

InterText

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“God-King on the Hudson”
by ELLEN TERRIS BRENNER

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C o n t e n t s

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TIME WAS, I'D WRITE A FIRSTTEXT COLUMN IN every issue of *InterText*. Then again, when you've been doing something as long as I've been publishing *InterText*, a lot changes around the edges. We began *InterText* 10 years ago. It's hard to believe it's been that long, but it's true. When Geoff Duncan and I started working on this magazine in 1991, the Internet was so small that we were the only fiction magazine out there that wasn't restricting itself to science fiction.

Back then, I was a 20-year-old college student, working at the college newspaper and (apparently) having a lot of spare time. Since then I've gone to graduate school, gotten a full-time job, got married, started teaching, bought a house, and plenty more. Now I'm a 30-year-old magazine editor and university lecturer—and in a few months, I'll be a father, too.

Fortunately, the extreme exertion that it took to produce an issue of *InterText* in 1991 is gone today. Geoff and I have gotten the creation of this magazine down to a science, and the eagle eyes of our submissions panel have drastically reduced the amount of time I spend wading through the numerous story submissions we get.

A long time ago, I told myself that I would probably stop doing *InterText* once Lauren and I decided to have children. And I considered it. But then I realized two things: first, I've slimmed down *InterText* to an extremely light workload in terms of my time, so I wouldn't gain a whole lot from giving it up. And second, I enjoy doing it, so the net result of giving it up would be a loss, not a gain.

And so you see before you the result: *InterText* will continue, if the fates allow, thanks to the work of Geoff and the submission panel to make things run smoothly. However, I can no longer guarantee that we'll be publishing on a regular schedule. I've planned to release issues quarterly, but as I write this it's been six months since our last issue hit the net. If it's any compensation, this is one of the largest issues we've done in a while... but six months is a long time, and in the meantime I've received several notes from people asking if we've stopped publishing.

I'm also going to consider alternate ways of putting out *InterText*, including perhaps posting stories more regularly on the Web site and then bundling them up into more traditional "issues" every few months. There are advantages to such a plan, but one big disadvantage: it will change the down-to-a-science method we use right now. So there's no way to tell if it'll happen.

In any event, as far as I can tell, *InterText* is here to stay. When will the next issue appear? I'd like to say December, but with a baby arriving in November, I'm not going to guarantee it.

I stopped writing these editor's notes on a regular basis because I found I often had very little to say, beyond that we've got some good stories for you and I hope you like them. That, I think, can go unsaid: we picked these stories because we liked them, and we hope that you do, too.

Now we'll start picking more. And, sometime soon, we hope you'll see them and enjoy them as well.

Jason Snell is the editor of InterText. He also edits TeeVee (www.teevee.org), and gets paid to be the editor of Macworld. He lives in northern California with his wife, Lauren.

God-King On the Hudson

ELLEN TERRIS BRENNER

*Just because magicians are showbiz fakers
doesn't mean there isn't magic in the world.*

THE MAN IN THE ECRU POLO SHIRT TURNED, cocktail halfway to his lips. Then he saw who, or rather what, had tapped his elbow, and the smirk froze on his face.

The pierced and tattooed gallery crowd turned to watch his embarrassment. I also watched, with a certain grim satisfaction. Mr. Polo Shirt had been irritating me all evening: gawking at my guests, ogling my photographs as if they were Times Square porn—even leering down my cleavage on the pretext of admiring my tattoos. So I'd decided to have one of my costumed performers pay him a visit—see how he handled it when strangeness ogled him back.

As I suspected, he could not handle it at all.

The alien creature regarded Mr. Polo Shirt out of blank glassy fish-eyes, bulging from a huge head whose otherwise featureless black surface merged necklessly into a pale armless torso. The appendage that had touched him was one of two stumpy black stalks jutting straight out from the creature's chest, terminating in chrome-plated pincers.

The creature flexed its pectoral muscles. The pincers clacked open and shut. Polo Shirt shrank from its touch and backed into the wall.

I crossed through the tittering audience to Mr. Ecu. "Don't be alarmed," I said. "It only wants some of your drink. See? Like this."

I held out my glass of *pinot grigio*. The creature turned on cue and took my glass in its right pincer. A tube-like proboscis uncurled from a slit where its mouth should have been and sank into the glass.

As the level in the glass fell and the creature emitted contented sucking sounds, Polo Shirt took the opportunity to bolt, fleeing out the door into the dubious safety of the East Village night.

Under a burst of laughter and applause, I murmured to the creature: "Well done. How are you doing in there?"

The surface of the head rippled gently—inside the latex, my performer was flexing her arms in the bonds that held them doubled up by her ears. "Just fine," came her muffled voice. "My boobies are beginning to get a bit sore, though."

I took the glass from her and stroked her tight-bound "appendage" appreciatively. "You'd best go backstage, then, and have Carlos let you out of these."

"Aw, but the bruises will look so chic when I hit

the clubs later." She waggled her proboscis at me, like a kid sticking out her tongue. But she did turn and sidle on silver-clad legs towards our makeshift dressing-room out back.

I watched her go, feeling let down. There was, after all, no glory in freaking the Polo Shirts of the world.

The crowd had returned to their original activities: looking at the pictures, at the remaining performers/creatures, at each other, and (furtively) at me. One party-goer, however, lingered nearby. At first glance another too-straight interloper, his gaze was anything but furtive: a frank, burning stare out of deep-set eyes, shaded by brows much too furrowed for such a youthful man. But he did not gawk like the Polo Shirt boor. He stared as if

**The creature turned on cue and
took my glass in its right pincer.
A tube-like proboscis uncurled from
a slit where its mouth should have
been and sank into the glass.**

to look beneath my tattooed skin, to read a secret I didn't know was inscribed there.

My memory stuttered that I knew him, and began to dredge up the how and where.

He approached, extending his right hand. "Madame Vosostri. Or should I say, Elisa Martz?"

The sound of my true name released my memory of his. "My god," I laughed, "I haven't been called 'Elisa' since I left college. Richard Masefield, isn't it? How in the world are you? Still studying folklore and mythology?"

As I took the offered hand, I noted that his left arm did not have one. A stump peeked out discreetly from the neat cuffs of shirt and sport coat. He certainly hadn't had that when we were in school. But there *had* been some incident about his left hand, hadn't there? My memory now got to work on that.

"I'm fine," Richard said. "Minding the family business, same as I was in school. And I've even found some use for the folklore studies." We both smiled; the dubious value of a Folklore and Mythology degree had been a running joke among the department's undergrad majors.

"And how about you?" he continued. "Your degree

doesn't seem to have hurt your career any, from what I see. This show is astonishing."

I glanced around at the white walls and their shots of artfully staged atrocities. "Frankly, I didn't think you were into this kind of thing."

"You might be mistaken about that." His tone was light, but his eyes burned more intensely. "Remember that semester we took 'Lore and Gore' from old Sebastian?"

I found myself laughing again. "I haven't thought about it in years. But of course I remember; you were the only other student beside me who never once ran out retching. Even that day when the Old Bastard started carrying on about penile subincision rituals among the Australian aborigines."

"We were losing them right and left that day, weren't we? I never was sure whether the old coot was indulging some Freudian fixation, or just wanted to see all the preppies squirm. Some of both, no doubt."

His eyelids dropped, hooding the fire halfway.

"I *am* interested in your work, you know." His voice went low and throaty; the fine hairs on my thighs stood up. "Very interested. I would like you to give me a call sometime, so that we can discuss it."

He reached inside his jacket with his one hand and produced a card. Black engraving on cream; under the name and address was a ceremonial knife of a style familiar to me, its wide heavy blade more of a cross between a hatchet and a butcher's cleaver than a knife.

"Do please call me," he said, giving me one last look. "Any time."

He turned and slipped through the crowd and out the door.

I stood, silent amid the babel, looking at that card and feeling my brightly-inked flesh go all to goosebumps.

MUCH LATER—AFTER I HAD HELPED THE GALLERY owner lock up, made the rounds of various private clubs, and arrived home by dawn's smoggy light—I sat cross-legged on my bed rubbing baby oil into my tattoos, the 5 a.m. newscast mumbling on the TV as I pondered Richard's reappearance.

Further memories had surfaced: one of another lecture from Sebastian's grisly class, this one concerning those ancient god-kings who were periodically sacrificed to insure their people's prosperity. The Old Bastard was recounting a particularly gory East Indian version of the regicide ritual, in which the king mounted a silk-hung scaffold set up in the public temple court, took up a sharp knife, and there, before all his people, proceeded to dismember himself. Ears, nose, lips, fingers, feet—any

and all flesh he could reach on his body—he'd cut and fling away, baptizing the crowd with his blood, until he became too faint to go on. At which point, with his last strength, he'd slash his own throat.

Sebastian's face gleamed with sweat as he stalked back and forth across the front of the lecture hall, describing this rite in its every excruciating detail. All around me students cringed in their seats, as if they themselves were being pelted with blood rather than words. I, meanwhile, watched in amused detachment, until my gaze met that of Richard Masefield, a classmate I barely knew outside of the impersonal camaraderie of candidates in a small obscure degree program. At which point I was no longer detached.

Richard's eyes were literally glowing. It was as if his entire body was in flames inside his skin, with the light escaping only out of his eye sockets. His gaze held mine only a split-second, then wandered around the rest of the hall. Yet even that brief glance had left me shivering and sweating.

Eventually he turned his attention back to Sebastian, staring as if the odious little monster were revealing the secrets of Richard's innermost soul. I, in turn, stared at Richard. I noted the clenched jaw, the shallow breathing, the hands clutching the seat arms so hard the lacquered plywood should have splintered in his grip. And that's when I spied the bandaged gap on his left hand where his index finger should have been.

Oh yes, I recalled thinking, I had heard something about that, an accident he had just a few days before. Some unlikely business about a kitchen mishap. My mind jittered an uneasy joke—imagine Masefield, this sober-sided industrial heir, severing his finger like Sebastian's god-king! But when I looked over at Richard, staring at Sebastian with those balefire eyes, my mirth faded into something more uneasy.

I snapped out of my reverie. The newscaster had just spoken Masefield's name.

"Millionaire industrialist Richard Masefield checks into a private hospital near his upstate New York home later this month, according to sources close to his family," the perky young thing was saying. "Masefield will have his left arm amputated at the elbow, in this latest of several operations to halt a rare bone cancer..."

As the newscaster gushed on about how Masefield's family firm had experienced a phenomenal previous quarter even while he endured this "latest episode in an ongoing personal tragedy," I pulled out Richard's card.

"Bone cancer my ass," I muttered, rubbing my thumb over the gleaming little black dagger. I dialed the number on the card.

THE LIMO MASEFIELD SENT FOR ME TOOLED NORTHWARD through the Hudson River Valley. I sprawled in torn denims on the leather upholstery and stared out the gray-tinted window, watching the river unwind under overcast skies.

There are many tales told about this valley, including variants that, for understandable reasons, do not find their way into popular books. Washington Irving, for example, retold many quaint tales of such bogeys as the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow and Henry Hudson's ninepins-playing crew; but Irving glossed over such details as the truth of how the horseman lost his head, and whose bones and skulls went into making those ninepins and balls. And these were just some of the European contributions. The Algonquin and Mohawk had some legends that made the worst yarns of the white interlopers seem like nursery fables.

Such tales, of course, were not to be taken literally. Yet there was some fire behind their smokescreen. I had seen enough in recent years, attended (and photographed) enough rituals of darkness and blood, to know something of that fire firsthand. A certain energy attends such rites. Even my own tattooing sessions had carried a little rush one could not write off to mere endorphin release, for the effect was markedly stronger whenever my skin received a picture of a deity.

Neither I nor those I ran with, however, fully understood how to channel these energies. Whatever tribal chain of knowledge had existed to guide these arts had been shattered long ago. Even the most hardened leatherfolk I knew, even the ones who had also trained in the occult, still had to be counted as innocents, navigating through unknown and dangerous territories by sheer trial and error. And I? I just took photographs, mainly, hoping one day to capture on film whatever it was that breathed on us and through us during those scenes.

But here now was quiet little Richard Masefield, apparently taking these rites further, in his own quiet way, than anyone I had ever heard of, and perhaps discovering thereby what others could not.

The limo turned off the main highway onto a riverside road lined with mansions. Masefield's estate was enclosed by man-high brick walls, broken by a single oak-portaled gate. We passed within, purred down a drive roofed over by old chestnut trees, and halted before a rambling country house, dark and silent, built from the local brownstone.

The chauffeur let me out and led me across cobbles to an ivy-covered entrance-way. There he gave me over to a man in chinos and chambray shirt, with a cherubic pink face out of which peered eyes nearly as fierce as Richard's. He introduced himself, in a gravelly

voice, as Charles.

I glanced about, ever the photographer, as Charles led me through the dim-lit heart of the building. Rooms clothed in burgundy wallpaper and mahogany paneling opened to left and to right. Through one doorway I glimpsed a massive collection of blades. On every wall hung knives and swords of every description—steel, crude iron, copper, bronze, stone, obsidian. Pride of place was given to a modestly-sized but authentic-looking guillotine. And I thought I saw the original version of the ceremonial knife on Richard's card.

We arrived at a surprisingly light and cheerful solarium facing the river. There, in a white-painted Adirondack chair, sat Richard, sipping coffee from a bone china cup only a hair more translucent than his skin. Charles brought another cup for me as I drew up a chair.

I sipped, then launched in without preamble. "It's all a cover story, then—the cancer, the private hospital?"

"No private hospital. It happens here. By my hand."

**"That story Sebastian told us.
About the sacrificial king.
It was more than just a tale
to upset the dull-minded.
It was, and is, real magic."**

"And what is it that happens?"

He paused.

"That story Sebastian told us," he finally began. "About the sacrificial king. It was more than just a tale to upset the dull-minded. It was more even than the crudely powerful symbolism of concrete-thinking 'primitives.' It was, and is, real magic, one of the few magics that continue to work reliably even in this age."

His eyes flamed against the pallor of his face. "It works because it uses blood—the life force—freely sacrificed by a living victim. And because it's done not for one's own self-aggrandizement, but for the good of one's people. One's kingdom."

"Where do you come by a kingdom?"

He smiled. "What I have does count as a kingdom. There are plenty of businesses these days with a family name still on the logo, but the family members are usually either dead or bought out. Mine is one of the last actively run by its family, and it's hard to preserve—especially when I'm the only family who runs it. My father died while I was in elementary school. My mother, while I was in prep school. Heart attacks, both of them. Unconsciously, they may have been making the same

bodily sacrifices I now do deliberately. I was their only child. So, young as I was, I picked up the burden from my fallen parents, and have carried it ever since.

“I stumbled upon the blood magic in college, about a week before that fateful lecture of Sebastian’s. I had just gotten devastating news about an investment—a loss I couldn’t possibly cover, that might sink the whole works. Terrified, I went to my dorm room to try and think, and instead fell into a sort of trance.

“I dreamed of the king on his scaffold. He stood on the platform and spoke to me in a serene voice, instructing me in the proper performance of the ritual as he carved at his flesh and showered me with his blood. The drops burned, but comforted me.

“I came to in the kitchenette on my floor, a bloody knife in my right hand and gore spouting from my left.

