ness, where anglers stalk salmon

and Americans search for monsters. The King's Own Highlanders were garrisoned at
the fort there, and I soon found myself a job helping keep the books for a firm
that made uniforms for these troops. And then I fell in love. I shan't write down her name; I haven't done so in half a century. Sometimes I manage to forget
her; I think I prefer it that way. Anyhow, I hoped to marry her, and plans were
made, and then she got ill--she had a brother in the garrison, where a fever was
raging--and finally God took her. No use protesting; He simply had other plans
for me, and the girl had gotten in the way. I see that now; it's why I'm writing
this, so I'll see it all for what it was before I go. I wasn't supposed to linger at Augustus; my destiny--my great destiny--lay somewhere to the east. Pushing on to Inverness, I booked a passage for Edinburgh, where I found a ship
to travel on, the Saracen. She was a rusted old tramp steamer, her twin smokestacks stained with grime, but they needed a purser on her and were willing
to hire me. Besides, I liked her name. I signed on board, eager to see what God
had in store for me.
Ports all over the world welcomed me in my quest. We docked at Lisbon, the Canaries, and Capetown, then sailed north to the Maldives and Bombay. In succeeding years I transferred to other ships and added new names to my catalogue of places seen. In a single year I saw Athens and Adelaide, Singapore
and San Francisco. In another I did nothing but sail back and forth between Manila and Hong Kong. I saw a temple in Java where they worshiped small green spiders, and a woman in Ceylon who gave herself to snakes. I visited the New Hebrides and New Caledonia off Australia, lured by the Scottishness of their names, and the great port of New York, a universe away from the tiny ruined hamlet of the same name near my birthplace, at the edge of the Inverliever Forest and Loch Awe, where anglers feast on salmon and trout. The world left its
marks on me, but I welcomed them. In Shanghai my face was slashed during a

robbery, but I found the scar handsome. In Montevideo my nose was broken in a waterfront brawl, but I decided I liked it better that way. I was aimless, for
once; I enjoyed it. I fell in love with travel. For a while, in the
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early years, I worried that God had forgotten me; then I hoped He had.
Throughout these years I found myself employed with increasing frequency by the
Brittanic East India Company. The work--the purchase of shipboard supplies, the
keeping of books-- came easily now, and the Company and its concerns were seldom
in my thoughts. But it seemed I was in theirs, because when the director of agricultural development unexpectedly took sick and died, they made me his successor.
Posts in Gibraltar and, later, Bombay awaited me. Once again my life had changed
drastically; after gallivanting across the globe, I was suddenly planted in an
office. I missed my vagabond days, but didn't have the strength to refuse the raise in pay. My first post, in Gibraltar, lasted exactly seven weeks; I was supposed to expedite the transfer of olive trees from Rabat to Madrid, but a Moroccan revolution cut off our supply. In Bombay, I had barely unpacked my bags
before I was placed in charge of a plan designed to introduce Welsh merino sheep
into the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The poor animals had been wrenched from their homes and shipped halfway around the world; I felt a kinship
with them. I set up a small office in the interior, in a dusty little village whose name I could never pronounce. It seemed as remote as another planet, though the wrinkled grey hides of the elephants passing on the streets reminded
me of the slopes of Ben Nevis. Only after we'd gotten set up did I discover that
I'd arrived at the hottest time of year, in one of the hottest years on record.
For once I didn't work hard; I sat there in my shirtsleeves and perspired. One
morning a little old man, his face as brown and wrinkled as a walnut, strolled
unannounced into my office. He was Mr. Nath, he told me in a shrill singsong voice, "a holy man." His forthrightness amused me, and I told him to sit down.
He'd come, he said, because the locals were complaining that I'd brought the heat wave with me. They feared that I was cursed. "Well," I said, not entirely
joking, "perhaps I am"--and I proceeded to sketch the particulars of my life. "I
feel," I said, "a little like a pawn, constantly being shunted from one scene to
another at someone else's whim. I still believe there's a design to it all, but
damned if I know what it is." Mr.
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Nath had been listening intently, nodding as I spoke. "All lives have a pattern," he said, "that we see in their beauty and completion only at the end.
One man is the second son, and will be second in all things. One will forever be

doomed to arrive too late. One will go from rich to poor and back again seven times in his life. Another will always take wrong advice. Another will win only one race, at the start, and thereafter will know nothing but defeat. One will make a miserable first marriage, and then his second wife will bring him only bliss. Another will rue every day but the last. Another's life will follow the pattern of a spiral, or a chess game, or the lines from a child's nursery song.

But you, my friend--" Suddenly I saw his eyes widen. He was staring at a swarm of bugs that had just flown into the room, a seething little microcosm of darting energy and flashing wings, hovering just above our heads, humming in the morning heat. They were, I don't know, gnats, mosquitoes, tiny flies. ... India has so many. Their presence in my office was unremarkable; the door to the other rooms had been open, and the cloth screens were riddled with holes. What unnerved me was the manner of their coming, the sheer abruptness of it, as if they'd been rushed onto the stage by some great unseen hand. The little man seemed more upset than I. "Bugs," I said, shrugging. He shook his head, eyes round with horror. "No," he whispered. "Pests!" I mistook this for a reference to the plague, and, thinking of my lost love, felt a stab of sadness. And at that moment, just as quickly as they came, the bugs vanished--simply melted into the air, as if that same great hand had wiped them off the board. The little man's eyes nearly popped from his head. He opened his mouth, made a strangled sound, and ran from the room. I was left staring at the place where the bugs had been, feeling more bemused than frightened. Those creatures didn't scare me, not then. But they scare me now. Because now I know what they were.

The costs of running the Bombay branch proved to be too high, that's what I was informed, and I found myself abruptly--and, I might add, high-handedly--relieved of my post. Blame it on the

dreadful heat I'd brought with me (for I'm more than half convinced I did), and on the drought that followed. No one had ever seen such weather; the Company's coffee crops withered, the sheep sickened and died, and the survivors had to be shipped north at considerable expense. Blame it on the war then raging in Europe, which more than doubled the price of doing business. Blame it on an act of God. All I knew is that I was suddenly being uprooted again, another chapter closed behind me. As I stood on the Bombay dock, gazing at the ship I'd soon be boarding while, around me, workers with ropes and pulleys strained to hoist cargo into the hold, I thought of the stable world I'd known as a child; I seemed to be inhabiting an entirely different place now, pushed from one scene to the next. These gloomy reflections were cut short by the highpitched voice of Mr. Nath, who had come to see me off. I'd become friends with him following

the
incident in my office; and though it was the one subject on which he'd refused
to talk further, I'd relished his insights on other matters--so much so, in
fact, that I'd hired him as my assistant. He had accompanied me back to Bombay;
he, too, was now jobless, but seemed much less downcast than I, and was looking
forward to returning to his village. As he walked me up the gangplank, he
listened impatiently as I complained once more about the turns my life had
taken. "Surely," I said, "God must be behind these huge changes." He gave a
little sigh before he spoke, as if this were something he'd been hoping to
avoid. "Yes," he said, "and no. The changes you speak of are moya, illusion." We
had reached the deck now; he gripped my arm and stared at me with, for the first
time, a hint of urgency. "In the things that matter," he said, "the Lord works
very slowly and deliberately, with a hand far more subtle than you imagine.
Don't you know how He changes a dog into a cat?" He paused, smiled when he saw
my bewilderment, and seemed about to answer his own question, when suddenly I
saw him look past me; his eyes widened with horror, the way I'd seen
before--with horror and, I think now, a kind of terrible understanding. A shadow
fell across the deck, and I looked up, half expecting to see a swarm of insects.
But something else darkened the sky: a rope had snapped, and an enormous wooden
crate destined for the hold was hurtling down

upon us. I stumbled back in time; Mr. Nath was not so lucky. The crate caught
him almost head-on, crushing him like a bug and bursting open on the deck, its
puzzling contents spilling out and all but burying my friend.
Coats, that's what the crate had contained; the word, in fact, was stenciled on
the side. Greatcoats, dress coats, army issues, fancy leather affairs with
epaulets and brass buttons. They lay scattered across the deck, some of them
dropping into the warm blue water. I even think I saw my old woolen coat from
Oban disappear beneath the waves. None of this made sense. The weather was hot
in this part of the world, preternaturally hot at the moment, the climate muggy
even at its best; these garments were as out of place here as a pair of
snowshoes. Now, of course, as I set this down and read it over, the whole thing
is comically clear; I must have been blind not to see it. But at the time my
friend's last words, and the contents of the crate that had killed him, were
sufficiently enigmatic that I spent most of the voyage pondering them. It was a
shorter voyage than anyone expected. The ship, the Jane Guy, traveled south,
then eastward, then south again. We kept clear of Japanese waters--there was
still a war going on--but in those days nowhere was truly safe. Passengers took
turns on deck, searching the horizon for a sign of danger. As I stood my watch
one moonless night, preoccupied by thoughts of God and death, the ship gave a
lurch, and somewhere metal echoed upon metal. Later a survivor would theorize
about Japanese torpedoes, but it seemed to me that a piece of the ocean floor

had simply risen up and speared us. However, there was no time for speculation.
We were sinking.
Boats were lowered over the side, passengers and crew having scrambled aboard,
and those of us who could lay our hands on oars paddled madly away from the ship. My boat lost the others in the darkness. We heard the sound of distant screams and a great rushing of water, but when the sun rose we found ourselves
alone. Several of us unfurled the single sail, but the canvas hung limp; there
was no wind. The sun's gaze was as blank and pitiless as poets have warned. There were thirteen of us in the boat--we joked about it, of course--and it wasn't many days before the other twelve were
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dead. Half-starving and delirious, I shoved their bodies over the side to thwart
temptation, and looked forward to dying myself. I felt like Ishmael or the Ancient Mariner; I couldn't understand why I'd been spared. That I had been immediately became clear, for no sooner did the last body hit the water than a
sudden wind sprang up and filled the sail. The boat began to move. I can see God's hand in that wind now, and in the calm that preceded it as well. It is not
a kindly hand; I wish now I'd had the courage to jump over the side and defy it.
But all I could do at the time was lie back, mumble a prayer of thanks, and let
the boat carry me where it would. I no longer questioned the plans He had for me, though I must have lapsed into a sun-dazzled reverie of some sort: boyhood
memories, faces, questions, words. But suddenly those thoughts were interrupted
by a rhythmic thumping. ...
Beats of a drum were echoing across the water, above the pounding of surf. I raised my head. Before me, in the distance, lay an island: coconut palms, thatched huts, and a row of natives waiting for my boat to wash ashore. They reminded me, as the boat drew nearer, of the black-faced sheep of my childhood
... only sheep had never worn bones in their noses, nor gazed at me so hungrily.
I can see even now, as in a fever dream, the group of them come toward me, dragging my boat onto the beach. In the background women are tending a fire; the
glowing coals remind me of my boyhood. The largest of the men lifts me from the
boat. He ties my hands; he anoints my face; he drags me forward ...
And heats a pot that's large enough to be my coffin. Wearily I whisper a final
prayer. ... Till at that moment, borne before a huge unnatural gust of wind, a
sailing ship appears on the horizon. The cartoon natives run away, and I am saved. The ship meets a steamer which returns me to Scotland; I set foot once more on my native soil. Still dazed and emaciated, a grey stick figure in cast-off Navy clothes, I sink to my knees and praise God for his goodness; I consider myself blessed. Later, as my weary legs carry me toward the house where
I was born, I believe I finally see the pattern He's imposed on my life: a madman's full circle, clear around the globe.
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The heath now stirs around me in the autumn wind. I have returned, like a piece of ancient driftwood, to the spot where I began--though not, in fact, to my parents' doorstep. Their cottage now stands empty like the others, roof rotten and fallen in, a picturesque ruin. Instead, I'm now living in a tiny bungalow just down the hill from it, on a small plot of what was once my parents' farm.

The land is subdivided now, along with the land of our neighbors, and a company down in London is busy populating it with vacation homes. Tourists, hikers, and holiday makers now roam the hills where once I tended my father's flocks. The old "puffers" have been replaced by diesel-powered vessels that take Americans to Jura and Islay, and the deserted forts, those still in decent repair, have now become museums. In one of them, devoted to local history and antiquities, I recently had the novel experience, novel but eerily disorienting--of finding a shelf of my own childhood books on display in a room labeled "Typical Crofter's Cottage, Early 20th Century." I felt a queer burst of homesickness, seeing them there in that reconstructed room; they looked as clean and well cared for as if my mother were still alive to dust them. Among them were the bound Youth's Companions that circumstance had robbed me of the chance to read. I removed one and sadly flipped through it. It fell open, as if by design, to a page entitled "Rainy Day Puzzles and Pastimes," below which my eye was caught by a familiar question: "How do you change a Dog into a Cat?" Heart pounding, I read on: "By changing one letter at a time. This age-old game is called a Word Ladder, 'for each change must make a new word. You can turn Dog into Cog, and Cog into Cot, and Cot into Cat--just three steps. Or you can do it in four, from Dog to Hog, to Hag, to Hat, to Cat. Or in five, from Dog to Bog, to Bag, to Bar, to Car, to Cat. In fact, the ladder may stretch as long as you like. The possibilities are endless!" And, by God, they are--though at first I didn't understand; it's taken me this long to work it through. And now, at last, it's all laid out here in this memoir, the secret itinerary of my own career from "Birth" to "Firth," to "Forth," and on to "Forts" ... and all for His amusement. All those deaths! The men of the Jane Guy, my father and mother, my friend Mr. Nath, the girl in Fort Augustus .

... Was it really for this that she had to die? To move me one rung down, from "Forts" to "Ports"? Couldn't He have spared her? Couldn't He have set me on a different course? I might have gone instead from "Forts" to "Forks," "Folks," "Folds," "Golds," "Gelds," "Melds," "Meads," "Meats," "Heats," and "Heath"

...
Or in an even more roundabout journey, from the "Posts" I once held, to "Poses,"
"Roses," "Ropes," "Rapes," "Races," "Faces," "Facts," "Fasts," "Fests," "Tests,"
"Tents," "Dents," "Depts.," and "Depth" (assuming the old cheat would allow Himself the use of an abbreviation near the end). But in my case He seems simply
to have plumped for the easiest and most direct route--except, I now realize, for a single false step. The holy man must have noticed it at once. "Pests!" he'd cried. Not "Bugs!" but "Pests!"--a chapter that, in someone else's life, might well have followed "Posts." Those creatures, had they been permitted to remain, would likely have led me on an alternate route to "Tests," "Bests," "Beats," and "Heats," arriving precisely where I am today. Instead, God must have changed His mind--and erased that swarm of pests from the game so hurriedly
that my friend saw what it meant. Perhaps, in the end, He simply found it easier
to move from "Posts" to "Costs," and to drag in that dreadful crate of coats. ... Well, I always knew I was destined for something; I just never thought it would be this. Saint John had it right, I see that now: In the Beginning Was the
Word. Unfortunately for me, the word was "Birth," and it was all downhill from
there. Below me now lies one more rung--the bottom rung, the one that follows "Heath." I'd rather cling to this one for a while, but I know that, like any true gamesman, God's going to have the last word.

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Muscae Volitantes

Chet Williamson

Writers, like actors, can get typecast. They can become known for doing something well, and usually to the exclusion of all the other things they do well. Chet Williamson is one of those writers who's been quietly, but with great
efficiency, establishing himself as a very fine writer. Best known for his crisp, original characters, he is also a fine stylist. His stories have appeared
in all the usual magazines and anthologies in addition to some markets most of
us just dream about: Playboy and The New Yorker. Yeah, like I said, Chet is the
Real.

He lives in the Amish country of Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, with a precocious,
intelligent, goodlooking son named Colin, and wife Laurie, who probably has the
warmest, greatest smile this side of Mary Tyler Moore. He looks like a college
professor who should be smoking a pipe (he doesn't), and when you meet him, you
keep wondering how such a nice, amiable guy like Chet can write such twisted stuff.

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When Randy Fralich's lover called him at home, Randy had not yet decided to kill
him, though the thought momentarily crossed his mind.

"What the hell are you doing?" Randy asked. "You never call me at home!"

"I'm sorry," Alan said, "but if I didn't call you tonight, that meant I couldn't
talk to you until Monday."

"What's wrong with Monday?" Randy whispered, listening with his free ear for the sound of Cathy's soft footfall in the carpeted hallway outside their bedroom.
"It's too important," Alan said, and Randy thought that he detected a flutter in Alan's usually unruffled manner.
Randy sighed. "This isn't like you, Alan. We have certain arrangements that we made and we promised to stick to."
"Randy, please ..." Alan's voice was pleading. This was a weak Alan, an Alan that Randy didn't know and didn't have the faintest idea of how to deal with. It had been Alan's strength that had drawn Randy to him that first evening, and now it was suddenly gone, leaving only a tinny voice that made Randy feel sick.
"What is wrong with--"
"I've got to see you, I've just got to."
"No. Not this weekend."
"Please. Tonight, please."
"Tonight? Are you crazy? Cathy will know something's wrong."
"Fuck Cathy." Another surprise. Alan never swore. He didn't have to. "Now are you coming over or aren't you?"
Randy snatched off his glasses and began to bite the stems.
"Stop chewing your goddamned glasses!" Alan ordered, his voice strong again.
"How did you ... ?"
"That clicking. I know you all too well, Randy. Now are you coming?"
"No."
"Then let me talk to Cathy."
His mouth filled with the taste of rust. "No!"

"Do I have to come over there and visit her personally? Maybe Monday when you're at work?"
And then the thought hit him. "Oh my God ... do you ... do you have something?"
The chuckle sounded hollow over the line. "AIDS? No, Randy. Don't worry. No AIDS. In fact I was just tested this week. Negative."
"Then do you ... want money?"
There was a flat silence. When they came, the words cut like a knife of frozen fire. "Have I ever asked you for money? Ever?"
"I ..."
"I don't want your money, Randy. I want you. Here. In thirty minutes." There was a final click, and, after a moment, the dial tone brayed.
Randy hung up and looked at the clock. 8:30. He jammed his wallet in his hip pocket, took some coins and tokens from the dresser, then opened his underwear drawer and dug beneath the unfolded briefs until he found the keys to Alan's apartment. Then he walked down the hall and into the kitchen, where Cathy was still sitting with her third cup of coffee, reading a Danielle Steele paperback.
She looked up at him with eyes too clear and open to be suspicious. "Coffee, hon?"
"No thanks." He sat down across from her, picked up the paper, and turned to the theater section. "Oh hell, this is the last night for that Herzog revival. You want to go?"
"I don't know ... Herzog ... Is that guy in it, the guy I don't like?"

"Klaus Kinski? Yeah." Please, God, he thought.
"No, you go. He gives me the creeps." She turned back to her book and coffee.
"You sure you don't mind?" Thank you, God. And thank you, Klaus, you creepy fucker, you.
Randy took a cab to Alan's building in the west eighties, unlocked the front door, and walked past the doorman's post (had this place ever had a doorman?).
The tired Otis elevator wheezed and clanked its way to the eighth floor where it
rattled open,
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revealing the paint-peeled door of Alan's apartment. Tonight, even though he had
the key, he knocked.
Alan opened right away, as though he'd been standing on the other side. He was
wearing his usual hang around home garb, dark tank top and denim cutoffs, exposing most of his massive, tanned thighs. He smiled warmly.
"Welcome, babe. How did you get out past mama?"
"Klaus Kinski," he muttered as he walked in.
Alan chuckled. "If it weren't for revival houses, you'd have no sex life at all."
Randy threw himself into the rocker, the hardest piece of furniture in the room.
"Look, I'm not in the mood for jokes. What do you want?"
Alan walked into the small kitchen, from where he could still see Randy, and opened the refrigerator. "You want a beer?"
"No, I don't want a goddamn beer! I want to know what you want."
Alan pulled the tab and took a long swallow. "I want to talk," he said quietly.
"I want to talk about you and me and life and death. I want to talk about your
leaving Cathy to live with me."
The nausea hit Randy in a flat, unrelenting wave. "Are you crazy?" he managed to
get out over the lump in his throat. "I can't do that, Alan."
Now Alan stood over him, looking down with hard eyes. "Yes you can. And you will. You tell her or I do."
"You always said we could keep it the way it is,"
"Well, things are different now." There was no expression on Alan's face.
"Different? How?" Randy stood up, face-to-face with his lover, so that Randy looked directly into his eyes, seeing nothing there but truth.
"I'm dying, Randy," Alan said. "Dying."
Randy shook his head. The words didn't register.
"I'm dying. And I want to spend the time I have left with you."
Then it hit, and Randy shrank back. "I thought you said ... on the phone ... about AIDS ..."
Alan turned and sat in the armchair. "It may be reassuring to
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know that gay men can die from things other than AIDS. I have lung cancer, Randy. Twenty years of Marlboros, no doubt." He laughed.
"Don't laugh like that! How can you joke--"
"It's my death," Alan said. "I can do what I want with it."
Randy slowly walked into the kitchen and poured himself a bourbon, not because
he wanted it, but to give himself time to sort out his contradictory emotions--grief, loss, fear, panic, and just a little relief. He went to Alan and put his hand on his shoulder.
"Alan, I'm sorry. I know it doesn't sound like much, but I'm so very sorry."
"About what? That I'm dying, or that you won't stay with me?"

Randy swallowed heavily. "That you're dying. But as for staying with you ... I
can't."
"I don't think you understand me, Randy." Alan stood up and moved to the doors
of his small balcony. "You will stay. You will leave Cathy, and you will stay
with me until I make the last trek to the hospital or until I decide to finish
it myself, which is much more likely." He opened the balcony doors, then added,
almost as an afterthought, "I hate hospitals."
"No," Randy said. "I can't, Alan."
"Then would you like me to make some calls? To Cathy? To the head of your
department? To your saintly mother? Look, when I'm gone you can go back to
Cathy. She doesn't have to know a thing."
"How the hell can I keep it from her?"
Alan smiled. "You're the clever one, Randy. You can explain a two or three month
absence."
"Two or three ... is that how long ... ?" He stopped, wondering if he sounded as
anxious as he felt.
"You bastard," Alan said. "You'd like it to be tomorrow, wouldn't you? Then you
wouldn't have to worry about your wife and your job and your reputation." Then
he walked toward Randy, a new expression on his craggy face. "Or is it something
else? Is it that you really don't love me anymore?"
Randy thought of grabbing the straw, of telling Alan that he hated him, to go
ahead and take an ad in the fucking Times if he

wanted to, that he'd deny everything.
But he couldn't. He still loved Alan, and he couldn't lie to him. "No, I love
you. I still love you. But you're ... so different now...'."
"Selfish?" Alan grinned. "You're right. And I deserve to be. I can't take
anything with me, and I don't expect anything on the other side, so I'm going to
get what I can in the little time I have left." His voice turned softer. "And
I'm going to get you."
Randy sat on the day bed, shaking his head, wondering how his life had come to
this moment. Alan sat beside him and took his hand. "You know you want to stay
with me, don't you? You know you don't want to leave."
"Alan, I just--"
"Look at me." Alan took Randy's face in his hands, turned it toward him. "Look
at me, Randy. Look in my eyes. See my face. I want you to remember it. Long
after I'm dead I want you to see my face. I want you to ..."
For the first time since Randy had known him, Alan wept, and Randy held him and
comforted him. Then they were lying on the bed together, and the caged grief and
fear turned to passion for relief.
When Randy awoke, he looked at his watch, saw that it was two in the morning,
then searched his mind desperately for an alibi to tell Cathy. He was pulling on
his pants and putting the final touches to a variation of the oft-told tale of

running into an old friend from college, when Alan awoke.
"Are you going?" Alan muttered sleepily.
"I have to."
"I want you to stay, Randy."
"I can't, I have to go home. It's too late already."
Alan laughed softly. "You can say that again." He stretched and stood up, lit softly by the hazy light from the window and the glass-paned door onto the tiny
balcony, toward which he walked. He swung the doors wide and stepped between them, then perched like a pale hawk on the wrought iron balcony rail.
That was when Randy decided to kill him.
There was really no process through which he chose to become

a murderer, no period of brooding in which he moved inexorably from love to hate. There were only facts, three undeniable facts-- Alan would not let him go;
he must go; and Alan was sitting on the balcony rail eight floors up from the hard cement at the airshaft's base.
And with these facts registered and cataloged, along with the knowledge that Alan was going to die anyway, the gray, organic computer inside Randy Fralich's
skull punched out what seemed to be the solution.
He walked to the balcony door, unzipped the jacket, and said, "All right, Alan.
I'll stay." Then he pushed Alan backward as hard as he could.
Alan gasped as he fell, his arms flailing. His right hand caught a piece of the
iron work and clung to it desperately, his nude body facing out from the building, his fingers and wrist bent backward at an agonizing angle. Randy knelt
and rapped at the knuckles, trying to be careful (the computer again) not to break the bones or split the skin. It was working. The grip was looser now, no
noise from Alan (good!) except rapid, ragged breathing.
Just as Alan's hand released its hold, he brought his head back and up, and for
a second his eyes looked full at Randy, the gaze piercing Randy's brain like crystal needles. Then the eyes and the face and the body fell silently away, a
white mother soaring into darkness.
Randy thought he heard the impact of the landing, like the dull krump of a mortar in a war movie, but far away and muffled by the city's nocturnal purr. He
looked over the edge and down, seeing nothing at first. Then a lighter patch of
darkness began to swim out of the black, and he thought he could see Alan on the
concrete below, arms and legs jutting out like gray branches from a stunted tree.
Randy listened. There were no suspicious noises, no screams of women, no shrieking of casements as long unused windows painfully opened. Lights remained
where lights had been, weakened by drawn shades. And the darkness remained as well, behind the closed eyes of other, sleeping windows.
He was safe. He was safe and it was time to go home. But first

he would have to be very careful and make sure that there was nothing in the apartment that could be traced to him. It was likely that the police would accept suicide as the cause of death, especially when they learned of Alan's illness, but Randy couldn't take any chances.

The thought of his lover alive came to him, but he drove it from his mind. He had to be clinical now, a machine. There would be time to weep later, to rationalize what he had done. It was all for the best, wasn't it? For both Alan and himself. He had spared them both suffering.

There were no personal belongings of his in the apartment, not even a toothbrush, as he had never spent the entire night. No letters either--he had never put anything in writing. And no message on an answering machine. Alan was the only person Randy knew in the city who did not have one. There were no photographs, for their affair had been extremely private, with no parties, gay bars, or vacations where friends with cameras lurked, and he had never given Alan a picture.

That left only address books. Randy drew the blinds and turned on a dim table lamp. He found only three addresses in Alan's book--Alan's parents, ex-wife, and an electrical repair shop in the nineties. There were several masculine first names with phone numbers, but Randy was not among them. He blessed Alan's tremendous memory, and closed the book.

Then he filled the sink and put the two glasses he and Alan had used into the hot water and rubbed the sides to smear any fingerprints. He rubbed the faucet handles and the doorknobs when he left, figuring that wiping them clean would have made the police suspicious.

No one was in the hall, or the elevator, or the lobby. He walked home, afraid to take a cab, entered his building unobserved, and walked the four flights to his apartment. Cathy was sleeping. His lies would have to wait until tomorrow.

The next morning the lies worked. She bought them completely over the breakfast he barely touched. Dear, simple Cathy, Randy thought, I still do love you a little, if only for your never-ending faith in me. He wanted to be alone for a while to sort things out,

so he told Cathy he had forgotten some work he had wanted to do over the weekend, and would walk the fifteen blocks to his office to get it.

Once on the street, he found himself almost surprised at the callous attitude with which he considered his actions of the previous night. He had loved Alan, yes, but Alan was going to die and seemed ready to drag Randy along, in spirit if not in body, and Randy could not let him do that. In truth, he had spared Alan, spared him months of mental and physical anguish as traitor cells gnawed away at that nearly perfect body until it was nothing but a gaunt shell of yellow skin stretched over mealy bones. At least this way it had been quick. And relatively painless, though Randy shuddered under the warm sun as he thought of that last look on Alan's face.

What had it meant? There was fear, yes, terror of that final dark plunge into the cement embrace of Mother Death, but there was more. Relief? Thanks? Maybe.

Love even, mixed with hate at the true knowledge of Randy's motive?

Jesus, no, don't think that, don't admit it even to yourself. You loved Alan, that's why you killed him. To spare him. To save him.