“I bandaged it as best I could and phoned Security, swearing I had done in my poor finger by accident. I had such a reputation as a sober, responsible sort that they actually believed me. And then the very next day, I received a phone call informing me that another investment I had made, a long shot I had dismissed as a tax write-off, had come through beyond my wildest imaginings. It not only canceled out the recent loss, but my losses for the entire quarter.

“The following week, I came into Sebastian’s class, and heard him tell the story I had dreamed.

“I went from that class straight to the library, and began what turned into months and years of specialized study, taking me to some very strange libraries indeed. Plus I’ve conducted some further research on my own.”

“And what did your research turn up?” I said, noting with surprise that my breath was coming in short fast bursts.

“Many things. The most important being that one does not have to go out in one Grand Guignol, like the original kings. One can stretch out the blood-magic over any number of years, sacrificing a member at a time. Kind of a carnal strip-tease.”

He smiled, and held up the stump of his left arm. “One finger at a time, this was, and then the entire hand.”

“At about what, twenty million a finger?” I blurted, trying, weakly, to be funny.

He smiled anyway. “I suppose I won’t convince you it isn’t about the money. It *is* about power, I’ll freely admit that. It has to be power for my kingdom’s sake, or as I said it won’t work. But I reap other sorts of power as well—power I never dreamed existed until I started giving bits of myself away to it.

“Unfortunately,” he went on, “I also discovered it weakens the magic to use any kind of mechanical compensation.” He pulled up his right pants-leg to reveal

a sophisticated-looking prosthetic. I shook my head; I had detected not the faintest limp in his walk. “As long as I wear this, I get almost no effect from this amputation. It only makes sense—it has to be a full sacrifice.”

“So that means,” I said, “you can’t go too much farther with your strip-tease unless you go into seclusion.”

“Exactly. But there’s a paradox in that too. The magic is also greatly weakened unless there is an audience. Remember the king on his public scaffold?”

Every square inch of my skin began to burn, as if my tattoos had started to writhe beneath my clothes. “That’s where I come in.”

“Yes. I need a documenter.” His eyes sparked like witchfire. We didn’t have to speak to know we’d reached an agreement.

“THE PROJECT,” AS WE CAME TO CALL IT, HAD SOME complex underpinnings. Richard had already put in years of preparations—picking staff, servants, agents, even intimates, whose loyalty to him would remain unshakable throughout the entire process. There were the legalities. Richard’s lawyers and one of my own choosing labored until they were dead certain my protection from prosecution was airtight. And then there was the matter of finding channels for discreet distribution of the photos.

Finally, the day came when I headed up the Hudson again, this time in my weather-beaten van, its cargo deck packed with the equipment I would need.

The few pieces of furniture in the knife-collection room had been removed. The carpet had been taken up also, revealing a circle of slate set into the floor, a single unbroken slab a good nine feet in diameter. Elaborate patterns in colored sand decorated the rim of this circle; at its center stood a simple wooden chair and table.

On the table rested the ceremonial knife, its blade glittering.

Richard entered, balancing himself on a crutch—he had abandoned the prosthetic leg now that he’d officially begun his seclusion. He came over to give me an impersonal peck on the cheek. He wore only a plain white caftan and looked freshly scrubbed.

“Watch you don’t smudge the sandpainting,” he said, taking care himself as he hopped over it into his inner circle. He seated himself, laying the crutch on the floor by his side, and waited patiently while I set up tripods, positioned lamps, took light level readings, snapped trial shots with a Polaroid.

Finally I had all six of my Nikons properly set up on the programmed timer, and the control clutched in my hand. I looked at Richard sitting there, slight and vulnerable as

a child, and felt my belly quiver.

“Okay, I’m ready,” I said.

“Good.” His glance burned into me as he pushed up his left sleeve and laid his already-mutilated arm on the table. His eyes grew unfocused as his attention turned inward.

His lips began to move, at first silently. Then I heard a faint whisper, which grew stronger until he was chanting in a low musical murmur. I caught a few syllables of what sounded like Sanskrit, but otherwise could make no sense of the words. The melody was singsong, serene—deceptively so, for as Richard chanted on, the room began to fill with a tension that started a cold sweat all over my body.

As I stood there, feeling chills on the backs of my knees, Richard started to glow. With my free hand I worked my light meter; no illusion, he really was emitting a faint halo of light. No way to adjust for it now, I thought distractedly, my teeth chattering as the energy in the room continued to climb. I’d just have to pray that it didn’t mess things up—

Richard took the knife in his right hand.

Suddenly there were hundreds of voices chanting along with his, thousands, voices chanting down the millennia from times in which their owners wielded knives of bronze, of copper, of obsidian, of flint. My mind filled with visions of the chanting knife-wielders, adrift across time down a river of blood and fire, in boats of their own flesh and bone...

Richard raised the blade and held it poised over his left arm just above the elbow. His face wore an expression of rapture. The halo around him stood out to the borders of the sandpainted circle, vibrating like a living thing. The chanting voices shook the air like thunder.

The knife began to fall.

I bruised my finger mashing my control button. The cameras added the electromechanical racket of their shutters to the din.

With a thud that sliced effortlessly through the cacophony, Richard brought the knife straight down through flesh and bone, and into wood.

He started—not with pain, for he neither grimaced nor cried out. But his head jerked back and his eyes and mouth sprang wide open, and tongues of light like magnesium flares shot forth from them. Blood also shot from the severed arm—not as much as I would have expected, but enough to splash a spray of red directly at me. I raised my arm against it by reflex. Where the drops splattered my bare arm they burned like acid.

I barely noticed. I had forgotten about exposures and light levels. I had nearly forgotten my name, and Richard’s. I was standing at the edge of a circle of power

summoned by a god-king, a god-king now inhabited by something—someone—that was not of this world.

That Being looked at me. It was like looking into the sun. The rest of the world vanished. I vanished.

The moment passed. The light collapsed in on itself as the presence departed from Richard. He became a small bloodstained figure sitting limp in his little wooden chair.

I felt pretty limp myself. The room had gone silent. My forearm itched strangely. I looked down; the spots of Richard’s blood glittered like rubies. Somehow I knew those spots were now as permanent as the rest of the color inked into my skin.

Gingerly I stepped over the sandpainting and knelt by Richard’s side. I cast a glance at the severed segment of arm lying in a pool of blood on the table. *Raw*

**With a thud that sliced effortlessly
through the cacophony,
Richard brought the knife
straight down through flesh
and bone, and into wood.**

meat! my daemonic sense of humor tittered. I pointedly focused on Richard.

“I’m all right,” he protested weakly. His eyes were slightly unfocused, and he shivered with what I took as the beginning stages of shock. He pulled the bloodstained sleeve up from where it had fallen down over the new stump. I gasped—the wound was already closed, the stump neatly rounded off, a narrow pink seam marking where the skin had drawn together over the exposed muscle and bone.

He shivered again, harder.

“Let me get Charles,” I said.

“No need. I’ll be fine. It’s just the backwash...”

On an impulse, I slipped my arms around him. His body was as weak as ashes, and yet I could still feel the after-echoes of the Being that had inhabited him. A wet heat started up between my thighs. I lowered my mouth upon his.

His eyes widened. Then he began to kiss back. His tongue explored my mouth, then grazed my jaw to follow the curve of my throat.

Presently I scooped him up in my arms—he was surprisingly light, and I well-muscled from hauling my gear. His head against my heart, I carried him up to his bedroom, where we proceeded to kindle a more earthly kind of fire.

THE CAMERAS HAD CAPTURED THE GLOW, ALL RIGHT. And in the exposure right after the blade fell, one of the six cameras captured something else. It took a good deal of digital post-processing to pull the image out of the wash of overexposure, and even after that all I had was a faint outline. But what an outline.

Richard just smiled and shook his head when I showed him that photo. He would not—could not?—name that Being for me. Not that a name would have made any difference. Just to know that the Being I had seen during the rite really existed was more than I had ever hoped for.

Richard slid the photo of the Being back into the envelope with the others, pulled me to him, and kissed me, and we talked no more about the image in the photograph that day.

That week, Richard's business earnings shot into the billions.

FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS, I DROVE THAT ROUTE UP the Hudson River valley, in every season and weather. I would turn down that lane to the estate by the river—that macabre burlesque on Versailles, complete with its own twilight Sun King, a ruler whose interior fire burned only more fiercely the more his flesh dwindled.

Not every visit was to document a ritual. Oftentimes Richard would entertain the small circle who were in on his little project. A bizarre lot we were. I suspect that under other circumstances I would have chosen to avoid at least a couple of them, and that a few of them felt the same about me. But over the years we drew together with a loyalty almost as bizarre as the secret which inspired it. We'd gather to pay court to our netherworld god-king, I bearing the unique double role of Royal Chronicler and paramour, which honor I wore like the growing number of ruby drops amongst my tattoos.

It was so easy sometimes to pretend that this could go on forever, and out of respect for our king we never questioned this pretense openly. But I remember one gathering during the seventh year, otherwise no more remarkable than any of our other odd meetings, when the reality struck home for me.

It was just past the peak of summer, when the first trees begin to turn to flame and the nights to turn chill with frost. A knot of us strange companions were gathered to sip wine as the sun dropped behind the mountains. Charles carried Richard down from the house. We stood by respectfully as the servant propped him up in one of the Adirondack chairs he so loved, tucked a lap-robe around the stumps of his thighs, and withdrew.

Someone placed a glass of wine in Richard's hand, and we took turns describing the sunset to him. He smiled,

the ruddy glare lighting up his gaunt-grown face. For a moment I thought I saw, in the vacant sockets where his eyes had once shone, that other light that had only continued to grow stronger with my every photo of his rituals.

Charles came out onto the veranda to ring the bell for dinner. Gregor claimed the honor of carrying Richard back up to the house. The rest of us trailed behind, and I wound up bringing up the rear with Unia.

As usual, she was already loaded. "So," she asked me, trying and failing to sound as if her question was spontaneous and unplanned, "how do you think it's going to end?"

"I beg your pardon?" I said stiffly.

"Come now," she said, her tongue darting out unpleasantly to lick her upper lip. "You know what I mean. Not to be crude about it, but our fearless leader hasn't too many more parts left to spare. I suppose he could start working on his remaining arm by way of his guillotine. Or he might resort to cutting off his nose despite his face—ha! And then what? I presume his cock is still eligible, since you and he continue to have relations—"

"If you hadn't had so much to drink, Unia, you'd remember my photos of that particular sacrifice." I kept my voice light, but shot her a glare to singe her brassy blonde hair.

She reddened. "Was just a joke, can't you take a joke?" she mumbled.

I glimpsed the genuine grief and fear hiding behind her tactless attempt at humor, and relented. We walked the rest of the way in silence.

Later that night, after the others had left, I climbed into bed, wrapped my arms around Richard, and was mortified to find myself bursting into tears.

"Hush," he said, pressing my head against his chest with his one arm. He held me there for some time, stroking my hair while I finished crying.

"Don't you know," he said at last, "that you will never lose me now?"

"You're going to die," I blurted stupidly, tears welling again.

Emotions played across his face. "Yes. I will die. I will kill myself. But I will not be gone and done with. You know this to be true."

I ran my free hand over his mutilated flesh, feeling that familiar heat between my thighs. How little Unia understood. "I will miss this body," I said.

He sighed, his face pointing at the ceiling. In the darkness, the caverns of his eye sockets began to emit a glow, and I knew he was seeing... something.

"I will miss it, and be glad to be rid of it both," he

said. "But come." He turned his head to find my lips with his. "We are wasting precious time. Which, as you have rightly pointed out, I have not much more of."

Later that night I dreamed of the Being, the phantasm I had continued to capture from time to time in my photos of Richard, though never more than in outline. I could not fully make him out in my dreams, either, but his terrifying presence was still a comfort.

THAT LAST NIGHT, WINTER OF THE TENTH YEAR:

I drove the valley alone, in my van, under a full moon. There had been an ice storm that day, and every twig of every tree was encased in a crystal-clear sheath, so beautiful in the moonlight, so deadly to the trees. The wind blew; the tree-limbs glittered and tinkled, a thousand ice-sheaths shattering with each motion. Every now and then a crack like a rifle report heralded the snapping of an overstressed limb.

The mansion was deserted, as Richard had ordered. I let myself in with my key, and made my way down the now-familiar hall, camera-bag slung over my shoulder. He waited for me in the solarium, where Charles had left him before he, too, departed. Limbless, sightless, nearly featureless, he sat propped up in the Adirondack chair, listening to the night wind, the chiming and clattering of the trees.

I kissed him, my tongue caressing his vacant mouth. When I pulled back, I saw the flames leaping in both empty eye-sockets.

"You don't have to go through with this, you know," I said.

He smiled, a death's-head grin. "Perhaps I never had to go through with any of it in the first place," he said, laboring carefully over the sounds. He'd taught himself to speak with lips alone, substituting for the sounds he could no longer make for lack of a tongue, and we in his circle had learned to understand him. "I could have let the family fortune fail," he said. "But as I said from the beginning, it never was about the money."

"I know." I picked him up, pressing his body against mine, and carried him to the hall of knives. The guillotine stood in the center of the sand-painted stone circle, a cot set up before it. I laid him on his back on the cot, positioned his head and neck correctly, and turned my attention to my cameras. When every last tripod and light

and timer was in place, and the shutter control switch rigged to respond to the drop of the blade, I came back to his side one last time.

He smiled, accepted one last kiss, then opened his mouth for me to put the guillotine's pull-cord between his teeth.

Twenty minutes later, driving south along the highway, the river below an iron ribbon under the moon, I felt something strike me like a blow to the solar plexus. I barely managed to pull off to the shoulder. Clinging to the steering wheel, gasping for breath, I knew: the blade had fallen on Richard's flesh for the last time.

I looked up then. The moon had gone rust-red, and the river below to scarlet. A huge wavering figure came striding over the crest of the hill, only vaguely human-shaped, glowing like flame, walking at an impossible speed. It was the phantasm from my photos, contained within Richard all these years, free to fully manifest at last.

It vanished for awhile into the shadows under the tinkling trees, then reappeared by the river's edge. I saw motion on the water: a boat, blood-red and bone-white, moving on the water oblivious to the current, no oar or sail to propel her. The boat bore down on the shore, headed for the Being of flame. He waded out to meet it in the river of blood.

Just before boarding, the Being turned, as if toward me. It raised a hand, whether in greeting or farewell I did not know.

"Goodbye, Richard," I said, the tears sliding freely down my face. "I'll see you in my dreams...?"

The Being nodded, as if hearing and answering my question. The ruby drops burned on my body.

He boarded the boat, and it was off again, bearing its passenger away at a speed as unlikely as the Being's gait. Mist began to gather on the river, like curdles of steam on the surface of the blood. For a moment many more boats were out there, slipping into and out of the mist, all carrying strange passengers on their bloody decks.

Then the mist swallowed all, and when it blew clear again the boats had vanished and the river had washed out to its normal gray.

The trees tinkled like tolling bells as I pulled back onto the highway. A huge and comforting presence enfolded me as I continued on south to the city.

ELLEN TERRIS BRENNER

Lives, works, plays, and writes in Seattle. She is an alumna of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, and has published a number of short stories and essays, including four in InterText. By day she geeks at a large software company; by night she lollygags around the Internet and works on more stories.

One argument against the death penalty is that it's cheaper to give someone a life sentence than to execute them. Well, in most cases.

THE YOUNG MAN PITCHED THE I.D. INTO THE OPEN transfer tray, spoke his name—Jojon Rillard—and doffed his yellow plastic helmet to present a better view of his face, trying not to be intimidated by the twenty-foot concrete stockade. “I’m here to pick up my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather.”

The guard levered the tray to his side of the window and examined both the I.D. and Rillard, daring a characteristic to differ. His sigh signified failure. “I can’t let you in. Maximum security, you know.” There was a metallic reverberation as he punctuated the statement with a whack of his zapper against the chain-link fence that enclosed the sally port. “’sides, technically you’re not a visitor.”

Rillard shrugged. He had anticipated “technical” impediments: delays, interviews, data templates to complete, background minutiae to disclose, ultimately their resort to the letter of regulation. Not that he wanted to enter the Carnation Center for Ultra-Maximum Security—who would? But he didn’t want to wait outside in the Iowa sun while the security guard enjoyed the relative comfort of shade, either—who would?

Curious that the guard didn’t ask for the name of his Gee-to-the-eighth grandfather. Surely some obscure statute required you to know precisely whom you were picking up, even if there were no one else it could be.

Wind stuttered, and a dust devil sieved through the chain-link. Rillard shut his eyes and held his breath. Grit hissed against the shatterproof window and ricocheted onto his blue leather outsuit, catching in the fibers of the collar-to-crotch ventral seal. It also blew up his nose. Rillard turned his face away and sneezed. The barren panorama fluttered like a monitor with a dying solar cell, then bounced back into focus. Half a mile to the north sprawled Verdania, a malchristening if ever there were one, neatly laid out by protractor and laser compass, aligned longitudinally to minimize overhead sunlight, not a single tree visible above the Sumerian mosaic of tangerine-tiled roofs. Beyond Verdania squatted the mininuke temple, beside it rose the exhaust ziggurat. Rillard could almost hear the steady mechanical whine of power feeding the air coolers and the fridges and stoves and culinary paraphernalia and God-knew what-all in the town built to support the Carnation Center and the incarceration of Clyde Ahmed Bedess Washington, Junior.

“He’s dangerous, you know,” said the guard. “And incorrigible.”

Cab Washington had refused to register for a military draft or to kill Indochinese natives in a spat *du jour*. Instead, he had killed the two police officers dispatched to arrest him for refusing to kill Indochinese natives. The powers that be in Dallas, a predeluvian hotbed of death penalty passions, had elected to blunt protest marches and a shutdown of sanitation and janitorial services by

**“He’s served his time,” said Rillard.
“He should have died.
He was supposed to die.”**

suggesting to the prosecuting attorney that a prolonged incarceration would in this instance be acceptable, to say nothing of prudent. Cab Washington had been sentenced to 360 years in prison on each of two counts of murder of a police officer, terms to run consecutively, with time off for good behavior (*chortle*), one good day worth two days of sentence (*snicker*).

“He’s served his time,” said Rillard.

“He should have died. He was supposed to die.”

“Then you should have imposed the death penalty.”

“I just work here, Mister.”

You and fifty others. The warden. The sergeant of the guard. The guards in the corner towers he’d seen while flying over the rammed-dirt road in the black skimmer with the yellow speed detailing and the kayak-shaped sidecar, now docked ten yards away in the vast but otherwise empty lot. The armorer for the weapons the guards carried. Guard shifts, working in pairs. Maybe a roving pair on the parapets, if the stockade had parapets. Someone to run the cafeteria, someone to serve the food, someone to clean up. Laundry, cleaning, maintenance and repair, transportation to and from Verdania for each shift, someone to operate the transport, someone to maintain it. Medical, dental, recreational, educational, nutritional.

You and a hundred and fifty others.

Wives, partners, children. Schools, teachers, nurses, student advisors, administrators. Grocery stores, grocers, clerks, deliveries, loaders. Pharmacies, pharmacists and assistants, more clerks. Furniture stores, and more clerks. Accountants, managers, assistant managers, recyclers.

communications operation and maintenance, plumbers, electricians, solaricians, sheet-metal technicians for the air ducts and the radioabsorbent siding.

You and three hundred others. All utterly dependent on the lingering incarceration of Clyde Ahmed Bedess Washington, Junior, and the remuneration for the work and services performed pursuant thereto.

“They said you was the only one left,” said the guard. “Last living relative.”

“Where is he?”

“He’ll be here.” The guard, paused, drummed fingers, leaned his chair against the rear of the enclosure, squinted. “Think you inherited whatever it is he’s got?”

The Washington name had died out five greats ago. But Canduca Washington had accommodated a vibro-artist named Xu Chali, and the issue from that evening eventually had taken up with Jayar Rillard. There’d been a lot of that going around, five greats ago. Whenever possible, survivors intermingled, because you never knew when you would get to intermingle again. Decades of planet-wide meteorological warfare and abuse will engender such uncertainties... but, then, peoples tend to react badly when their coastlines are inundated. Those who have coastlines. And those about to get them.

Rillard shrugged.

“How’d they find you, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“DNA trace. Apparently I had enough to qualify as a next-of-kin.”

“That’s how they *identified* you.”

Rillard jerked his head toward the skimmer. The movement dislodged a bead of sweat, launching it off the tip of his nose. “In that I get known. Someone zapped my comm.”

“You’re a runner.”

“From here to there. It pays.”

“Run contraband?”

Everybody runs contraband. That’s where the money is.

“No.”

Movement in the vague ochre sky to the south caught Rillard’s eye. Seabirds, he reckoned, drifting north with the high-pressure system that scared the clouds off but not the ubiquitous haze. Whenever the breezes died, you could catch the faintest whiff of brine and decomposition from the Ouachita Islands in the Bay of Louisiarka. Surf fishing between the Bay and Keokuk Harbor was good this time of year, and he had been on his way there when the comm flashed across the datascreen on the skimmer instrumentation console. The false bottom in his sidecar contained eight fresh artichokes, to be delivered discreetly to the back door of the Life Mayor of Keokuk, whose partner had acquired a taste for them

during a vacation to Fresno Beach. In exchange, he was guaranteed food and lodging to the end of the snook season, and a permit to fish them. Something he did because... well, *just because*. What other reason could there be? The detour to the Carnation Center cost him but two hours, easily made up. But he had assumed Cab Washington would be ready to go.

The guard’s squint seemed a permanent affectation. “He know you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Why d’you suppose he lived so long?”

Why, indeed? For spite? Some old folks hung on just to watch the heir-expectants fidget. Some ripped the shroud off the Grim Reaper and played his ribs like a xylophone. Others simply gave up. What made a person want to live? To go on living? Especially nowadays.

Force of habit? The momentum of life?

“Maybe he thought it was funny,” said Rillard, plucking at the damp fabric under his armpits, “the way it cost so much just to keep one man locked up forever. When I leave with him, this place will die, like an industry town whose company moves elsewhere. Like the sunken coal mines in the Appalachian Archipelago. Maybe it amused him to keep you occupied.”

Whatever will you do, Rhett? Wherever shall you go?

“He was guilty, you know.”

“After 273 years, who gives a fuck?”

“It was The Law put him here.”

“And you.”

“What’s that s’posed to mean?”

“You need Cab Washingtons a lot more than they need you.”

The guard pulled at his lower lip. “What’re you going to do with him?”

“He’s not on parole, or probation. He’s free. He can do what he wants.” Rillard looked away, at the haze and the seabirds. Already he could smell the snook and the smelt in the ancient iron skillet, hear the sizzle of the hot oil on the open fire, feel the sand between his toes. Maybe his Gee-eighth ancestor understood what it meant to be alone with your thoughts, your memories, your reveries, by a solitary fire on a dark beach. Maybe the incorrigible Cab Washington just wanted to go fishing. He could, now. He could do whatever he wanted.

“There he comes,” said the guard.

Rillard couldn’t look. How many wrinkles did Methuselah have? Or any of the Biblical patriarchs who lived to ages old and ripe? He sniffed, but the breeze deflected whatever fetid aromas emanated from the man. He flicked his eyes there, and away. A glimpse of a very black man, like an old pygmy, stooped of shoulder and hobbled of gait, pate a gleam, attired in cafeteria whites

and scarred brown slippers. Smiling.

He looked again, longer.

Not exactly a smile. Almost a smirk. But the weariness of the rest of his expression said the victory included a terrible cost.

In his knobby left hand Cab Washington carried a sheaf of documents. Rillard reckoned they pertained to his new status. The old man did not so much as glance at the guard as he passed. He gimped toward the black and yellow skimmer as if he knew it was waiting for him. He spilled himself into the sidecar, and finally looked back over his shoulder. Let's go, young'un. Rillard's neck creaked with the effort the old man made.

With a parting wave at the guard, Rillard boarded up the skimmer, initialized power and controls, and eased her out of the docklot.

"Put this on," said Rillard, passing the old man a battered orange helmet.

Cab Washington gave no indication that he had heard, or had noticed the helmet. He stared straight ahead, at the dead-brown roadway over which the skimmer passed without touching, at the eastern horizon where orange land met orange sky. With the sun behind them, they seemed to rocket directly into their own shadows.

"We off the grounds yet?"

The words startled Rillard into five seconds of silence.

"I reckon so."

"Thank God Almighty," cried Washington, in a fluid, prolonged gospel tone, and died.

Rillard slowed the skimmer. In and of themselves the words meant nothing to him, but in that tone they became a last will and testament. Gently he nestled the helmet on Washington's lolling head, and gradually reaccelerated the skimmer toward Keokuk Harbor.

"Let's go fishing," he whispered.

TYREE CAMPBELL

Is a retired U.S. Army translator. His first SF e-novel, Nyx, will be released in 2001, and his second, The Dog At The Foot Of The Bed, is scheduled for release early in 2002. At present he is collaborating on an illustrated fantasy novel. When he is not writing, he is thinking about writing. Otherwise, he and Beth tend pets and plants and each other.

S u n s e t

NEAL GORDON

*This is a story about four people.
Two are present. Two are not.*

TWO CLEAR PLASTIC BAGS HANG FROM THE RAFTER at the far end of the cabana. Half filled with liquid, they sway in the salt sea air. Red twine snakes around the rough log rafter, sealing each bag and holding it in place.

Ray motions to the waiter and points, "What are they?"

The waiter, an older man, not like the usual young cabana boys that served his food, looks at Ray for a moment. "*¿Habla español?*"

"*Un pequito*. Barely," Ray says and takes a sip from the cold bottle.

Slowly, the waiter says in broken English, "They are not the friends of the mosquitoes."

"What's inside?"

"Vinegar and water. *Cerveza, señor?*"

"No. *La quenta*. The check, just the check," Ray says and reaches for the roll of colorful money he got in exchange for his bland green dollars at the hotel desk. It would be easy enough to sit here and get plastered. The sun on the water and the pink and white tourists around him are comforting: their voices a sing-song of accents from across the ocean. Ray laughs as a small blonde boy finishes a sand castle and then stands, raises his arms Frankenstein-like, and crushes his own work. The action is so simple and clear that he feels a lump rise in his throat. He has to shake his head to clear the moment.

Ray steps into his shoes and, feeling his skin suddenly crinkly, slowly stands. He sees Julia, lying in the crowd around the water's edge, stomach down on the yellow beach towel, her red hair pulled back in a knot. Ray stares at her as the waiter brings the check and lays it on the table. Her shoulders glare with oil, and her black suit looks impossibly dark against her still-white skin. She's going to get torched, he thinks.

Ray looks at the check and peels off a twenty, converting back to dollars in his head. "Three bucks," he says out loud. Two beers, chips and guacamole. No wonder everyone here is poor. They could charge ten at home, easy.

Ray goes and sits down on a plastic beach chair with his hand on the front of his neck. As he has done a thousand times, he touches the small hard lump there without thinking. The small lump has always been there, one of a spare pair of ribs. Contorted to be sure, they are not smooth and even like their well formed siblings. One rib, the one he fingers now, points out above his collar bone, as if trying to grow out of his neck, like a creeping

ivy searching for the sunlight. Its twin rises briefly then turns back into him, into the shadows of his interior. He does not know where it ends. The times when he is conscious of his action, he thinks of them like tea leaves, waiting to be read in the bottom of a cup, predicting his past and future.

Julia turns her head to him and the wisps of her hair touch the sand. Ray cannot help but notice how the sun has made her hair's red seem more yellow this past week.

**The action is so simple and clear
that he feels a lump rise in his
throat. He has to shake his head
to clear the moment.**

"What's going on down there?" she asks, sitting up and pointing past him down the beach. He turns and looks to where a crowd is gathering around a lump in the sand. People run toward the crowd, hurrying.

"Looks like a fight, maybe. All of these college kids," Ray says lifting his head. He wishes once again that he had thought twice about traveling here this time of year, when there seem to be young people and families everywhere.

"Go down and see," she says, shielding her eyes to see.

"Fine," he says, getting up. The sand is hot in Mexico, he thinks as it sticks to his feet like tar. It is formed from tiny pieces of shell, unlike the sand he is used to back in New Jersey.

A hundred yards down, he can see that it is definitely not a brawl: the crowd isn't moving. He quickens his step and between the legs of the gapers he sees a large, dark colored something on the beach.

When he is within ten yards of the crowd, he recognizes the something as the body of a man. A group of young men are doing CPR. The man's body has gone sort of purple-gray, a color Ray recalls too vividly from a year ago when he looked at his stillborn son in the delivery room.

Without taking another step forward, Ray turns and begins to walk back up the beach. The last thing he wants to do is look at a dead body. He shakes his head to stop his mind from thinking of that color.

"What is it?" Julia calls when he gets close enough that she can yell over the surf.

“Dead guy.”

“That’s terrible,” she says, sitting up.

“Big fat gray dead guy.”

“Are you sure he’s dead?”

“They’re doing CPR on him, but no way. He’s dead.”

He sits down and looks at her. She is beginning to cry, he sees. It is one of the moments where he feels the least like a man, least like he can do anything about what happened. He puts a hand on her back.

“It’s so sad,” she says. “He’s probably here on vacation.”

“Goes without saying,” he says looking down at his sand covered feet. God, the sand sticks to everything. He looks at the water rolling onto the beach, a green blue color he doesn’t naturally associate with the ocean. But, he thinks, he could get used to it. The waves roll up, dark blue, then begin to swell, a lighter blue, then almost emerald green as they break and roll up on the yellow sand. Julia’s hitching stops under his hand and he knows the moment has passed for her.

“I am definitely taking that class at the Y when we get back.”

“Class?”

“CPR. Can you imagine?”

“Dying on vacation? There are worse places.”

“No, for whomever he’s with. Can you imagine what a nightmare they’re vacation has just become?”

“Hadn’t thought about it,” he says thinking that the guy looked too young to be married and way too fat to have a girlfriend.

“What if they’re alone here? Having to handle all of the details in a foreign language?”

“I’m sure some diplomat will come.”

“So sad.”

“Let’s go inside. The sun is killing me.”

“Ray,” she says looking at him.

Ray feels his stomach roll over again, like the waves. A moment passes and Ray feels in that moment the conversation between them that is not said about a baby that he wants but she will not have. But this time Julia laughs, and everything is okay again. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that,” he laughs and bends over to pick up his towel and the bottles of sunscreen and water.