What was it he had said? Something about remembering his face after he was

dead.
Don't worry, Alan, Randy mused. You can count on that. He thought he would never
be able to forget that white face falling away, like an oval moon leaving its orbit, sailing into the black gulf of space, the craters of the eyes getting smaller and smaller until lost to sight.
Randy shook his head as if to clear it of the image, and looked up beyond the edge of the concrete and steel gorge made by the Sixth Avenue buildings, up to
the overcast gray sky that hung over New York City that morning like an ashen canopy.
He saw Alan.
It was Alan's face, slightly out of focus, up in the sky. Randy stopped dead on
the sidewalk, held firmly by the sight, oblivious of the jostles and curses he
received from his fellow pedestrians.
Yes, it was Alan, and he hesitated to look away, expecting the vision to be gone
when he looked back. At that instant he preferred

the totally irrational idea of its reality to the more sensible one of its being
an illusion projected on the sky by his own guilty mind.
He tried to focus on the face, but the image blurred, the outlines dulled. Randy
shifted his focus closer, until it seemed that he was watching the liquid film
on the surface of his own eyes through a microscope, and suddenly it was there.
The face swam before him as a crisp, clear image, but seemed to shift when he tried to look directly at it. It would remain for only a second, then drift up
or down or to either side, so that he saw it only peripherally.
The face was exactly as it had been the second before Alan had fallen, eyes and
mouth wide, the skin of the face taut over the sculptured cheekbones. But there
was no dimension, no definition, like a preliminary sketch before the shading is
done. Color was absent also. The face was a duller gray against the gray sky.
Even the outlines were not smooth strokes, but seemed to be rather a series of
small dots or blobs that held together, a flotilla of tiny boats on the sea of
Randy's eyeball.
It was only after he had determined all this that he began to get scared. The utter novelty of the illusion was enough to keep him from thinking about its significance, but it wore off quickly, leaving the fact alone to hit him like a
mallet on the forehead. Here was a man he had killed, whose face he was seeing
quite clearly in his mind or his eye or his mind's eye, without conscious volition. Alan's face had just walked into his consciousness like an uninvited
guest, and it was time for the guest to go home.
Randy blinked his eyes rapidly, then brought them down to street level. At first
it seemed to work. The image faded, became lost in the visual jigsaw of Sixth Avenue shops, cars, signs, and pedestrians. He took several deep breaths and

realized that he was sweating, even though the day was pleasantly cool. He tasted the sting of salt as he licked his upper lip to clear it of the moist sheen that had formed, wiped his dewy forehead with his sleeve, and walked on.
Soon he discovered that the face was not gone. First it drifted across the gray
side of a passing bus as Randy waited on the corner for the light to change. Startled, he stepped back, bumping into a tall, rangy black man who called him a
name and clipped him on
205
the shoulder with the heel of his broad hand. Confused and angry, Randy turned
down the cross street, rubbing his eyes viciously. The man shouted after him, but he didn't understand the words.
Randy walked halfway down the block like a blind man, eyes jammed shut, hands over them, peeking every few steps to get his bearing, although he could not have said where he was going. Once he tried to look down at the sidewalk, but Alan's face formed immediately on the gray smoothness of the cement, like the afterimages of a flashbulb.
He hailed a cab and gave the driver his address, only a few blocks away. After
he saw Alan's face crawl slowly along the back of the driver's seat, he shut his
eyes, and didn't open them until he heard the driver ask, "This okay?"
Randy thrust the bills into the man's hand, then, blinking rapidly, rushed into
his building. The blinking seemed to work. If he could not focus long enough on
a suitable background, the image did not have sufficient time to form.
Blink, blink, again and again ... don't give it a chance, he thought as he hurried between the closing doors of the elevator. An old woman was inside, packed fearfully into the corner, the metal handrail pressing against her hip.
Randy blinked frantically. "Something, something in my eye," he said in a tone
of desperate apology that sounded high and hysterical in the confined space.
"Gotta wash it out."
She nodded, eyes still wide, but calmed somewhat by the pedestrian explanation.
"Dust," she said softly, and a trace of a sympathetic smile touched the corners
of her broadly lipsticked mouth. "Dust," she repeated, as if expecting an answer.
The doors slid open at Randy's floor and he stepped out, still blinking savagely, leaving the perplexed woman standing in her corner, her mouth forming
the word, "dust," with no sound.
Cathy was sitting in the bentwood rocker reading when he staggered in, his eyes
flicking away like signal lights. "God, hon," she said, shooting to her feet, "what's wrong?"
"My ... eyes," he said, and instantly realized how utterly obvious that was. "There's something in my eyes. I keep seeing ... spots or something."
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"Do they hurt?"
"No, no ..."
"Here, let me look."
She pressed him gently down onto the sofa, and he tilted his head back, stopped
blinking, and stared up at the off-white ceiling where the image of Alan's face

immediately formed, drifting lazily across his field of vision.
Cathy's voice came from far away. "Now just hold still. ..." And he thought, what if she can see it? What if it's there, set in my eyes like two magic lantern slides?
"No!" he shouted, clamping his eyes shut and lurching to his feet.
"No!" he yelled, stumbling blindly toward the one room that contained the privacy he needed.
"No ..." he sobbed, as he slammed the bathroom door on Cathy's curious, anguished face, and turned the lock.
Dark. Silent, peaceful, blessed dark. No lights, no windows to the dull grayness
of the outside world that made such a perfect palette for the image his eyes had
created. He fumbled about in the closet until he found some towels, and jammed
them down against the bottom of the bathroom door where a hairline crack let the
hated light seep in.
Then, covered with a damp, clinging film of perspiration, he sat on the cold tile of the floor, his stomach twisting and churning in a paroxysm of nervous fear that quickly became a diarrhetic attack. He pulled himself onto the toilet
seat just in time, and, afterward, sat there sick and sweating, praying for either the nausea to go away and let him rest or to overtake him completely and
let him puke his guts out, anything to stop feeling so sick.
The feeling remained, a steaming, bilious lump the size of an apricot hanging deep in his throat, not going up, not going down. Finally he threw himself exhausted to the floor where he lay on his side, arm pillowing his throbbing head, pants tangled around his ankles like the aftermath of an inept escape act.
He lay there for only a few seconds before another attack came, knotting his bowels with pain. He clawed his way back onto the seat, and hyperventilated in
agony as the sickness roared out of

him. Then he fell once again onto the floor.
After a while the nausea faded, the lancing pain receded mercifully into memory,
and he fell asleep. A few minutes later he was awakened by Cathy's voice, muffled and deadened through the sealed door.
"Randy? Hon? Are you all right? Are you sick?"
He pushed himself to his hands and knees. "No," he called, but his voice sounded
weak and flinty. He cleared his throat and tasted bile. "No," he called louder.
"No, m'okay."
"Honey, I called Dr. Levy. He can take you in a half hour if you hurry."
Damn her! Nosy bitch, mind her own goddamn business, should've killed her and not ...
The thoughts clattered like toppling dominoes, and Randy realized he was dangerously near hysteria. Stop it, he told himself. Stop it now!
"Hon?" she called again. "Are you too sick? Should I cancel?" She sounded very
worried.
No, he thought, I have to do something. Maybe it's just some crap on my eye that's just a circle or something, and I'm making up the rest. Maybe Levy can just wipe it away. Maybe, maybe, maybe ...
"No! I'll go. Gimme a minute." He slowly stood up, took a deep breath, switched

on the light. The bathroom flickered, then flooded with white fluorescence. He thought he could see the face begin to encroach on his vision, so he started blinking madly, thinking of silent movies and strobe lights. The bathroom was a mess.

First he cleaned the white tile floor, then washed himself, stripping and throwing the stained and sweat-dampened clothes into the hamper. He wanted to take a shower, but there was no time. Naked, he padded across the bare boards of the hall to the bedroom, where he quickly dressed and grabbed the necessities for the trip to the ophthalmologist.

"Ready?" Cathy said as he entered the living room.

Randy nodded, blinking faster than ever, in fear of seeing the ghostly face again.

"Well, let's go." She picked up her purse and was almost at the door before he stopped her.

"You don't have to go," he said. "I'll be okay alone."

She turned back, hurt and surprise in her eyes. "But I'm worried about you. It's all right, I want to go with you."

"But I don't want you to," he said testily. For a moment he almost regretted the outburst, not because he felt guilty at hurting her, but because she could have been a good seeing-eye dog. Now he would have to blink and stumble his way down to a cab and into Levy's office. But so be it. He just didn't want her around him. As guilty as it made him feel, he just couldn't bear her presence.

"Cathy, I'm sorry, but I want to go alone. I'll be fine. Levy'll fix me up in ..." He had been about to say, in the blink of an eye. In no time. Don't worry."

He kissed her cheek and went out the door.

On the ride to Levy's office, he kept his eyes closed, opening them once to glance at his watch. Alan looked back from the crystal.

Randy walked through the office door ten minutes late, and was quickly shown into the long examination room. He sat in the proffered chair and pressed his eyes shut, feeling a growing nausea at the sight of the cutaway chart of the human eye.

Levy walked in five minutes later, bluff and hearty as usual. Randy offered him some simple symptoms--spots in his eyes, things floating on the surface.

"Any pain?"

"No."

"Then why the blinking?"

"I, uh, I can't focus on them that way. They ... they bother me."

"Headaches?"

"No."

"Nausea?"

He didn't answer for a few seconds. "A little. I think I'm just upset by it." Classic understatement.

"What do these spots look like?"

"Spots, that's all." Like the face of the lover I murdered.

"Round spots? Long spots? Square spots? Liver spots?"

"Some are round, some longer, like rods."

"Can you focus directly on them, or do they drift away?"

"Drift away."

Levy pushed a button on a console and a small fluorescent screen lit up at the other end of the room. "Look at that light."
He did, blinking rapidly.
"Stop blinking and look at it. Do you see the spots?"
"Yes," he said, his voice breaking, as Alan looked across the room at him.
Levy clicked off the fluorescent and pushed another button. An intense, bright yellow ray shone full in Randy's eyes. "How about now?"
It was painfully bright. As his eyes struggled to adjust to it, his pupils closing down, he realized with a sense of joyous loss that the image was gone.
"No ..." he said slowly. "No, it's not there."
"It?"
"Them, I mean. The spots."
Levy smiled in the darkness. "Figured as much. Look here." He shone a pocket flash full in Randy's eyes as he examined them with a magnifier. "Yep. Just flying flies."
"Huh?"
"Muscae volitantes. Latin to you. Means flying flies. Floaters. Most everybody has 'em. They're in the vitreous humor."
"But what are they?"
"Well, we used to think they were red blood corpuscles that managed to escape from the tiny capillaries in the retina. But now we think they're the remains of some embryonic fluid." He laughed. "Who knows what they'll be next year?"
Randy started to relax. At least they had a name--that was a start. "What can I do about them?"
Levy shrugged. "Live with 'em."
"Live with ... what do you mean, live with them?" The tension returned as if it had never left.
"Listen, I don't see anything out of the ordinary in there. No

more or no less of the little bastards than anyone else has. Now I don't know why all of a sudden you became aware of them, but--"
"Patterns" Randy said. "They're coming in patterns."
"They often do. In lines and curves and all sorts of shapes. But they break up, reform, break up again. It's a constant process, and the patterns change constantly."
"My ass they do ..."
"What?"
"The light," said Randy, grabbing at straws. "Why can't I see them in that bright light?"
"Put gray on gray against a bright background, and you're not going to see much."
"Then you can't do anything for me?" He knew he sounded panicked but couldn't help it.
"Not really. We could take some more tests, see if there's something I've missed. But if they're just our friendly little flies, there's nothing to do about them." Levy turned on the lights.
Randy hopped off the chair and began to blink again. "Fuck your tests," he said, and walked blindly toward the door.
"Mr. Fralich, I'm sorry," Levy called after him.
Randy stormed out of the office, shouting "Bill me!" to the receptionist. He was

lucky enough to immediately catch a passing cab, and barked his address to the driver, opening his eyes long enough to glance at his watch and learn that it was nearly noon. Despite his terror, he felt hungry. He had had no breakfast, and knew that a good lunch was what he needed. He would go home, and Cathy would make him an omelet, and then he would think about all of this. He would sit down and close his eyes and block that son of a bitch Alan out of his thoughts and make him go away and leave him alone.

The thought felt so good that he opened his eyes and looked out at the gray haze over the river. Alan was still there. Randy squeezed his eyes shut.

It was near Seventh and Thirty-fifth that it happened. Traffic stopped. Horns honked. Cabbies, chauffeurs, bus drivers, citizens spewed obscenities out of open windows as they craned their necks

to see what it was this time.

"What's the holdup?" asked Randy, opening his eyes and thinking that rapid blinking was becoming as natural as sweating.

The driver shrugged, muttered a low "goddamn," and started laying on the horn again. Randy sat there five minutes, then ten, opening his eyes at intervals to confirm the fact that they had not moved. Finally he handed the driver a five, stepped out of the cab, blinked his way to the sidewalk, and started uptown on Seventh.

By the time he got to Fortieth Street, something was changing. Slowly he realized that the clouds were flying away from over the city on the brisk wind that had just sprung up. It was brightening.

He passed the bottleneck of Forty-third (a delivery truck toppled on its side, though he couldn't figure out how it had happened), and suddenly the traffic was running freely again. He tried to hail a cab, but they were filled with passengers going to or coming from hundreds of lunches, so he kept walking uptown.

Randy finally saw the sun on the corner of Forty-seventh and Seventh. He had just started crossing the street when he stepped into the intensely bright, direct light that the passing of the clouds had bestowed on the city. Directly overhead, it hung like an antiseptic globe in an operating room that sent down its warm fire to purge and cleanse and heal. He turned his face toward it, his blinking ended, and stared full into the steaming eye.

The particles that had formed Alan's image had become invisible, eradicated by the golden beams that streamed like liquid wires through his cornea, into his retina, penetrating the optic nerve and sending the gloriously welcome message of light, light, light into Randy Fralich's desperate brain.

The image was gone, washed away by the orb at which Randy stared with all the concentration and rapture of the Hindu fakirs who burn away the lies of human vision with the sun's truth. He never heard the horn or the brakes. He never saw the car.

And though no one would ever know it, he never even felt the blow that lifted

him and threw him spine first against the punishing iron of the fire hydrant.
212
Ten hours later two interns sat in a snack bar at Roosevelt Hospital, talking about the Mets. A third intern entered, heated a container of spaghetti and a double burger in the microwave, and sat beside the others. "Well?" said one.
"A mess," muttered the newcomer, biting into his burger and talking as he chewed. "But McReady got him through, with a little help from Feinstein."
"You're kidding."
"Nope. You owe me a buck." With his free hand he pocketed the dollar the other
handed him.
"Thought I had a sure thing. His spine looked like a pretzel."
"Then McReady's a pretzel bender." The intern swallowed a red lump of spaghetti.
"Might've been better for the guy if he wasn't."
"Why?"
"Paralysis. Total."
"Rough."
"Mmm. Wife took it hard."
"Well," said the youngest of the three interns, "it's better than dying."
The intern who was eating snorted. "Tell that to a guy who's gonna spend his life looking at a gray hospital wall and see what he says, if he could talk."
The intern poised his fork over the bowl of spaghetti and noticed how the loops
and whorls of the noodles and the globs of sauce sometimes made little pictures.
There, he thought. That one could almost be a face.
213
The Man in the Long Black Sedan
Ed Gorman
Although I've never met Ed Gorman in person, I feel like I know him very well.
In addition to writing many fine novels in the mystery and suspense genres (such
as Murder Straight Up and Rough Cut), Ed also is the publisher of Mystery Scene--a huge magazine dedicated to all the strange and wonderful genres. I met
Ed by phone when he called late one night inviting me to write my infamous column ("The Mothers And Fathers Italian Association") for his magazine. In the
process of agreeing to a deal, I realized this guy Gorman and I had a lot in common. The usual stuff--we liked the same writers, saw all the same great movies, etc. But he lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and doesn't travel much. So now
we carry on an erratic correspondence, burn some big time on our MCI bills, and
still we've never met face-to-face.
The following story deals with, among other things, the number one fear with which all parents live. Gorman's writing falls somewhere between hard-boiled and
steam-cleaned. He knows how to hurt you, and he doesn't hesitate.
214
At first light, the crickets still unceasing and the neighborhood dogs joining
in, I eased from bed so as to not wake Ellen, and walked along the hardwood of
the hallway to Christopher's room. It was August and humid, and the floor was almost sticky against my bare feet.
Two of them lay in bed, my eight-year-old Christopher and his classmate Donny.

They'd spent all day yesterday taking full advantage of hot blue summer and slept now in sweet exhaustion. Donny was his best friend, Christopher had confided recently. Donny liked to rent Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom just as often as Christopher did and his favorite Stooge was Shemp. You couldn't ask for a better friend than that.

In the downstairs bathroom I gave myself what my mother always calls a sponge bath, afraid a full-force shower would wake Ellen. Ellen would have questions for which I would have no answers.

I dressed in a clean white button-down shirt and newly dry-cleaned blue slacks.

Add a tie and you have the uniform I wear every day to the computer store I manage. Just before I left the bathroom, I stared with disbelief at the thirty-nine-year-old face fixed forlornly in the mirror. I've always felt a tiny shock of betrayal when I look on my mirror image, as if my real face had been stolen and an imposter put in my place. What I feel seems to bear no relation to the wry, even smug face I've been given.

In the basement, in a cabinet that locks with an ancient antique key, I found the Smith and Wesson .38 that had belonged to my father. Taking it to a cobwebbed window, holding it up to the dust and dawn, I turned it over and over in my slender hands, as if by doing so it would reveal some sublime secret about its purpose.

But of course I knew its purpose, didn't I?

Harcourt is a Midwestern town of forty-two thousand. It wakes early. White milk trucks crisscross the wide streets and avenues, and paperboys and papergirls on quick new bikes toss their papers with reasonable accuracy on silent front porches still silver with dew. After college, I did not want to go back east. I wanted the furious rolling green of heartland summer and the vast cool shadows of its nights.

215

The motel I sought sits half a mile from the westernmost part of town. A one-floor, twelve-room complex with the office in the center, it is the sort of place I often stayed in as a boy, when my angry father and defeated mother spent their vacations driving across country in search of a peace neither of them would ever find.

The long black sedan sat in the last parking slot on the northern wing of the building. It was this year's model but dulled by the dust of gravel roads. A red, white, and blue bumper sticker said STAND UP FOR AMERICA.

Oh, he was some ironic bastard, he was.

I pulled in next to him, took the .38 from the glove compartment, went up to his door.

Despite the noisy country-western music coming from the next room, I could hear his shower running.

He was making it damned easy for me.

I took out my credit card and went to work, looking around to see if anybody was watching. It's never as easy as it looks on TV shows, opening doors this way,

but most of the time it does work.
He had clothes laid out on the bed, a blue summer-weight suit, a short-sleeved blue shirt, a red regimental-striped tie, white Jockey shorts, and black socks.
Beneath the clothes, the bed lay unmade and you could see black hairs on the pink pillow where he'd slept. The air smelled of steam from the shower and aftershave and cigarettes.
I sat down in a patterned armchair next to a nightstand with a phone and a copy of Penthouse that was probably his. He was very good. Very, very good. All these little bits of business to disguise who and what he really was. The magazine was a nice touch.
When I heard the bathroom door open, I got the .38 ready.
He was a short, chunky man of perhaps fifty, balding, jowly, and cross looking, like the crabby neighbor on TV sitcoms. He had a wide white towel wrapped around his fat belly and green rubber shower thongs that went thwack against his heels when he walked. On his right bicep was a tattoo of a panther. That was another nice touch, the tattoo.
He had his head down so he didn't see me at first, but when he

came into the room and raised his eyes, his first reaction was to get angry. Most people would be afraid--startled--to see somebody with a .38 sitting in their motel room chair. But not him. "Who the hell are you?" he said, nodding to the gun, "and just what the hell are you doing in my room?"
"I know who you are. I know what you are."
"What the hell are you talking about, pal?" He shook his head in disgust. "You want my money, right? And my wallet, too, I suppose. For the credit cards." He scowled. "Nice little town like this, you don't expect this kind of thing."
Keeping the towel modestly about him, he went over to the nightstand, his thongs thwacking against his heels again, and picked up his wallet and tossed it to me.
"There you go, pal. Now put the gun away and get the hell out of here." He didn't sound so angry now. More disappointed in his luck.
I just let his wallet lie at my feet where it had landed. "I know who you are."
"Who I am? What the hell's the big deal about that? I'm Larry Washburn and I work for Calico Chemical Company and I'm in this burg for a week to sell my herbicide to farmers. So what?"
I smiled. "You're good. I'll say that for you."
For the first time, his voice softened. "Are you all right, pal?"
"You've chosen my son, haven't you?"
"Your son?"
"What'll it be? A car accident? Drowning?" I shook my head, repelled at the sight of him. "No, it'll more like be a disease, won't it? Cancer, I suppose, or cerebral palsy. Something that will make him suffer a long time." When I thought of how poor little Christopher would suffer with cancer, I raised the .38 that

it was square at the center of his chest. "You like them to suffer, don't you?
And for their parents to suffer, too, right? Accidents are over too quickly. They're not nearly as much fun as disease."
For the first time, he started glancing around the room and looking afraid. "Pal, you've got me confused with somebody else."
"You drive around from town to town and you pick them out, don't you? One by one. A boy here, a girl there. They're so innocent and loving and trusting and
you don't care at all how much you
217
make them suffer, do you? Do you know what it's like to hold your little child
in your arms and know that this child is going to die from a horrible disease?
Do you know how heartbreaking that is? But you feed on it, don't you? And nobody
ever recognizes you for what you are. Nobody ever realizes you've got the power.
But I know. Because I've got the power, too. But I use my power to help people."
I thought of Dr. Russo at the state university where I ultimately went when no
other kind of doctor could help assuage my headaches. "They're not headaches,"
Dr. Russo had told me: "They're visions. You're seeing things other people can't
see. And it's terrifying you." I said, "You know how I knew you were here?"
He didn't say anything. He just kept looking around the room. Especially at the
door.
"Little Cindy Brisbane. Her mother brought her over to my son's birthday party
and I saw inside Cindy's head. I saw what was growing there. A tumor. And six days later, they rushed her to a hospital after she kept fainting. And you know
what they found? They found that tumor I'd seen." I was starting to get angry again. "Why the hell did you put that tumor in Cindy? She's had a hard enough life as it is being adopted and all." I gripped the .38 tighter. "You're not going to get my son."
"You got a ring."
"What?"
"Wedding ring."
I looked at the gold band on my finger. "You know all about me. You've been checking me and my family out for the past several days. You know I'm married.
And you know about my son."
"Why don't we call your wife?"
"What?"
"Call your wife. Have her come over."
"So you can give her an aneurysm? Or rheumatoid arthritis? Or some kind of spinal disease? You'd just love to have my wife come over, wouldn't you?"
"Pal, please, look, you've got me confused with somebody else. I'm from Traer,
Iowa, born and raised there. I'm a door pounder. A goddamn salesman, can't you
see that? I don't even know what this power is you're talking about."
218
He had a lot of wiry gray hair on his chest and little breasts like a thirteen-year-old girl. I put the bullet right there, right between his

breasts.
He went over backwards on the bed. The funny thing was that the towel kept him
covered very well.
His arms went out as if he were falling helplessly into a swimming pool. Blood
made his chest hair the color of copper wire even before he hit the bed.
I'd struck him directly in the heart.
Far away on the other side of the motel room walls, I could hear shouts and curses. The gunshot had awakened people, of course.
I had to hurry now.
I went over to him and stood over him. If you didn't know who and what he was,
you'd think he was dead. His eyes had rolled back and his tongue was angled out
of his mouth and his fingers were already getting rigid.
But because I knew exactly what I was dealing with, I knew that in no time he would be up and coming for Christopher.
He will never die.
Not him.
Shouts grew louder; distantly, I heard a siren.
I needed to get out of the motel room and I did.
On the drive back home, I could sense him stirring back in the room. When you're
able to see things the way I can--identifying Cindy's tumor, for example--you're
sometimes able to tell what people are doing even at great distances.
I could see him sitting up now, holding his hand to the pumping wound in his chest, cursing me.
Then I saw what he had planned for Christopher. ...
I hurried.
"Hi, hon," Ellen said when I got home. She was in red shorts and a white T-shirt
and standing over the stove where she was

fixing bacon and eggs. "You sure got up early this morning. You run down to the
store?"
"No," I said.
How could I possibly explain to her what I had to do?
She smiled. "Our son and his friend are getting used to summer hours. I'll bet
they won't be up before afternoon."
"He's coming," I said.
"What?"
"He's coming."
"Who's coming?"
"He wants to hurt Christopher. A disease. Maybe Donny will be lucky and get off
with an accident. But Christopher will get a terrible disease."
I could see she was scared now. She put down the spatula and came over to me.
"Honey, what are you talking about?"
Up in the room, they were still sleeping. Christopher and Donny.
My head was throbbing. He was very angry back there in his motel room. Very angry.
In Christopher's body I see, I hear, I feel the cancer cells already beginning
to grow.
I think of the photos I've seen of youngsters with cancer after chemotherapy. Those round, hairless little faces. Those sad and yearning eyes. And the

parents
standing by so brave, so brave.
She wanted to stop me, Ellen did, and that's why I had to kill her.
She just didn't understand why I need to help Christopher before he can get
to
him... .
But then, it's not possible to understand unless you have the power.
I raise the gun.
Christopher stirs.
Begins to look up.
Blond hair mussed.
Face smudged with sleep.
220
I'm not going to let him have them. He wants them to suffer. Even Donny will
suffer. I see that clearly now.
But I won't let them suffer.
"Dad, what's wrong?" Christopher says.
I wish he'd stayed asleep. Sleeping, it would have been easier for me.
"I'm sorry, Chris," I say. "I love you, honey. I love you."
I get him near the temple. Death, a red blooming flower against his blond
hair,
is quick and final.
I kill Donny right after.
I've scarcely started to leave the room when I hear them coming up the stairs
so
heavily, heavily in the narrow echoing staircase.
Police.
I turn, the gun still in my hand and
"You scared us, Mr. Washburn."
"Oh? How's that?"
"Several of our guests were sure they heard a gunshot in your room."
Washburn laughed. "Gunshot? Afraid not."
"It's a terrible morning, anyway," the desk clerk said, taking the key from
Washburn and shaking his head. "Real nice fellow named Tom Brice went crazy
this
morning and killed his wife and his son and a friend of his son's. Shot them
dead." You could hear the numbed disbelief still in the clerk's voice. "Just
don't know what to make of a thing like that, do you?"
Washburn frowned. "Nope, guess I don't, my friend. Guess I don't."
Then he pushed out into the sunlight and got in his long black sedan and
drove
away.
221
His Frozen Heart
Jack Hunter Daves Jr.
Most of the stories in Borderlands are here because of their innovation,
unique
vision, weirdness, etc. But there were a few stories that made the final cut
for
a more special reason: they were so well written, I couldn't keep them out.
"His
Frozen Heart" by Jack Hunter Daves is, as Rod Sterling would have said, a
case
in point. The whole time I was reading this story, I kept thinking: this guy
can
write. There is a sense of atmosphere, of place, that permeates the language
of
Daves, and he makes it move with a persistent undercurrent of emotional power.
Daves was born and raised in the green hills of Tennessee. He reports being a
"normal" kid till the age of nine when he discovered a stack of movie-monster

magazines. Thereafter, hooked on the stuff of the bizarre, he became a heavy-duty reader. "I'd rather be shot in the kneecaps than watch a whole night's worth of American prime time TV, "he writes, adding: "I want to be a writer because I'm quite mad." Okay, Jack.

222

The highway between Fayetteville and Belfast slid in a black tide beneath a dusty Dodge Dart with chipped paint and bald tires. Hewlett Peirce fought against the feeling that the road disappeared into him rather than behind him,
slipping up inside his body like a cold metal rod. It would be lost in the big
freezing hollow between his breath and his soul. His heart was sleeping, preserved in ice. His eyes saw, but were connected to nothing.

He once killed a boy on this road. A boy who wore white sneakers. The Tennessee
Valley weather forecast called for temperatures in the teens and snow flurries
before midnight. The radio warned to watch those bridges and overpasses just before he flicked it off.

On either side of the highway, unseen in the dark, lived sad people. Warm spots
in the night betrayed by pinpoints of yellow windows on the hillsides. Those unseen people often held private misery, things no one else would ever know, within the confines of their skins. They say in the farm reports that the major
cash crop in Lincoln County is Burley tobacco. Not true. Hopelessness is rolling
out by the truckload with plenty left over to stock local cupboards for the winter. Hewlett wished he had been drunk the night he ran over the boy. That was
a decade ago. He had been a newly ordained minister and the Lord had filled his
cup. No room left over for alcohol. Things were very different now.