When he opens the door to the hotel room, he is struck by the cool dryness of the room. The air conditioner makes such a difference in this heat, he thinks. “I’m going to rinse off this sand,” he says and steps into the bathroom. He hears the sliding door open to the deck and turns on the shower to get the water right.

The shower is cool, and he feels a quick chill and a bit of lightheadedness that quickly passes along with

some blue fuzzy places in his vision. A hand on the solid marble wall helps, and in a moment he is fine, lathering. His skin feels tender to his touch, as if he was having an allergic reaction. Turning off the tap, he steps in front of the mirror and sees that he has gotten too much sun.

“I’m burned,” he calls, but he hears the ocean through the glass door and can feel the humidity from outside in the few moments since they came into the room. He steps out into the room and says loudly, “Close the door, you’re letting the air out.”

“God, am I as burned as you?” Julia says turning back into the room, and pulling the door closed.

“That bad? I wore sunblock.”

“Sunscreen, more likely. Which bottle did you use?”

“The blue one in my towel.”

“That’s only SPF 4. You should have worn at least 20. You’ll be sore later.”

“What should I do? Take some ibuprofen?”

“I don’t think it would hurt. Drink some water. Do you still want to go out tonight?”

“It’s not that bad, is it?”

“No, I guess not, if you don’t think so.”

“It’s just a sunburn.”

“If you say so. I’m going to get cleaned off.”

He pulls back the bedcover and lies down on the cool white sheets. They feel amazing against his skin: cold. But he can feel that some parts of his body, his upper arms, the backs of his knees, the webbing between his fingers, feel swollen and stiff. When he rolls over to take a sip of water, the sheets stick. The sensation is like he’s being peeled out of his skin. “Jesus,” he says aloud, laying back. He can feel the heat radiating from his naked body.

Listening to the shower in the next room, Ray thinks about the dead man on the beach. Surely his body was cold by the time they got him onto the sand. Not cold, he corrects himself, just not warm enough.

“Are there any beers left in the refrigerator?” she asks when she comes out of the bath, a white towel wrapped around her.

“I think so. You want one?”

“Please.”

He grimaces as he gets up, but when he picks up the beer bottle, its coldness convinces him to have one as well.

“God, you’re almost purple,” she says when he walks into the bathroom. He is pretty shocked by his reflection in the mirror. The white band of his privates is shocking compared to the red of the rest of him. Beet-red, make that.

“You’re burned too.”

“Not anything like you, sweetie,” she says. “Can you open that? I can’t manage it.”

He twists off the beer bottle top and hands it back to her. In turning to take it, the towel around her and falls to the floor. There is a silence.

“Want me to put some lotion on your back?” he says in what is his most normal voice.

“Please,” she says and hands him the bottle from the counter while pulling her hair forward over her shoulder.

He squeezes the lotion into his hand, puts the bottle down and begins to spread it on her back when she pulls away. “Sorry,”

“It’s just cold,” she says.

He stops and rubs his hands together and then goes back to spreading it on her bare back. He feels her push back against him and looks into the mirror to see that she has closed her eyes. Her skin is smooth and warm and the lotion turns thin and begins to absorb. When he is finished, his hands feel greasy and he goes to the sink to rinse them. When he returns, she has not moved.

He lies down next to her and she turns her face to him and her eyes open as she smiles. She makes a noise and closes her eyes again, leaning in and kissing him. He touches her and in a few moments she is pulling him toward her, but he can’t. He closes his eyes when she looks at him.

He rolls away from her, stands and pulls on a pair of shorts. “I’m going down to the front desk to ask about a good restaurant in the city,” he says.

“Are you okay,” she asks.

“Yes, perfectly. Just sunburned,” he says and pulls on a shirt. The cotton feels like sandpaper.

“Maybe later?”

“Absolutely.”

“Buy money,” she says and smiles and begins to dry her hair with the towel.

In the lobby, people mill about and Ray goes to the concierge desk by the front door.

“¿Hay un buen restaurante?”

In Ray’s mind, the words are converted slowly to English. We have a fine restaurant, sir.

“No... En la ciudad?”

There are many. Try Ricardio’s. Understand?

“Entiendo. ¿Usted necesita un coche conseguir allí?”

Certainly, a taxi for you.

“Bueno. Sobre una hora. ¿Puedo cambiar el dinero aquí?”

7.5 to one.

Ray takes two fifties from his wallet and the man

hands him a pile of bills in bright colors.

“Gracias.”

In the room, she is dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed wearing a blue sundress with a white shirt beneath. Her perfume fills the air. “You look great.”

“Any luck with the concierge?”

“I got a name of a restaurant in the town. There are taxis out front. *Andiamo al barre?*”

“Italian? The bar? Not just yet. We need to talk.”

“No, we don’t. Let’s just go have a drink and not talk.”

“I need to understand what is happening, Ray.”

“Nothing is happening. We’re on vacation.”

He touches her and in a few moments she is pulling him toward her, but he can’t. He closes his eyes when she looks at him.

“You feel far away.”

“I’m just thinking about things.”

“What kind of things.”

“I’m just thinking about me.”

“Without me?”

“No, it’s not like that.”

“Well, what is it like?”

“It’s not important. I’m just trying to understand what kind of person I am.”

“What kind of person are you?”

“I knew you were going to ask that.”

“Well, you spend so much time thinking about yourself. You are so self-involved. It’s very hard to be around you when you’re like this.”

“Look, you know how you’re always saying how self-involved I am? Is it better to be self-involved and think about yourself or is it better to sit around and gossip about everyone else and think about their lives?”

“I don’t do that.”

“I’m not saying you do. I’m just saying that’s what I get all day at the office. Who fucked who and who shit on who and what they are going to do to who, *ad nauseam.*”

“They’re just talking to talk.”

“And I’m just thinking to think. Is that okay?”

“Look, I was just trying to see what was bothering you. Now it seems it’s me bothering you.”

“You’re not bothering me. I’m just a little withdrawn right now. I’ll be better in a drink or two.”

“Then let’s go.”

In the elevator stand a young boy and his father. The boy is gorgeous, brown hair and freckles. “Dad, how come my pants won’t stay up?” he says, one hand on his green corduroy pants. Ray feels Julia chuckle. How can the kid be wearing corduroy? It must be 85 degrees in the shade. Kids.

“Because you don’t have a belt, kiddo.”

For a moment, there is only the sound of the elevator clicking past each floor. “I do too have a belt,” the boy says and pulls at one of his belt loops to show his father.

“No, that’s a belt loop. See this is the belt,” the man says pointing to his own.

“Can I have yours?” the boy asks. Ray can’t help but laugh out loud. The boy looks at Ray, and then turns face in toward his father, embarrassed. Ray feels the momentum of the elevator slow into that moment when everything feels heavier than it is.

“Too big, kiddo. We’ll get you one, okay?”

In an almost whisper as the doors open, the boy says, “No. It’s okay.”

Ray and Julia walk toward the hotel bar, through the marble tiled lobby, toward the ocean. Ray laughs and lifts two fingers to the bartender, and says “*Dos margaritas, por favor.*” The dark skinned man smiles and dips his head toward his work.

On the porch of the building, the sun feels warm and Ray moves to sit in the shade of the giant umbrella. Without thinking, he takes her hand and looks into her face. A smile spreads across her lips, her eyes closed and he feels her squeeze his hand. The waiter breaks the mood with the drinks.

“On the room?” he asks.

“*Sí, gracias.*” Ray says. The sun dips below the edge of the umbrella and Ray slides his chair back a bit further into the shade.

“Cute boy,” Julia says.

“Yes, he was. Very,” he says taking a sip of the sugary drink. “How do you feel when you see children?” he asks and leans forward into the sunlight to see her eyes. With one hand he shades his forehead.

“I used to not be able to look at them. Now it’s not so bad. How about you?”

“The same, mostly,” he says and leans back. The time is not right.

“Can we talk about what happened in the hotel room?”

“Talking about it won’t help.” Ray watches as a young girl tries to walk down the slippery steps in swim fins.

“Yes, talking always helps.”

No. It doesn’t. It just makes me more aware of it. Look,

if there’s one problem in the world that I don’t want to think about, it’s this one. Thinking about it makes me even more self-conscious, which makes it more likely. Okay. Let’s not talk about it.

The little girl holds the handrail, but he can see how unsteady she is.

“Is it the baby?” It’s the first time that she’s said anything this direct and he is speechless. “Or is there something else?”

“No. There’s nothing else,” he says. He watches as the girl begins to slip and he jerks to his feet instinctively. From the corner of his vision, a woman on the beach stands just as he does.

“Did you plan on a place with so many kids?” Julia asks, putting a hand on his and directing him back to his chair.

“No.”

From the taxi, Ray watches as they pass through vendor-lined streets. Cheap white fluorescent light gives the evening a sterile green glow. The further they drive, the dimmer the light becomes. There are far more shops than shoppers, as the Americans stand out so clearly from the locals. Beggars wait on the corners, cups out. Peddlers hawk goods to each passing customer.

Finally the taxi leaves the brightly lit market area and travels through dark streets until it comes to a brightly lit open air restaurant. The taxi pulls to a stop and the driver reaches back and flips open the door. “*Costa,*” Ray starts, but the driver turns and says, “After, I take you home, *señor.*”

“You’re going to wait?”

“Same price one way or both. I eat here.”

“Oh,” Ray says and crawls out of the back seat.

The restaurant is cement floored, with red-linoleum-topped tables and chrome-legged chairs. Music plays and families laugh and talk. The taxi driver sits at the low counter and seems to know everyone. Ray and Julia sit at an open table near the kitchen. Kids run wild through the place.

“Menus?” an old woman calls from behind the counter.

“*Gracias, sí.*”

“*¿Cerveza?*”

“*Dos,*” Ray says, looking at Julia, who nods.

The old woman smiles as she waddles over to the table with two bottles of *Sól*, two glasses, half a lime and two sheets of paper. “Thanks,” Julia says. The woman squeezes the lime into the glasses, and pours the frothy beer.

“The menu looks great. How’s the molé?”

“You need to eat more than that,” the woman says.

“What else is good?”

“Everything is good, but the rellenos are very popular with the sunburned *gringos*.” She laughs and puts a hand on Ray’s shoulder. “How is it that she is *rojo*, and you are the fire?”

“She’s smarter than I am.”

“Your English is terrific,” Julia says.

“I’ll tell you a secret. Everyone on the island speaks English. They are just stubborn about it.”

“Aren’t you?”

“I am the most stubborn of all. I insist that everyone is comfortable here.”

“We heard you were the best restaurant in town,”

“You must be staying at the new hotel.”

“How did you know?”

“My oldest is at the desk there. He sends everyone to us.”

“But you are the best, right?”

“My son is no liar,” she says.

“What should I try?” Ray asks.

The woman takes the menus from them, looks at Ray a moment and says, “Sunscreen, *gringo*. Sunscreen,” as she walks back to the kitchen.

When the food comes, first spicy and small and later in large platters, smoking hot but cool on the mouth, they find themselves laughing. Beers go down easily and with each course, the woman calls out to them, “Still hungry?” Afraid to stop they laugh and nod, the dishes magically appearing and going away.

As the meal winds down, the woman sits with them and eats a cup of ice cream. Her brow is wet with sweat, and they laugh and watch as the restaurant slowly empties. In time, the taxi driver comes to the table, and the woman introduces him as her youngest.

“Is everyone here yours?” Ray asks.

“Only the good ones,” she says and kisses her son on the cheek.

THE RIDE HOME IS SLOW AND CALM, THE SHOPS ALL closed and dark. It is late when they get to the hotel room and she turns and goes into the bathroom when they are in the room. Sleepily, he undresses and sits on the edge of the bed thinking about the meal and the day. Images of the old woman, the children on the beach, the dead man return to him.

When she returns, he is no longer tired, but just awake. “I’m sorry,” she says, falling onto the bed next to him. Her arm lays open toward him, and he takes her hand. Her eyes, half open, look at him, and he knows that she is thinking about sex, recognizes the look from when they were first dating. For so long, he has felt washed out and now being wanted fills him again with something new. The sex is slow and steady and good and he

smells the sangria on her breath, low like dry dirt in a sun shower.

Lying together, afterward, her eyes half closed now, Ray feels full. His mind feels light and he knows it’s the sunburn and possibly dehydration but he lets the feeling linger and says, “We should have another baby.”

A long moment passes and Ray realizes that she does not flinch at his asking. “You asleep?” he asks.

“No, I heard you,” she says, turning her head toward him, her hair falling across her face like a veil.

“Do you think about it?”

“When I was little, I had an aunt who came to live with us. Aunt Honeywood,” she says, and he feels

**Her eyes, half open, look at him,
and he knows that she is thinking
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when they were first dating.**

his eyes close.

“Yes,” he says, turning toward her, smelling her hair.

“She was pregnant. I didn’t know it at the time. Pregnant and alone, and it was awful, Ray. Her husband had left her and here she was all alone and pregnant and stuck with us out on the farm in the middle of nowhere and I swore that I’d never be her.”

“You’re not her. You have me.”

“And I used to think that. Before. When June was with us.” His eyes open at the name. June. He hasn’t thought of her as a person in a long time. Just a thing that happened. “I used to think that we were always going to be okay, and then I learned that there is no always.”

“I’m ready for us to have another baby, Jules.”

“Why? Why do you want a baby, Ray?”

“What do you mean, why?”

“I mean why are you ready to do this again? Why now? How can you even think of it?”

Ray rolls onto his back, and opens his eyes at the dark ceiling above him. He feels the sound of the ocean more than hears it. Feels his heart beat adjust to its rhythm, slows and relaxes. He feels the relaxation of the loved and protected, and knows why he wants children.

“I used to sit on my Dad’s lap and watch the news with Walter Cronkite.”

“Mmm,” Julia sounds.

“There were all of these images that I didn’t understand. Deaths and killing and shooting and still, sitting there, smelling my Dad, feeling his whiskers on my neck, I thought that those things couldn’t touch me.”

“But they can.”

“But they touch everyone. That’s no reason to stop going on. We’re not going on, anymore, you know. We’re stuck.”

“Can’t go forward, can’t go back.”

“No, we can go forward. It’s the only way we can go.”

“We could go apart. Sideways.”

“I don’t want that. I never have.”

“I need to hear that. Sometimes you are so alone.”

“Not really. I’m just not engaged. Like a motor with the clutch in.”

“And you think another baby will fix that?”

“Yes, I do.”

Time passes. Ray isn’t sure how much. A few minutes? Half an hour? A long time until he feels himself start to nod to sleep and his body jerks like he is falling down stairs.

“Tell me a story, Ray. Tell me a story while I fall asleep. Tell me a story like you’ll tell our child.”

Ray feels his chest swell with the words. “Once upon a time,” he starts. “Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess who lived with a man who lived inside his own head. ‘Why do you live in your head,’ the woman asked

the man, but the man was so busy thinking of what to say that he forgot to answer her.” Ray feels Julia move toward him, settling in. He feels her body relaxing. “Eventually, she decided that he didn’t want to talk to her anymore and she went off by herself to have a baby. She thought that the baby could talk to her, but the baby died, and when she needed him most, the man spoke even less, because he was thinking about what had happened and couldn’t find the right words to let her know that he was still in love with her, even with everything that had happened.”

Her breathing slows and Ray puts an arm around her. “So, although the woman thought the man had withdrawn from her, had gone even further away, he was really thinking about her all the time. After a time, the man realized that in trying to get away from the pain he felt, he had moved so far away from the only thing that could cure the pain: his love for the woman.”

He feels that she is asleep, but he goes on. “When they spoke, they realized together that the only way away from the pain was by being closer together, and so they decided to try again even though they were both afraid. But now they were afraid together, and it made all the difference.”

NEAL GORDON

Began studying writing at Iowa State University, then transferred to the University of Iowa creative writing program. Following completion of his degree, he left the Midwest for the East Coast. He went to graduate school at Temple University. His work has appeared in magazines, compilations and online over the past decade.

The Metal Box

TOM SHEEHAN

*Family problems can be quite complex.
But they can have simple solutions.*

IT WAS SO DAMNED PETTY THAT NOT ONE PERSON IN the entire family really knew how or where or when the rift began. It was there just as suddenly as the January thaw, being felt, being known, but still in all somewhat unbelievable. And every one of us, to the last thinking one of us, looked to Grandfather John Templemore to perform the cure, re-forge family ties, focus attention to proper matters. Hadn't that man accomplished, so many times, the near impossible? The wizened little man with the piercing blue eyes that could accost you or lay balm on your wounds. The white-bearded sage who reveled in poetry and masters of the language. The articulate stone mason, his trowel now put away, who knew Yeats better than the classicists. Saturday evenings, on his wide porch fronting on the town, or deep in the pocket of his kitchen, the fire at amble, he it was who took us spellbound into the magic of joy, crowding us with the language.

At five foot seven he was a stick-out among the whole clan, those grown among us all over six feet. "The vitamins did it," he swore time and time again. "The vitamins Grandma slipped into your drinks, put in your cereal. Every swallow she was at you, mark my words. Day in, day out, redemption was her law. Ireland was to lay no claim of blight on her children. Its music tolerated, its language invited to stay, but little of the foul disease that ran itself to ground."

And here we were, despite the love and respect we bore for him, his offspring of seven children and their twenty children, pitched into separate camps. Wives refused to talk to other wives; children, in folds of naïve stubbornness, carried the invisible emblems of parental separation; and nobody, any longer, knew why.

The rift *was*, and it hurt. A touch of plague seemed to bear it.

In a radial cluster of homes around Grandfather's house on the hill looking down on the town, our homes looked spoked and core-tied. No house of ours was more than a quarter mile from the great gray house whose doors were never locked, where we left for marriage or war three or four times over, or came home to, where young Joey was nursed back to health after the Storm in the Desert.

Except for Saturday evenings, that house near empty, we did not visit, leaving him and Grandmother alone with a bit of silence, the memories absorbing every bit of that silence. It was Grandfather during the week who

did the visiting, trudging his way on good or bad days to this house or that house, trying to keep knotted what he had tied during his eighty-seven years. He'd come down off the hill as intent as a small breeze, letting a color or an odor or a sound provide direction, as if ears or eyes or nose set his visiting map in place rather than his heart, rather than a schedule, rather than a logbook. "I saw John Three throwing the ball at Kirch's mitt like

**It was plain and small,
bluish with some legend faded to
smithereens, and mysterious.**

some loosened comet. I could hear it popping leather all the way from my gate.... I saw Enda, her curls flying, running at the head of the pack, a prime engine she was, full-out bore, the boys like exhaust fumes trailing behind."

With the rift widening as insidiously as that which had shifted Ireland's children about the world, his visits became more frequent. House to house he went in calling, never mentioning a cause, his intent open for inspection.

And it was that March, the air ripe with expectancy, a shell ready to explode, that I first saw him carrying the metal box under his arm. It was plain and small, bluish with some legend faded to smithereens, and mysterious. Never had he cluttered himself except with a book or two, spines up under an armpit, titles caught in darkness, us left wondering what he was reading. Never would he carry about other such cargo. Now with spring here, John Three's fastball and curve finding pace with each other and getting ready for a new season, Enda and Fitz-grace flying as twins on the high school cinders, pilot Paul home for a month after seeing hell on his daily horizon indicator, Grandfather John Templemore came among us with the metal box under one arm.

Every step he took away from the house on the hill, the box was under his arm. Every time he was visible to any one of us, the metal box, still bluish and faded at legend, was under an arm. It could have been sewn in place. Grandmother could have tucked it there as easily as basting a hem. Grafted to his body it could have been.

And the other change came too. Before any of the grandchildren could get to his house on Saturday evenings, before they could climb the hill for Yeats or Sean O'Faolain or Padraic O'Conaire, for that hard round mouth of his to soften on certain consonants the way music comes from nothing it seems, he was out of the house and down the hill.

Saturdays, for the want of a word, became *different*. No longer did the cluster squeeze in on him, no longer did *Innisfree* drift with resonance from the deep heart's core, or *The Devil and O'Flaherty* draw breath all the way down into a lung's expanse. Into the separate camps he moved in random schedule, slower in step, the box a new weight. Once inside, once settled on a new dais, he'd recite, read, play the mimic again, but it was not the same. From his delivery something had been taken, from the magic an edge of voice removed. And the metal box was an alien prospect, though not one soul asked him about it. John Templemore was not asked such questions.

But we began to talk about it, that faded blue, totally curious metal box—casually at first, as an aside, almost under our breath, and then at length as a solid curiosity. The box assumed the proportions of an unwanted visitor only grudgingly accepted into our company. It became, momentarily, and then completely, topic and essay. Near-mute wives began to nod at those they had recently ignored, began to find themselves coasting or sliding into a banter and a head-to-head chat over short fences, over bush and rail, at corners. The box's contents became uppermost in all of this; not why it was, but what it was, a fleeting whispery thing of relevance we could tie no strings to.

The grandchildren, and friends and companions of course, more visibly deprived of the tones, inflections and the rolling *Rs* of Saturday evenings' magic, were quicker

to react. Out of their encampments they came unflagged and open, honest in each and every assessment, citing first their uniform loss, and then their guesses. They offered the idea of a last will and testament to put us all in proper place; Grandfather's own one and only poem that had taken a whole lifetime to compose; the lot of money he had saved over the years or the winnings of the Irish Sweepstakes no one had ever learned of; a map of the gold mine he had found as a boy near Keene, New Hampshire while on a fishing trip along the river that passed through Gilsum.

There was such a myriad concoction of ideas and values that whole generations had brought to deposit. It was carnival and delicatessen, circus and smorgasbord.

And, as suddenly as the proper burst of another spring day, the rift was gone. Melted. Disappeared. Over and out and gone. We did not believe it had ever been. And we did not speak of it, rather enjoying with a savage appetite a long-lost favor given back so abruptly. We enjoyed each other again. We waited for Grandfather to sit on his porch on Saturday evening, waiting for us, waiting to toss that magic blanket over the most receptive audience of all.

It did not happen. Grandfather John Templemore died walking down the hill on a Saturday morning in April. Young Joey saw him from the road.

The magic was gone, and all knew it. At his graveside we stood hushed, expectant, knowing better. Something beautiful had been taken away. Yet something beautiful had been given back to us.

That night Joey opened the box. It appeared empty, but we all knew what had been in it. How it had manifested itself. Now we think we are back to where we used to be, where we were meant to be.

But Saturday, as far as everybody knows, is gone forever.

TOM SHEEHAN

Has published stories in numerous publications, three books of poetry, and is co-editor of A Gathering of Memories, Saugus 1900-2000, a nostalgic 482-page look at his home town of Saugus, MA.

Fourteen Ways of Seeing Dad

JONATHAN ALEXANDER

*Here's a collection of snapshots of life:
some of them real, some imagined.*

THESE ARE THE THINGS I KNOW ABOUT MY DAD.

i.

COMING HOME FROM THE ARMY, HONORABLY discharged from his forced service during the Korean War, he's hitchhiking home on a dusty road in Georgia. A convertible pulls up, top down, and a youngish guy tells him to get in. He can take my dad as far as Birmingham, possibly further. My dad gets in, and they drive for hours and hours.

Eventually, they stop at a motel to spend the night before venturing further in the morning. The driver takes the bed, and my dad spreads out on the floor. The lights are turned off, and, after a moment, the driver tells my dad that he would probably be more comfortable in the bed. My dad agrees and climbs in beside the driver.

I don't know why, but I imagine my dad doing this very carefully—not in a fearful sort of way, but in a methodical, almost gingerly manner. Quietly. A few minutes pass and then the driver puts his hand on dad's thigh. Immediately, my dad gets out of bed, pulls on his clothing, and leaves the hotel.

I imagine him walking all night. Somehow, he eventually arrives home in Mississippi. Picayune.

I do not know what he told the driver, or even what they must have talked about for the hours and hours they were together, crossing Georgia and into Alabama. They may not have said much at all. My father never spoke much. But he told us this story one night, shortly after mother had cleared the plates from the table.

My sisters and I remained quiet and still while mother began washing the dinner. No one knew what to say, but I, at fifteen, knew the story had been for my benefit, a cautionary tale. I got up and walked quietly away from the table.

ii.

AT TIMES, MY MOTHER MET WITH OTHER WOMEN TO arrange schedules for after-school care for their children or to borrow various cooking items or ingredients, and the gathered women would talk and talk—sharing much more than just Tupperware tips. But I never once saw my father talk to another man except in the most businesslike way possible. I don't think he had any friends. He even

once said, over dinner, that friendships between a man and a woman were far more stable than those between people of the same sex.

At the time, as he was passing the butter, I didn't buy it—and I still don't. I knew that statements such as these had histories, whole genealogies of people trying to love one another. But I was not privy to this ancestry. I could not count the rings on this particular family

**He once said that friendships
between a man and a woman
were far more stable than those
between people of the same sex.**

tree. And what little I knew seemed hardly enough to prepare me for my own life, especially when I wanted to know how my father and mother had struggled, how they had survived.

I know that my dad worked for the electric company for most of his adult life, but I know that he got more of a charge out of retiring early than he ever did hauling meters from house to house. He hated his job—for the thirty years he had it, and for the twenty years he survived it. He will take much of his story to the grave.

My mom, made of sturdy stuff, didn't want to be a blue-collar wife, so she tried a business, and in its way, it succeeded; it proved that women who have married up into the blue-collar world can pretty much have their way with their men, twisting their arms into the most pathetic ventures imaginable.

I pitied them. I always thought they should divorce. I always thought that both of them would be happier pursuing other lives, other loves. Any other life, any other love. But that's not the way it was done. You moved up into the world through marriage. As my mother once put it, why cut your resources in half?

Over time, my mother slowly explained all of this to me. She was a tomboy and came from a very large family in which an alcoholic father, coming home smelling of jeans, dirt, and sweat, would sling his wife's laboriously prepared meal all around the kitchen. He would not remember doing this later. But my mother remembered going without supper because you couldn't eat off of the floor, no matter how hungry you were. Shortly after she

turned eighteen, she and her gay brother moved away to New Orleans, where they figured they could start over, the butch little girl and the fag making a home for themselves at last. They knew there were other places.

My mother said that she married my father because he understood. I had trouble with this because I knew so little about my dad's life before he got married and I was born. Mom would tell stories—granted, always with a moral—but at least she talked, and my sisters and I slowly developed a sense of who she was as a person and not just as a mother.

My father, though, was a different story, with a seemingly simpler plot, almost two-dimensional. In short, a man—not much to know except for the given. What I *did* know was that my dad had grown up in southern Mississippi, and I think that part of him never forgave himself for that. I don't think he'd quite put it that way, but he wore sadness like a pair of sweat-stained overalls. Throughout his entire life, he worked in someone else's uniform, inherited from having grown up poor in a small southern town.

On one thing, my parents were clearly united: they both insisted that we never know their lives as it played itself out on their flesh and in their memories, so they shielded us with everything their money could buy. But even as a child, I could tell which histories were authentic, and which store-bought.

And as I began separating out the course of my desires from theirs, I began to resent them. Compared to the embarrassment of riches I imagined for myself, their lives seemed weak and pathetic. I enjoyed culture and the arts, read voraciously, imagined myself into a future resplendent with the height of aesthetic appeal. I would become a writer while they were just hicks. I would know the depths of the soul while they bargained at Kmart. I knew I was different, and knowing them (in pity) would tell me exactly how—and for what purpose.

I thought I could tell which futures were authentic, and I would be the arbiter of my own destiny. But the only thing I really knew is that there were—there *had* to be—other places.

iii.

I ONCE SAW A PHOTO OF MY DAD IN HIS ARMY uniform, posing for a picture he'd sent home to his mom and dad. I couldn't believe how old the picture was. It seemed to me that I shouldn't be holding something so old and worn, and I thought this stiff little photograph should be behind glass in a museum, awaiting the inspection of others and their learned comments about history and politics. "Note the insignia and the uniform: clearly the Korean conflict. I wonder what year this is?" "Well,

if you examine the globe in the background, you can see the borders of..." "Oh, yes, I see... that would mean..." "Exactly..."

I carefully put the photo back in the cardboard box from which I'd taken it, and then I put the box back in the bottom drawer of the built-in chest. I had been home alone, finding a history, while my parents went to visit my grandmother's gravesite.

At times, I'd go with them to Picayune, where we'd spend the entire day transported to a different decade, a stilled eddy in time. I never much liked these visits, and as soon as I could I convinced my parents that I was old enough to stay home by myself, where I'd spend the day either masturbating or rooting through my dad's things, careful to place everything back exactly as I'd found it.

But sometimes, they'd pressure me with family responsibility. You ain't seen Aint Jo in months. She don't even know what you look like no more. And at times, it was easier to submit myself to inspection than assert my precarious adulthood. So I'd go with them to visit my dad's older sisters, little knowing at the time that these trips offered me a silent insight into the world still playing in my father's imagination.

For instance, there was Aint Jo, who gummed her words and lived her days in cotton floral onesies. I never knew if she worked or not, and I wasn't certain that she knew how to clean house beyond stacking dishes on every raised surface so you wouldn't have to step around them as they cluttered the floor. But mostly I couldn't take my eyes off her mouth, which worked nonstop from the moment we arrived to the time we departed, when my mother would attempt graciously to decline supper served in unwashed pots and pans. We spent the most time at her house.

Then there was Aint Ru, who could've been a carbon copy of Jo. Ru lived in a trailer, a dirty silver tube that might have once orbited the earth but for the lethargy of southern heat. Her many children had steadily built their white wooden homes around their mother's plot of dirt, creating a world that seemed a separate state of their union. They knew each other, obviating the need to know anyone else.

When we'd visit, I'd usually hang back, aloof. Their children, even those my age, played games whose rules I would never comprehend. I'd catch a glimpse every now and then of their exchanges of power and dominance, of how they'd transform a bat and ball into the battlements of an ongoing war of the sexes, but I'd usually watch from the sidelines, prematurely scornful of their simple ways.

My mother would encourage me to join in, but my dad

himself remained mute, choosing to remain aloof. He seldom spoke at these gatherings, and my mom had to carry most of the conversation, about which she'd bitch all the way back to New Orleans.