At the moment he worked as a dishwasher at a catfish house in Fayetteville. The
people he worked with were intimidated by his melancholy face, an expression obviously as deeply set and immobile as the one on the Easter Island statues. Even though they obviously considered him an emotionally disturbed,
thirty-six-yearold dishwasher bum, he still would have loved to have gone with
them after work and gotten hammered. They were likely going to a beer joint called the Wagon Wheel or over the state line to the Plush Horse in Huntsville.

No one had asked him to come along.

He was approaching a small town called Belfast, with one blinking caution light
flanked by an ancient grain warehouse and an even older general store. Six miles
on the other side lay the trailer park where he lived. This was the town the boy
had lived in for fourteen years. He was buried here in two pieces.

223

People he had grown up with lived in the blackness on either side. A young farmer to the left was about a month away from losing his farm to the People's
Bank of Lincoln County. His father had killed himself with work trying to keep
that from happening. To the left and right lay lonely pain and dreams gone numb.

Hewlett couldn't remember the actual sound of the boy's scream, just the

surprised look on his face as the headlights struck him. The young man had been to a Softball game and had forgotten his glove. He twisted his bike back onto Highway 231 intending to go back to the ball field. Hewlett had been visiting old shut-ins at the nursing home. He was sleepy. It was dark. The people at the softball game heard it happen. They all came running.

Everything had changed in the space of three breaths. Hope and happiness were wedged under his car and dragged across asphalt and gravel. Hewlett wobbled out of his car, yelling for help, looking at the dead boy on the shoulder of the road, blurred by the tears in his eyes. Blurred by his car.

The boy's mother ran from a dark street and onto the highway. She must have been waiting on the porch, hearing or possibly seeing the accident. Her face was stretched in an unmoving expression of despair. It was designed to hold a certain kind of pain the way a holster is made to cradle a particular firearm.

All of her wrinkles and worry lines were carved out over the years so that this mask, for this occasion, could be worn. She fell down, screaming and trying to breathe, on the roadside next to a boy covered with blood and gravel dust. He had been the only good thing in her world. He had been her only hope for meaning and love in her painful animal life span.

She took the boy's severed leg into the backseat of the police car and sat there, rocking. Hewlett recalled her screams when the ambulance drivers tried to take it away. She was positive that they would lose it. Her dry fingers neatly tied the laces of the white sneaker.

The caps and faces of the ball players and their families floated around him in the dark. He remembered their cleats scraping the asphalt. No one had touched his shoulder or held his hand or tried

to help him stop shaking. The ambulance lights slipped over a hill with the police car close behind. A deputy came over to take down his account of the thing. His face was impact proof.

Hewlett looked at his face in the rearview mirror. He tried to see himself as a preacher again. The image came, but it was unpleasant, like suddenly seeing in a crowd the girl you wanted to marry years ago. He had left the ministry less than two weeks after the accident.

A decade later, on this barren December night, he was traveling toward Belfast, his own private gauntlet. Closed stores, dark barns, and ratty houses. A grain silo. Belfast Elementary waited for morning and digested the souls of children in its rooms full of creaking desks and worn-out books.

The world was ice. Precious and delicate, but without a hint of love.

Hewlett knew the child's name but hadn't spoken it aloud in ten years. He was afraid to hear the sound of it in his own tired voice, as if it would let out his suffering like air from a balloon. And he wanted to keep that pain. It was the only thing that held him together. His diamond. His frozen heart.

The Dart swept over the death zone about two miles out of Belfast. A few years ago Hewlett could've recalled exactly how it felt to drag a bicycle thirty-seven feet and then crunch it with his rear wheels. But that form of torture had given way to something else. Always at this spot. Lately he felt that he wasn't alone in his own persecution. The boy was touching him. Always after he hit this spot in the road.

The car heater was turned off. The accident occurred on an unbearably hot summer night and he hoped that the cold would hold his mind, everything, to this night and not that one.

Houses drifted by. Dull glow of TV sets in windows. Cattle clumped together in pastures and barn lots. Old people stayed awake watching Johnny Carson because they were afraid they'd die in their sleep in the long hours before dawn.

225

The Dart hugged a sharp curve and Hewlett heard something slide across the backseat. It hit the door on the right side with a soft sound. He knew what it was as surely as some people know they'll never truly be loved.

He began to smell wet canvas. Newly mown grass. Decay. This had happened before, and each time he had pressed down hard on the accelerator and shot for home, never turning to look back because he was afraid the shadows weren't deep enough and he would see it.

He wanted to stop the car and run into the pitch-black fields.

The leg lay in the shadows of the backseat, whispering across the vinyl upholstery as the car swerved and made ascents and descents through the countryside.

Hewlett reached up to the overhead light switch. He was going to look at it. Maybe then it would go away. There was resentment in him for anyone, especially the boy, joining in on his self-torture. He didn't need any help. Not this kind.

His scalp tickled as the object behind him moved again with the motion of the car.

Tree climbing. First base sliding. Football kicking. Bicycle pedaling. Scabby kneed.

The light flickered for less than a heartbeat. With his cold fist he pounded the light fixture, but it refused to come back on. Between watching the road and flipping the switch, he'd missed it.

But it was still there. Dew and blood and grass and summer dust.

The car was doing eighty when he saw something on the road ahead. He slowed down, thinking someone's cow had wandered onto the highway. The closer he got, the less it looked like a cow. He didn't have time to even feel surprise as he jerked at the steering wheel.

The Dart embraced the telephone pole like a long-lost friend. Metal and glass rippled in waves. Hewlett fell out on the passenger side, landing on his knees.

He couldn't stand up. The top of his head seemed to weigh a thousand pounds.

He
looked down at the
226
gravel between his hands and noticed with great interest that the pebbles were
turning black, one by one. Reaching to his face, he understood. His fingers
encountered the delicate shreds of his mouth. Since he couldn't make his teeth
touch, he knew his jawbone must be broken. It was all right. He never used it to
smile anymore. Only to eat.
Getting up was impossible, so he crawled on bloody knees into the cold, deep,
brown grass of the embankment and pressed his sticky face to the ground. From
down on the midnight road came the sound of bike tires going round and round and
round.
Hewlett's voice sobbed out of his mouth, mixing with the blood. "Go away! Please
... Please leave me alone, Warren."
227
Evelyn Grace
Thomas Tessier
Tom Tessier is one of those writers who've been quietly creating a list of works
that are head and shoulders above most of what's being done each year ... and
who receive little, if any, recognition. To say this guy is underrated is almost
criminal. He grew up in Connecticut, then went on to attend University College
in Dublin. He's authored three books of poetry, had three plays professionally
staged, and has published eight novels of horror and psychological suspense,
including Finishing Touches and Rapture. His latest novel is Secret Strangers.
Of his short fiction, there is, sadly, not much of it. Tessier simply doesn't
write many short stories, and that's why I'm so pleased to have an example of
his work included here. The story that follows is one of those pieces that
escalates from perfectly ordinary beginnings up through the levels of the
quietly disturbing until it finally unloads a doublebarreled last line that
gives new meaning to the old axiom that the only things that matter in life are
sex and death.
228
So Evelyn Grace was dead from a drug overdose at the age of thirty-eight. Her
body was found on the floor of the studio flat in east Los Angeles where she had
been living for the last seven months. She had been a model, an actress, a
singer, and she was unemployed at the time of her death.
Evelyn Grace. Dead. An accident, or so the coroner had ruled. But it was not
impossible to imagine that Evvy had known exactly what she was doing with her
last needle. Or that she had been murdered for some bizarre California-type
reason. In fact, it was easy to imagine all sorts of things about Evvy. She had
always been the kind of girl who made a guy's blood run away with his mind.
Tim LeClerc refolded his newspaper and set it aside. He lit a cigarette. He knew
her, but they had never met. He and Evelyn Grace had been in the same graduating
class at high school, back in the late sixties. They had been in different
groups, however, and they didn't live in the same neighborhood, so for four
years they passed each other in the corridors at school, but their paths

never
really crossed. Tim had been aware of her, it was hard not to be, but she had probably never even known that he existed. In a class of nearly two hundred there were bound to be quite a few strangers, even after all that time.
Bitter early March, the land still frozen, locked up beneath steel clouds and day-old snow that was already tarnished with the grime of Utica. The wind hit Tim's face like cold fire as he ran from the diner to his car. It was then, while he sat huddled and shivering, waiting for the engine to idle down and the
heater to generate some feeble warmth, that the idea came to him. He would go to
Evvy's wake.
Why not? He was curious to see her again, even if she was dead or maybe because
she was dead, and that was morbid. But on the other hand, her parents would appreciate the gesture. You can never have too many visitors at a wake. It was
only about twenty miles away, in Rome. Besides, he had no one to rush home to,
nor anything better to do with his evening.
That was how far he'd gotten, Tim thought. Twenty-odd miles in twenty-odd years.
Never mind. He'd seen enough of the world when he was in the army to realize that upstate New York was the

place for him. He came back alive and whole, and settled into a modest but clean
apartment on the eastern edge of Utica. After a few false starts he had landed a
decent job at the bottling plant and had been there ever since. Nothing to crow
about, but it was a life and it did have its occasional moments, although Tim would be hard-pressed to enumerate many of them. When he wanted female company
he could always find it. Somebody's neglected wife, or a divorcee on the wrong
side of thirty, or any of the women at work who were still single because they
were overweight or ugly or too crushingly dull to snag a mate. Nothing romantic,
but the years had given Tim a rather functional attitude to sex.
His was just an ordinary life, but he never regretted it or felt sorry for himself. He liked it the way it was, uncluttered and straightforward, low-key but comfortable. At least he would never be shipped home in a steel box in the
cargo hold of a jet plane while strangers drank cocktails overhead. Funny, how
he'd been to Vietnam and escaped that fate, while Evelyn went to L.A. and hadn't. Poor Evvy.
Tim polished his dress shoes. He put on his best shirt and tie, and his only suit. He had second thoughts while driving to the wake, but promptly dismissed
them. If he felt awkward when he got there he would just take a quick look at her, mumble some words to the parents, and then leave. That's what he'd probably
do anyway; no sense in sitting around once his juvenile curiosity had been satisfied.
But what actually happened was shockingly pathetic. Mr. and Mrs. Grace were the
only people there when Tim arrived. He felt very odd indeed as he crossed the

room and knelt down at the open casket. For a few moments he was occupied with
Evvy. She looked lovely still, her face virtually unmarked by the years and events of her life. The mortician had done a good job, applying no more makeup
than was absolutely necessary. Even now she retained her girlish good looks, the
ghostly afterimage of a beauty you never forget once you'd encountered it.
Tim was touched by her haunting appearance, saddened by the fact that her life
had plummeted to this abrupt end, and he found himself wishing that he had met
her when they were in high school

together. How different everything might be now--for the both of them--if they
had. It was an idle fantasy, of course, but Tim believed there was a kernel of
truth in it. Don't all lives have at least one turning point that's flukey or accidental or capricious? Too bad, too bad ...
At last he stood up and turned to Evvy's parents. Leonard Grace was small and wiry, with a scattering of white fuzz about his largely bare scalp. His manner
was bright and alert, though he nodded his head too often, as if to emphasize his agreeable and understanding nature. Charlotte Grace was plump, with a moon
face and a distracted air. It took Tim a few minutes to notice that now and then
she would fade right out of the conversation, like a distant radio signal drifting in the ether. She had run the family for as long as it had existed, was
Tim's guess, but now she was probably an Alzheimer's case.
Tim explained that he had been to high school with Evelyn, and her parents were
very grateful to him for taking the time to come to the wake. He didn't actually
say that he'd been a friend of their daughter, but they somehow got that idea and he saw no need to clarify the matter. It was such a sad situation, two old
people, one of them not quite all there, alone with the dead body of their only
child.
And hardly anyone came. The calling hours were from seven to nine, and in that
time perhaps half a dozen people appeared to pay their respects. They were older
folks, acquaintances of the parents, and none of them stayed more than ten minutes.
It was amazing, shocking, to Tim, who had expected a rather large turnout. A lot
of people would have moved away over the years, but there still had to be plenty
of former friends and classmates of Evelyn's left in Rome, so where were they?
It was as if nobody wanted to admit knowing her. But why? Just because she'd been something of a bad girl, running off to California, living a wild, silly,
rotten life? Because she'd met her squalid death at an age when she should have
been organizing bake sales and ferrying kids to Little League games? I see

Evelyn Grace is dead. Tsk, tsk, tsk. Well, it was to be expected. Smug, self-satisfied bastards. I didn't even know her, Tim thought, but I'm a better

friend to her now than all those people ever were.
"She never wrote to us," Mrs. Grace said to Tim.
"Oh, she did too, Mommy," Mr. Grace put in gently.
"Never wrote, never called," Evelyn's mother continued. "We never knew where she
was or what she was doing."
"She sent postcards," Mr. Grace said. "And she did call us on the telephone every now and again. Let us know she was okay."
"Once a year?" his wife asked challengingly. "Once a year, at best," she explained to Tim.
"Some people are like that," Tim rationalized. "'Me, I can't write a letter to
save my life."
It was a terrible choice of words, he realized immediately, but fortunately Mrs.
Grace was already on another wavelength, and Mr. Grace merely nodded agreeably.
A few minutes before nine, when no one else had arrived for more than half an hour, Mrs. Grace whispered something urgent to her husband.
"Tim, would you mind hanging on here a minute while I take Mommy to the can?"
"Uh, sure."
No sooner had the old couple left the room than one of the young funeral home flunkies glanced in, checked the wall clock against his watch, and left. Charge
by the minute, Tim thought sarcastically. He stood up and walked to the casket.
It seemed very strange to be alone with Evvy--at her wake. Once again he was struck by how attractive she looked. And death shall have no ... dimension? He
vaguely recalled a line from a poem in high school English class.
Without thinking, Tim reached to Evvy with his right hand, knowing that his body
shielded the gesture in case anyone came into the room. He hesitated briefly, afraid he would make a mess of the cosmetics if he touched her face, afraid her
fingers would grasp at his if he touched her hands. Trembling, he let his palm
settle on her breast. The experience was so confused between the real and the imagined that he wasn't at all sure what he actually felt, a pleasantly firm young female breast or something harder and dead, a mixture of sawdust and embalming chemicals. When

he removed his hand he felt a jangling rush of guilt and excitement, but he was
more pleased than ashamed. He'd had his little moment of intimacy with Evvy, who
had always been not only untouchable but unapproachable to him.
"You will be there tomorrow," Mr. Grace said when he and his wife returned. It
was a plea, not a question. "Won't you?"
"Yes, of course," Tim replied, although he hadn't planned to attend the funeral
as well.
"We had to pay the funeral home for pallbearers," Evelyn's mother said. "Twenty-five dollars apiece."
"Mommy, please."
"I'll see you in the morning," Tim said, trying to smile comfortingly as he

shook hands with them.
"Thank you," the Graces both said as he left, "thank you."
Tim called the bottling plant in the morning and told them he was taking a sick day. It was crisp and clear outside, with a hint of thaw in the air. He felt good and had slept well, which Tim attributed to the kindness he'd shown Mr. and Mrs. Grace by sitting with them for two hours and promising to attend the mass.
It wasn't often he had the chance to do something nice like that for a couple of old folks. His own parents had died within three months of each other several years ago, and his only living aunt and uncle were in Scottsdale, Arizona. Mr. and Mrs. Grace needed him last night and this morning, almost as if he were a son or a nephew or an old family friend.
But it was not just altruism on Tim's part that pleased him. The bleak circumstances of Evvy's death, the fact that virtually no one had come to her wake, the way her parents had assumed him into their tiny circle, and the feel of her breast in his hand-- all of these things combined somehow to bestow on Tim a curious share in Evvy's life, and, however peculiar that might be, he genuinely liked it.
There were more people at the funeral mass than had attended the wake, but Tim was sure that most if not all of them were just the usual band of daily churchgoers. One of the pallbearers wore a green bowling league jacket. Aside from the funeral home crew and the priest, Tim and Evelyn's parents were the only ones at

her grave side. Mrs. Grace turned wobbly and started to moan when it was time to leave, while Mr. Grace struggled to maintain a semblance of glassy-eyed composure. Tim helped them both walk along the gravel path to the cars.
"You will follow us back to the house, Tim," Mr. Grace said as he stood by the door of the funeral home Cadillac.
"Oh, no, thank you, but--"
"Please, Tim, come on along for a little while. We'll have some coffee and pastry." He put his hand on Tim's shoulder and gave a beseeching squeeze. "Mommy was up till after midnight, cooking. She couldn't sleep at all."
Tim sighed inwardly. It didn't seem right that Evvy's folks should have to return directly home alone. It was bad enough for them to have to forego the normal postfuneral reception with its sustaining presence of family and friends, but to have no one, no one at all, even to share a cup of coffee with, after they'd just buried their daughter--that was simply too much.
"Sure," Tim agreed. "I'll follow you."
The Grace home was a cramped little asbestos-shingled house of the working-class thirties vintage. Not much, but no doubt it had seemed palatial, even miraculous, when it was built and first occupied during the Depression. Easy to imagine a girl like Evvy desperate to escape from here. But for Tim there was something nostalgically comfortable about it--he had grown up in much the same sort of place, and not nearly so far from this one as he had thought. When you go back to the old neighborhood the distances collapse, the yards shrink, and

houses that once looked big turn into boxy chicken coops.
Tim and Mr. Grace sat in the living room and chatted, while Mrs. Grace brewed the coffee and prepared a platter of pastries. It was desultory, inconsequential
talk about Rome, the old days, and the rapidly changing times that had overtaken
everyone. Tim and Mr. Grace were in agreement that most of the changes were not
really for the better. Astroturf, for instance. It was not until Mrs. Grace had
rejoined them, and they were all sipping fresh-perked coffee and nibbling delicious sesame-rum sweetcakes, that the conversation finally gathered itself
around the subject of Evelyn.

It was soon clear to Tim that there was a huge, aching mystery at the center of
their existence and that it had to do entirely with the missing years of Evelyn's life, from the day she'd left home years ago until the day before yesterday, when she'd been air-freighted back to her parents. Everything in between was a cloud of unknowing, a dense fog broken only by the occasional spark of a phone call here, a postcard there--which, perversely, enhanced the darkness rather than illuminated it.
Evvy was a riddle to Tim as well, but he had been thinking about her quite a bit
these last couple of days. Not logically, but intuitively, since they'd finally
crossed paths only because of her death and his curiosity. There were some things he knew, others that he deduced or reasoned out for himself, and, most of
all, there was everything he found himself wishing, imagining so it amounted to
the same thing in the end. Evvy was in the purely residual phase of her incarnation, so it was up to him.
"I didn't want to go into it last night, at the wake," Tim said. "There wasn't
enough time, and I didn't know how you would take it, but I do want to tell you.
Evvy and I were good friends for many years. Ever since high school, in fact, and--"
"Evvy? Who's Evvy?"
"Evelyn, Mommy. Hush now, let the boy talk."
Mr. Grace leaned forward in the seat, every aspect of his presence fixed intently on Tim. Mrs. Grace was annoyed at her husband for his rare show of assertiveness, but she said nothing about it and made an effort to pay attention.
"Well, what can I say," Tim went on hesitantly. "Evvy and I were good friends,
ever since high school. Of course, we did lose track of each other for a while
after that, but when I got out of the army I thought I'd stay on the West Coast
for a while, see if I could find a good job there, and we ran into each other again. We went out a lot, had fun together, that kind of thing. She was busy trying to make a career for herself, and in the meantime I'd found decent work
at a defense plant, but we still managed to get together a couple of nights a week, and on weekends. And ... well, we got pretty serious, and there were times
when I was sure we'd get married and settle down to a more normal life, you

know? But
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something or other always seemed to get in the way of it. So, it was an off-again on-again type relationship, but even when it was off we were still great friends. I always loved Evvy, no matter what, and I think she loved me most of the time. I know she did. But we never managed to get it to the next stage. I wish that we had. We stayed in touch up until a couple of months ago,
when I decided that it was never going to work out, and I was ready for a change
in my life, so I made up my mind to move back here. We talked maybe once or twice on the phone, right after I moved, but that was it."
Mr. Grace's mouth was slightly open, and his throat muscles worked mightily either to shut it or to say something, but he did neither. Mrs. Grace appeared
to be no less fascinated by what Tim had said, but she didn't look as completely
surprised as her husband did.
Tim had paused to catch his breath--and his wits, he could only hope. He had said enough, too much, and it had taken off on him at once. It had seemed harmless enough. All he wanted to do was to give them something to cling to, a
few dressed-up facts to fill in some of the vast blank spot that Evvy had left
them. But no sooner had he started then the story took on a life of its own and
became an account of his long love affair with Evvy. Is that crazy or what? Tim
wondered.
But he had enjoyed it, too. Such an extraordinary thrill, to hear those things,
to know that they were rising from a buried part of his brain. That they put him
into Evvy's life, and Evvy into his. Tim marveled that he hadn't contradicted anything he had said previously to Mr. and Mrs. Grace. But it was clear to him
that they'd accept whatever he told them. They just wanted to hear as much as they could about their daughter, and that was the problem. Tim had merely opened
the door.
"Go on," Mrs. Grace prompted.
"Yes, please, Tim. Tell us more."
Reluctant, feeling trapped by his own good intentions, but at the same time secretly delighted, Tim continued to elaborate his impromptu saga of Evelyn Grace's missing years. Her efforts to make it as a folk singer, then as a rock
singer, finally as a country
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and western singer. Her two or three nonspeaking parts in forgettable movies. The picture of Evvy perched atop a Harley that was used for the front cover of a
biker magazine. Another one, showing her menaced by a man with a knife, that appeared in a true-crime magazine. The in-between jobs, waitressing in some pretty good restaurants and nightclubs, serving drinks in an L.A. airport bar,
that sort of thing. The occasional respite taken in the unemployment line, recharging her batteries for the next time around. Nothing too shabby, nothing
unrespectable, but never any breakthrough. The long hard road of a pretty young

woman chasing her ambition down the years in Los Angeles.
Woven throughout, like a bright gold thread, was Tim's love for Evvy and her sometime love for him. Tim went on about how he was still sad that they'd never been able to make it a permanent relationship, a marriage, how he had learned to accept that. Now he consoled himself by thinking of the happier memories he had of Evvy and by reminding himself that in spite of her weaknesses and failings she had been a good person.
Tim wanted to finish there, on the kind of life-affirming note people strive for in funeral situations. He felt tired, and it seemed as if he had been talking for hours. But Evvy's mother and father were not quite through with him yet.
"The end, Tim," Mr. Grace said softly. "You have to tell us what happened to her at the end."
"Yeah, what about the drugs," Mrs. Grace demanded.
"Oh, well. Some of the movie people she knew, I guess they introduced her to cocaine somewhere along the line, and then the harder stuff. I tried to get her off it, but once you're hooked it's rough. You have to make a total commitment, and Evvy could never bring herself to that point where she was willing. That's the main reason why I had to give up, at last, and get out of the scene altogether. I couldn't change her, and I couldn't bear to watch what was happening to her, so I packed up my stuff and came back here. And she let me go.
The guy who was supplying all her drugs meant more to her than I did."
"Did he use her?" Mrs. Grace asked. "They get them hooked, and then they use them."

"I don't know about that," Tim replied. He didn't like this because it tainted his own newly developed feelings for Evvy. It was probably unavoidable--she had died of a heroin overdose-- but it seemed too distasteful. "All I know is I lost her. We all lost her in the end."
Mr. Grace looked subdued and thoughtful in the long silence that followed. Mrs. Grace seemed to be formulating some response but it never reached the stage of spoken words. Tim was about to leave when Evelyn's father took him aside.
"Come with me a minute," he said, leading Tim up a narrow flight of stairs. They went into a small bedroom. Obviously it had been Evvy's. "Tim, they sent back these two boxes of things with her. Personal effects. Not much, as you can see, but I was thinking maybe you'd like to take a minute and look through them. You might find something in there, some little keepsake, to take home and remember her by."
Tim was going to refuse, but it would probably be rude to do so. Besides, he liked the idea too much.
"Thank you," he said.
"Feel free, take your time," Mr. Grace added. "Come on down when you're finished."

"Okay."
Tim waited as the old man's footsteps faded away. Then he sat down on the bed,
Evvy's bed. For a moment he pictured her as the most gorgeous girl in high school, the way she had been then. In this room. In this bed. He remembered seeing her at the lake on the day after the senior prom. She was with her crowd,
and she was wearing a bikini that would be demure by today's standards. No one
had a tan in June. Evvy had snowy blonde hair, long pale thighs. ... It was sweet for Tim to pause there, to enjoy once again the permanence of her beauty.
Not much was right. The two cardboard cartons were filled for the most part with
cheap clothes. Sneakers, jeans, T-shirts, socks. No dresses, no jackets, nothing
very good. Evvy had had very little left at the end, her flimsy life stripped down to the minimum. He had to find something he could show to Mr. Grace and thank him for. The cheap plastic barrette would do nicely--and it still smelled

of Evvy's hair (or at least her hairspray).
Tim reached down to the bottom of the second box and pulled up a handful of bras
and panties. Startled, he dropped them, but then he relaxed, smiled, and allowed
himself to examine them. They were blue and lavender, not a white in the bunch.
Evvy's bra size was 36C, for breasts that were ample but not excessive. Tim had
been aware of that as far back as ninth grade and as recently as last night. He
held a pair of delicate purple cotton briefs up to his face--God in heaven, they
still had the delicious unwashed scent of her in them!
Tim quickly shoved the panties into his jacket pocket, and then carefully rearranged the other things back in the boxes. He held the barrette conspicuously in his hand and went downstairs. Mrs. Grace was still sitting where he had left her. She gave him a strained smile as he came into the living
room. He started to say something to her.
Bong! and bong! again, before he even hit the carpet. Bong! Bong! Bong! His hands were useless floppy things and his vision skittered away like marbles on a
hardwood floor.
"The flat part, the liat part," Mrs. Grace warned. "Not the edge. That's my best
skillet."
Tim's empty hands were bound together behind him with some sticky plastic stuff--packing tape, he realized dimly. And then his feet. His head wouldn't clear, but he tried to speak; it was impossible to put words together. He tried
to focus his sight on the plastic barrette, which he was aware of, somewhere, near his face on the floor.
"Son of a bitch," Mr. Grace wheezed, his voice high-pitched, almost strangled,
but with a nervous edge of triumph in it. "You could have saved her. You were the only one who could have saved her. We couldn't talk to her, we couldn't do
anything with her. That's the way it is sometimes between parents and kids,

you
just can't do anything. No matter what you try, it doesn't work. But you could
have saved her. You loved her, but you walked away and left her there to die.
You left her there with that other son of a bitch, who was pumping dope into her."
"Least he could've done was make her call home once a week,"
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Mrs. Grace remarked.
"Washed his hands of her, that's what he did."
Again Tim tried to speak, but as soon as he opened his mouth he was kicked in the jaw. His tongue hurt and he tasted his own blood. He felt the old man's hands on his body, emptying each of his pockets. Oh no, don't do that.
"Where's his car keys? Here we go. ... Look at this, Mommy, look. The son of a
bitch was trying to steal Evelyn's underwear. Didn't want to bring her home, no.
Just her underpants'd do."
"Whispering Jesus," Mrs. Grace responded.
Tim listened as Mr. Grace explained to his wife that he was going to drive Tim's
car into downtown Rome, leave it there, and then walk back to the house. She was
to do nothing until he got home, except hit Tim with the skillet again if he tried to cause trouble for her.
Move his car? That was bad. But I can get out of this, Tim told himself. Even if
she is half gone, I can talk to her, I can distract her, confuse her, and work
myself free. I should have known, he thought. The one thing he had steered clear
of in his story was why Evvy had cut herself off from these people, to the point
where she communicated with them only once or twice a year, and then by postcard
or telephone. It had seemed too delicate to mention, and he had no idea of what
might be involved, but now it came to him: Evvy might have had her reasons.
Tim's mistake may have been to assume, like everyone else, that Evvy had been a
bad child, selfish, uncaring, neglectful of her parents. Now he knew that there
must have been another side to the story, Evvy's side, and he was stuck in it.
"Doesn't he need his car to drive home?" Mrs. Grace saw fit to ask as her husband was about to leave.
"He isn't going home. Tomorrow we'll drive him up to Canada and dump him there
in the woods. I don't even want that son of a bitch in the same country."
When he heard his car being driven away, Tim looked at Mrs. Grace. He gathered
himself, tried to clear his throat and speak. But the old woman rose from her seat and approached him. She had the roll of tape in her hand.
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"I don't want to see you," she said. "I don't even want to hear you, and I sure
don't want you looking at me."
Ah, no, Tim thought as he saw her yank a length of tape from the roll. She bit
it loose, and he noticed a couple of fugitive sesame seeds clinging to her dentures. She slapped the tape over Tim's mouth to keep him from talking.