I don't think my dad's sisters approved of my mother. She'd taken their boy, their plaything. I'd seen the one picture, buried in my dad's memory box, of him outfitted in a frilly dress and bonnet. He couldn't have been more than five, and I wondered how many such pictures from all over the world must exist of little boys dressed up as little girls, the living playthings of sisters and mothers. The camera would just *have* to come out and record the comic atrocity, to be kept secret the rest of the little boy's days, hidden in a box at the bottom of a chest of built-in drawers.

I wondered why no such picture had been taken of me.

iv.

ONE TIME, I WOKE UP CLUTCHING MY CHEST, PAIN choking my call for help. My parents found me and rushed me to the hospital, where I was released the next day, no explanation. My mother stayed with me overnight, sleeping upright in a chair by the mechanical bed, and before my father left to take my sisters home, my mother told him to kiss me. I remember the grazing of his stubble on my twenty-year old cheek. I remember shuddering, just a little, but I cannot recall if it was him or me.

v.

MY PARENTS NEVER HIT US. THEY HAD THEMSELVES been raised with firm hands, perhaps too firm, and I think that kept them from striking us, even when we probably deserved it. My friends' parents thought us odd in that we were never spanked; nobody could be *that* good.

At times, friends would describe the intimacy of punishment, of taking their licks like a "man." Sons in particular seemed to get it from their dads with clockwork regularity. Part of me, I know, was a bit jealous when hearing these stories. I knew my friends would've thought me crazy, but I wondered what it would've been like to have dad pull down my pants or swat my butt, his emotion for me unrestrained and directed at last. But I never saw him once raise a hand to me. It was so much easier to simply ignore.

vi.

WHEN I WAS IN THE NINTH GRADE, WE WERE TAUGHT some basics of family genealogy, and the inevitable assignment finally arrived: construct a family tree and

history scrapbook, dating as far back as you can. Discover your roots. Discover who you really are.

I could fill out mom's portion of the tree fairly well; with age, she increasingly enjoyed remembering her childhood, probably because it was increasingly distant from her. My dad, however, wouldn't be pinned down: "The past is done with. Only the future counts." I knew I couldn't write that down and turn it in, as true as it might be for my dad. So, reluctantly, he said he'd give me the necessary names.

I awoke one morning to find a list of relatives on a scrap of paper held to the refrigerator with a banana magnet. Dad had already gone to work, and he'd probably written the names down while he had his morning coffee.

**My dad wouldn't be pinned down:
"The past is done with.
Only the future counts."**

This didn't surprise me. But I was old enough to be intrigued by the reticence. It was at about this same time that I started to want to stay home on Sundays, when the rest of the family went to grandma's gravesite. And slowly I began to piece things together.

vii.

WHEN MY DAD WAS 19, FRESHLY RETURNED FROM the army, he threw what little he had away, put the rest in a duffel bag and took the bus to New Orleans. A friend had phoned and said that his boss was hiring people to work in a recently built jelly factory. The pay wasn't hot, but the boarding house around the corner didn't cost much anyway, and besides, he'd be living in New Orleans. A bar on every street corner. A brothel in the back of the bar on every street corner.

There were really no other options. Picayune wasn't a particularly gripping place if you were young, even for the most avid fans of local high school football. And the army had shaken him: he knew there were other places. His sisters, though, were content, and neither of them would see him off at the bus station. His mother didn't speak to him for a year afterward, and his dad had hardly ever spoken to him at all.

So, stowing his life above his seat, he rode the bus to the jelly factory and the boarding house. It wasn't long, though, before the sweetness of the factory became cloying, and the roaches in the boarding house competed for bed space, so dad took another job. Ten years later he met my mother, and together they drove themselves into a family, a house, and as much respectability as they could.

viii.

MY FATHER DIDN'T MARRY UNTIL HE WAS THIRTY two. That's a lot of time between getting out of the army at nineteen and finally "settling down," as my mother constantly advises me to do. Sometimes, I think that I'm following in my father's footsteps, but I have no idea where he might have placed his own feet for that mysterious stretch of time before his marriage.

I have imagined many possibilities for him.

ix.

ONCE, AFTER MY DAD HAD JUST TURNED TWENTY-two, he and a group of guys from work go out for a drink, perhaps visiting one of those neighborhood bars on a street corner. This one just so happens to have a brothel in back. First, though, they have a beer and peel peanuts, dropping the shells on the floor, ignoring the small red and white striped containers the peanuts are served in. The news plays loudly on the television because no one is really supposed to talk after all, this being largely a stag bar with a brothel in back.

Eventually, one of the guys gets up, winks, and says he'll be right back. And then they are all, one at a time, getting up to relieve themselves. And then it's dad's turn, and he goes because he knows it's what he's supposed to do, like dropping the peanut shells on the floor.

It's over quickly and he doesn't even get a good look at her face, but when they are done, he rests his hands for a moment on her thigh. She hasn't shaved on a while, he thinks, and for a moment he's hitchhiking again through Georgia. He gets up quickly and leaves, the guys clapping him on the back as they all leave the bar.

x.

ANOTHER TIME, MY DAD PLANS HIS ESCAPE. HE'S twenty-five, maybe twenty-six, and he senses that time is running out. He would like to travel West, destination unsure, but he knows that there is something in the world he can do, something he can put his hands to besides the jars of jelly he helps to fill, or the meters he detaches from houses that refuse to pay their bill.

He won't go alone, though. He can't. But Beau, his best friend, this funny, funny coon-ass from Lafayette, just won't go with him. He has friends here. More importantly, he has family here, and they would never forgive him leaving the state. They barely forgive him moving to New Orleans, but in the course of a life some things must be done.

So my dad and Beau argue about it one summer night. Beau offers him the necessary cash, a friendly consolation prize, but my dad is not appeased. There are some minor accusations, nothing really serious, but

they don't speak again like they used to. Beau finds other friends. My dad works at his job.

Then he gets married.

xi.

AT TIMES, I KNOW I MUST HAVE IMAGINED HIM gay—a cute, if skinny country boy in the Big Easy. A little naïve, but all the more attractive because of it. I admit I liked my dad, grinning just a bit in his khaki army uniform, bending slightly over to rest his elbow on his knee. He seemed so pleasantly surprised to know the world bigger than Picayune, even if he was only stationed in some out-of-the-way fort, never making it to Korea because the war ended. Still, the look on his face said it was enough.

I often wish I'd stolen the picture and hidden it in a book. I could see my dad, off from work, wearing those tight-fitting uniform pants, perhaps seeing the driver from Georgia in a crowded bar. He shyly looks away, but he knows he's been spotted, and he gives in to the inevitable. They complete their unfinished business, and another history blossoms into the future.

But I know this is wrong. I know these thoughts belong to someone else, not him.

xii.

I AM CONVINCED THAT MY FATHER IS THE FIRST TO know I'm gay, even before my mother, even before me.

Not because I rejected the sports equipment they bought me when I was young, hoping I'd outgrow my glasses and oversized head. And not because I preferred to read and play school with the neighborhood kids, whose parents steadily refused invitations to come over. And not because of my flamboyance or daydreaming, which other boys forsook for the more ritualistic pleasures of knowing each other's bodies.

Actually, if I'm pushed to say how I know he knew, I don't think I could come up with a satisfactory answer. But I know that men usually know, or they are at least quick to suspect—often correctly.

But I'm not being completely honest. He knew when the picture of him in the little girl's dress was suddenly missing. No announcement of lost goods was ever made, but he came down to dinner one evening, quietly took his place, listened while my mother said the prayer before meals, and, just before the prayer was over, stole a glance at me, his head still slightly bowed.

He knew I had taken the picture. If I'd have swiped the one of him in his army uniform, he might have almost been proud. As it is, though, a whole other story opened up before us.

We ate most of the meal, as usual, in silence. And that was that.

xiii.

WHEN I FINALLY BROUGHT MY FIRST LOVER HOME, I didn't tell my parents what Mike was to me or what the rings on our pinkie fingers meant, exchanged in a drunken ceremony in a crowded bar. I couldn't have been more than nineteen at the time, and, having grown up in the Deep South, I could barely put into words what the love of two boys might mean to others—except that this is not something you talk about or even admit to. Even in New Orleans, sex of any stripe existed between Bourbon Street and the Riverfront.

I knew, though, that I was doing something illicit, even damnable—and hot as hell. I kept hoping mom or dad would catch me trying to pull Mike's leg hairs as we sat around the dinner table. Every now and then, Mike's eyes would bulge and I'd grin through the mashed potatoes in my mouth.

My dad never raised his eyes from his plate. Nothing, perhaps, unusual in that, but I noticed it for the first time. I'd known before that my dad didn't say much during meals, and that the rest of us should be quiet. But tonight, chewing my food as quietly as possible, I saw my dad, in his electric company uniform, his weather-beaten face, his blotchy and straining hands, and I thought to myself, never, no. Not for me.

xiv.

I MOVED OUT OF MY PARENTS' HOME WHEN I WAS seventeen. I went to college, paid for my own education, and kept my life a secret from those who had given it to me. Mostly, they kept their eyes on their own plates. Sometimes I'd visit, and they would bring me back to school, stopping to eat at the Piccadilly Cafeteria outside Baton Rouge. Each time, we'd order the same thing, my parents sharing a plate of food between them. By this time, they could afford more, but why cut your resources in half?

My mother and I talked, sort of, and my dad focused on his plate. No one asked about Mike, or why he had moved out of our shared dorm room. Most of the time, the clacking of metal on plates from the surrounding diners overwhelmed our need to talk, and we sat silently, stiffly.

After the last of the dessert had been eaten and my mother had had her post-meal cigarette, she began to pick up her things. They wanted to drive me into town before heading back home, but I refused. I could easily take the bus.

For just a moment before leaving, though, I looked at my dad full in the face. And he looked at me, first out of the corner of his eyes, his head still slightly bowed, and then with his head lifted and his eyes steady. I nodded once and said "Dad."

Then I got up from the table and walked quietly away.

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The Gilding of Norm Lilly

T.G. BROWNING

*Some people wear their unpopularity like a badge.
When you've got it, baby, flaunt it!*

THERE ARE THREE COMMON REACTIONS TO AN incoming phone call at 2:47 in the morning, if you're Doris Preston, Chief of Police of the City of Toledo, Oregon. The first is to grab the phone immediately, then snarl "What the hell do you want?" The second is to rip the phone out of the wall, turn over, and go back to sleep. The third is to elbow Milt in the ribs and mutter words to the effect that he should answer it, you're in conference.

All three methods felt too exhausting this particular morning, so Doris invented a fourth way. She answered it, and in a mild voice said: "Can't it wait till morning?"

This threw the person on the other end of the line, Jimmy Hartman, Doris's second in command, into confusion since he'd expected the three usual options and had an answer prepared for the first one, with contingency plans for two and three. The phone company got an easy 10 seconds of work transmitting nothing but phone hiss.

Finally, Doris sighed and sat up. "Okay, Jimmy, I'm awake. Not necessarily aware, but I am awake. What?"

"You'd better get dressed and meet me at 1131 Spruce Loop Road." He paused, licked his lips and started to continue, only to get cut off.

"Why on earth would I go to 113-something Spruce at—" Doris squinted at the alarm clock on the headboard behind her, "—2:48 a.m., Pacific Whatever Time?"

That Jimmy could answer, so he did. "To look at Norm Lilly's body before it gets hauled to the morgue."

Phone hiss. Gears slowly turning. And then, "Judas Priest. And you're not going to tell me he had a heart attack, are you?"

It was a rhetorical question but by this time, Jimmy didn't let that stop him. "No, he didn't. At least I don't think so. I think the three bullets in his chest killed him."

"Okay, Jimmy. I'm on my way. Start the ball rolling."
"Right, Doris."

Amazingly, Milt managed to sleep through it all. A fact that Doris planned to remember and comment on later.

THE OREGON COAST TOWN OF TOLEDO IS A SMALL town set in a valley six miles from the ocean and the much bigger town of Newport. It was built on hills. Really ugly, nasty, smell-the-burnt-clutch hills that gave

the town a freakish, poverty-stricken, San Francisco-ish, where-have-all-the-people-gone look. This made passers through pass right on through, at speed.

It had actually been a blessing when the Oregon State Highway Department had bypassed Toledo entirely, even though it put a number of locals out of business. For one thing, Main Street probably wouldn't have to be resurfaced for another thirty years. For a second, buildings on Main Street were freed up by an extended

**"I don't think it was a heart attack.
I think the three bullets
in his chest killed him."**

round of bankruptcies, which in turn lowered the asking rent, which in turn allowed a number of start-up businesses to be born. There were now more merchants on Main Street than at any time in the last 70 years—though they all made considerably less than the ones that they replaced.

Doris lived up the hill from Main Street and after turning left on it, headed for Butler Bridge. It crossed a slough of the Yaquina River and provided the only access to a peninsula where Spruce Loop Road happened to be. She glanced once at each of the three buildings Norm Lilly owned on the main drag and sourly shook her head.

If anybody was going to get murdered in Toledo, it would have been Lilly. The man had been cordially loathed and not-so-cordially threatened for the last twenty years, particularly so since the discovery that he had owned 80 percent of the land condemned by the state to build the bypass. It also turned out that he'd owned the only qualifying gravel pit within thirty miles, which provided the aggregate for the bypass and was the not-quite-silent partner of the contractor who got the bid. Throw in the fact that he'd slipped a ringer in as pitcher for the Little League team he sponsored—a midget with a wicked fastball—and you had a man destined to die by violence or venom. If Doris had only motive to go on, she'd be pushing retirement before she'd gotten through investigating the first-round draft picks.

Doris crossed the bridge named after Horace Butler, the first person to plunge to his death by falling off the railing while drunk, made a right just past the looming

Georgia-Pacific semi-solid landfill, and three minutes later she was at the Lilly residence.

JIMMY HAD TAKEN AT LEAST 20 MORE PICTURES than were needed or tasteful, and stood leaning against the upright piano in the front room. He'd managed to sweet-talk Tim Thompson to come out rather than the county coroner, a move which would win him brownie points with Doris. (Doris had sworn that the next time she looked at Dr. O'Hara, it would be over the barrel of an illegal automatic weapon.) Further, since Dr. Thompson was competent, while O'Hara added new, majestic meaning to the word incompetent, it meant saving at least four days of confused exchanges between the county coroner and the Toledo P.D. Jimmy might have been young, but he wasn't stupid.

Thompson was a tall man with a serious face and a permanent tan acquired by some mysterious process no one would guess about. He generally looked distinguished and thoughtful. At that moment, however, he looked more puzzled than anything else, and Jimmy found himself gnawing a knuckle wondering what the problem could be. He was about ready to find out when Doris opened the front door and marched in. Her dark brown hair looked to have had a passing argument with a brush sometime in the past hour or so and she had gone so far as to don her uniform, minus the hat. At 5'4" and 115 pounds, she might not have looked ominous, but that was only the impression that only the chronically stupid would keep for any length of time.

She looked over the scene and Jimmy was gratified to see her glance once at Thompson and then nod in his direction. She didn't say anything but approached the body from the right side and then leaned over to get a better look.

Oh, thank God, she thought. No shots to the head. I just hate looking at that. Her eyes traveled down the body to the chest where two gunshot wounds were evident—neither one looked to have hit the heart. A little further down was the third wound Jimmy had alluded to—about belly-button level—and Doris suddenly a bad feeling began a free ascent up her spine. She straightened up as Dr. Thompson also stood up and looked down at her, his eyes questioning.

"Oh, jeez." Doris muttered, looking around the body. "He wasn't moved, was he?"

Thompson shrugged. "I don't know at this point. But even if he was, you see the problem."

"Damn. Damn, damn, damn. I just hate it when things like this happen."

Jimmy straightened up and cocked his head, catching her attention. "What, Doris? What's going on?"

Thompson looked back to Doris, unwilling to intervene. "Coward." Doris muttered at him. "Leave me the dirty work."

"What dirty work? Doris..." Jimmy didn't like the way the conversation was going.

"Jimmy. Look at the body."

"I have, so?"

"Look around the body."

"I *have* Doris. What's your point?"

"Three wounds. None instantly fatal." She looked at him for a moment and then sighed. "So where's the blood? There ought to be blood all over the place."

Jimmy looked at the corpse and then back at Doris. "But there isn't any."

"Right."

"So?"

"So, either there's a vampire living under the carpet, or he was dead when he was shot."

Jimmy looked to Thompson, who nodded.

Absently, Doris asked, "Who called this in?"

"Anon—"

"—ymous, right. Did you check the caller I.D. log?"

"Pay—"

"—phone. Right." Doris straightened up and looked at him. "At least there are some things in life you can count on besides taxes." She turned to Thompson. "We're going to need time of death."

Thompson nodded. "I'll know after the autopsy."

Doris glanced over at Jimmy, and then at the former Mr. Lilly. Out of nowhere she said, "Look at his face. See anything odd?"

Jimmy bent over, emulating Doris's earlier stance. He didn't even twitch for almost a minute and finally sighed and straightened up. "No, I don't. What am I missing?"

Doris shrugged. "It's probably nothing but my imagination. I haven't run into Lilly more than a couple of times in the last six months. His face looks thinner."

Jimmy nodded. "I'll grant you that, but so what?"

"He looks terrible, Jimmy."

"He's dead, Doris. That happens a lot when people die."

She shook her head impatiently. "He looks like somebody who's been in considerable pain for quite some time."

Jimmy absently nodded and looked back at the corpse. He thought back to his uncle who'd died of bone cancer when he was a teenager. Damn, she was right.

Thompson spoke up. "Who was his doctor? That'd speed things along if we could talk to him."

Doris frowned and shook her head. "I know he wasn't McCallum's—but it could have been anybody from

Newport. Jimmy, check the bathroom and bedroom for prescription bottles. Start calling around as soon as it's a decent time." Doris looked at her watch and groaned. "Damn, it's already four. Almost no point in going back to bed."

But she did.

THE TAIL END OF THAT CRISP APRIL MORNING greeted Doris when she took up the Lilly case again, heading to see the late Lilly's sister at the Lincoln County courthouse. She hoped to discover who his doctor had been, but with the great love often found between siblings, Doris figured she'd be lucky if Alice could recall his phone number. Calling the extended Lilly family close was accurate only if living on the same tectonic plate counted.

At least they were making progress. Jimmy had turned up a prescription for morphine tablets and was waiting for a call back from the Portland pharmacy where it'd come from. Too bad the prescribing doctor, a Dr. Raemi in Portland, had left on vacation and wasn't likely to return for two weeks.

Dr. Thompson had made it a point to retrieve the bullets first thing. After Jimmy had struck out calling doctors, he'd headed to Corvallis and the State Police Lab with all three—a 9mm, a .38, and a .22. Doris had only shook her head when she'd learned that bit of news. Three different guns argued for three different shooters and Doris had a bent mental image of people lined up to pay a buck to take a shot at Norm Lilly. Hell, with Lilly's popularity, such an offering could have put even the Lincoln County Fair in the black.

Alice had her back to Doris, but somehow sensed her approach. Before Doris could get a word out, the county clerk said, "I'm busy and you're out of your jurisdiction."

Doris expected no less. The two of them didn't have what one would call a cordial relationship.

"Glad to see you too, Alice. Got a few moments?"

"No. Not that it matters to you, I suppose."

"Too true." Doris rounded Alice's desk and parked herself in a chair from the next desk beyond.

Alice didn't look up. She was peering at a registered letter, reading with an intensity that would have done credit to a mercury vapor lamp.

"Look, Alice, I'll make this as painless on the two of us as I can. Okay?"

Alice shook her head, held up a well-manicured nail, finished what she was reading, and then put it down slowly. Softly she said, her face chiseled in smooth, unyielding stone, "That son of a bitch." Her voice sounded almost awed.

"Who?"

Cold gray eyes bored into a set of equally cold gray eyes. "My brother, Norman."

"Which is why I'm here. Norm's..."

"Dead. I know." She paused and took a deep breath. "I got a call from the hospital."

"I won't say I'm sorry. You don't like hypocrites any better than I do. Your brother was a jerk."

"No argument. On that, you, me, Mother, and all three of Norm's ex-wives can stand shoulder to shoulder. Probably a whole hell of a lot of others too numerous to name."

"Was he sick?"

Alice regarded Doris for a moment and then flicked

"I won't say I'm sorry. You don't like hypocrites any better than I do. Your brother was a jerk."

her eyes around the room. Abruptly she got up. "You want answers, I want a smoke." She didn't wait to see if Doris followed; she headed for the back of the office and the worker bee elevator. Doris just managed to get a hand interposed between the doors as they closed, waited for the doors to sullenly jerk back open again and then joined her. Alice ignored Doris and fumbled in her purse, finally extracting a pack of Lucky Strikes and a lighter. About that time, they hit the top of the building and exited to the county prisoners' exercise yard, forty square yards of asphalt, chain link fence, and razor wire. It doubled as the smoking ghetto, which might explain why a lot of the smokers had started to act a lot like lifers on Devil's Island.

"So you want to know about Norm's health," Alice said, after lighting up. "Why is that?"

"I don't know if you've been told, but Norm had three bullets in him when he was found."

Alice cocked her head and blew a smoke ring. A faint, wan smile lurked behind the smoke. "Really? Self-inflicted?"

"I doubt it."

"So somebody killed him and you're asking how his health was." Alice looked off to the west, where she could see two tiny black figures grimly trying to surf in water within spitting distance of freezing. "I can't for the life of me see how it makes any difference."

Doris didn't answer immediately but followed the other woman's gaze for a moment and then looked back at her. Why *did* she want to know? She couldn't think of a good reason.

“Just trying to pin everything down. Probably doesn’t relate in any way...”

“But you’re so thorough you make me queasy.”

“Thanks. Glad to help out.”

“It happens that you’re right. Norman was sick. Terminal, as a matter of fact. From what I was told—”

“By?”

“Norman, who else? And no, he wasn’t trying to mend fences before he croaked. Far from it. He wanted to make damned sure my daughter paid off her loan to him before he went to that great boiler room in the sky. Or ground, more likely, the bastard.”

“How long did he have?”

“Between three and five months. Assuming, of course, that he couldn’t get a liver transplant.”

“His liver was...?”

“Inflamed, enlarged, and cirrhotic, was what I was told. It sounded like it wanted more *Lebensraum* to me.”

“Loaner livers are hard to get, I take.”

Alice nodded, still looking thoughtful. “Scarce as hen’s teeth from what I hear. I tell you, I nearly died laughing when he told me.”

Doris cocked an eyebrow; she realized that someone wanting to see Norm die slowly and horribly probably wouldn’t shoot him. Much too quick an end. A really nasty poison would beat a gun hands down, with an attitude like that.

“When did you last see Norm?”

“Hell, I don’t remember, Doris. Sometime last week. Wednesday, I think. Here at the courthouse when he was filing some papers.... He was shot three times?”

“That’s the way it looked.”

“But you think he was already dead when he was shot, right?” Alice’s expression was so neutral it couldn’t properly be called an expression.

“Where did you hear that?”

“O’Hara been talking about it. It’s all over the building.”

Doris sighed. “Swell. Why couldn’t he wait a day or two for revealing that?”

Alice nodded—she didn’t think that much of O’Hara either.

“I guess that answers what questions I had. If you can come up with anything that relates to the investigation, give me a call. I can’t imagine what it might be, but keep it in mind.”

Alice shrugged and watched as Doris headed around the elevator to the stairs. There was something implacable about Doris that made her nervous.

DORIS DECIDED TO TAKE A CHANCE THAT TIM THOMPSON WAS IN AND O’HARA WASN’T, SO SHE DROPPED

by the county coroner’s office on her way out. Natalie Cloughlin perched on a stool, idly browsing the Web for lack of any real office duties. Natalie was a snoop, a ghoul, and a gossip... which explained why Doris thought she was a scream 90 percent of the time.

“Hey, Doris. Looking for Tim or Dale?”

Doris regarded her for a moment before she replied. “Take a wild guess, Natalie.”

The other woman chuckled evilly. “Tim stepped out about five minutes ago but should be back any minute. Dale is flapping his gums to one of the commissioners, two doors down.”

Doris sighed. Cooling her heels never appealed to her, even if it was part of the job. She grabbed a note pad and a pen and started to write a note to Thompson. She had gotten six words into it before the door opened behind her and she heard a soprano voice.

“Is Chief Preston—oh. There you are.”

Doris looked over her shoulder and saw a woman she knew vaguely: Christine Langerhaus. She worked for Georgia-Pacific, bossing shipping, scheduling trains bringing in materials and taking paper products out. Doris had spoken to her on a number of occasions by phone—generally when some Toledoite had been trapped by a train undergoing extended mating rites.

“Here, Christine. What do you need?” Doris turned back to her note with the intention of finishing it, but found her hand frozen in mid-scrawl when Ms. Langerhaus said, distinctly:

“I killed Norm Lilly last night. I thought you might want to talk to me.”

Doris found her whole body slowly and very carefully turning to the left, as she wondered if Christine had brought the gun along to show Doris just *how* she’d shot Lilly. She rather hoped she hadn’t. Natalie’s bemused expression crossed her field of view, and Doris felt minutely relieved that Natalie didn’t look like somebody who expected her counter to require the massive cleaning of bloodstains in the next thirty seconds.

Just as distinctly as Christine had spoken, Doris replied, “Oh. Really?” Her voice sounded so calm that she wondered if someone else might have replied for her.

“Here’s the gun.”

Doris’s larynx, warmed up and working on its own without cerebral support, said, mildly, “That’s very thoughtful of you...” and her left hand, following the lead provided by the voice box, reached out slowly. It’s amazing how many body parts figure they can really shine if they’re only given half a chance. Before Doris had even managed to look at the woman, her hand closed around the grip of a gun.

Doris hefted the gun curiously, noted it was an old Colt Police special, a .38, and regarded Christine Langerhaus for a moment and then, for want of anything more dramatic to say, asked, “Want to have a seat?”

Christine shook her head and Doris found herself shaking hers in response. “Okay. Let’s get you back to Toledo, then.” Natalie regarded the two other woman, her expression like that of a seeing-eye dog who doesn’t believe what it’s seeing.

“That’ll be fine,” Christine said after a moment’s pause and the three women found themselves looking at each, stuck in one of the those awkward social situations that Emily Post never considered.

Doris didn’t remember to recite Miranda rights until they were out of the building and nearly to the squad car.

DORIS DROVE BACK TO TOLEDO WITH HER MIND revving in high gear. From the beginning, Lilly’s murder—if murder it was, and Doris wasn’t convinced—had the feel of a carnival house of mirrors. Nothing was quite right. Except, of course, that Lilly certainly had enough people who would have liked to see him safely underground. She was mulling that over and occasionally glancing back at her prisoner when Meg, the Toledo Dispatcher, called.

“Doris, you need to get back here. We’ve had a break in the Lilly case.”

Doris grabbed the mike and muttered darkly to herself. Of course. Had to be. “Don’t tell me—let me guess. The mayor just turned himself in for killing Lilly.”

Silence.

Then a click and what sounded like someone taking a deep breath. “Really? Then that makes two people. The justice of the peace just walked in and gave himself up to Mort for shooting Lilly. You think they did it together?”

Doris snuck a look back at her prisoner, who was lost in thought, staring out the side window. She didn’t appear to have heard. “No, Meg. No. I repeat. No. Bud did not turn himself in—but I do have someone who did. Has Mort read the J.P. his rights?”

“Of course. Mort says the J.P. was being blackmailed!”

Doris risked a glance back at her passenger just in time to see Christine’s head snap around and her face turn ashen. Her eyes were wide.

Okay, so Christine was being blackmailed, too. I bet whatever Norm had is currently floating above Toledo in a fine black ash. Better not let them compare notes.

“Shove the J.P. into the file room and have Mort keep everybody away from him. I’ll be there in about five

minutes with who I found behind door number 1. Under no circumstances put him in a cell. Preston out.”

LIKE MOST SMALL TOWNS, THERE WERE A NUMBER of positions that didn’t pay enough to keep anybody who had such bizarre needs as three meals a day or a change of clothes. The jobs were damned important, but the citizens expected somebody to do them because of an overabundance of civic responsibility or underabundance of common sense. Chickens would starve on what the City of Toledo paid for mayor, city council, fire chief, or justice of the peace. You can bet Doris wasn’t swimming in greenbacks herself.

People still did the jobs for whatever reason. Take L.

**“Don’t tell me—let me guess.
The mayor just turned
himself in for killing Lilly.”**

Kent Parsons, the Justice of the Peace. To keep himself in a style accustomed to food, Kent ran a drug store. A good half of his business was by selling mail-order alternative medicine items, stuff people called folk remedies thirty years ago.

Not that many places sold packaged kits for mustard plasters, with directions printed in three colors and four languages. Very few places had pamphlets on cupping, lancing, or the care and off-duty feeding of leeches. The State Attorney General’s Office had only recently been able to talk Parsons into removing his pamphlet on home trepanning and was still working on getting him to drop the kit. (It came complete with local anesthetic, drill, gauze, plaster, and a road map to the skull, brain, and dura mater. It may not have been a big seller, but at the price he got for it, he didn’t *have* to sell that many. He certainly didn’t count on repeat business for that particular item.)

To pay back the world, God, and possibly any other deities that might have been offended, Kent worked for low pay and weird hours as the Justice of the Peace. He sat in judgment on traffic matters and, by arrangement with the county, set bail for minor offenses. Even Doris had to admit he did a pretty good job on the whole, even if she did figure he set bail awfully low.

Doris waved off any questions as she ushered Christine into the back and got her settled in one of the three cells. As soon as she emerged, it was to a confused gabble of questions from Meg, Jimmy, and Mort as well as Fred Vasquez, who usually worked night shifts. She again waved for quiet and sat down on her desk. For a few

moments she listened to their speculation and was about to put a halt to it when the phone rang and she picked it up without thinking. “Toledo Police, Preston.”

“Doris, I think you might want to come home.” Milt was speaking precisely, in his Police Voice. It gave Doris the willies.

“Why would I want to come home right now, Milt? Aside from the fact that it’s almost quitting time and I haven’t eaten.”

“Well, there’s a package that’s been delivered—or rather it will be if you come and sign for it. UPS.”

“Can’t you?”

“No, you have to.”

“Well, he’ll be gone by the time I...”

“That’s unlikely. I’ve kind of taken the driver into custody. You really want to come home. Now.”