Then,
at a more leisurely pace, Evelyn's mother began to wrap the rest of his head
in
tape. He thrashed his body as wildly as possible, but he couldn't stop her,
and
when his head was done she proceeded on down around his arms, eventually
securing his knees. It was a big roll of tape, and Mrs. Grace used all of it.
"Now, that's better," she said.
Grotesque, Tim thought, grotesque. He pictured himself as a kind of slapdash
mummy, rotting away in the Canadian woods. Say, fifty yards from a back
road--the Graces wouldn't be able to drag him any farther than that--but
would
he ever be found? It was such an outrageous and unreal image that Tim was,
even
now, incapable of feeling mere panic or terror. Instead, his mind was
overwhelmed by a profound sense of exasperation.
If only his story had been true, and he and Evvy had been in love for a
while.
Then he wouldn't be where he was now, and Evvy would still be alive--because
Tim
never would have walked away from her. He never would have settled for an
unhappy ending with Evvy, not in real life.
Tim's lungs felt like they were being clamped in a waffle iron, the oxygen
slowly burning out of them. The last conscious thought he had was a rich and
vivid recall of the last conscious smell he had experienced, Evelyn Grace's
cunt.
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By the Light of the Silvery Moon
Les Daniels
Les Daniels is something of a rarity. Unlike most writers who have only
recently
turned to HDF as a viable means of making a living, Daniels has always been a
horror writer; i.e., way back, before it was fashionable (read: profitable),
before Stephen King reinvented the whole genre. He lives in Rhode Island, but
was born in Connecticut, and is currently investigating the old saw about
life
beginning after the age of forty. Regardless, he is a down-to-the-bone New
Englander, and for twenty years has been writing fine, regional novels of
horror
in the tradition of Lovecraft, but without all the excess verbiage.
He also writes with a wry sense of humor and a sometimes savage wit. He
reports
he's sold every short story he's ever written, but adds he's only written
five.
So what. Stats are stats, and when you're batting a thousand, you're doing
great. Daniels' story for Borderlands is another one of those pieces I
included
so as to vary the mix, to keep things from getting too damned bleak. Well,
almost ...
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He had no name (few wolves do) and little enough of memory. And when he
remembered anything at all, it was not the cold sharp air of the forest
piercing
his nostrils, nor the musky scent of frightened prey, for there is no need to
recall what is so often there. Instead his recollections were of stranger
scents: flaming bits of bodies with the blood burned out of them, and beings
trapped in rolling iron boxes, each one spewing forth cloud upon cloud of
deadly
fumes instead of sweetly pungent droppings. These odors haunted him, along
with

visions of pale hairless things that staggered on their fat hind legs, their paws wrapped in dried skins stolen from other creatures. Such things were monstrous, as were the celebrations in airless wooden boxes that did not move,
where there was nothing to breathe but smoking weeds and the stink of fermented
fruits and grains. There might be howling in such a box, but it came from another box, and it was marred by the sound of lightning forced through scraping
metal wire, and wind forced through dried dead reeds.
He dreamed of these things when the moon was round, and had he been able he might have spoken of them to his fellows in the pack. Yet he was grateful that
he had no words and wondered why he knew of them at all. They were one of his dreams.
He slept in a den with his mate and her pups; he coupled with her when she gave
him the scent; yet still he dreamed of nuzzling loins that reeked of mint or even strawberry. Horror possessed him. He trembled and howled, and all the more
because his tiny forebrain knew as much of the truth as it could contain: when
the light in the sky became a circle, he became a man.
He whimpered and snuggled into the musty fur of his mate, wondering all the while if it was her beauty or his own bestiality that was only a fragment of his
troubled sleep. He wondered where he was.
Then he was free, loping through the snow in the deep track that had been plowed
for him by a wandering moose, hearing nothing but the whisper of the wind and the touch of his feet on the ice beneath them. Hunger bit at his belly, almost
like another animal attacking him; perhaps that was what had started the dreams
and then driven him out into the night. His pack was starving, all

of them, and they could not range free from the den while the pups were new. They would not survive much longer without food, and so he hunted, on and on for
more than a dozen miles, pausing only to mark the trail with his leg lifted.
It was when he lowered his leg that he realized the change was coming, for the
pads on his foot turned suddenly tender, and the cold cut through them. He had
lost the talent, which all wolves possess, of regulating his own body temperature, and by this sign he could tell that he was turning into a monster.
He began to shiver in the frigid air, rearing up on his hind legs to snap at nothing, a growl in his throat as he felt his teeth drawn painfully back into his head until he had only thirty-two little stumps, hardly enough to fill the
muzzle being crushed back into his face. Everything was pulling back into him and everything was agony; he experienced each individual hair as it was absorbed
into his stinging flesh.
And then he bloated, bulking up into a pink and swollen thing more than twice his proper weight, a thick and weak and hairless thing that feared the gentle dark. It fled shaking and screaming through the snow, and it took him with it.
With feeble, bleeding, clawless forepaws, the man he had become turned over a rock made slippery with a transparent glaze, and found the cache of clothes

beneath it. He could not remember how they came to be there, but when he crawled into them the cold could not hurt him as much. Everything about him had changed except his hunger. He staggered on in search of food, his numb feet stuffed into the skin of slaughtered cows.

Much of the night had given way to his slow progress through the snow before he topped a rise and let his eyes confirm the truth his ears and nose had told him long ago: he was about to enter the other world. Below him was an endless stream of poison gas, floating over a strip of ground that looked like a dry river bed, and through that raced a succession of the iron boxes with humans caught inside.

These beings seemed to be following the moon the way he was; in fact, each one of their boxes was in pursuit of two bright yellow disks of light that it could never catch. He saw that much almost at once, but decided he would follow the lights too.

This was what men did. Perhaps there was food at the mouth of the empty river. Dragging his feet through the piles of the gray slush that spattered at him, he paced behind the headlights (he began to know their name), staying carefully to one side as it came back to him that cars could kill.

Finally he realized where they were going. It was not the moon they were pursuing after all, but a big red star whose outline glowed against the sky. There were red squiggles beside it, and somehow he knew that they meant "red star" too, although that made no sense when the red star was right there beside them anyway. And they didn't look like what they said; they looked like splashes of blood on black snow.

Then he saw that the Red Star was another box, but so much bigger than the others that he could not look around it. Most of it seemed to be made of ice: it glistened in vast sheets, and light came shining through to fall on him. The cars opened, and those who had been caught inside rushed away like sensible creatures but then gravitated at once toward the giant trap that looked like fire enclosed in ice. He sensed their hunger, and despite his fear he followed them. A good hunter could steal food even from a snare.

He was startled by the glare inside, brighter than sunlight and colder than moonlight. He closed his eyes against it as death filled his nostrils. Hundreds of animals had perished here, and their bodies had not been consumed. The overwhelming sense of slaughter and of waste filled him with dread even as he felt himself begin to drool.

Someone shoved against him; he snarled and raised his upper lip before he remembered that he had no fangs to bare. Dozens of humans had gathered here, but they were not a pack. Each one was like a lone wolf without a territory of its own; each one was angry and aggressive and afraid. They had hold of other little

boxes that moved like the cars did, and they pushed them at each other as they passed. Some of them put things in these small boxes, and just the sight of that made his head swim. Everything in this world was inside something else; nothing ran free.

The noise he had dreamed about washed over him again: wires

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and reeds and skins struck by sticks, with the scraping of hair against gut wailing over them. He found himself humming along with it against his will; he was becoming more like the humans with every minute he spent among them. He took a shopping cart and did with it what the others were doing. The light was so intense it almost blinded him, just as darkness would blind a man, and the music made him deaf. Only the stubby pink nose he had been cursed with told him anything at all. It spoke of meat.

He was in an aisle filled with meat. The floors were meat and the walls were meat, and they stretched out before him as far as his dazzled eyes could see. The sight should have brought him joy, but there was terror in it, too, only excess can bring. Had there ever been a time when so many animals had died at once? What could have killed them all, and what had stopped it from eating them?

The fur on his back would have stood on end if it had not vanished hours ago. He could smell cattle and sheep and pigs, chickens and turkeys and ducks, a few kinds of fish he recognized and many more that he did not. He could smell hundreds of dead creatures, thousands of them, and on each of them was the stench of decay. This was not fresh meat, still quivering with the hot pulse of blood; this was something sliced and drained and spoiled.

It was cold, too. He felt the chill of death seep into his hand as he clutched involuntarily at part of a cow. The meat had already been chewed up, like what he regurgitated to feed his cubs, and it was enclosed in transparent ice like the stuff that made up the walls of the Red Star. With trembling fingers he dropped it into his cart. Nearby lay pigs which had been masticated and then stuffed into their own intestines, even though such parts of an animal were not good to eat. He passed them by, but he could not resist the chance to sweep three chickens into the cart, even though they were as cold and hard as stone.

Then he was on a rampage, grabbing with numb fingers at the ribs of a hog, the leg of a lamb, the brain of a calf. He snatched at a cluster of chicken livers, still swimming in chilled blood, and felt the sticky liquid squirt out over his hand. He licked at it and saw a female staring at him. He growled at her.

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It was time to go, time to escape with this meat before he joined it in those frigid walls that surrounded him. Panic surged through him when he saw that the way out was blocked, and then he recognized the checkout line for what it was.

This standing in a row was something only humans did, and he was delighted by his cleverness in understanding it. Perhaps he would get away after all.

He followed a metal cage that had been loaded with the icy fragments of dead

animals. Humans stood before him and behind him, similarly laden, their wire traps having captured creatures that were already corpses, but it was not this ugly image that made him shiver. Instead, he was possessed by the idea of taking these broken bodies to a place where he could expose them to a flame and watch the fat and juices flare into the sky, leaving him nothing but a dried husk to chew. The very thought made him gag, but he knew he would carry out this mad plan unless something stopped him. He tried to hold on to a picture of his pups, waiting in the burrow he had dug with his own paws, but somehow they seemed very far away, and he knew that they might die without seeing any of this meat he had hunted down for them.

Squinting against the glare around him, he watched those ahead of him file out into the night. Some sort of ritual seemed to be involved. They had to pass before a young female, hardly more than a cub herself, and they had to let her touch each one of their treasures as they greeted her. And there was something else. Each one made an offering to her, passing her something that looked like a green leaf, and sometimes more than one. But where could they have found green leaves in the winter? At this time of year they were scarcer than prey. His twitching hands were empty, and the clothes he wore began to itch. He laid out his catch before the female and allowed her to touch it.

"Forty-two forty-nine," she said.

He had no idea what these sounds meant. She looked at him. He suddenly felt dizzy.

"Forty-two forty-nine," she said.

He thought of green leaves, and of summer, and of plentiful game. He dropped to his knees.

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The human behind him saw what was happening and sprinted for the dairy section at the back of the store.

The cashier leaned over her register to get a better look just as he rose again on his hind legs. His slavering jaws closed on her face.

He fed, and not on putrid, juiceless carrion. He experienced the taste of living blood splashing in his mouth, the feel of hot flesh throbbing against his tongue. The purity, the truth of it. His throat was full.

He shrugged off the last of his clothing and ran. The Red Star opened up its glistening wall of ice and set him free. He danced around a stream of rolling traps and capered across the unbroken snow until he reached the shelter of the trees.

The chunks of the young cashier were safe inside him, ready to be coughed up when he was home at last. His children would eat tonight.

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A YOUNGER WOMAN

John Maclay

Sometimes the best horror stories are the ones based on ideas or premises which at first glance seem to be totally harmless. Such is the case with the utterly prosaic male fantasy John Maclay brings to life (well maybe not life ...) in the story to follow.

Maclay, for many years, was well known as a specialty publisher in Baltimore--a career capped by the extremely successful series anthology, Masques, edited by J. N. Williamson. But in the last few years, short stories under the Maclay byline have appeared in some of the small press magazines, and as time passes, an impressive body of work accumulates. "A Younger Woman" is easily the finest example of John Maclay Is promise as a writer.

He was going to do it; this time he was really going to do it. The realization sent a thrill through Jack's forty-two-year-old body as he pulled the Chrysler convertible into the driveway of the Baltimore apartment building on a spring evening that was too beautiful for words. Before, when he'd dreamed about it during the long nights at home

with Meg, there had been a pocket of fear underneath. And on the two occasions when he'd stormed out of the house, suitcase in hand, after one of her mads or stony silences, he'd only spent the night in a hotel to crawl back the next day after work. But now the fear was gone, and the dream was firmly and forever in place.

The Chrysler and the evening hour confirmed it. Before, in case the car be spotted or Meg grow suspicious of his being out late, Jack had never driven to Marcia's apartment and never visited in other than daytime. Instead, he'd arrived by bus or cab, by some circuitous route he and his lover had laughed at, as well as the excuses they'd given for being out of their offices. Their hour of stolen passion, that of a married, middle-aged man and a twenty-two-year-old single woman, had been sweet, at first even more sweet for being stolen. Marcia had even bought black curtains so they could pretend it was all night. Yet gradually, the dream they created with their bodies had grown, had stretched beyond the boundaries of that hour and that bedroom. And they'd come to know they had to take it there, in reality.

Jack sat behind the steering wheel for a moment, going over it once more in his mind. His wife entering menopause, growing querulous, conservative ... old, while he was feeling younger than ever. His having come to rely on Meg over the years, but that slowly changing to a feeling of being dominated, having his manhood threatened, despite his position as a successful attorney. The felt need, during those long nights at home and though there was still sex, to be free again, coupled with the sudden, little-boy fear of being so. And the caring

almost too much--"What will Meg do? Totally unfair!"--yet the inner voice--"It's nature. I don't make the rules."

At first, there had been no focus for his feelings--but then there had. An innocent walk, one day three months ago, to a rival law firm to drop off some papers. The secretary who took them from him--and the way their eyes met. Marcia was tall, almost his height, and was dressed in a blue and white striped blouse and gray skirt which showed off a beautiful figure. She had a wide, open face, short, feathery blonde hair, and a broad smile with pink lips and perfect teeth.

Her voice was small, weak, almost a giggle--

but, judging by her position with the firm, she was smart enough. And the chemistry, the way her pale eyes met his...

The inner voice, Jack's true one, had spoken; it was almost as if he were listening to himself. He'd asked Marcia out for a quick drink after work, and she'd accepted. Then there'd been another one, the next day. Then lunch--and, as they both obeyed an unspoken need, separate cabs to her apartment. Where he'd really found out what was happening: their first embrace, his body feeling at last the power of his years, while he sucked hungrily at the fountain of youth of her lips ... their clothes falling away, she breathing in his ear about his maturity, his mastery, while his eyes and hands marveled at the flawless smoothness of her flesh ... her body, big, perfectly formed, sexually powerful, breasts high and round like a picture, blonde hair below like a fantasy, yet above all, young, young ... and their first time, which took him into a new or forgotten world. And after which, when he cried into her shoulder, he'd had to explain why.

But now, as he sat in the Chrysler, Marcia was coming out of the Baltimore apartment building in a white spring dress, toward him. The dream was going to be real now, all the time, and just as good for being so. Jack leaped out of the car, took her suitcase from her young hand, tossed it into the back. Grasped her smooth, sleeveless shoulders, kissed her sweet lips, at last thinking of the future, not the past. Opened the door, eyes feasting on her graceful figure as she got in, became his forever. Got back behind the wheel, and drove off into the sunset.

They stopped for dinner on the other side of Frederick, at an old stone inn. And knowing the romance would be strong enough, they became lawyer and secretary again, talked lightly of practical things.

"Did you ... tell her?" Marcia asked, her eyes clear in the candlelight. "Tell ... Meg?"

"No," Jack replied. "She'd never have understood. And that might have made her ... too strong." He smiled. "But I did leave it so that she'll have more than enough."

Marcia nodded. "And we'll be okay? I packed just the suitcase, like you said,

and sold the rest, but it only came to a couple
251
thousand dollars."
He took her hands across the table, forced a laugh--then found he didn't feel guilty at all. "Remember, I explained that? Some time ago, when I started my ...
dream, I began hiding away some money. 'Fuck you' money, some people call it."
Her young eyes--God, so wonderfully blue--questioned.
"So that you can say that to what you don't like, have to get out of. Or"--he had a sudden, happier thought--"in this case, my love, so that I can ... fuck you!"
She giggled, getting his drift.
And in Pittsburgh, in an expensive hotel room, they did it, all over the king-size bed; free for the first time, just the two of them, without any other
commitments. Again, Marcia seemed to hide herself in his older mastery, praised
his strong chest and legs, while Jack reveled in her smooth white flesh, her wonderful tightness below. They seemed the perfect combination of maturity and
youth.
It was the next morning, as they drove leisurely through Ohio, that the first,
mild problem occurred.
They had fallen silent--no problem, Jack thought; just dreaming together--and he
reached over and turned on the Chrysler's radio. Out came a sixties song, something by the Mamas and the Papas. He smiled, sighed, and started to drum his
fingers on the dash in time with the music. They'd never listened to the radio
together before.
Marcia smiled over at him, blonde hair ruffling beautifully in the top-down wind, breasts swelling the T-shirt she wore. But said, "Do we ... have to have
that old stuff?"
He frowned, told her the name of the group, said the song had been a big hit.
"And besides, Mama Cass was from Baltimore-- Forest Park High School."
"Well, okay," she replied. And she good-naturedly began to beat time too, trying
to sing along.
But he wondered why she agreed so easily.
By nightfall they were in Indianapolis, in another big room, big playpen, though
the place was a tank town, continuing to carry their sexual odyssey cross-country. And the next day, after a big breakfast to replenish their strength, they were back on the road
252
again, the morning sun at their backs.
That was when, as he looked over at Marcia, Jack felt another, little twinge. It
might have been the light, but ... there seemed to be tiny wrinkles beside her
blue eyes, the kind an ... older woman might have.
"Are we pushing it too hard?" he asked her, reaching over to put his hand on her
thigh, which still seemed firm enough. "After all, we have the rest of our lives."
"No." She smiled back. "Just a bit tense, maybe--getting used to all this. But

it's wonderful, lover!"
So to help her relax, he flipped on the radio again. Pressed the scanner, wound
up with a fifties rock station. "You should like this. Doesn't your 'generation'
have a nostalgia thing for the early rock?"
"Well ... yeah," she replied. And her fingers drummed on the dash.
Near Kansas City, after a long pull, they stopped for the night at Jack's cousin's. The man was his age, and they'd been close, having grown up in Baltimore together; he was one of the few people he'd told about Marcia and his
decision to break from Meg and escape with her. And after a much-appreciated steak dinner, prepared by the cousin's wife, who'd reluctantly come around to the situation, the two men sat on the dark front porch, drank beer, and talked
about it.
"Sometimes I think of doing what you did," the cousin said. "Yet there's something that tells me not to. Sure, I haven't been a hundred percent faithful--most men aren't. But when I strayed, with a younger woman, it was more
like a dream, an escape."
"Well," Jack replied expansively, "if the inner voice gets strong enough, you just have to follow it, have to make that dream real. It's not your fault that
men and women age differently. And there's nothing wrong with a woman being older--it's just not for me. I've felt bad, yes--but it was nothing like I was
going through at home. Or what I would have, for the rest of my life, if I hadn't acted. And now, I have no regrets at all--I feel great. There's even something ... American about it, you know? Going for youth, newness; going west?"

His cousin leaned back in his porch chair. "Just tell me one thing."
"Yes?"
"Why didn't you pick a ... really younger woman?"
And Jack suddenly had a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, as if the
bottom had dropped out of his whole day.
He said a hasty good night to his cousin and went upstairs to the guest room, where Marcia lay dozing in bed. In the light of the night table lamp, which was
still on, he looked at her ... closely. And saw, not only the crow's feet he'd
thought he noticed the day before, but a few wrinkles on her brow, a puffiness
in her cheeks, a general coarseness, even on her exposed shoulders and arms, to
her smooth, white flesh. ...
God, he thought, the light, or your imagination, can do strange things.
The next morning they got up very early, planning to share the driving all the
way to Denver, said good-bye to their hosts, and pulled the Chrysler out into the dawn.
"Why are you ... looking at me funny?" Marcia said after a while.
Jack had hoped she hadn't noticed his scrutiny. "Oh... nothing. Probably just drinking in your beauty, lover."
And, as they sped past endless fields of Kansas wheat greening in the sun, he had to admit that she did look good, young enough, dressed as she was, surely for him, in a revealing pink halter top and silk jogging shorts. In fact, when

they made rest stops, other men looked at her, making him proud.
So he flipped on the radio again. And the scanner turned up a St. Louis station,
broadcasting nonstop jazz.
"This is before both our times," he said, smiling over at her. "But I've always
sort of liked it. How about you?"
"Oh, I love it!" Marcia replied. "Sitting in some dark, smoky club in the forties, watching the band ..."
"Well," he said happily, "no 'generation gap' here. Maybe you can teach me!"
But when they made Denver, in the small hours of the morning, Jack's sinking feeling had returned, and his doubts were deep.

Maybe it was the hypnotic effect of the long drive, out the night, the whole trip, suddenly seemed unreal. And the way Marcia, on the way to the plush motel
suite he'd hopefully reserved, got stiffly out of the car, not speaking, and walked heavily after him across the parking lot. ...
It's as if, he thought, she was nearly as old as my wife, Meg, as myself, yesterday, when we listened to the fifties rock. And today ... older? He thought
further. Could she still have some regrets about our escape? Could I? Could they
be making me feel old, not younger, and she ... ? But that's ridiculous.
Yet, as he put her to bed--they both were too tired for sex, especially she--two
voices echoed in Jack's mind.
The first, Marcia's, when she'd talked about jazz and the smoky club ... as if
she'd been there. Though the music had only been a sign.
And the second, belonging to a big trucker at one of the rest stops, overheard:
"Gee, what a sexy outfit. And she wears it well ... for an old broad."
In the morning, when Marcia got out of bed, Jack watched her. It must be the strain of the trip--if not on her, on me, he thought again, as if grasping at a
last, rational hope. My eyes, my mind must be tired, must be playing tricks on
me. She can't have ... aged right before them. ...
But it was true. He was able, trying hard, to conjure up a picture of his lover
as she'd been on that first wonderful afternoon in her apartment, when they'd made it, and his dream had begun to become real. Now, as then, she was naked, moving about the room. Yet now ...
She was less tall, less statuesque; inches had been taken from her height, and
where her curves had once been those of heartbreakingly beautiful shoulder, breast, hip, and thigh, now they were those of a body compressed, lessened, by
age. And sagging: her breasts were flat, flaccid, her hips puckered and pendulous, her once firm, marblelike face and neck a mass of pouches; all of this, all of her, grown out of, yet concealing and grotesquely caricaturing, the
perfect twenty-two-year-old she'd been.
Where it had once been a dream, it was now a nightmare, Jack

knew. He had never before believed in punishment, in poetically just retribution
for the following of impulses, especially natural ones, but at this moment, he

knew. His stomach churned, he instantly feared all creation; the bottom dropped
out not only of his day, but of his whole life, of existence itself. And the worst of it--he too got out of bed, stole a look at himself in the mirror, saw
no change at all--was what he, he indeed, out of some unknown, malevolent force
operating inside him, had done to her.
He had tried to make, keep himself young by escaping with Marcia ... but instead, far from even the possible punishment, for his middle-aged obsession,
of himself continuing to age, he had made Marcia's years turn practically to hours, her minutes to seconds; made her lifetime trickle away in sickly perfect
time with the miles they had traveled.
Yet knowing that it was a nightmare, but real, was not enough. The worst of it,
Jack realized as he dressed next to this heavy, sixtyish woman--who did not really know, as was apparent from her still-happy small talk--was that they had
to go on.
Nor is there anything wrong with her being ... her age, he thought now, trying
to hold back insanity, as he helped her out into the light of day, back across
the parking lot to the Chrysler, and they drove west, the direction not lost on
him; west was also death. She's not unbeautiful--as Meg, God, Meg wasn't, and wouldn't have been, unbeautiful. It's just that she's missed all the years in between--as I have, the later ones, with Meg--but for her, far worse.
So, to try to keep Marcia happy--I've ruined her, but I'm not completely selfish, he thought ruefully--he reached over, flipped on the radio once more.
And out came the sounds of an Astaire-Rogers musical from the thirties.
Her puffy fingers drummed on the dashboard. "Ooo, lover! I used to dance to that
... when I was young."
The day before, he would have braked to a stop and screamed. Now, Jack turned the radio off.
Their next nightfall--at a cheap motel in the wilds of Utah, all pretense of luxuriant sex gone, sunken into the earth they'd traversed, and the folds of Marcia's flesh--was uneventful, but for

the surreal landscape around them, which matched Jack's now-horrible odyssey.
And but for the proprietor's surprise that he should be sharing a room with his
... mother. Something else, Jack thought with supreme logic, that I tried to escape.
They got a late start the next morning. He dimly remembered her having gone instantly, heavily to sleep, while he tossed and turned on the bed in a half-conscious stupor, his heart and head pounding; at one point, he thought he'd even fled from the room, and gone out onto the desolate earth to scream at
the moon. But it was she who was worn out now ... as he bundled her bent, whitehaired, toothless form, shapeless in a sack dress, into the car.
It was the last day of their trip, but where Jack might have imagined himself and Marcia being in an impossibly free, lighthearted mood as they entered California, their secret goal, that ... young place in which they'd hardly dared
think they would enjoy the rest of their lives together, now neither of them

spoke ... as if she, in her senility, could have anyway. He kept his eyes away
from her, stared at the ribbon of road, driving being the only reflex that
remained to him; didn't even dare reach for the radio, in terror of what new, or
old, surprise it might hold for him, and in her. The only, constant sound was
the swish of the Chrysler's tires; he didn't even stop for meals, as if either
of them could have eaten.
But when, after dark, they entered the last city, L.A., Jack forced himself to
look at Marcia one more time. Maybe it had been only a nightmare after all, born
out of his second thoughts, his disorientation at finally achieving his
dream--or better yet, he thought, some sort of parable made manifest, some
lesson about youth and age. Maybe ...
But when, in the passing lights of the sprawling city, he got clear looks at
her, he knew the worst, the unspeakable end. Something he might have guessed,
from the inexorable progress of the last few days. The ... process ...
"Oh ... God! Oh-oh-oh ... God!!" he heard himself scream to the empty sky. But
inside, he was beyond terror ... already dead.
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As was the form, once his golden young woman, on the seat beside him. Whose sack
dress was now a sack ... of bleached, white bones. And whose once--beautiful,
springlike face had become ... a skull.
Jack drove on, straight ahead. Through the night streets, aimlessly, of that
city of youthful promise, now become a city of death. Straight ahead, through
neighborhoods, rich and poor, passing surreally in the dark, to the end of the
American land, to a place where the bulky forms of ships waited.
Straight ahead, into the even deeper darkness of the sea.
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But You'll Never Follow Me
Karl Edward Wagner
Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1945, Karl Edward Wagner has been an
influential name in the HDF field for twenty years. He has written or edited
some thirty-five books, including the prestigious annual anthology, The Year's
Best Horror Stories. Highly regarded by both his readers and his fellow writers,
he is the winner of four British Fantasy Awards and two World Fantasy Awards. He
also wrote the script for Conan II, but the film is as yet unproduced.
Karl moved to North Carolina in the sixties to attend medical school (he's a
psychiatrist), but decided to cultivate his literary talents rather than a
couchside manner. His fiction combines sensitivity and muscle, which makes his
style unique and damned enviable. The following piece examines a deeply personal
dilemma many of us must someday face. Karl's letter which accompanied the story
confessed that "writing this one was like throwing myself on a grenade."
I know exactly what he means. ...
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It wasn't the smell of death that he hated so much. He'd grown used to that in
Nam. It was the smell of dying that tore at him. Slow dying.
He remembered his best buddy stuck to the paddy mud, legless and eviscerated,

too deep in shock to cry out, just gulping air like a beached fish, eyes round with wonder and staring into his. Marsden had closed those eyes with his right hand and with his left he put a .45 slug through his friend's skull.

After that, he'd made a promise to himself never to kill again, but that was as true a promise as he'd ever made to anyone, and never-intended lies rotted together with the never-realized truths of his best intentions.

Marsden found a moment's solitude in the slow-moving elevator as it slid upward to the fourth floor. He cracked a zippered gash into his bulky canvas flight bag, large enough to reach the pint bottle of vodka on top. He gulped down a mouthful, replaced the stopper, and then replaced the flask, tugged down the zipper-- all in the space of four floors. Speed was only a matter of practice.

He exhaled a breath of vodka as the elevator door opened.

Perhaps the middle-aged couple who waited there noticed his breath as he shouldered past them with his bag, but Marsden doubted it. The air of Brookcrest Health Care Center was already choked with the stench of bath salts and old lady's perfume, with antiseptics and detergents and bouquets of dying flowers; and underlying it all was the veiled sweetness of urine, feces, and vomit, physically retained in bedpans and diapers.

Marsden belched. A nurse in the fourth floor lounge scowled at him, but a blue-haired lady in a jerry cart smiled and waved and called after him: "Billy boy! Billy Billy boy!" Michael Marsden shut his eyes and turned into the hallway that led to his parents' rooms. Somewhere along the hall a woman's voice begged in feeble monotone: "O Lord, help me. O Lord, help me. O Lord, help me." Marsden walked on down the hall.

He was a middle-aged man with a heavyset frame that carried well a spreading beer gut. He had mild brown eyes, a lined and long-jawed face, and there were streaks of gray in his short beard and in his limp brown hair where it straggled from beneath the

Giants baseball cap. His denim jacket and jeans were about as worn as his scuffed cowboy boots.

"You'd look a lot nicer if you'd shave that beard and get a haircut," Momma liked to nag him. "And you ought to dress more neatly. You're a good-looking boy, Michael."

She still kept the photo of him in his uniform, smiling bravely, fresh out of boot camp, on her shelf at the nursing home. Marsden guessed that that was the way Momma preferred to hold him in memory--such of her memory as Alzheimer's disease had left her.

Not that there was much worth remembering him for since then. Certainly the rest of his family wouldn't quarrel with that judgment.

"You should have gone back to grad school once you got back," his sister in Columbus had advised him with twenty-twenty and twenty-year hindsight. "What have you done with your life instead? When was the last time you held on to a job for more than a year?"

At least she hadn't added: Or held on to a wife? Marsden had sipped his Coke and

vodka and meekly accepted the scolding. They were seated in the kitchen of their parents' too-big house in Cincinnati, trying not to disturb Papa as he dozed in his wheelchair in the family room.

"It's bad enough that Brett and I keep having to drive down here every weekend to try to straighten things out here," Nancy had reminded him. "And then Jack's had to come down from Detroit several times since Momma went to Brookcrest, and Jonathan flew here from Los Angeles and stayed two whole weeks after Papa's first stroke. And all of us have jobs and families to keep up with. Where were you during all this time?"

"Trying to hold a job in Jersey," Marsden explained, thinking of the last Christmas he'd come home for. He'd been nursing a six-pack and the late night movie when Momma drifted into the family room and angrily ordered him to get back to mowing the lawn. It was the first time he'd seen Momma naked in his life, and the image of that shrunken, sagging body would not leave him.

"I'm just saying that you should be doing more, Michael," Nancy continued.

"I was here when you needed me," Marsden protested. "I was here to take Momma to the nursing home."

"Yes, but that was after the rest of us did all the work--finding a good home, signing all the papers, convincing Papa that this was the best thing to do, making all the other arrangements."

"Still, I was here at the end. I did what I had to do," Marsden said, thinking that this had been the story of his life ever since the draft notice had come.

Never a choice.

They hadn't wanted to upset Momma, so no one had told her about the nursing home. Secretly they'd packed her things and loaded them into the trunk of Papa's Cadillac the night before. "Just tell Momma that she's going for another checkup at the hospital," they'd told him to say, and then they had to get home to their jobs and families. But despite her advanced Alzheimer's, Momma's memory was clear when it came to remembering doctors' appointments, and she protested suspiciously the next morning when he and Papa bundled her into the car. Momma had looked back over her shoulder at him as they wheeled her down the hall, and her eyes were shadowed with the hurt of betrayal. "You're going to leave me here, aren't you?" she said dully.

The memory of that look crowded memories of Nam from his nightmares.

After that, Marsden had avoided going home. He did visit Momma briefly when Papa had his first stroke, but she hadn't recognized him.

Papa had survived his first stroke, and several months later had surprised them all again and survived his second stroke. But that had been almost a year ago from the night Marsden and his sister had sat talking in the kitchen while Papa dozed in his wheelchair. That first stroke had left him weak on one side; the second had taken away part of his mind. The family had tried to maintain him

at
home with live-in nursing care, but Papa's health slowly deteriorated, physically and mentally.
It was time to call for Michael.
And Michael came.
"Besides," Nancy reassured him, "Papa only wants to be near Momma. He still insists on trying to get over to visit her every day. You can imagine what a strain that's been on everyone here."
"I can guess," said Michael, pouring more vodka into his glass.
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"Where are we going, son?" Papa had asked the next morning, as Marsden lifted him into the Cadillac. Papa's vision was almost gone now, and his voice was hard
to understand.
"I'm taking you to be with Momma for a while," Marsden told him. "You want that,
don't you?"
Papa's dim eyes stared widely at the house as they backed down the driveway. He
turned to face Michael. "But when are you bringing Momma and me back home again,
son?"
Never, as it turned out. Marsden paused outside his mother's room, wincing at the memory. Over the past year their various health problems had continued their
slow and inexorable progress toward oblivion. Meanwhile health care bills had mushroomed-- eroding insurance coverage, the last of their pensions, and a lifetime's careful savings. It was time to put the old family home on the market, to make some disposal of a lifetime's possessions. It had to be done.
Papa called for Michael.
"Don't let them do this to us, son." The family held power of attorney now. "Momma and I want to go home."
So Michael came home.
The white-haired lady bent double over her walker as she inched along the hallway wasn't watching him. Marsden took a long swig of vodka and replaced the
pint bottle. Momma didn't like to see him drink.
She was sitting up in her jerry cart, staring at the television, when Marsden stepped inside her room and closed the door. They'd removed her dinner tray but
hadn't cleaned her up, and bits of food littered the front of her dressing gown.
She looked up, and her sunken eyes showed recognition.
"Why, it's Michael!" She held out her food-smeared arms to him. "My baby!"
Marsden accepted her slobbery hug. "I've come for you, Momma," he whispered as
Momma began to cry.
She covered her face with her hands and continued weeping as Marsden stepped behind her and opened the flight bag. The silencer was already fitted to the Hi-Standard .22, and Marsden quickly pumped three hollow-points through the back
of his
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mother's head. It was over in seconds. Little noise, and surely no pain. No more
pain.
Marsden left his mother slumped over in her jerry cart, picked up his canvas bag, and closed the door. Then he walked on down the hall to his father's room.
He went inside. Papa must have been getting up and falling again, because he

was
tied to his wheelchair by a bath towel about his waist. "Who's that?" he mumbled, turning his eyes toward Marsden.
"It's Michael, Papa. I'm here to take you home."
Papa lost sphincter control as Marsden untied the knotted towel. He was trying
to say something--it sounded like" Bless you, son"--then Marsden lovingly shot
him three times through the back of his skull. Papa would have fallen out of the
wheelchair, but Marsden caught him. He left him sitting upright with the Monday
night football game just getting underway on the tube.
Marsden finished the vodka, then removed the silencer from the pistol and replaced the clip. Shoving the Hi-Standard into his belt, he checked over the flight bag and left it with Papa.
He heard the first screams as the elevator door slowly closed. Someone must have
finally gone to clean Momma's dinner off her.
A uniformed security guard--Marsden hadn't known that Brookcrest employed such--was trying to lock the lobby doors. A staff member was shouting into the
reception desk phone.
"Hold it, please! Nobody's to leave!" The guard actually had a revolver.
Marsden shot him through the left eye and stepped over him and through the glass
doors. Marsden regretted this, because he hated to kill needlessly.
Unfortunately, the first police car was slithering into the parking lot as Marsden left the nursing home. Marsden continued to walk away, even when the car's spotlight pinned him against the blacktop.
"You there! Freeze!"
They must have already been called to the home, Marsden thought. Time was short.
Without breaking stride, he drew his .22 and shot out the spotlight.

There were still the parking lot lights. Gunfire flashed from behind both front
doors of the police car, and Marsden sensed the impact of buckshot and 9mm slugs. He was leaping for the cover of a parked car, and two more police cars were hurtling into the parking lot, when the twenty pounds of C4 he'd left with
Papa went off.
The blast lifted Marsden off his feet and fragged him with shards of glass and
shattered bricks. Brookcrest Health Care Center burst open like the birth of a
volcano.
Two police cars were overturned, the other on fire. The nursing home was collapsing into flaming rubble. No human screams could be heard through the thunder of disintegrating brick and steel.
Marsden rolled to his feet, brushing away fragments of debris. He retrieved his
pistol, but there was no need for it just now. His clothes were in a bad state
but they could be changed. There was no blood, just as he had known there would
not be.
They couldn't kill him in Nam, that day in the paddy when he learned what he was
and why he was. They couldn't kill him now.

Was it any easier when they were your own loved ones? Yes, perhaps it was. Michael Marsden melted away into the darkness that had long ago claimed him.
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Stephen
Elizabeth Massie
Some stories come bursting out of us fully formed, already worked out, down to final line, by that strange unconscious process only vaguely understood by even the best of us. While other tales, perhaps because of the delicate territory they explore, need to be cattle-prodded into being, shocked and whipped on until they function independently. These stories, the tough ones, are usually the best ones we're capable of writing-- probably because they need to be dragged kicking and screaming into the world. Because they come from the darkest, most secret places in ourselves-- from our engine rooms, down there where it's sweaty and stinking and full of creativity's grime.
Beth Massie's "Stephen" is one of those stories from one of those places. When I read her earliest draft, I knew I was onto something special, but felt she needed to travel a bit farther into the dark land she 'd mapped out for herself I asked her to rewrite it three times, and I wasn't sure she'd put up with my demands. But she did, and the results are truly stunning. Born in 1953 in Virginia, Beth has always lived in that state which is the gateway to the South.
She's written lots of short stories for the small press magazines and several anthologies, and her agent tells me she's turned in a brilliant first novel entitled Sineater. I have no fear in predicting Elizabeth Massie will be a major voice in the nineties.
266
Michael and Stephen shared a room at the rehabilitation center. Michael was a young man with bright, frantically moving eyes and an outrageous sense of nonstop, bitter humor. He had been a student at the center for more than a year, and with his disability, would most likely be there much longer. This was true, also, for the others housed on the first floor of the west wing. Severe cases, all of them, living at the center, studying food services, auto mechanics, computer operating, art, and bookkeeping, none of them likely to secure a job when released because when hiring the disabled, businesses would usually go for the students who lived on east wing and on the second floor. The center had amazing gadgets that allowed people like Michael to work machines and press computer keys and dabble in acrylics, but the generic factory or office did not go in for space-age, human-adaptive robotics. And Michael himself was a minor miracle of robotics.
Anne arrived at the center late, nearly ten thirty, although her meeting had been scheduled for ten o'clock. The cab dropped her off at the front walk and drove away, spraying fine gravel across her heels. Inside her shoes, her toes worked an awkward rhythm that neither kept them warm nor calmed her down. A cool November wind threw a piece of paper across the walk before her. On its tail followed the crumbled remains of a dead oak leaf. Anne's full skirt flipped and

caught her legs in a tight embrace. It tugged, as if trying to pull her backward
and away. In her mouth she tasted hair and sour fear. When she raked her fingers
across her face the hair was gone, but not the fear.
The center was large and sterile, a modern bit of gray stone architecture. The
largest building was marked with a sign to the left of the walkway:
ADMINISTRATION AND ADMISSIONS. Almost the entire front of this building was
composed of plate glass with borders of stone. Anne could not see behind the
glass for the harsh glare of morning sun, but in the wind the glass seemed to
bulge and ripple.
Like a river.
Like water.
"Christ."

Anne scrunched her shoulders beneath the weight of her coat and glanced about
for a place to sit and compose herself. Yes, she was late, but screw them if
they wanted to complain about volunteer help. There were several benches just
off the walkway on the lawn, but she didn't want to sit in full view. And so she
took the walk leading to the right, following along until it circled behind the
main building beside what she assumed was a long, gray stone dormitory. The walk
ended at a paved parking lot, marked off for visitors and deliveries. She
crossed the lot, skirting cars and food trucks and large vans equipped for
hauling wheelchairs, heading for a grove of trees on the other side. A lone man
pushing an empty wheeled cot crossed in front of Anne and gave her a nod. She
smiled slightly and then looked away.
The trees across the lot encircled a park. Picnic tables were clustered beneath
the largest of the oaks, and concrete benches made a neat border about the pond
in the center. The pond itself was small, no more than two acres, but it was
dark and clearly deep. Dead cattails rattled on the water's edge. A short pier
jutted into the water from the shore, with a weathered rowboat tethered to the
end. Leaves blew spastic patterns on the black surface.
Anne sat on a bench and wrapped her fingers about her knees. There was no one
else in the park. She looked at the brown grass at her feet, then at her hands
on her knees, and then at the pond. The sight of the bobbing boat and the dull
shimmering of the ripples made her stomach clamp. What a raw and ugly thing the
pond was.
A cold thing, enticing and deadly, ready to suck someone under and drag them
down into its lightless depths. Licking and smothering with its stinking
embrace.
Phillip would have loved this pond.
Phillip would have thought it just right.
The fucking bastard.
If she was to go to the water's edge, she thought she might see his reflection
there, grinning at her.
But she did not go. She sat on the concrete bench, her fingers turning purple
with the chill, her breath steaming the air. She did not look at the pond

again,
but at the grass and her knees and the
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picnic tables. She studied the gentle slopes the paths made about the park, all
accessible to wheeled means of movement. Accessible to the people who lived
here. To the people Anne's mother had protected her from as a child; who her
mother had hurried Anne away from on the street, whispering in her ear, "Don't
stare, now, Anne. Polite people don't react. Do you hear me?
"There but for the grace of God go you, Anne. Don't look now. It's not nice."
Anne closed her eyes, but the vision of the park and the tables and the sloped
pathways stayed inside her eyes. She could hear the wind on the pond.
"Damn you, Mother," she said. "Damn you, Phillip."
She sat for another twenty minutes.
When she crossed the parking lot again, her eyes in the sun and her hands in her
pockets, her muscles were steeled and her face carried a tight, professional smile.
Janet Warren welcomed Anne into the center at ten fifty-six, barely mentioning
the tardiness. She took Anne into her office, and, as assistant administrator,
explained the functions of the center. She gave Anne a brief summary of the
students with whom Anne would work, then led her off to the west wing.
Anne entered Michael's room after Janet gave an obligatory tap on the door.
Michael grunted and Anne walked in, still holding her coat, which Janet had
offered to take, clutched tightly to her stomach.
"Michael," said Janet to the man on the bed. "This is Miss Zaccaria, the lady I
said would be coming to help us out."
Michael propped up on his elbow, straightening himself, patting his blanket down
about the urinary bag as if it were an egg in an Easter basket. He gave Anne a
wide grin.
"Well, if it ain't my dream lady come to see me in the flesh!" he crowed. "Are
you real or just a vision of delight?"
Anne licked her lips and looked back at Janet Warren. "Thank you, Mrs. Warren.
I'll be fine now. I'll let you know if we need anything."
"Hell, I know what I need," said Michael. "And she's standing
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right in front of me.
Janet nodded, her motion seeming to be both acknowledgment of what Anne had said
and a sisterly confirmation of what she had come to do. Janet turned and left the room.
"Come on," said Michael, and Anne looked back at him.
"Come on? What do you mean?" There was only a small comfort in her professional
ability at conversation. It wasn't enough to overcome her discomfort at seeing
the physical form of Michael before her. He was legless, with hipbones flattened
into a shovel-shaped protrusion. The thin blanket emphasized rather than hid his
lower deformity. He was missing his right arm to the elbow, and there was no

left arm at all. A steel hook clipped the air in cadence with the blinking of Michael's eyes.
"Come on and tell me. You ain't really no shrink, are you? I was expecting some shriveled-up old bitch. You really is my dream lady, ain't you?"
Anne focused on Michael's face and took a slow breath. "No, sorry," she said. "I'm from Associated Psychological. I'm a clinical social worker."
Michael grappled with a button and pressed it with the point of his hook. The bed rolled toward Anne. She held her position.
"No, you ain't. I dreamed about you last night. Dreamed I still had my parts and you was eating them nice as you please."
Anne's face went instantly hot. She could have kicked herself for not being ready for anything. "I was told you've had a rough time these past months," she said. "Not getting along with the other students like you used to do. I'd like to help."
"Sure. Just sit on my face for a few hours."
Anne glanced at the withered body, then back at his face. Of all the students she would be working with through the volunteer-outreach program, Michael was the most disabled. "Is that all you think about, Michael? Sex?"
"When it comes to sex," he said, "all I can do is think." He laughed out loud and wheeled closer. "You like me?"
"I don't know you yet. I hope we'll like each other."
"Why you here? We got shrinks. Two of them. You on a field trip?"

"Field trip?"
"You know, like them school kids. Sometimes the local schools bring in their junior high kids. Show them around. Let them take little look-sees. Tell them if they are bad enough and dive into shallow lakes or don't wear their seat belts, God'll make them just like us."
Anne cleared her throat and loosened her coat from her waist. "First of all, I'm here on a volunteer program. Until the new center is finished down state, there will continue to be more students than can be properly provided for. The center called on our association to help out temporarily. You are a student with whom I've been asked to work."
"Student." Michael spat out the word. "I'm thirty-one and I'm called a goddamn student."
"Second," Anne said, "I'm not on a field trip. I'm not here to stare. I'm here to help."
Michael shook his head, then eased off his elbow to a supine position. "So who else is on your list besides me?"
Anne opened the folded paper Janet had given her. "Randy Carter, Julia Powell, Cora Grant--"
"Cora'll drive you ape shit. She lost half her brain in some gun accident."
"And Ardie Whitesell. I might like Cora, Michael. Don't forget, I don't know her yet, either."
Michael sighed. "I don't need no shrink. What the fuck's your name?"

"Miss Zaccaria."
"Yeah, well, I'm okay. I don't need no shrink. Don't need one any more than old
roomie over there." Michael tilted his head on his pillow, indicating a curtained corner of the room.
"Roomie?"
"Roommate. He don't need no shrink, neither. I don't 'cause I got things all figured out in this world. Nothing a little nookie can't cure." Michael looked
at Anne and winked. "And roomie over there, he don't need one 'cause he's in some kind of damn coma. Not much fun to have around, you know."

Anne frowned, only then aware of the mechanical sounds softly emanating from the
corner. The drawn curtain was stiff and white, hanging from the ceiling-high rod
like a starched shroud. "What's wrong with your roommate?"
"Hell, what ain't wrong? Come over here." With a hissing of his arm, Michael rose again and clutched the bed switch, tapping buttons in a short series, and
the bed spun around. The legless man rolled to the curtain. Anne followed. Michael shifted onto his right side and took the curtain in his hook. "Stephen's
been here longer'n me. He ain't on no shrink's list." Michael pulled the curtain
back.
It was not registering what was before her that allowed her to focus on it as long as she did. There were machines there, a good number of them, crowded around a tiny bed like rumbling and humming steel wolves about a lone prey. Aluminum racks stood on clawed feet, heavy bags of various colored liquids hanging from them, oozing their contents into thin, clear tubes. A portable heart monitor beeped. Behind it, a utility sink held to the wall, various antiseptics and lotions and balms cluttering the shelf above. The rails of the
bed were pulled up to full height. At one end of the mattress was a thin blanket, folded back and tucked down. And at the other end, a thin pillow. And
Stephen.
Anne's coat and paper dropped to the floor. "Oh, my dear God."
"Weird, huh? I call him Head Honcho. I think he must be some doctor's experiment, you know, keeping him alive and all. Don't it beat all?"
On the pillow was a head, with black curled hair. Attached to the head, a neck,
and below that a small piece of naked, ragged chest, barely large enough to house a heart and single lung. The chest heaved and shuddered, wires pulsing like obscene fishermen's lines. That was all there was of Stephen.
Anne's heart constricted painfully. She stepped backward.
"Nurses don't like him. Can't stand to touch him, though they shave him every three days. Doctor checks him nearly every day. Head Honcho don't do nothing but
breathe. He ain't much but at least he don't complain about my music." Michael
looked at Anne.
Anne turned away. Her stomach clenched, throwing fouled bile

into her throat.
"Hey, you leaving?"
"I need to see the others," she managed. And she went out of the west wing to the faculty rest room, where she lost her control and her lunch.
It was three days before Anne could bring herself to visit the center again.

The
AP partners were asking her for her volunteer hours chart, and as the newest member of the firm, she couldn't shrug it off. And so she returned. Her pulse was heavy in her neck and the muscles of her back were tight, but she decided she would not allow herself more than passing acknowledgment of them.
She talked with Cora in the art room. Cora had little to say, but seemed pleased
with the attention Anne gave her painting. Randy was in the recreation hall with
Ardie, playing a heated game of billiards wheeling about the table with teeth gritted and chins hovering over cue sticks. Anne told them she'd visit later, after the match. Julia was shopping with her daughter, and Michael was in the pool on a red inner tube.
"Hey, Miss Zaccaria!" he called when he saw Anne peering through the water-steamed glass of the door. "Want to come in for a swim? I'm faster in the
water. Bet I could catch you in a split second. What do you say?"
Anne pushed the door open and felt the onslaught of chlorine-heated mist. She did not go any closer to the pool. "I never learned to swim, Michael. Besides,
I'm not exactly dressed for swimming."
"I don't want you dressed for swimming. What fun would that be?"
Anne wiped moisture from her forehead. "How long do you plan to swim? I thought
we could visit outside. The day's turned out pretty fair. It's not as cold as it
has been."
"I'm finished now, ain't I, Cindy?"
The poolside attendant, who had been watching Michael spin around on his tube,
shrugged. "If you say so." She pulled Michael's wheeled bed from the wall and moved it to the pool steps. "Get over to the side so I can get you out."
"Hey, Miss Zaccaria, do me a favor. My blue jacket is in my
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room. It's one of those Members Only things. Anyway, I'm not real crazy about wind, even when it's warm. Would you get the jacket for me? Door's unlocked."
Anne's head was nodding as she thought, Oh, Christ, yes, I mind. "No problem,"
she said. She left the pool, telling herself the curtain was drawn.
They would always keep the curtain drawn.
Michael's door was indeed unlocked. The students of the center kept valuables in
a communal vault, and the staff moved about the floor frequently, so chances of
theft were slim. Anne went into the room, expecting the jacket to be in plain sight, prepared to lift it coolly and leave with her self-esteem intact.
But she did not see the jacket.
She checked Michael's small dresser, behind the straightbacked visitor's chair,
in the plastic laundry basket beside the vacant spot where Michael's bed rested
at night. It was not there.
Anne looked at the curtained corner. Certainly the jacket would not be behind the curtain. There was no reason to go there, no reason to look.
She walked to the curtain and edged over to the hemmed corner of the heavy material. It's not over there, she thought. Her hands began to sweat. She could
not swallow.
She pulled the curtain back slowly. And let her gaze move to the bed.
Again, it was a flash image that recorded itself on her startled retinas

before
she looked away. The head was in the same place, eyes closed, dark hair in flat
curls. The neck. The breathing, scarred half chest. Anne stared at the sink, counting, rubbing thumbs against index fingers, calming herself. She would look
for Michael's jacket. There was a chair like that on Michael's side, and a laundry basket, although this one held no clothes, only white towels and washcloths. By the wall beside the sink was a pile of clothing, and Anne stepped
closer to search through it. There were shirts, mostly, several pairs of shorts
and underwear. And a blue jacket. Anne picked it up. She looked back at the small bed.
And the eyes in the head were open, and they were looking at her.
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Anne's fingers clenched, driving nails into her palms. She blinked, and glanced
back at the pile of clothes, pretending she hadn't seen the eyes. Chills raised
tattoos up her shoulders, and adrenaline spoke loudly in her veins: leave now.
Her hands shook as they pawed through the clothes on the floor, acting as though
she had more to find. Calm down. And leave.
But the voice made her stop.
"I didn't mean to stare," it said.
Anne flinched, and slowly stood straight. She looked at the bed.
The eyes were still open, still watching her.
Her own mouth opened before she had a chance to stop it, and she said, "I was looking for Michael's jacket." Leave now! cried the adrenaline. That thing did
not say anything. It can't talk. It's comatose. It's brain dead. Leave now!
The eyes blinked, and Anne saw the muscles on the neck contract in a swallowing
reflex. "Yes," it said. And the eyes closed. The whole ragged body seemed to shudder and shrink. It had gone to sleep again.
The jacket worked in Anne's fingers. Michael was in the pool, waiting for her.
It's brain dead, Anne. Get hold of yourself. "Stephen?" she whispered.
But it did not open its eyes, nor move, and Anne took the jacket down to the pool where Michael was fuming about on his bed, spinning circles around the yawning attendant.
"So I store my stuff on Stephen's side of the room, 'cause he don't complain none. And when I get visitors they don't think I'm a slob. Nurses don't care. I
get the stuff from over there into my laundry basket when its really dirty."
Anne was in Michael's visitor's chair. He was on his side, his gaze alternating
between her, his hook, and the curtain.
"He's never complained to you?"
Michael chuckled shallowly. "You serious? He's in a coma, I told you already. Listen to this, if you don't believe me." Michael reached for the sleek black cassette player on the nightstand beside the bed. He pushed the switch, and an
instant blast of heavy rock shattered the air. Above the shrieking guitars and
pounding
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percussion, Anne could hear the sudden, angry calls from the neighboring students.

"Go, look, quick," Michael shouted over the music. "Go see before those damned
nurses get here."
Anne shook her head, smiling tightly, brushing off the suggestion.
Michael would have none of it. "Shit, just go on and look at Dead-Head Honcho."
"I don't think it's my place to bother him."
"Get on now, the nurses are coming. I hear them damn squeaking shoes down the hall!"
Anne got up and looked behind the curtain. The head was silent and motionless.
The eyes were closed.
"What'd I tell you? Deaf, dumb, blind, and in a coma. Sounds like hell to me, and God knows I seen hell up close myself."
"You have?" Anne went back to her chair. "What do you mean, you've seen it up close?"
"Look at me, Miss Zaccaria. You think the love of the Lord do this to me?"
There were then three nurses' heads at the door, clustered on the frame like Japanese beetles on a rose stem. "Turn that down, Michael, or the player's ours
for the next week."
"Shit," said Michael. He grappled the button; pushed it off. "I ain't no goddamn
student!" he told the nurses who were already gone. "It's my business how loud I
play my music!"
"Tell me about your accident," said Anne. But she was thinking: Hell, oh, yes,
it must be like hell, living in a coma.
But he's not in a coma. He is conscious. He is alive.
And when you are already in hell, what is hell to that?
Her next session with Michael was canceled because he was in the infirmary with
the flu. And so Anne sought out Julia and spent an hour with her, and then with
Cora, who did not want to talk but wanted Anne to paint a picture of a horse for
her. Randy and Ardie were again at the billiard table and would have nothing to
do with her. Then she visited the faculty lounge, and listened with feigned interest to the disgruntled banter and rehab shoptalk.

A few questions were directed her way, and she answered them as cordially as possible, but she wanted to talk about Stephen. She wanted to know what they knew.
But she could not make herself bring up the subject. And so she went to the west
wing, and let herself into Michael's unlocked room.
She went to the curtain and took the edge in her fingers. Her face itched but she shook it off. No, said the adrenaline. "Yes," she said. And she pulled the
curtain back.
The tubes flowed, nutrients in, wastes out. The monitor beeped. Bags dripped and
pumps growled softly. Anne moved to the end of the bed. She forced herself to see what was before her, what she needed to see, and not be distracted by the machinery about it.
The flesh of the chest twitched slightly and irregularly with the work of the wires. Every few seconds, the shuddering breath. It would be cold, Anne thought,

yet the blanket was folded back at the foot of the bed, a regulatory piece of linen which served no purpose to the form on the pillow. With the wires and tubes, a blanket would be a hindrance. The neck did not move; swallowing was for
the wakeful. The head as well did not move, except for the faint pulsing of the
nostrils, working mindlessly to perform its assigned job.
Anne moved her hands to the railing of the bed. She slid around, moving along the side to the head of the bed. Her feet felt the floor cautiously as if the tiles might creak. She reached the pillow; her hands fell from the railing. Her
face itched and again she refused to give in to it.
Through fear-chapped lips, she said, "Stephen?" The monitor beeped. The chest quivered.
"Stephen?"
The sleeping face drew up as if in pain, and then the eyes opened. As the lids
widened, the muscles of the cheeks seemed to ease. He blinked. His eyes were slate blue.
"I hope I'm not bothering you," she said.
"No," he said. And the eyes fluttered closed, and Anne thought he was asleep again. Her hands went to her face and scratched anxiously. She pulled them down.

Stephen's eyes opened. "No, you aren't bothering me. Why would you think that?"
"You were sleeping."
"I always sleep."
"Oh," Anne said.
"You've been spending time with Michael. What do you think of him?"
"He's ... fine. It's good to spend time with him."
The head nodded, barely, sliding up and down the pillow, obviously an effort.
"You are Miss Zaccaria."
"Anne," she said.
"Anne," he repeated. His eyes closed.
"Do you want me to go now?"
His eyes remained closed. "If you wish."
"Do you want me to?"
"No."
And so she stood those very long minutes, watching Stephen slip into sleep, trying to absorb the reality of what was before her, counting the beepings of the heart monitor.
Again the eyes opened. "You are still here."
"Yes."
"How long has it been?"
"Only a few minutes."
"I'm sorry."
"No, that's all right. I don't mind."
Stephen sighed. "Why don't you sit? There is a chair over there somewhere."
"I'll stand."
"Michael is wrong. I do mind his music. I hate it."
"I could ask him to keep it down."
"It's not the volume. It is the music. Music was created for movement, for involvement. I feel a straightjacket around my soul when Michael plays his music."
Anne said nothing for a moment. Stephen looked away from her, and then back again.
"Why do you let them think you are comatose?" Anne asked.
"That way I can sleep. When I sleep, there are dreams."

"What kind of dreams?"
"Ever the clinical social worker," said Stephen. And for the first time, a small
smile crossed his lips. Anne smiled also. "That's me," she said. "My dreams are
my own," he said. "I would never share them." "All right."
"And I would not ask you to share yours," he said. "No," said Anne. "I'm tired,"
he said. And when she was certain he was asleep once again, Anne left.
"I liked college, my studies there. The psyche of the human is so infinite and
fascinating. I thought I could do something with all I'd learned. But I wasn't
smart enough to become a doctor."
"How do you know?"
Anne shrugged. "I know."
"And so you are a therapist," said Stephen.
"Yes. It's important. Helping people."
"How do you help?"
"I listen to them. I help them find new ways of seeing situations."
"Do you like your patients?"
"I don't call them patients. They are clients."
"Do you like them?"
"Michael asked me something like that when we first met. He wanted to know if I
liked him."
"Do you?"
Anne crossed her feet and angled her face away from Stephen. There was a lint ball on the floor by the bed. The nurses and orderlies were obviously not quick
about their business here.
"Of course I do," she answered.
"That's good. If you like people you can help them."
"That's not a prerequisite, though. Liking them."
Stephen closed his eyes momentarily. Then he looked at Anne again. "You have a
husband?"
"No."
"A boyfriend, certainly."

"No, not really. I've not wanted one." Anne hesitated. "It's not what you think."
"What do I think?"
"That I'm a lesbian or something."
"I haven't thought that."
"I'm not."
"You have family, though."
Anne's crossed arms drew in closer. Family, yes, she did. God knows what wonders
she could have accomplished had it not been for her beloved family.
"A mother," she said. "An older brother."
"What are their names?"
"My mother is Audrey. My brother ... "Suddenly Anne was acutely aware of the utility sink behind her. She could see it brimming with water, cold water, stopped up and ready. ... "My brother's name is Phillip."
"Are you close?"
Anne's shoulders flinched at the nearness of the sink. Dark water; thick, stinking, and hungry water. Eager. She swallowed, then looked down at her hands.
Pathetic things, she thought. She flexed them. Goddamn it all. She looked up

at
Stephen. His forehead was creased, with a barely discernible shadow over his eyes.
"Sure," she said. "We're close."
Then Stephen went to sleep. Anne stared at the dust ball and at the tubes running from beneath Stephen's ribs. And her fingers, wanting to move forward,
were stopped, and were locked onto her lap like a colony of trapped souls.
Janet Warren was chuckling as she ushered Anne into the office. "It's no big deal," she said, obviously seeing through Anne's tight smile. "Honestly, I just
want to talk with you for a minute."
Anne took one of the chairs that sat before the desk; Janet sat on the edge of
the desk.
"It's Julia," Janet said.
Anne recrossed her arms and frowned slightly. "Julia? What's wrong with her?"

"Now, don't get me wrong. Sorry, I don't need to talk with you like that. You know what you're doing, you know how people react sometimes. I'm sure you've had
clients freak out during sessions, things like that."
Anne said, "Certainly."
"Julia went a little crazy after your last visit. She started throwing things;
she even threatened bodily harm to herself if you came back again."
"Mrs. Warren, certainly you don't think--"
"I don't think anything, Anne. We're in this together, remember? Julia has always been easily set off. It seems you remind her of someone she hated back when she was a child. In school, somewhere back then. You've done nothing wrong.
As a matter of fact, you seem to be making real progress with Michael."
Anne tapped the rug lightly with the ball of her foot. "Michael likes to joke around. I seem to be a good receptacle for that."
"So be it," said Janet. "That could be just what he needs at this point."
"Yes, I believe so."
"So what I wanted to say was just forget about Julia for the time being. I'll get another volunteer assigned to her. With your own work at the association, I'm sure a smaller volunteer load won't disappoint you."
Anne nodded, stood, and started for the door. She turned back. "Mrs. Warren, what do you know about Stephen?"
"Stephen?"
"Michael's roommate."
"Ah, yes," Janet said. She slipped from the desk top and went around the desk to
the swivel chair. She did not sit. "It may sound bad to say that we assigned Michael to that room because we didn't think any other student could tolerate Michael and his moods. Stephen's in a coma; you probably already know about that. We have brain waves, and they seem quite active, but who can figure what
kinds of unconscious states the human can fall into? But whatever it is, Stephen
is not to be disturbed. I would appreciate it if you would remind Michael to stay on his side of the curtain."
"Of course I will," said Anne.

"Thanks."
Anne looked out the office door, toward the activity in the main hall. Several
wheelchaired students were talking with visitors; family, possibly. She

looked
again at Janet. "Before Stephen came here, who was he? I mean, what did he
do?"
Janet sat and dug her fingers beneath a pile of manila folders, in search of
a
particular one. "What? Oh, music, he was a musician. A pianist. On the way up,
I
was told. Into classical concerts, things like that. A pity."
It felt as though cold water had been poured over Anne's lungs. She held her
breath and slid her balled fists into her pockets. "And what," she began,
"happened to him?"
The phone burred on the desk, and Janet raised an apologetic hand to Anne
before
picking up the receiver. She dropped to her seat with her "hello," and Anne
left
the office.
Michael seemed glad to be out of the infirmary. He waggled his eyebrows at
Anne
as she came into the room and raised himself up on his elbow. "Miss Zaccaria!
Did you miss me?"
Anne sat in the visitor's chair. "Sure, Michael. Are you feeling better?"
Michael snorted. "Not a whole hell of a lot better, but enough to get me out
of
there. God, you should see the nurses they have for us sick students. The old
ones all look like marines, and the young ones look like willing virgins.
Like
going from hot to cold and back to hot again all the time. It's enough to pop
your nads, if you got some."
"Are you well enough to start back into the electronics program? You haven't
done anything for nearly a month; and you know you can't stay unless you are
working toward a future."
"I've been sick. I had my emotional problems, right? I mean, you can vouch
for
that. That's why you're here."
Anne scratched her calf. "You have to look at your goals, Michael. Without
goals
you just stay put in time and don't make progress."
"I got a goal."
"What's that?"

"To get my butt scratched. You ever scratch your butt with a hook?"
Anne shook her head.
"You scratch my butt for me, Miss Zaccaria?"
"Michael, don't start--"
"I ain't trying to be gross, honest. I just got an itch."
"Michael, it's not my place to do that. There are nurses."
"Tell me about it. Okay, then my back. You scratch my back? Please?"
Anne felt her hands catch her elbows. She sat straight, shifting as far from
Michael as she could without getting up from the chair. "I'm not supposed to."
"Why?"
"I just can't. It's not professional. Therapists aren't supposed to touch
clients."
"I'm not talking like you being my shrink now. Just my friend. Please. My
back
itches."
"No, Michael."
Michael was silent for a moment. He looked away from Anne, and studied a
faint
spot on his blanket. When he looked back, his face was pinched. "I ain't
trying

to be gross," he said softly. "How about my face? Can you scratch my nose for me?"
Anne, slowly, shook her head.
"Please," he said. "Nobody ever wants to touch me."
"I can't," said Anne.
Michael watched her, and then with a quick motion, he reached out and jabbed the
play button on his tape player. Shrieking music cut the air. "Fine," he cried over it. "Sorry I asked. I didn't mean it, anyway. It was a joke. A butt scratch, shit, I just wanted a butt scratch for some jollies is all."
And then the nurses came and threatened Michael and he turned the music off.
"One of the last sets of visitors I had was quite a long time ago, said Stephen.
"But it is one I'll never forget." He blinked, and his dark brows drew together,
than apart. A strand of black, curled hair had been moved nearly into his eye,
and Anne wondered

what it would be like to reach out and push it back. "They were from a church.
Pentecostal something. Holiness something. Young people, all of them. Neatly dressed, each in a pure white outfit that made me think of angry young angels.
Even their Bibles were white. They didn't want to be here; I could hear them whispering behind the curtain. They were very frightened. But the leader, a young girl of about eighteen, quieted them, saying 'Even as you do it unto the
least of the flock you do it unto Jesus.' And in they came, smiles flashing. The
girl told me I needed to turn my life around, I needed to turn to the Lord. I told her I wasn't turning anywhere, couldn't she see that? She became flustered
with my responses, then furious. I believe I was supposed to shake in the presence of their godly and bodily wholeness. Her face was as pale as her dress.
When she finally ushered out her little group, she told me, 'You better accept
the love of the Lord. There isn't anyone else in this world who would love something like you.'"
"Christ, Stephen."
"No, it's all right," he said. His eyes closed, held, then opened slightly. "It
was a long time ago."
"You said one of the last sets of visitors were the church people. Who were the
last?"
"Two insurance salesmen. I saw who they were, and went to sleep. I think they were more than relieved. I've been asleep most of the time since."
"Stephen."
"It's all right," he said. "Really."
Stephen shut his eyes. Anne watched his face. The nurses had done only a fair job of shaving. There was a small red cut on his chin. Then Stephen looked at her.
"Why wouldn't you touch Michael?'
Anne started. "You were listening."
"Yes."
"I can't. It's not part of the job, you know. People might take it the wrong way."
"Why are you a counselor, Anne?"

"So I can help people."

"There are lots of ways to help. Doctors, physical therapists, teachers."
"Yes." But they have to touch people. I can't touch, not now, not ever. Phillip
touched me. Sweet God, he touched me and touching is nothing but pain and ...
"Your family hoped you'd be a counselor?"
"No, I don't think it mattered to them." ... anger and disgust. Touching is filth, degradation. It is losing control. Anne's feet were planted squarely on
the floor. She was ready to run. Touching is cold and hateful, like putrid, black water.
"Tell me about your family."
"I already did."
"You have a mother. A brother."
"I already did!" Anne's hand flew to her mouth and pressed there. She had screamed. "Oh, God," she said then. "I'm sorry."
"It's all right."
Anne's throat felt swollen. She swallowed and it hurt. "I didn't mean to shout.
It was rude."
"It's all right."
"Stephen," Anne began, and then hesitated. She inched herself forward on her chair. Stephen's eyes watched her calmly, and they were not eyes of a blue and
frightening ocean, but of a blue and clear sky. She saw an understanding there,
and she wanted to reach out for it.
She wanted it, but knew the only way to have it was to touch it.
She sat back. "Good night, Stephen," she said.
"Good night," he answered. And he slept.
Randy was being released from the center. The staff threw him a good-bye party,
complete with balloons and ridiculous hats and noisemakers which Randy pretended
to hate but obviously loved. He made a point of hooting his paper horn into the
ear of everyone present. Randy had landed a job in the camera room of the local
newspaper. His going away gift was a framed, fake newspaper front page, complete
with the headline "RANDY MYERS, AKA CLARK KENT, SECURES POSITION AT DAILY PRESS." Beneath the

caption was a large black and white photo of Randy, cigar in teeth, leaning over
the billiard table. A cue stick was in his hand.
"I taught him everything he knows," said Michael, as he looped about among the
partiers. "He ought to take me with him, or he'll just make a mess of things."
Anne left in the midst of the hubbub and went down to the pond behind the administration building. The sky was overcast, and mist covered the algaed water.
Water, the dark trough of fears.
She stood beside the edge. The wind buffeted her.
Her mind, wearied, could not hold back the rush of memories.
Phillip, as a boy, touching Anne in secret. First as a game, then as an obsession. Anne growing up; Phillip growing up ahead of her, and his touching becoming even more cruel. His body heavy and harsh; his immense organ tearing into her relentlessly. Anne crying each night, knowing he would come to her

and
would have no love for anything except the sensation of his own explosive release. Phillip swearing that if she told anyone, he would kill her.
Anne, promising herself over and over that if she was not killed, she would never let this happen again. She would not touch or be touched.
And then came the night when Phillip decided blood would make it more rewarding.
He was tired of the same old thing; he said he was going to change Anne just a
little, like a sculptor changing a piece of clay to make it better. With the door locked and his underwear in Anne's mouth, he carved. He took off her little
toes, stopping the blood with matches and suturing with his mother's sewing kit.
He decorated her abdomen with a toothed devil face into which he rubbed ink from
Anne's cartridge pen. Across her breasts he etched, "Don't fuck with me." The ink finished it off.
The next morning, Mother wanted to know why there were stains on the sheets. She
accused Anne of having a boyfriend in at night. She shook Anne until the confession was made. Anne took off her nightgown and her slippers. Mother shrieked and wailed, clutching her hair and tearing hunks out. Then she said, "The grace of God has left you! You are one of those deformed creatures!"
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Mother confronted Phillip.
Phillip killed Mother in the tub that evening with scalding water and an old shower curtain.
Then he had found Anne, hiding in the garage.
Anne doubled over and gagged on the bank of the pond. She could still taste the
sludge and the slime from so many years ago. She drove her fists into the wall
of her ribs, and with her head spinning, she retched violently. At her feet lay
brown leaves, stirred into tiny, spiraling patterns by the wind and the spattering of her own vomit.
She wiped her mouth. She stood up. Her vision wavered, and it was difficult to
stand straight.
She made her way to Michael's room.
Michael's tape player was on the bed table. Michael had left it on, though softly, and as Anne picked it up she could feel the faint hammering of the percussion. The player was slender and cool and Anne could wrap both hands about
it easily. Much like Phillip's cock, when she was just a young girl. With a single jerk, she pulled the cord from the wall. The table teetered, then crashed
to the floor. The music died in mid-beat.
Anne hauled the player, cord dragging, to Stephen's side of the room. There was
sweat on her neck, and it dripped to her breasts and tickled like roach legs.
She ignored it. Stephen was asleep. Anne threw the player into the sink and it
shattered on the dulled enamel.
"This is for you, Stephen," she said. "No more music. You won't have to suffer
it anymore."
She ran the water until the heat of it steamed her face and stung her eyes. She

grabbed up the pieces of broken player and squeezed them. Sharp edges cut into
her hands and she let the blood run.
"And this is for you, Phillip. Goddamn you to whatever hell there is in this world or the next."
She looked at Stephen's bed. He was awake, and watching her.
"Anne," he said.
Anne wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Blood streaked her chin.
"Tell me, Anne."

"My brother killed my mother. Then he tried to kill me."
"Tell me."
Anne looked at the dead player in the sink. The hot water continued to run. Anne
could barely catch her breath in the heat. She stepped back and licked the blood
from her hands. "He tried to kill me. He was fucking me. Ever since I can remember, he was fucking me, hurting me, and enjoying it like any other boy would enjoy baseball." She turned to Stephen and held out her wounded hands. "Touching is wrong. And he knew it. When Mother found out, he killed her. He took me down the back road to the water treatment plant and threw me into the settling pool. It was not deep, but I could not swim, and the bottom was slick
with sludge and it was rancid, Stephen, it was sewage and garbage, and I slipped
under and under and every time I came up Phillip would lean over the rail and hit me with a broom handle. It was night, and I could no longer tell the difference between- up and down, it was all black and putrid and I couldn't breathe. Phillip kept hitting me and hitting me. My blood ran into the sewage and when I screamed I swallowed the sludge."
Anne moved closer to Stephen's bed, her hands raised.
"Someone heard us. Phillip was stopped and arrested. I spent a good deal of time
in the hospital, with concussions and infections."
Stephen watched between her bloodied hands and her face.
"I wanted to help people," Anne said. "I don't think I ever can. Phillip has seen to that."
"Yes, you can."
"Tell me, Stephen. What can I do for you?"
Stephen sighed silently, his chest lifting then falling. His head rolled slightly to the left, and he stared at the light above the bed.
"Love me," he said finally.
"I do, Stephen."
His eyes blinked, the light reflecting tiny sparks. He looked back at Anne. His
mouth opened, then closed. His jaw flexed and he licked his lips with his dry tongue. "Love me," he said.
Anne hesitated. Then slowly, she lowered the side rail of the bed. She knelt beside the bed and put her head onto the pillow

beside Stephen. For a moment she held still, and then she brought her hand up to
touch Stephen's lips with her fingers. They did not move, yet she could feel the
soft blowing of his breath on her skin.
She moved back then. Stephen watched her. Then he said, "You knew about my music."
Anne nodded.
"My dreams are different now."
Anne nodded.

After a long moment, he said, "Anne, love me." His voice was certain, kind, and
sad.
Anne touched her face and it was hot and wet with the steam and her own sweat.
She touched Stephen's face and it was fevered. She traced his cheekbone, his chin, his throat, and the damp, tendoned contour of his neck. She let her palm
join her fingers, and felt slowly along his flesh among the myriad of tapes and
tubes and wires. When she reached his heart, she pressed down. The beating quickened with the pressure, and Stephen moaned.
"That hurt," Anne said.
"No."
Anne stood straight. She unbuttoned her blouse and let it drop from her shoulders. She could not look at Stephen for fear of revulsion in his eyes. She
removed her bra, and then slipped from her skirt and panties.
She looked at Stephen, and thought she saw him nod.
Anne climbed onto the foot of the bed. Beneath her knees the folded, unused blanket was cold. She moved forward, and bent over Stephen's body. Around her and beside her was the tangle of supports. Her body prickled; the veins in the
backs of her hands flushed with icy fire. She tried to reach Stephen, but the web held her back.
"I can't," she said.
Stephen looked at her.
"These are in the way. I can't."
He said nothing.
And Anne, one by one, removed the web that kept her from him. She loosened the
wires, she withdrew the needles, she pulled out the tubes. She touched the bruises and the marks on the pale

skin. "I do love you," she said.
Anne lay with Stephen. Her hands were at first soft and tentative, then grew urgent, caressing his body, caressing her own. As she touched and probed and clutched, her fingers became his fingers. Gentle, intelligent fingers studying
her and loving her.
Healing her.
She rode the current, rising and falling, her eyes closed. Stephen kissed her lips as she brought them to him, and her breasts as well, and as she lifted upward, he kissed the trembling, hot wetness between her thighs. She stretched
her arms outward, reaching for the world, and then brought them down and about
herself and Stephen, pulling inward to where there was nothing but them both.
His breathing was heavy; her heart thundered. An electrical charge hummed in the
pit of her stomach. It swelled and spread, moving downward. Anne opened her mouth to cry out silently to the ceiling. The charge stood her nerves on unbearable end, and it grew until it would hold no longer. The center of her being burst. She wailed with the pulses. And she fell, crumpled, when they were
spent.
"Dear God," she whispered. She lay against Stephen, one hand entangled in the dark curls. Their warmth made her smile.
Her fear was gone.
Then she said, "Stephen, tell me. Only if you want. Why are you here? What

put
you in this place?"
Stephen said nothing. Anne hoped he had not slipped into sleep again.
"Stephen," she said, turning over, meaning to awaken him. "Tell me why you had
to come to the center. What happened to you?"
Stephen said nothing. His closed eyes did not open.
Anne pressed her palm to his heart.
It was still.
The party was over. Back in the recreation hall, Anne could hear Michael tooting
his paper horn and calling out, "Hey, Miss Zaccaria, where are you? I'm ready to
give you that swimming lesson. What about you?"

The water in the pond did not move. The breeze had died down, and the mist was
being replaced by an impenetrable fog that sucked the form and substance from
the trees and the benches around the surface of the blackness.
There were leaves at her feet, and she kicked them off the edge of the bank and
into the pond. Small circles radiated from the disturbances, little waves moving
out and touching other waves.
Anne took off her shoes and walked barefoot to the end of the pier. The boat was
still moored there, full of leaves.
The deep water below was as dark as Stephen's hair.
Some have their dreams, others nightmares.
Stephen had his dreams now. Dreams without end.
Amen.
And Anne would now accept her nightmare.
The leaves on the water were kind, and parted at her entrance.

Alexandra
Charles L. Grant
I guess you could say I'm an easy mark for stories about dangerously seductive,
decidedly strange women. What this says about my real-life preferences, I'm not
sure, but when Charles L. Grant sent me the following introduction to a lady
named Alexandra, I knew I couldn't refuse her come-ons.
Grant is one of HDF's best-known proponents of what he calls "quiet horror."
Living in the unhurried regions of northwestern New Jersey with wife and fellow
writer, Kathryn Ptacek, he continues to write the stories that have garnered him
praise and reputation. For more than ten years, he edited the award-winning
anthology series, Shadows, publishing stories that left their readers with a
lingering chill instead of an inyour-face, cheap shot ending. He is a
traditionalist in all the best senses of that word, and his stories employ the
polished instruments of suggestion rather than the bludgeons of explicitness.
Charlie has written a succession of finely crafted novels of horror and
psychological suspense, many of them based in his personal Arkham--the town of
Oxrun Station. It's a place where most of you wouldn't want to even visit, much
less close a deal on some real estate. After you meet one of its more alluring

residents, you'll understand what I'm talking about.
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You must understand, Michael--you don't mind if I call you Michael, do you, Mr.
Vaulle?--it's difficult to talk about her.
In fact, I do this only for those I believe have an understanding beyond that which is normally given to men. Most of the time, and I feel no shame in admitting it, visitors I have incorrectly appraised pat me on the shoulder and
tell me that time, precious time, heals all wounds, brings fresh adventure, settles old scores.
Most of the time they see nothing special about the display case in my study, and the cameo on black velvet that lies in its center.
I trust you don't mind this digression. It is your appointment, of course, and
if you're pressed for time as so many youth are these days ...
No?
Splendid.
Then there's no need to bother the receptionist just yet, we can get your vitals
later. If you'll just follow me into the study--be careful of that rug, that fringe has tripped me many a time when I'm careless--I'll just switch on the light and you can see for yourself what I am talking about.
The cameo.
It's larger than most, as you've no doubt already noted--here, I have the key,
but be patient, the lock sticks now and then--and the ivory is slightly darkened
though it's been in the case for I don't know how many years. I made the gold frame myself, actually. Simple white on rose seemed somehow inadequate; I felt
she needed something ... regal, I guess. As good a word as any.
But if you think that is excess, you cannot deny that her silhouette is perfection. Well, I suppose that's rather presumptuous, isn't it. You didn't know her. You couldn't tell if it were perfection or not. You'll have to take my
word, I'm afraid. I guarantee it's her. The curls that cap and frame her skull--her hair was black--that faint uptilt of the chin, the hollow of the cheek where three fingertips could lie and feel satin, the eye that even in person seems to follow you everywhere, like some cheap religious painting. Quite the angel in profile; quite the demon when she stares at you in anger, something I am fortunate not to have witnessed myself.
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Time passes, so many years, and I still, in my dreams, see the way she looked at
me at Derick Arman's party. If you don't know him, surely you must know the place--a ridiculously ornate Victorian down near the hospital on King Street. Red and cream. White porch. Stained glass in the attic window. The man has San
Francisco taste, no question about it, but his parties weren't to be ignored.
She was there.
I was alone.
When she looked at me ... in my dreams, lord, in my dreams that even when I walk
through these halls do not leave me ...
Apologies, my friend. Sometimes I drift, but I can assure you it isn't reverie.
I'm much too old for that now.
We were talking about the look.
It was a curious one, as a matter of fact. At first I had the impression she

felt as if she knew me, or had perhaps seen me somewhere before. Distant acquaintance. Well met and forgotten at some other party, glimpsed on the train
platform, brushed by on the street. It almost made me smile so she'd either nod
or look away.
I didn't.
I turned instead to my somewhat overdressed host and asked some idle question about his financial business, received some equally inane response in which I had no interest, and passed the rest of the evening making sure that those who
wanted to see and speak to me did, avoiding those whose lives had no bearing on
mine.
After my taste and fashion, I was enjoying myself.
The food had been catered, the wine freshly brought up from the cellar, the guests a mixture of the loud and the louder--the mice and the social lions.
There was music from somewhere, speakers cleverly in the wall, not terribly intrusive, not distinctive enough to make one stop to listen.
The conversation as well was unintrusive to decent thinking and listening.
You can see, there, in the expression, that she too cared little for sound that
meant nothing to her. Not quite haughty, as you

might expect. Distant. Very distant.
I touched her when Stanley died just as the first guests were making noises about their departure.
He was an obese man was Stanley Pringle, florid face made bloodlike by the screaming white hair he seldom bothered to have cut. White suit completely out
of season. Pointed black shoes. A self-styled connoisseur and collector of antique automobiles which had, for some unfathomable reason, made him extremely
wealthy, and just as obnoxious. He called me Mat, Mats, and sometimes, God help
us, Matsie. Immediate familiarity was his aim, I suppose. I had given him no permission to address me that way, but he was the sort of man who took it anyway.
Hateful.
Boorish.
That night he was out on the porch and lecturing, for that is all he could do when he was drinking, when, without warning according to those who were there,
he toppled. Not sagged. Not folded. Not a damn dramatic thing. Toppled as though
clubbed from behind. Before anyone could move to assist him, he was prone. Blood
from a smashed nose in bright spatters across the wood flooring. Hair thrown forward. Right hand grasping a shattered tumbler, a piece of which had been driven through his palm like a nail, the spike severing a vein and staining his
skin a dark crimson.
Like fools we gathered at the door, at the living room windows, to see what all
the commotion was about, to gasp at the figure we finally did see, to shout in
varied stages of controlled hysteria instructions to Derick about the police, an
ambulance, someone even wanted to know if there was a doctor in the house. There

was. But I knew the man was dead and my services would be of no use save to expiate those hovering helplessly around him from further involvement.
Now look closely as I hold this to the light, don't worry, you won't hurt it, not with just a look, and you can see how delicate are the shadows that are formed by the engraved lines beneath her eyes.
You see?
That's precisely the way she looked when she came up behind me and peered over
my shoulder at poor Stanley. She murmured a
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question; I told her Stanley had evidently made one speech too many, drank one
scotch too many, and all that he carried on his enormous back had finally caught
up with what was left of his heart. She giggled, though I hadn't meant it in jest. She told me her name was Alexandra Copeland, and it was a terrible thing
to admit but even though she had exchanged a few words with him earlier, she felt nothing. A man had died, and though she supposed she ought to at least feel
something, she felt nothing at all. I half turned and explained that the death
of a stranger was, in effect, no death at all to other strangers. She gave me that look again. Matson Fremont, I told her in case her memory desired jogging;
but she made no sign of recognition. She just looked. And my profession began to
wonder about shock and such things, to such a degree that I suggested that perhaps she might like to sit down, have a glass of water or sherry; all the other women were playing their roles quite well, snaring their men in feigned helplessness and horror, and I'd imagined she would be ready to do the same.
She was not.
She merely glanced at the body one last time, touched a gloved finger to the beauty mark mole just below her nose--you can see it, just here, that bump, no,
Michael, please, you can't touch it!-- and decided that the party was over, she
might as well go home.
Derick prevented me from doing the gentlemanly thing in offering her my company
by grabbing my arm and absolutely insisting I do something, people were afraid,
there might be a disease or food poisoning or something. I could not, told him
so, nevertheless allowed myself to be hauled onto the porch to establish the motions and the routine which, while doing Stanley no earthly good at all, served to reassure the others that help was indeed within arm's reach.
By the time it was over, police and ambulance and onlookers departed, she was gone.
I walked home alone, thinking about Stanley, thinking about the woman, finally
thinking about myself and what I might have done with my life, what fortunes I
might have made, had I chosen to live in a major city instead of a village like
Oxrun Station. Death affected me that way. Spawned an introspection that usually
lasted
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but an hour or so. I suspect part of it came from my facing that challenging

spectre every time I donned a surgical gown, every time I picked up a clamp, a
scalpel, took a calming breath, and invaded another's fortress; and the rest was
the most natural of reactions to seeing someone you know forever lost to further
conversation, conviviality, a handshake, a nod, a sharing of tempers.
She called me that night.
You can see, as I turn it... so ... how the lips seem to smile. Not much. An
imagined twitch of the lips. It almost borders on amusement, wouldn't you say?
She called me that night.
In my dreams she always calls me.
She asks if I wouldn't mind spending some time with her the next evening, that
the death of the stranger was not, as she had thought, so terribly remote. She
can't seem to rid her imagination of his image. I accept readily; my mood
demands it. She smiles with her voice--that twitch, just a hint--and leaves me
to midnight, to the full moon that casts rooftops in mercury and sidewalks in
gray shrouds, leaves me to walk the hails and wonder if she is attracted to me.
I am not in love. I have no feeling toward her one way or the other, yet I am
oddly excited, so much so that I cancel most of my appointments the next day and
spend time in the park picking autumn flowers for her. In my dreams. Autumn
flowers. Which I hand to her at her front door, as arranged. Which she brings to
her face and breathes. Breathes. Inhales. Until they shrivel, brown, grow
brittle, fall to her feet, and shatter on her shoes.
I think nothing of it.
I take her hand.
We walk.
Through the streets of the Station, conjuring stories of the lives we see behind
the lights in the windows of the houses on the blocks that we travel; telling
life stories that are lies but are determined to be grand, enticing,
enthralling, captivating as a web with a single droplet of rain on the uppermost
strand where it catches the moonlight and turns it to pearl.
We do not kiss upon parting.

We never kiss.
Instead we agree to attend a dinner party together in one of the mansions out on
Williamston Pike.
We meet.
We smile somewhat shyly, endearing for her, rather foreign for me.
We feed.
A woman dies in the midst of a silly game of hide-and-seek on the back lawn.
I am called because I am who I am and the only one of my profession at that
party that night.
She leaves without me. I understand. Tending the dead among the living is not
the way to run a courtship. I call her later. She apologizes. She wants to see
me again.
As I dress, I note how distinguished the silver is among the dark of my hair. I
had not noticed it before. Surely it had not been there a few days ago. But I am

not concerned, for in my profession youth is an anathema to those who demand the
charade of age.
I feel a bit tired as I hurry down the stairs. Leaning against the newel post, I
catch my breath, shake my head. Too much excitement, Matson, I tell myself; she
is only a woman, after all. Nevertheless, I tire.
And as I leave the house--this house, in fact--I note that I am trembling.
We meet.
I take her hand.
A hardness in her palm, and when I hold it under a street lamp I see a cameo
there. A sly look. I smile. It is her. She is mine.
Unless, of course, it is the other way around.
I slip it into my coat pocket and we walk through the streets, telling stories,
telling fantasies, stopping by a collie standing perplexed on a corner so she
may stroke it until its legs begin to quiver, its fur begins to shed, its teeth
begin to fail, its eyes begin to fade, and we walk on over the bones, telling
stories, telling lies.
In my dreams she kisses me at last on her porch.
In my dreams I hold the cameo as she closes the door behind her.
298
Notice, if you will, the lock on the display case.
I envy your envy, and would that I could allow you to hold it, to feel the ivory
as cool as spring and hard as ice, to sense the smile, touch the hair.
Would that I could.
But if I did, she would be yours, not mine.
And age comes soon enough, without hurrying it along.
Oh, good lord, can you ever forgive me, Michael! You've come all this way for
your appointment, and here I am, behaving like a dotty old fool, taking up your
valuable time. No, it's all right, I sometimes get this way, though damned if I
know why. Not loneliness, I can assure you. Not loneliness. And here I am,
babbling again. My apologies.
Come this way, please.
The examination room.
Not so many people in here these days, I'm afraid. I'm not at the hospital at
all anymore. Please, take off your shirt. Few friends, fewer patients. They fade
away too soon, don't you think? They come, they literally bare themselves to
you, and then they fade away.
Sit up here, please.
Michael Vaulle.
Do you know ... did you know ... you know, Derick told me just last week that
there is talk in the Station about me now, the patients who come in here, take
their examinations, take their prescriptions, follow the instructions, and
...
fade away. It used to be--deep breath, now, sorry the lens is so cold, a cliched
stethoscope hazard--it used to be that people preferred an older physician. A
bit of gray in the hair. A few wrinkles. Experience. Manner. All things to all
men. The patients expected it, demanded it.
I imagine they'll all be gone soon.
And from all that gossip, malicious and curiously amusing, I expect there'll

be
no one to take their place. All that talk might even force me to move on, leave
the Station, establish myself in a new place.
Not that I'm concerned, of course. I'm not exactly living in
299
poverty, as you can see. I'll survive the innuendo, as I always have, as I always will.
Well. A little liquid in the lungs. You're smoking too much, I daresay.
I myself keep as trim as I can, and do my best to give my patients what they want. I have never in my life prescribed the wrong thing. A placebo sometimes,
however, such a miracle they are, and sometimes, listening to them as you are so
kindly listening to me, I hear what they're really saying.
And I give them that as well.
Now if you'll just hold out your arm, I can wrap this thing around it, pump it
up, see what's cooking. Your heart seems sound, I can say that much. Your color
is good. Except for those lungs, you really ought to quit smoking, I don't know
that I'll find anything wrong. Of course, you never can tell just by looking, can you.
For example, the moment you walked in, I knew exactly who you were.
Mr. Vaulle.
Don't be so surprised. Of course I did.
Experience, remember?
Your mother was a fine woman, and was my patient for many, many years. You think
I wouldn't notice the uncanny resemblance even after all this time, even though
I never treated you? You have her eyes and that blunt, oh-so-determined chin.
No, I knew right away. And something else as well--you think I don't know who it
is who's been talking about me to the others, my colleagues and friends, questioning my methods, remarking upon my age, the fate of my patients, suggesting of all things retirement before shame-- or something like that--drives me away in some kind of disgrace?
I am old, young man, not senile.
In my dreams she holds me; she tells me things.
In the cameo you can see nothing that lies below the shoulder, but I have. I have. Ageless. Soft. Gold to a physician's hands. A miser's hands. So few have
been there, and have been as fortunate as I to come away whole.
So few.
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In my dreams.
Please, Michael, stop fussing. You can dress now. We are done. The charade is over.
No, put that checkbook away. There's no need. There'll be no charge. It was, if
I may say so without giving offense, rather amusing, waiting to see how long it
would be before you knew I had caught on.
For your sake, I'll say nothing to anyone about your visit.
You loved your mother. You are concerned. She was a wonderful lady. I miss her
too. Before her time, as some might say.
But I fear, Michael, that I knew her somewhat better than you did. It's true,

no
call to be upset. She was, and you know I'm right, the sort of parent who never,
ever wanted to bother their children. Not a martyr, simply considerate, as she
defined the word. You did not really know what she wanted when she learned of the cancer. I did.
I always do.
And if--please, come this way, to reception--if you are anything like your mother in temperament, you'll not let this crusade, if that's the proper word,
drop, will you? I didn't think so. We see things differently, you and I, my friend, and while you have youth and vigor and a lifetime ahead on your side, I
have something else.
Would you like to see the cameo again?
I thought not.
301
The Good Book
G. Wayne Miller
My first encounter with G. Wayne Miller's work was a short story in an anthology
that happened to be brimming over with work by new writers. That I still remember Miller's piece and have forgotten almost all the others speaks very well for it indeed. I met Wayne at a World Fantasy Convention in Nashville in 1986, and we became friends. He's visited me in Baltimore; and I've freeloaded
on him up in Pascoag, Rhode Island. He sent me at least four stories that just
weren't right for Borderlands, and I had to reject all of them. Dumping on stories by your friends can be a problem, but Wayne showed me how much of pro he
is. He never carped or bitched; he just kept sending stories until I read one I
liked enough to buy.
G. Wayne Miller works full-time for the providence Journal Bulletin and lives with his wife, Alexis, and two young daughters in a small mill town in the northwest corner of Rhode Island. His first novel, Thunder Rise, received good
reviews and there are plenty of others on the way. In case you were wondering,
the G. stands for George, even though I usually tell everybody it's for Gwynnplane. ...
302
"Jesus save us," said the gray-haired woman as she looked out the kitchen of the
solitary house that stood back apiece from Bob's Texaco. Bob's was the only gas
for twenty-five miles in either direction on this backwater stretch of State Route 55.
"What is it?" Bob asked. He sounded tired, as if not really caring to hear her
answer. As if he'd never really cared to hear any of Phyliss Morton's answers over the thirty-seven childless years she'd been his lawfully wedded wife.
"There's a man on the flagpole."
"Say again?"
"You heard me. A man on the flagpole. At the very top. Come here. See?"
No question Phyliss had lost more of her marbles of late, but a wife was a wife
and so Bob trudged obediently across the kitchen floor to the window. He

looked
out at the rundown station, the deserted blacktop road, the yard littered
with
junk cars and washing machines and doorless ice chests. Across the road were
the
pine-covered Berkshire hills. The first pink of day already was painted
across
the eastern sky.
"Well, I'll be damned!" Bob was focusing now on the flagpole--his flagpole,
the
backbreaking fruit of his labor three decades ago--still rising tall and
straight from the shaggy lawn. There was no faulting Phyliss's eyes: sure
enough, a man was impaled on the top of that pole, his body limp and bent like
a
piece of spaghetti draped over the tine of a fork.
"I think he's dead," Phyliss said.
"Sure'd be a miracle if he were alive," Bob said, his voice awakening. "I'll
be
damned."
"Ain't no kid," Phyliss said, squinting. "Too big to be a kid. Anybody you
know?"
"Dunno," Bob muttered. "Can't tell from here. Have to get a closer look. I'll
be
damned. I'll be goddamned."
They peered, the two of them, without saying anything for the next several
minutes. It was the male species up there, all right, and no lightweight kid,
as
Phyliss had noted. The guy could've topped two hundred pounds and it wouldn't
have surprised Bob one bit. He was clothed: wool jacket, jeans, work boots,
just
exactly

what a reasonable sort would pull on for an April day in western
Massachusetts.
You couldn't see his face, only the back of his head--thick black hair, a
strong
neck--but you could well imagine nothing very pretty was written on that
face.
The pole had punctured his body at chest level, but had not penetrated
straight
through his back. No doubt it was the bones that made up the rear of his
ribcage
that had prevented him from dropping to the ground. At least that's the way
Bob
figured it.
"Goddamn!" Bob exclaimed again.
"Ain't moving 'tall," said Phyliss. "No question, he's dead."
"Wonder how the devil he got there."
"Probably just that way."
"What way?"
"The devil."
"Now, Mother." That had always been his and everybody else's name for her,
Mother, even though the Good Lord had denied her kids of her own. She'd had
the
name so long Bob could no longer remember how she'd earned it, whether as a
bad
joke or something else.
"Don't 'now Mother' me, you hear?" she said angrily. "You're only showing
your
ignorance of these matters."

"Ain't no spring chicken," Bob offered.
"Thirty years old, if he's a day."
"Guess I better call Sheriff Thompson."
"Oh, no, you don't."
Bob shrugged his shoulders. "Suit yourself. I suspect he'll be here soon enough,
anyways."
And he was. Less than two hours later, as Bob was outside switching on the stations' two pumps (regular, unleaded). Sheriff Thompson pulled up in the town's only cruiser, a 1979 Plymouth with 113,000 miles on the odometer. By then, Phyliss had locked herself into her room and was into the Good Book something serious.
"Recognize him?" Sheriff Thompson asked Bob after he'd sized up the situation.
"Never seen him before in my life," Bob answered. Like Sheriff Thompson, Bob was
rubbernecking, looking up again and again
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at the man's face, which featured a closed mouth and eyes that were dark but expressionless.
"Any idea how he got up there?" Sheriff Thompson asked.
"Nope."
"Wasn't her, was it, Bob?"
"Phyliss?" Bob crackled. "She's sixty-five, sheriff, can't hardly get to the John without that cane of hers. How's she gonna be putting dead folks up on flagpoles? Have any idea, sheriff?"
"Can't say as I do."
"Didn't think so."
"Guess we better give a ring to the electric company," Sheriff Thompson said. "They got a cherry picker. Going to need one to get the poor turkey down."
"Can't let you do that," Bob said matter-of-factly.
"Can't'? How's that, 'can't'?"
"Mother won't permit it. Until she's had time to think on it, she says he's got
to stay there. She's got her nose buried in the Book, even now."
"What's going on here, Bob?"
"She says he must be some kind of sign."
"'Sign'? What the hell's that mean, Bob, 'sign'?"
"Dunno. She ain't saying. You know how she can be, sheriff, with her religion.
You knowed her long enough."
"Well, Phyliss or no Phyliss, I'm gonna get that poor sucker down," Sheriff Thompson announced.
"No, you ain't," Bob said.
"And why's that?"
"'Cause you're standing on private property, sheriff, that's why, and this here's America, last I checked," Bob said. "You're gonna have to get some kind
of warrant before you come back here. Now don't go getting all shook with me. Them's Mother's words, not mine. You know how Mother can be."
Turns out Sheriff Thompson wasn't able to get that warrant. Try as he might, he
couldn't put his finger on any law pertaining to removal of dead folks from private flagpoles. But law wasn't the only issue as far as Sheriff Thompson was
concerned. There was another sticky wicket: Bob had warned him that Phyliss was
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threatening to shoot anyone who tried to get the man down until she was good and
ready. And while he doubted she would go that far, he knew she was off her

rocker just enough not to want to chance it.
So that first day and that first night, Phyliss stayed locked inside her room.
Every now and then, Bob could hear her voice, hushed and somber, and he could smell burning beeswax, but he knew better than to barge in on her. When she had the Good Book out--there was never any predicting when she would have the Good Book out--there was nothing you could do but kick back and wait. These things just had to run their course.
Until dark, Bob spent the majority of his day outside. Mostly, he was settled into his plastic-web lawn chair, pulling on a pipe and listening to talk shows from over the mountain on his transistor radio. Occasionally, he had a customer.
All told, perhaps eight or nine that day--not an unusually slow day for this time of year, and not an unusually busy day, either, but just sort of right there in the middle.
About half of those eight or nine didn't notice the man on the flagpole. It was kind of funny, Bob thought, how folks could be. Wasn't just people on flagpoles they missed, either. Why, it was impossible to count the tourists who'd asked him what road they were on, when the sign saying this was State Route 55 was not more than a mile down the road and bigger than the side of a barn. And Lord only knew how many folks wanted to charge their gas, when the sign requesting cash only was taped right to the pump, both sides.
Those who did notice the man were set off by it. In his conversations, Bob allowed as how he couldn't blame them. It was, after all, not a pretty sight; for sure, you wouldn't be seeing a color shot of it on next year's chamber of commerce brochures. In fact, about the only good you could say about the stranger was he didn't have any guts showing and there wasn't any dried blood to speak of dripping down the pole or splattered on the ground below.
"How'd he get there?" they all wanted to know after their initial queasiness had quieted down some.
"Ain't got the foggiest," Bob answered.

"Why doesn't someone get him down?" was their inevitable next question.
"The wife won't let them. Oh, she will sooner or later, it's just that there's gonna have to be a little wait."
And with every one of those motorists, all of them out of towners, that was the end of the questioning.
Sitting there on his lawn chair that day, Bob had occasion to remember when, and why, he'd put up that twenty-five-foot pole. It was going on thirty years ago now, the summer Phyliss had miscarried and they had to do emergency female-type surgery to save her life, and for a spell there, it was touch and go, no one knowing if she would make it. Acting on an impulse he never bothered to try to understand, Bob, who'd always had a knack for woodworking and carpentry, had built that pole while she was still in the hospital recuperating--recuperating and discovering the Good Book. He built it "to last forever," as he sometimes

later boasted. He cut the ash himself from a grove up in the Berkshire Hills, planed the ash into straight pieces, sectioned and glued the pieces, painted the completed pole white, and dug the hole and poured the concrete for the foundation. He even erected it himself, alone, with the help only of an ingenious series of cables and pulleys attached to nearby trees. It was nice, every now and again, remembering when he'd still been young enough to tackle a project like that.

By morning of the second day, word about the man on the pole was spreading through town, and more than a few of the locals were making the drive out to Bob's Texaco to have a look-see for themselves. Unlike the out of towners, the locals were not so queasy. Weird things had happened before in Hancock (all those people over the years who'd disappeared under strange circumstances up at Windham's Folly, the old quarry, just to give one example), and more likely than not, they would happen again. Especially when Phyliss was involved. Everybody knew how different she'd been since losing her baby so long ago. Everybody had heard the talk of the strange goings-on out at her place, talk of funny noises and tourists who'd mysteriously disappeared and Bible-thumping and candles burning late into the night. Who knew

the truth of any of it, but since when did truth ever get in the way of a juicy rumor?

None of the locals seemed to care one whit who the man on the pole was, long as he wasn't one of their own--and Sheriff Thompson had already established that by taking pictures with a Polaroid camera, then comparing those shots to his missing persons file (which had only two entries: Billy Williams, who wandered away in a drunken fit from time to time but always did turn up again; and twenty-three-year-old George Aliens, a faggot since eighth grade, rumored to have run off to live with a guy who wore dresses).

How the stranger had wound up there thirty feet in the air was, however, a subject of great debate.

"He must have dropped from a plane," was one theory.

"Ain't no doubt he shinnied up there drunk and then stuck hisself," was another.

"Got what he deserved for trying some fool stunt like that, you ask me."

"Phyliss's got something to do with it, mark my words," was a third.

"You oughtta charge a buck a head admission, Bob," allowed one man. "You'd be on easy street in no time."

Phyliss came out of her room just once the second day. She stood at the door of the house, looked up at the top of the flagpole, and went back inside without uttering a word.

On the afternoon of the third day, a thunderstorm of frightening proportions ripped through Hancock, spawning tornadoes that ripped up Elise Brett's barn and knocked Jimmy Carson's trash truck over and blew all of the windows out of the Hancock school bus, unoccupied at the time, thank the Good Lord. Bob, who took

cover inside a garage that hadn't seen business since before the flagpole went
up, was betting sure that the storm would snap the pole. It did not, although the pole did sway and creak terribly, all the while producing sounds like an animal in pain. Neither did the man up there become dislodged, although his clothes became a tattered mess. Phyliss emerged briefly after the storm had passed. Seeing that the stranger was still aloft, she pronounced that fact to be
the work of the Lord and then disappeared back inside.
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Morning of the fourth day broke clear and cool. When Bob went out to switch on
the pumps, he noticed a flock of crows had finally found the body and were picking at the head, exposing the skull in one spot; he scared them off with his
shotgun, the same weapon Phyliss had threatened to turn on Sheriff Thompson. Along about noon, Phyliss walked into the sunshine. Her face was drawn, her gait
tired and unsteady, but for the first time since the whole affair had begun, she
was smiling. She told Bob that it was time, the man could now safely come down.
Those were her precise words: "It's time. He can now safely come down."
"Who is he, Mother?" Bob asked.
"The son we've waited for all these years."
"Say again?"
"He's my baby."
"But that can't be," Bob said, ruffled for the first time since this whole dang
thing started.
"But it is."
"How can you know?"
"It's written here," she said, patting the Good Book. "It was only a matter of
finding it."
"But it don't make no sense."
"Some things weren't meant to make no sense."
"But how'd he get up there, Mother?"
"The Lord works in strange and mysterious ways," she said. "Now let's get him down. I want him off of there before that sheriff comes nosing around again. It's only a matter of time 'fore he hooks up with the DA."
Bob complied. It took the better part of the morning, and it required ladder work and a clever placement of ropes and pulleys, and it strained Bob's back something fierce, but by lunchtime, he had the man down. Using a wheelbarrow, he
finally got him inside and into the room Phyliss had so carefully prepared, a room that had been empty and locked going on three decades.
"Now what?" Bob asked her when they'd arranged the body, surprisingly limp and
soft and not nearly as bad smelling as he'd expected, in the middle of the white-sheeted bed. Over the bed a
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hand-crafted animal mobile had been hung.
"We must seek His forgiveness."
"Meantime, we got ourselves a rotting body. 'Fore long, it's gonna stink something awful."
Phyliss struck him then, the back of her hand across his mouth. A pencil of blood trickled down his chin. He turned away.
"Shame," she said. "Sinner. Does He not promise us Resurrection? Let us pray."
Bob and Phyliss were not seen the fifth and sixth days, a Friday and a

Saturday.
The shades to their house were drawn, and a handlettered sign the words CLOSED
TODAY appeared on the gas pumps next to the one that proclaimed CASH ONLY.
Sheriff Thompson noticed that the body was gone, of course, and he came knocking
on their door, and when there was no answer, and when he could not peek through
the shades, he got back in his cruiser and drove away. First thing Monday
morning, he was going to get a search warrant. He was going to go through that
place with a fine-toothed comb. He was going to make some arrests. He was going
to raise holy hell. He was the sheriff. Things had gone far enough.
At dawn the seventh day, Sunday, a new body was observed on the pole. It was
Bob's, and the coroner who eventually examined it concluded that he had died up
there, although how that could be was a mystery he reckoned would never be
solved.
Before the sun had climbed over the Berkshire Hills, the house and gas station
went up in flames. The flagpole, and Bob, were not touched. There were no bodies
found in the ashes of the house. No sign of Phyliss. Only a report that she had
been seen leaving town in Bob's Chevy wagon, a dark-haired young man behind the
wheel.
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BY BIZARRE HANDS
Joe R. Lansdale
For Scott Cupp
About three years ago, I wrote a column in which I mentioned Joe Lansdale as one
of the most underrated writers in the business. In 1988, Joe won the Horror
Writers of America Bram Stoker Award for best short story, so all that's
changing. He writes with a pure, clear, wholly original voice that yanks you to
attention from the first sentence and never lets up. Reading his prose is like
watching Jose Canseco in the batting cage-- seemingly effortless, deceptive
natural power. This guy is one of our best, friends. Have no doubts about that.
In addition to crafting some of the most memorable stories of the past five
years, Lansdale has given us novels such as The Drive-In, The Night Runners, and
Cold in July. He is also working on some film scripts, plus novels and
anthologies in the genres of suspense and westerns.
Joe Lansdaie lives in Nacogdoches, Texas, with his two kids and his wife, Karen.
Of the following story, I can only tell you I think Joe has created one of the
most wholly loathsome characters you'll meet in a long, long time.
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When the traveling preacher heard about the Widow Case and her retarded girl, he
set out in his black Dodge to get over there before Halloween night.
Preacher Judd, as he called himself--though his name was really Billy Fred
Williams--had this thing for retarded girls, due to the fact that his sister had

been simple-headed, and his mama always said it was a shame she was probably going to burn in hell like a pan of biscuits forgot in the oven, just on account
of not have a full set of brains.
This was a thing he had thought on considerable, and this considerable thinking
made it so he couldn't pass up the idea of baptising and giving some God-training to female retards. It was something he wanted to do in the worst way, though he had to admit these wasn't any burning desire in him to do the same for boys or men or women that were half-wits, but due to his sister having
been one, he certainly had this thing for girl simples.
And he had this thing for Halloween, because that was the night the Lord took his sister to hell, and he might have taken her to glory had she had any bible-learning or God-sense. But she didn't have a drop, and it was partly his
own fault, because he knew about God and could sing some hymns pretty good. But
he'd never turned a word of benediction or gospel music in her direction. Not one word. Nor had his mama, and his papa wasn't around to do squat.
The old man ran off with a bucktoothed laundry woman that used to go house to house taking in wash and bringing it back the next day, but when she took in their wash, she took in Papa too, and she never brought either of them back. And
if that wasn't bad enough, the laundry contained everything they had in the way
of decent clothes, including a couple of pairs of nice dress pants and some pin-striped shirts like niggers wear to funerals. This left him with one old pair of faded overalls that he used to wear to slop the hogs before the critters
killed and ate Granny and they had to get rid of them because they didn't want
to eat nothing that had eaten somebody they knew. So, it wasn't bad enough Papa
ran off with a beaver-toothed wash woman and his sister was a drooling retard,
he now had only the one pair of ugly, old overalls to wear to school, and this
gave the other kids three things to tease him about, and they never missed a chance to do it. Well, four things. He was kind

of ugly too.
It got tiresome.
Preacher Judd could remember nights waking up with his sister crawled up in the
bed alongside him, lying on her back, eyes wide open, her face bathed in cool moonlight, picking her nose and eating what she found, while he rested on one elbow and tried to figure why she was that way.
He finally gave up figuring, decided that she ought to have some fun, and he could have some fun too. Come Halloween, he got him a bar of soap for marking up
windows and a few rocks for knocking out some, and he made his sister and himself ghostsuits out of old sheets in which he cut mouth and eye holes.
This was her fifteenth year and she had never been trick-or-treating. He had designs that she should go this time, and they did, and later after they'd done
it, he walked her back home, and later yet, they found her out back of the house
in her ghostsuit, only the sheet had turned red because her head was bashed in

with something and she had bled out like an ankle-hung hog. And someone had turned her trick-or-treat sack--the handle of which was still clutched in her fat grip--inside out and taken every bit of candy she'd gotten from the neighbors.
The sheriff came out, pulled up the sheet and saw that she was naked under it,
and he looked her over and said that she looked raped to him, and that she had
been killed by bizarre hands.
Bizarre hands never did make sense to Preacher Judd, but he loved the sound of
it, and never did let it slip away, and when he would tell about his poor sister, naked under the sheet, her brains smashed out and her trick-or-treat bag
turned inside out, he'd never miss ending the story with the sheriff's line about her having died by bizarre hands.
It had a kind of ring to it.
He parked his Dodge by the roadside, got out and walked up to the Widow Case's,
sipping on a FROSTY ROOT BEER. But even though it was late October, the Southern
sun was as hot as Satan's ass and the root beer was anything but frosty.
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Preacher Judd was decked out in his black suit, white shirt and black loafers with black and white checked socks, and he had on his black hat, which was short-brimmed and made him look, he thought, exactly like a traveling preacher
ought to look.
Widow Case was out at the well, cranking a bucket of water, and nearby, running
hell out of a hill of ants with a stick she was waggling, was the retarded girl,
and Preacher Judd thought she looked remarkably like his sister.
He came up, took off his hat and held it over his chest as though he were pressing his heart into proper place, and smiled at the widow with all his gold-backed teeth.
Widow Case put one hand on a bony hip, used the other to prop the bucket of water on the well-curbing. She looked like a shaved weasel, Preacher Judd thought, though her ankles weren't shaved a bit and were perfectly weasel-like.
The hair there was thick and black enough to be mistaken for thin socks at a distance.
"Reckon you've come far enough," she said. "You look like one of them Jehova Witnesses or such. Or one of them kind that run around with snakes in their teeth and hop to nigger music."
"No ma'm, I don't hop to nothing, and last snake I seen I run over with my car."
"You here to take up money for missionaries to give to them starving African niggers? If you are, forget it. I don't give to the niggers around here, sure ain't giving to no hungry foreign niggers that can't even speak English."
"Ain't collecting money for nobody. Not even myself."
"Well, I ain't seen you around here before, and I don't know you from white rice. You might be one of them mash murderers for all I know."
"No ma'm, I ain't a mash murderer, and I ain't from around here. I'm from East
Texas."
She gave him a hard look. "Lots of niggers there."
"Place is rotten with them. Can't throw a dog tick without you've hit a burr-head in the noggin'. That's one of the reasons I'm traveling through here,

so I can talk to white folks about God. Talking to niggers is like," and he lifted a hand to point, "talking to that well-curbing there, only that well-curbing is smarter and a lot less likely to sass, since it ain't expecting
no civil rights or a
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chance to crowd up with our young'ns in schools. It knows its place and it stays
there, and that's something for that well-curbing, if it ain't nothing for niggers."
"Amen."
Preacher Judd was feeling pretty good now. He could see she was starting to eat
out of his hand. He put on his hat and looked at the girl. She was on her elbows
now, her head down and her butt up. The dress she was wearing was way too short
and had broken open in back from her having outgrown it. Her panties were dirt-stained and there was gravel, like little b.b.s hanging off of them. He thought she had legs that looked strong enough to wrap around an alligator's neck and choke it to death.
"Cindereller there," the widow said, noticing he was watching, "ain't gonna have
to worry about going to school with niggers. She ain't got the sense of a nigger. She ain't got no sense at all. A dead rabbit knows more than she knows.
All she does is play around all day, eat bugs and such and drool. In case you haven't noticed, she's simple."
"Yes ma'm, I noticed. Had a sister the same way. She got killed on a Halloween
night, was raped and murdered and had her trickor-treat candy stolen, and it was
done, the sheriff said, by bizarre hands."
"No kiddin'?"
Preacher Judd held up a hand. "No kiddin'. She went on to hell, I reckon, 'cause
she didn't have any God talk in her. And retard or not, she deserved some so she
wouldn't have to cook for eternity. I mean, think on it. How hot it must be down
there, her boiling in her own sweat, and she didn't do nothing, and it's mostly
my fault cause I didn't teach her a thing about the Lord Jesus and his daddy, God."
Widow Case thought that over. "Took her Halloween candy too, huh?"
"Whole kitandkaboodle. Rape, murder and candy theft, one fatal swoop. That's why
I hate to see a young'n like yours who might not have no Word of God in her...
Is she without training?"
"She ain't even toilet trained. You couldn't perch her on the outdoor convenience if she was sick and her manage to hit the hole. She can't do nothing
that don't make a mess. You can't teach her
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a thing. Half the time she don't even know her name." As if to prove this, Widow
Case called, "Cindereller."
Cinderella had one eye against the ant hill now and was trying to look down the

hole. Her butt was way up and she was rocking forward on her knees.
"See," said Widow Case, throwing up her hands. "She's worse than any little ole
baby, and it ain't no easy row to hoe with her here and me not having a man around to do the heavy work."
"I can see that ... By the way, call me Preacher Judd. And can I help you tote
that bucket up to the house there?"
"Well now," said Widow Case, looking all the more like a weasel, "I'd appreciate
that kindly."
He got the bucket and they walked up to the house. Cinderella followed, and pretty soon she was circling around him like she was a shark closing in for the
kill, the circles each time getting a mite smaller. She did this by running with
her back bent and her knuckles almost touching the ground. Ropes of saliva dripped out of her mouth.
Watching her, Preacher Judd got a sort of warm feeling all over. She certainly
reminded him of his sister. Only she had liked to scoop up dirt, dog mess and stuff as she ran, and toss it at him. It wasn't a thing he thought he'd missed
until just that moment, but now the truth was out and he felt a little teary-eyed. He half-hoped Cinderella would pick up something and throw it on him.
The house was a big, drafty thing circled by a wide flower bed that didn't look
to have been worked in years. A narrow porch ran halfway around it, and the front porch had man-tall windows on either side of the door.
Inside, Preacher Judd hung his hat on one of the foil wrapped rabbit ears perched on top of an old SYLVANIA TV set, and followed the widow and her child
into the kitchen.
The kitchen had big iron frying pans hanging on wall pegs, and there was a framed embroidery that read GOD WATCHES OVER THIS HOUSE. It had been faded by sunlight coming through the window over the sink.
Preacher Judd sat the bucket on the ice box--the old sort that used real ice--then they all went back to the living room. Widow

Case told him to sit down and asked him if he'd like some ice-tea.
"Yes, this bottle of FROSTY ain't so good." He took the bottle out of his coat
pocket and gave it to her.
Widow Case held it up and squinted at the little line of liquid in the bottom.
"You gonna want this?"
"No ma'am, just pour what's left out and you can have the deposit." He took his
Bible from his other pocket and opened it. "You don't mind if I try and read a
verse or two to your Cindy, do you?"
"You make an effort on that while I fix us some tea. And I'll bring some things
for ham sandwiches, too."
"That would be right nice. I could use a bite."
Widow Case went to the kitchen and Preacher Judd smiled at Cinderella. "You know
tonight's Halloween, Cindy?"
Cinderella pulled up her dress, picked a stray ant off her knee and ate it.

"Halloween is my favorite time of the year," he continued. "That may be strange
for a preacher to say, considering it's a devil thing, but I've always loved it.
It just does something to my blood. It's like a tonic for me, you know?"
She didn't know. Cinderella went over to the TV and turned it on.
Preacher Judd got up, turned it off. "Let's don't run the SYLVANIA right now, baby child," he said. "Let's you and me talk about God."
Cinderella squatted down in front of the set, not seeming to notice it had been
cut off. She watched the dark screen like the White Rabbit considering a plunge
down the rabbit hole.
Glancing out the window, Preacher Judd saw that the sun looked like a dropped cherry snowcone melting into the clay road that led out to Highway 80, and already the tumble bug of night was rolling in blue-black and heavy. A feeling
of frustration went over him, because he knew he was losing time and he knew what he had to do.
Opening his Bible, he read a verse and Cinderella didn't so much as look up until he finished and said a prayer and ended it with "Amen."

"Uhman," she said suddenly.
Preacher Judd jumped with surprise, slammed the Bible shut and dunked it in his
pocket. "Well, well now," he said with delight, "that does it. She's got some Bible training."
Widow Case came in with the tray of fixings. "What's that?"
"She said some of a prayer," Preacher Judd said. "That cinches it. God don't expect much from retards, and that ought to do for keeping her from burning in
hell." He practically skipped over to the woman and her tray, stuck two fingers
in a glass of tea, whirled and sprinkled the drops on Cinderella's head.
Cinderella held out a hand as if checking for rain.
Preacher Judd bellowed out. "I pronounce you baptised. In the name of God, the
Son, and The Holy Ghost. Amen."
"Well, I'll swan," the widow said. "That there tea works for baptising?" She sat
the tray on the coffee table.
"It ain't the tea water, it's what's said and who says it that makes it take ...
Consider that gal legal baptised ... Now, she ought to have some fun too, don't
you think? Not having a full head of brains don't mean she shouldn't have some
fun."
"She likes what she does with them ants," Widow Case said.
"I know, but I'm talking about something special. It's Halloween. Time for young
folks to have fun, even if they are retards. In fact, retards like it better than anyone else. They love this stuff ... A thing my sister enjoyed was dressing up like a ghost."
"Ghost?" Widow Case was seated on the couch, making the sandwiches. She had a big butcher knife and she was using it to spread mustard on bread and cut ham slices.
"We took this old sheet, you see, cut some mouth and eye holes in it, then we wore them and went trick-or-treating."
"I don't know that I've got an old sheet. And there ain't a house close

enough
for trick-or-treatin' at."
"I could take her around in my car. That would be fun, I think. I'd like to see
her have fun, wouldn't you? She'd be real scary too under that sheet, big as she
is and liking to run stooped down with her knuckles dragging."
To make his point, he bent forward, humped his back, let his
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hands dangle and made a face he thought was in imitation of Cinderella.
"She would be scary, I admit that," Widow Case said. "Though that sheet over her
head would take some away from it. Sometimes she scares me when I don't got my
mind on her, you know? Like if I'm napping in there on the bed, and I sorta open
my eyes, and there she is, looking at me like she looks at them ants. I declare,
she looks like she'd like to take a stick and whirl it around on me."
"You need a sheet, a white one, for a ghostsuit."
"Now maybe it would be nice for Cindereller to go out and have some fun." She
finished making the sandwiches and stood up. "I'll see what I can find."
"Good, good," Preacher Judd said rubbing his hands together. "You can let me
make the outfit. I'm real good at it."
While Widow Case went to look for a sheet, Preacher Judd ate one of the
sandwiches, took one and handed it down to Cinderella. Cinderella promptly took
the bread off of it, ate the meat, and laid the mustard sides down on her knees.
When the meat was chewed, she took to the mustard bread, cramming it into her
mouth and smacking her lips loudly.
"Is that good, sugar?" Preacher Judd asked.
Cinderella smiled some mustard bread at him, and he couldn't help but think the
mustard looked a lot like baby shit, and he had to turn his head away.
"This do?" Widow Case said, coming into the room with a slightly yellowed sheet
and a pair of scissors.
"That's the thing," Preacher Judd said, taking a swig from his ice tea. He set
the tea down and called to Cinderella.
"Come on, sugar, let's you and me go in the bedroom there and get you fixed up
and surprise your mamma."
It took a bit of coaxing, but he finally got her up and took her into the
bedroom with the sheet and scissors. He half-closed the bedroom door and called
out to the widow, "You're going to like this."
After a moment, Widow Case heard the scissors snipping away and Cinderella
grunting like a hog to trough. When the scissor
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sound stopped, she heard Preacher Judd talking in a low voice, trying to coach
Cinderella on something, but as she wanted it to be a surprise, she quit trying
to hear. She went over the couch and fiddled with a sandwich, but she didn't eat
it. As soon as she'd gotten out of eyesight of Preacher Judd, she'd upended the
last of his root beer and it was as bad as he said. It sort of made her

stomach
sick and didn't encourage her to add any food to it.
Suddenly the bedroom door was knocked back, and Cinderella, having a big time of
it charged into the room with her arms held out in front of her yelling, "Woooo,
woooo, goats."
Widow Case let out a laugh. Cinderella ran around the room yelling, "Woooo, woooo, goats," until she tripped over the coffee table and sent the sandwich makings and herself flying.
Preacher Judd, who'd followed her in after a second, went over and helped her up. The Widow Case, who had curled up on the couch in natural defense against the flying food and retarded girl, now uncurled when she saw something dangling
on Preacher Judd's arm. She knew what it was, but she asked anyway, "What's that?"
"One of your piller cases. For a trick-or-treat sack."
"Oh," Widow Case said stiffly, and she went to straightening up the coffee table
and picking the ham and makings off the floor.
Preacher Judd saw that the sun was no longer visible. He walked over to a window
and looked out. The tumble bug of night was even more blue-black now and the moon was out, big as a dinner plate, and looking like it had gravy stains on it.
"I think we've got to go now," he said. "We'll be back in a few hours, just long
enough to run the houses around here."
"Whoa, whoa," Widow Case said. "Trick-or-treatin' I can go for, but I can't let
my daughter go off with no strange man."
"I ain't strange. I'm a preacher."
"You strike me as an all right fella that wants to do things right, but I still
can't let you take my daughter off without me going. People would talk."
Preacher Judd started to sweat. "I'll pay you some money to let me take her on."
Widow Case stared at him. She had moved up close now and he could smell root beer on her breath. Right then he knew what

she'd done and he didn't like it any. It wasn't that he'd wanted it, but somehow
it seemed dishonest to him that she swigged it without asking him. He thought she was going to pour it out. He started to say as much when she spoke up.
"I don't like the sound of that none, you offering me money."
"I just want her for the night," he said, pulling Cinderella close to him. "She'd have fun."
"I don't like the sound of that no better. Maybe you ain't as right thinking as
I thought."
Widow Case took a step back and reached the butcher knife off the table and pushed it at him. "I reckon you better just let go of her and run on out to that
car of yours and take your ownself trick-or-treatin'. And without my piller case."
"No ma'm, can't do that. I've come for Cindy and that's the thing God expects of
me, and I'm going to do it. I got to do it. I didn't do my sister right and she's burning in hell. I'm doing Cindy right. She said some of a prayer and she's baptised. Anything happened to her, wouldn't be on my conscience."

Widow Case trembled a bit. Cinderella lifted up her ghostsuit with her free hand
to look at herself, and Widow Case saw that she was naked as a jaybird underneath.
"You let go of her arm right now, you pervert. And drop that piller case ... Toss it on the couch would be better. It's clean."
He didn't do either.
Widow Case's teeth went together like a bear trap and made about as much noise,
and she slashed at him with the knife.
He stepped back out of the way and let go of Cinderella, who suddenly let out a
screech, broke and ran, started around the room yelling, "Wooooo, wooooo, goats."
Preacher Judd hadn't moved quick enough, and the knife had cut through the pillow case, his coat and shirt sleeve, but hadn't broke the skin.
When Widow Case saw her slashed pillow case fall to the floor, a fire went through her. The same fire that went through Preacher Judd when he realized his
J.C. Penney's suit coat which had cost him, with the pants, $39.95 on sale, was
ruined.
They started circling one another, arms outstretched like

wrestlers ready for the run together, and Widow Case had the advantage on account of having the knife.
But she fell for Preacher Judd holding up his left hand and wigging two fingers
like mule ears, and while she was looking at that, he hit her with a right cross
and floored her. Her head hit the coffee table and the ham and fixings flew up
again.
Preacher Judd jumped on top of her and held her knife hand down with one of his,
while he picked up the ham with the other and hit her in the face with it, but
the ham was so greasy it kept sliding off and he couldn't get a good blow in.
Finally he tossed the ham down and started wrestling the knife away from her with both hands while she chewed on one of his forearms until he screamed.
Cinderella was still running about, going, "Wooooo, wooooo, goats," and when she
ran by the SYLVANIA, her arm hit the foilwrapped rabbit ears and sent them flying.
Preacher Judd finally got the knife away from Widow Case, cutting his hand slightly in the process, and that made him mad. He stabbed her in the back as she rolled out from under him and tried to run off on all fours. He got on top
of her again, knocking her flat, and he tried to pull the knife out. He pulled
and tugged, but it wouldn't come free. She was as strong as a cow and was crawling across the floor and pulling him along as he hung tight to the thick,
wooden butcher knife handle. Blood was boiling all over the place.
Out of the corner of his eye, Preacher Judd saw that his retard was going wild,
flapping around in her ghost-suit like a fat dove, bouncing off walls and tumbling over furniture. She wasn't making the ghost sounds now. She knew something was up and she didn't like it.
"Now, now," he called to her as Widow Case dragged him across the floor,

yelling
all the while, "Bloody murder, I'm being kilt, bloody murder, bloody murder!"
"Shut up, gaddamnit" he yelled. Then, reflecting on his words, he turned his face heavenward. "Forgive me my language, God." Then he said sweetly to Cinderella, who was in complete bouncing distress, "Take it easy, honey. Ain't
nothing wrong, not a thing."
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"Oh Lordy mercy, I'm being kilt!" Widow Case yelled.
"Die, you stupid old cow."
But she didn't die. He couldn't believe it, but she was starting to stand. The
knife he was clinging to pulled him to his feet, and when she was up she whipped
an elbow around, whacked him in the ribs and sent him flying.
About that time, Cinderella broke through a window, tumbled onto the porch, over
the edge and into the empty flower bed.
Preacher Judd got up and ran at Widow Case, hitting her just above the knees and
knocking her down, cracking her head a loud one on the SYLVANIA, but it still didn't send her out. She was strong enough to grab him by the throat with both
hands and throttle him.
As she did, he turned his head slightly away from her digging fingers, and through the broken window he could see his retarded ghost. She was doing a kind
of two step, first to the left, then to the right, going, "Unhhh, unhhhh," and
it reminded Preacher Judd of one of them dances sinners do in them places with
lots of blinking lights and girls up on pedestals doing lashes with their hips.
He made a fist and hit the widow a couple of times, and she let go of him and rolled away. She got up, staggered a second, then started running toward the kitchen, the knife still in her back, only deeper from having fallen on it.
He ran after her and she staggered into the wall, her hands hitting out and knocking one of the big iron frying pans off its peg and down on her head. It made a loud BONG, and Widow Case went down.
Preacher Judd let out a sigh. He was glad for that. He was tired. He grabbed up
the pan and whammed her a few times, then, still carrying the pan, he found his
hat in the living room and went out on the porch to look for Cinderella.
She wasn't in sight.
He ran out in the front yard calling her, and saw her making the rear corner of
the house, running wildly, hands close to the ground, her butt flashing in the
moonlight every time the sheet popped up. She was heading for the woods out back.
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He ran after her, but she made the woods well ahead of him. He followed in, but
didn't see her. "Cindy," he called. "It's me. Ole Preacher Judd. I come to read
you some Bible verses. You'd like that wouldn't you?" Then he commenced to coo
like he was talking to a baby, but still Cinderella did not appear.
He trucked around through the woods with his frying pan for half an hour, but

didn't see a sign of her. For a half-wit, she was a good hider.
Preacher Judd was covered in sweat and the night was growing slightly cool and the old Halloween moon was climbing to the stars. He felt like just giving up.
He sat down on the ground and started to cry.
Nothing ever seemed to work out right. That night he'd taken his sister out hadn't gone fully right. They'd gotten the candy and he'd brought her home, but later, when he tried to get her in bed with him for a little bit of the thing animals do without sin, she wouldn't go for it, and she always had before. Now she was uppity over having a ghost-suit and going trick-or-treating. Worse yet, her wearing that sheet with nothing under it did something for him. He didn't know what it was, but the idea of it made him kind of crazy.
But he couldn't talk or bribe her into a thing. She ran out back and he ran after her and tackled her, and when he started doing to her what he wanted to do, out beneath the Halloween moon, underneath the apple tree, she started screaming. She could scream real loud, and he'd had to choke her some and beat her in the head with a rock. After that, he felt he should make like some kind of theft was at the bottom of it all, so he took all her Halloween candy.
He was sick thinking back on that night. Her dying without no God-training made him feel lousy. And he couldn't get those TOOTSIE ROLLS out of his mind. There must have been three dozen of them. Later he got so sick from eating them all in one sitting that to this day he couldn't stand the smell of chocolate.
He was thinking on these misfortunes, when he saw through the limbs and brush a white sheet go by.
Preacher Judd poked his head up and saw Cinderella running down a little path going, "Wooooo, wooooo, goats."

She had already forgotten about him and had the ghost thing on her mind.
He got up and crept after her with his frying pan. Pretty soon she disappeared over a dip in the trail and he followed her down.
She was sitting at the bottom of the trail between two pines, and ahead of her was a clear lake with the moon shining its face in the water. Across the water the trees thinned, and he could see the glow of lights from a house. She was looking at those lights and the big moon in the water and was saying over and over, "Oh, priddy, priddy."
He walked up behind her and said, "It sure is, sugar," and he hit her in the head with the pan. It gave a real solid ring, kind of like the clap of a sweet church bell. He figured that one shot to the bean was sufficient, since it was a good overhand lick, but she was still sitting up and he didn't want to be no slacker about things, so he hit her a couple more times, and by the second time, her head didn't give a ring, just sort of a dull thump, like he was hitting a thick, rubber bag full of mud.
She fell over on what was left of her head and her butt cocked up in the air, exposed as the sheet fell down her back. He took a long look at it, but found

he
wasn't interested in doing what animals do without sin anymore. All that hitting
on the Widow Case and Cinderella had tuckered him out.
He pulled his arm way back, tossed the frying pan with all his might toward the
lake. It went in with a soft splash. He turned back toward the house and his car, and when he got out to the road, he cranked up the Dodge and drove away noticing that the Halloween sky was looking blacker. It was because the moon had
slipped behind some dark clouds. He thought it looked like a suffering face behind a veil, and as he drove away from the Cases', he stuck his head out the
window for a better look. By the time he made the hill that dipped down toward
Highway 80, the clouds had passed along, and he'd come to see it more as a happy
jack-o-lantern than a sad face, and he took that as a sign that he had done well.
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ABOUT THE EDITOR
Thomas F. Monteleone has been a professional writer since
1972. He has published more than 80 short stories in numerous magazines and anthologies. His notorious column of opinion and entertainment, The Mothers and
Fathers Italian Association, currently appears in Mystery Scene Magazine. He is
the editor of three anthologies, of which Borderlands is the most recent. Of his
eighteen novels, recent titles include The Apocalypse Man (1991), Fantasma, Crooked House, Lyrica, and The Magnificent Gallery. His two collections of selected short fiction are Dark Stars and Other Illuminations and Fearful Symmetries.
He likes baseball, computers, British ales and stouts, women who laugh at his jokes, comic books, all kinds of music, driving his Prelude at high speeds on country roads, and getting lots of mail every day. He lives in Baltimore with his wife Linda and son Brandon. He is forty-four years old and is still dashingly handsome.
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an excerpt from
DARK DESTINY
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....It took Greg almost two hours of cursing up and down Benedict before he found the path. And it was scarcely more than that, at best a winding trail. The
entrance was so overgrown with scrub that it couldn't be seen from the lane leading to it, and the stretch spiraling around the hillside was invisible from
below, choked with weed and sage.
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At first Greg wasn't sure it was wide enough even for his small car, but he had
to chance it; chance the ruts and ridges
and clumps of vegetation that punished tires and driver alike as the little hatchback went into a slow low. Without air conditioning it was like trying to
breathe with a plastic bag over your head, and by the time he was halfway up the

hillside he wished he hadn't started.
Or almost wished. Only the thought of what might be on the summit kept him going, through the stifle of heat and the buzz of insect swarm.
The car stalled abruptly, and Greg broke into panic-ooze. Then the transmission kicked in again, and he sweated some more as a bump in the road sent the hatchback veering left, pitching Greg against the door. Beneath underbrush bordering a curve he caught a sudden sickening glimpse of the emptiness just beyond the edge, an emptiness ending in a tangle of treetops a thousand feet below.
Greg fought the wheel, and the car lurched back on an even course. The road must have been better in the old days: even so, it was one bitch of a trip to make just to go bowling. But that was Bernie Tanner's business and Bernie Tanner's road.
Greg's own road stretched back a lot farther than the bottom of this hill, all the way back to Tex Taylor, a onetime cowboy star at the Motion Picture Country Home. He had all those stories about the old days in Hollywood, and that's all Greg had wanted at first: just some kind of lead-in he could

work up into a piece for one of those checkout-counter rags. He'd been selling that kind of stuff long enough to get used to the idea he'd never win a Pulitzer Prize.
But what the dying western wino told him gave sudden startling hope of another kind of prize -- one that might have awaited presentation for nearly half a century up there at what Tex Taylor called the House of Pain. That's what he said its name was, after the Asian woman took over and began to give quality time to S-and-M freaks. Maybe it was all a crock, but it sounded possible, certainly worth a trip up there to find out.
Trouble was that Tex Taylor was borderline senile and couldn't remember exactly where this weirdo whorehouse was located. But he did, finally, come up with the name of somebody he'd seen there in the glory days. And that's how Greg got hold of Bernie Tanner.
Greg wondered if Bernie had any money. Today anything with a Beverly Hills address could probably fetch a mil or so on the current market. Maybe Bernie would pay him a mil or so just for old time's sake, just out of pride.
And there were others like Bernie still around, stars and directors and producers who were bankable way back when; some of them had saved their money or put it into real estate and led comfortable, quiet lives in Bel Air or Holmby Hills. If Bernie would pay a million, how much would all the others be willing to fork over, given the proper motivation?

Greg grinned at the thought. And then, as the car swung around the last curve, his grin widened.
He had reached the summit. And on the summit was the house.
Hey, it wasn't the Taj Mahal or Buckingham Palace or even the men's washroom at the Universal Tour. But the bottom line was it hadn't

burned or gone down in an earthquake
or been bulldozed by a developer. It was still here, standing in shadowy
silhouette against the late afternoon sun.
Greg took a flashlight from the glove compartment and
clipped it to his belt. Then he reached into the compartment again and found
there was just enough left in the envelope for a little toot, enough to keep
him
bright-eyed and bushytailed while he did whatever he'd have to do up here. He
waited for the rush, then got out and lifted the hood to let the steam
escape.
There'd be no water up here, and probably no gas or electricity; they must
have
had their own generator.
He stared up at the two-story structure. Frame, of course; nobody could have
hauled machinery here for stone or concrete construction. The roof had lost
its
share of shingles, and paint peeled from boards that had once been white, but
the building's bulk was impressive. Half a dozen boarded-up windows were
ranked
on either side of the front door: tall
windows for a tall house. Greg closed his eyes and for a
moment day was night and the windows blazed with the light of a thousand
candles, the front door opened wide in welcome, the classic cars rolled up
the
driveway, headlights
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aglitter, wheels gleaming with chrome. And off behind the distant hills the
moon
was rising, rising over the House of Pain.
It was the toot, of course, and now moonlight shimmered
into sunlight and he was back in the teeth of searing heat,
radiator-boil, insect-buzz.
Greg walked over to the double door. Its weathered, sun-blistered surface
barred
intrusion, and at waist level the divided doors were secured by lock and
chain.
Both were rusty;
too much to expect that he could just walk up and yank his
way in.
But it happened. The chain gave, then came free in his fist, covering his
palm
and fingers with powdery particles of
rust from the parted links. He tugged and the door swung
outward. Hinges screeched.
Greg was in the house and the house was in him.
Its shadows entered his eyes, its silence invaded his ears,
its dust and decay filled his lungs. How long had it been since
these windows were first boarded, this door locked? How
many years had the house stood empty in the dark? Houses
that once were thronged with people, throbbed to their pleasure and their
pain
-- houses like this were hungry for life.
Greg withdrew the flashlight from his belt, flicking it on and fanning the
beam
for inspection. What a dump!
He was standing in a foyer with a solid wall directly ahead, archways opening
at
left and right. He moved right, along a
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carpet thickly strewn with dust long undisturbed, and found himself in a room

that he imagined must take up most of this wing. A huge Oriental rug covered the
floor; its design was obscured and fraying, but Greg thought he could detect the
outline of a dragon. Sofas and chairs were grouped along three sides beneath
gilt-framed paintings which, Greg noted, might have served as centerfolds for
the Kama Sutra. Angled at the far corner was a piano, a concert grand. Once upon
a time somebody had spent a lot of money furnishing this place,
but right now it needed maid service.
Greg's flashlight Crawled the walls, searching for shelves
and bookcases, but there were none. The fourth side of the
room was covered by a row of tattered drapes hung before the boarded-up windows.
The drapery may also have displayed the dragon pattern, but outlines had faded;
its fiery breath was long extinguished.
Greg crossed the foyer and went into the other wing. It turned out to be a bar,
and at one time may have resembled Rick's place in Casablanca, but now the set
was struck. The
room was a tangle of upended tables and overturned wooden chairs, flanked by
booths on two walls and tattered drapery on the third. Along the fourth wall was
the bar, with a big mirror behind it, bordered on both sides by shelves and
cupboards that had once displayed bottles and glasses but now held only heaps of
shard. The mirror itself was cracked and mottled with mold. Here's looking at you, kid.
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At one side of the bar a door led to what must have been
the kitchen; on the other side an archway framed the base of
a staircase beyond. Skirting the maze of tables and chairs,
Greg headed for the archway.
Upstairs would be the bedrooms and maybe the private
quarters of the Marquess or whatever she called herself. The
place looked as if it had been abandoned in a hurry; the padlocked door and
boarded-up windows may have been the results of a return visit. But why leave all the furnishings? Greg
had no answer, but he hoped to find one. And find what else
might also have been abandoned.
The stairs' worn padding muffled his footsteps, but creaking began when he
reached the long hallway off the upper landing. It echoed again as he opened and
closed the doors
lining both sides of the corridor.
All led to bedrooms, each with its own indecorous decor.
Here lay a round bed surrounded and surmounted by mirrors, but the sumptuous
bedspread was riddled with mothholes and the mirrors reflected only the light of
Greg's flashlight beam. In another room stood a bare marble slab with
metal cuffs and an assortment of chains hanging from ends
and sides. The marble top was flecked, the metal attachments
reddened with rust, not blood. And the whips on the wall
rack dangled impotently; the case of knives and needles and
surgical shears held pain captive through the empty years.
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Empty years, empty rooms. Wall mural obscenities turned into absurdities by the

crisscross of cracks, the random censorship of fading over decades of decay. But where were those private quarters: an office, someplace to keep the books,
the files, the cash, and maybe -- just maybe -- what he was looking for? He hadn't gone through all this just to chase shadows. What the hell was he doing
here anyway, prowling through a deserted whorehouse at sunset? The Johns didn't
come to these places looking for
starkness and desolation; tricks were supposed to be welcomed. But what had he
found except rot and ruin, a bar full of broken bottles, a parlor piano that grinned at him with keys like rows of yellowed teeth? Damn it, why didn't somebody tend to a customer? Company, girls!
Greg came to the end of the corridor, reached the last
room on the left. There'd been nothing here now and maybe ever. Tex Taylor was
lying, the old rummy had no proof, and he was just doing a number like the old
ham he was, using Greg as an audience for the big deathbed-revelation scene. Who
said people had to tell the truth just because they were dying?
He opened the door on a bedroom just like all the others, dark and deserted: bare walls and bare bureau top, empty chair and empty bed.
At least that's what he thought at first glance. But when he looked again he saw
the shadow. A dark shadow, lying on the bed.
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And now, in the flashlight's beam, the shadow turned to gold.
There was a golden girl lying on the bed, a golden girl
with a jet-black halo of hair framing an almost feline face --
slanted eyes closed in slumber above high cheekbones, coral
curvature of lips relaxed in repose. The flashlight beam swept
across her nudity, its light lending luster to the gold of her flesh.
Only one detail marred perfection. As Greg stared down
he saw the spider. The big black spider, emerging from her
pubic nest and crawling slowly upward across her naked belly.
Greg stifled his gasp as he realized the girl was dead.
She opened her eyes.
She opened her eyes and smiled up at him, opened her mouth and flicked a thin pink tongue in a sensual circle over
the coral lips. Her smile widened, revealing twin razor-rows
of teeth.
Now, still smiling, the girl sat up. She raised both arms,
hands coming to rest on either side of the throat hidden by the dark tumble of
her hair. The long fingers splayed, tightening their grip as if trying to wrench
the head free.
Then the girl tugged, lifting her head off her neck.
She was still smiling
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