Doris looked at the ceiling for a moment. “Judas Priest, Milt. I really don’t want you to tell me that the UPS driver has confessed to shooting Norm Lilly. I don’t think I could take that right now.”

Milt paused for a moment before answering which gave Doris a bad moment. There was still a third shooter to account for. “Well, no, I won’t tell you that. But the box Norm Lilly sent you might have something in it that might prove interesting.”

By this time, the rest of the squad room had lapsed into silence and stood around like a herd of disgruntled penguins waiting for a herring handout. The side of the conversation they heard begged for speculation. They also knew Doris would shoot anybody who started doing so.

Doris sighed. “Okay, I’m on my way.” To her onlookers, she said, “Okay, people. Find something to do. I’ll be back in a bit. Jimmy, I want you to get Tim Thompson over here—be persuasive. I’ve got to know what he’s got before we start talking to Christine or Kent.”

She had a crummy feeling Norm Lilly was having a laugh somewhere, right about now. She was seriously thinking of using what remained of him on Earth for target practice.

IN ACTUAL FACT, MILT HAD MERELY SAT THE UPS driver down and given her coffee and a donut while he wrote out a note for the woman’s supervisor. The woman’s name tag, barely visible under a shock of orange hair that crawled down her left shoulder, said Emily. She kept one hand possessively on the package and the other alternated between a Bridge Bakery cinnamon donut and her coffee, all the while looking around the kitchen speculatively. She didn’t have a clue why she was being detained, but with a cop writing an excuse, she figured it counted as a break and she could kick back.

Doris drove up, came in the back door and surveyed the kitchen scene before saying anything. The box under discussion was about twelve inches long, nine wide and two inches deep. About the size of a ream of paper. Doris sincerely hoped it wasn’t.

“I’m Doris Preston. Where do I sign?”

Emily sighed and stuffed the rest of her donut into her mouth. While chewing, she pulled out the data board and handed it to Doris, who scrawled her name. “Thanks for waiting. You’re helping an ongoing investigation and it’s appreciated.”

“Can I finish my coffee?”

“Take the cup with you. We got plenty,” Doris muttered as she looked the package over. Emily lifted the cup in a salute and left.

Doris sighed and began slitting the shipping tape on the box with her pocketknife, all the while chewing the inside of her cheek. “I don’t suppose I need to check it over. I doubt it’s a bomb.”

“Probably not. Should I go in the other room just to be safe?”

“Hell no. I go down, you go with me. That was the deal.”

Milt chuckled softly and sat back. Doris favored him with a glare and then opened up the box. Inside was a letter, lying on top of a mass of various papers—check stubs, credit card receipts, hotel room receipts, you name it. “Oh, God. That son of a bitch.”

Doris knew exactly what it was. All the fixings for blackmail, probably on half the people in town. Probably only missing whatever evidence Christine and Kent had destroyed last night.

She looked at Milt, who found himself totally at sea. He didn’t have any of the particulars on the arrests Mort and Doris had made that day. Doris sighed and explained.

Milt took it all in stoically enough and didn’t interrupt. When she finished, he looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, “Lilly was a pillar of the community?” Distaste tinged each word.

“Only insofar as he was rich and had a lot of influence.”

“So what are you going to do? This is probably evidence of a bunch of crimes.”

Doris shrugged. “Right now, I’m not going to do anything but read the bloody letter. Then I’m going to seal the box up and hide upstairs under the bed.”

“Are there a lot of unsolved crimes in Toledo?”

Doris thought for a minute and suddenly realized that she couldn’t think of more than one or two. She shook her head. Not real crimes, stuff that really should be solved and not picayune odds and ends that could safely

be ignored, like in any small town. But that didn't mean there weren't things in there that nobody knew about that should be attended to. *Oh, Judas. I'm going to have to figure out what I'm going to do with it. I think I'd rather retire and become a streetwalker. Or a bag lady. Maybe a nun. Some order far away that doesn't allow talking but does allow sex and husbands. Too bad I can't think of one.*

"Damn." She took a deep breath. "Listen to this."

Hello, Doris. How are things? You will be getting this after my murder and are probably wondering just what's going on. Well, I'll tell you. Since I've not got all that long to live thanks to cancer, and I hurt quite a bit, I just thought I'd spread my good fortune around and make my passing memorable.

I'm not a popular man and I take a certain amount of pride in that. Most people in this jerkwater town don't have the sense God gave a gopher. They're stupid and smug in their stupidity. They can be counted on to cheat at pinochle, drink too much, sleep with anything that can be talked into taking the time out, and can't recognize people who are their obvious superiors, much less treat them as such. So, over the last thirty years, I've watched the idiots and taken notes until I had something on damned near everybody of any importance. Enough to embarrass, humiliate, and more important, incarcerate plenty of people.

Interestingly enough, I don't have anything on my sister or you that isn't past the statute of limitations. The only thing I found was that night you hot-wired your roommate's car and drove into the Willamette River. That was after you had steam-rolled a six pack of Colt .45, if you recall the details and I doubt that you do. The picture of you throwing up on your roommate is priceless... and don't bother looking, it isn't in the box. I'm having it buried with me.

Now, as for my murder, I have a few candidates for that. First, there's L. Kent Parsons, who I've been blackmailing for 17 years. Then there's Christine Langerhaus. Same story, 9 years. Finally, there's my mother. The old bitch found out I'd skimmed 20 grand a year off the trust Dad left her—you can figure she's not a big fan of mine.

Have fun. Go to town. You've got months and months of arrests and trials and general brouhaha and I can guarantee you're going to hate every minute.

And you'll do it. You're such a smug, sanctimonious snot you'll do it because it's the right thing to do.

You never should have told anybody about that midget. I really didn't have anything against you, personally, until then.

*Sincerely,
Norman Lilly, deceased.*

Doris put the letter down and looked far less grim than Milt would have expected. Even more to his astonishment, she wasn't grinding her teeth. "You've thought of something."

Doris didn't answer immediately. She sat back and drank some coffee, drank some more, and then looked back at Milt. "Yeah, I did indeed. Let's wrap this up. I'm going back to the station to talk to Jimmy and Tim Thompson. I'll leave you to clean up this mess. When you're done, I want you to go to Newport and pick up Alice Tromlits. If you could bring her down

"You never should have told anybody about that midget. I really didn't have anything against you until then."

to the station, I think we can get this whole thing finished tonight."

JIMMY LOOKED PEEVED AT THE PROSPECT OF missing dinner with his wife. Tim Thompson sat at Jimmy's desk, having his dinner, a triple cheeseburger with everything. Meg stood with her left hand holding the left side of the jacket high while her right hand chased the sleeve around behind her back. At this point the sleeve was winning. She caught Doris' expression out of the corner of her eye and abandoned her quest. The prospect of possibly getting an hour of overtime *while* listening to what was essentially gossip was not an opportunity Meg could ignore. She found a spot out of Doris' direct line of fire.

Once seated, Doris leaned on her desk, her left hand cupping her chin and asked, "Well, Doctor, what did you find out?"

Thompson swallowed and reluctantly put the rest of the cheeseburger down. "Well, I'd have to say that Lilly died of a heart attack. It was close, but I *think* it was a heart attack rather anything else. There's no question he was dead long before the bullets took up residence."

"What ran second?"

"Poison—strychnine to be accurate. There was a large dose in his stomach that he'd only started to digest. Just traces in the blood." He looked thoughtful and then made a face halfway between astonishment and bemusement.

“He drank it in some coffee—and I use the term loosely. Jimmy found the coffee cup, and the stuff in it didn’t pour so much as crawl. Maybe the shock of that hitting his stomach triggered the coronary.”

“You think?”

“Nope.” He went back to eating.

“Okay. How about morphine? Did he have any in him?”

“No, now that you mention it. Surprised me a bit. I would have thought he was in considerable pain from the condition of his internal organs.”

“So we have a death by natural causes, one case of attempted poisoning and three cases of corpse shooting. That’s more or less what I figured.”

All three looked at Doris questioningly. Thompson didn’t know Doris well enough to draw a conclusion from her statement, but Jimmy and Meg did—their expressions hammered on Doris like Alaskan mosquitoes who’ve sighted their first meal of the spring. She ignored them.

“Jimmy, kick both Christine and the J.P. free on their own recognizance. Tell ’em the usual ‘don’t leave town’ hype, but add that I want to see both of them tomorrow afternoon—about two o’clock. OK?”

“Aren’t you going to question them?” Jimmy asked.

Doris shrugged. “I doubt if they have anything important to tell us. Whoever poisoned Lilly might, but not them. All three shooters can’t even be considered accessories after the fact; I don’t plan to bring that charge against them.” Doris looked at Meg who met her glance stoically, expecting to be forced to quit the scene before anything interesting happened.

Doris surprised her. “Meg, stick around for another hour or so. The only two people I want to talk to are Milt and Alice Tromlits. Anybody else, screen out for the next hour. I’ll be working on writing some stuff up—”

The phone rang, barely beating the front door opening. Meg jumped for the phone and Doris found herself looking at two women—Alice Tromlits and her mother, Matilda Lilly. Matty to her friends, had she any, which she didn’t.

Matilda Lilly was pushing 85, but unlike a number of the seniors in town, she didn’t look like she got any enjoyment out of straight-arming the Grim Reaper. With her grim expression, narrowed black eyes in a pasty Grandma Moses/Apple Doll face, she looked like she’d much rather kick the Reaper in the nuts and have done with it. The woman radiated bitterness like a working smithy radiated heat. Doris could tell where Norm came by his spitefulness; hi-test malevolence that potent rides DNA like a tick rides a rabbit.

Before Doris could so much as mutter “Oh, jeez,” Matty started in.

“Just who the hell do you think you are, you little puffed up bitch? Rousting my daughter around like some cheap streetwalker—not that the idiot doesn’t need rousting, but I’ll do it, not some jackass woman cop who...” Matty stopped rather suddenly in mid-tirade.

It was the cold gray eyes boring into her that did it. That and the twitch of Doris’s right hand which plainly showed the hand’s desire for the close companionship of a gun. Matilda Lilly may not have been much of a reader of the printed word, but she certainly qualified as a speed reader of physical text.

Doris looked mildly disappointed. She glanced at Alice questioningly.

“My mother got a little upset when I mentioned you had a talk with me this afternoon.” Alice shrugged.

“Really? Pity.” Doris looked back at the old woman and then pointedly looked at a chair a comfortable distance away. “Shut up and sit down. If you interrupt me just once, I’ll throw you in a cell and have somebody hose you down. That is, unless you want to confess to shooting your son. He seemed to think you planned to.”

Matilda pursed her lips tightly and remained mum.

“No matter.” Doris turned back to Alice and waited while the other sat down in the chair beside her desk. Without preamble, she asked, “How in hell did you get him to drink that coffee? Couldn’t he taste the poison? Besides, I would have thought he’d refuse to take a chance on anything you’d give him.”

Alice smiled slightly. “By that time, he didn’t really care what I had in it.”

Doris looked thoughtful. “What did you do with his morphine?”

“Flushed it.”

“Really? What actually *was* in the prescription bottle? Remember, we can have it analyzed.”

“I put some old saccharine tablets in it. I figured he wouldn’t notice.”

“Did you know he was setting things up to have somebody kill him?”

Alice sighed and nodded as she crossed her legs. Without asking permission she lit up a Lucky Strike and took a big drag.

Her mother looked astonished. “You killed him?” From the tone of voice, Doris couldn’t tell if Matty approved or heartily approved.

“I sure as hell *tried*. His damned will saddles me with the trust for you and more liens on the estate than you can count on your fingers and toes. On top of it all, the bastard left me just enough money to make sure I’d have to pay taxes on it. I’m going to lose everything to lawyers. Prison’s starting to sound pleasant after fifty years of the two of you.”

Doris sat back in her chair and casually asked, “How did you get Christine, Kent, and...” Alice favored her with a chill look and didn’t finish the list. “...and the rest to actually shoot a dead man?”

Alice snorted. “Norm always did have a problem with overkill. He didn’t know which of the three would crack and he didn’t care. He just wanted out.”

“And when Christine showed up...”

“Before, actually. I gave them all a call and told them they could get out from under Norm’s thumb *without* killing him. I had to sweeten the deal, I’m afraid. I ended up giving them each \$2,000 on top of the original blackmail evidence.”

“Did you really think we’d miss the fact that he was already dead when he was shot?”

Alice looked disgusted for a moment and then shrugged. “I didn’t think of that until after Christine shot him. Only then did I realize he didn’t bleed.”

“Well, brighten up. You don’t have to worry about a murder charge. The autopsy pegged the cause of death as a heart attack.” Alice looked mildly surprised.

Meg cupped the phone she held and called to Doris. “It’s Milt. He says Alice Tromlits’s house is burning down.”

“Oh, that’s just ducky.” Doris glared at Alice. “You set it, didn’t you?”

The other woman nodded. “Hell, yes. I own it outright and I mailed a registered letter to my insurance company informing them I’d torched it. After our little talk, I knew you weren’t buying the idea Norm had been blown away, and knowing my brother only too well, I figured he’d planted lots of evidence in my house.”

“Evidence of what?” Doris asked, more to herself than to Alice.

Alice favored her with a withering look and with the merest hint of a smile, said, “Don’t be silly. I’m not going to answer *that*.”

Par for the course. Asking a Lilly for cooperation was nearly as pointless as eating celery. The entire Lilly family seemed to have a talent for making life miserable for just about anybody within a blast radius of at least 7 miles—that being approximately how far away Alice’s house stood, or smoldered, as the case might be.

MILT GOT HOME ABOUT TWO HOURS LATER, SMELLING of smoke and bearing evidence of unwilling participation in crowd activities. Getting melted marshmallows out of a police jacket isn’t easy, which explained his tight expression. A dark smudge under his jaw completed the picture and gave him a raffish air he normally didn’t carry.

He doffed his jacket and hung it up, put away his other

cop gear, and then ran a hand through his crew cut: one very long day. Maybe not as filled with revelations as Doris’s, but a day that could have benefited from less activity. Lots less activity.

And the day was not yet done, he could see.

Doris sat on the fireplace hearth, warming her hands over a small fire she’d built using what little dry wood they had remaining this long after winter. Crackles and pops and an occasional hiss drifted out of the fireplace reluctantly, as if the hot smoke had tried to suck the sound up the chimney as it made its escape. As he approached, he watched Doris reach into a sack, rummage around and extract some paper, which she promptly stuffed under the one big piece of wood in the fireplace.

The entire Lilly family seemed to have a talent for making life miserable for just about anybody within a blast radius of at least 7 miles.

Milt dared it to remain unburned. Only a piece of wood would be stupid enough to go one on one with Doris right now. He sat down in the recliner and leaned back. He sighed. He waited.

He got bored. She wasn’t going to tell him what she was doing and he really, really didn’t want to ask straight out. At least she’d found the box under the bed upstairs where he’d placed it, as her sub-ether spousal telepathy had directed. She knew he wouldn’t get rid of it. He just *couldn’t*.

Hide it, yes. Forget about it, damned right. Destroy possible evidence? No way.

Doris was a hell of a lot more pragmatic than he was—always had been. He’d seen that the night he’d first determined that Doris was as serious about him as he was about her. The subject had been blackmail then, too.

She looked at him, gave him a tight grin, fished around and grabbed a handful of paper.

“You sure, absolutely sure, that you want to do that?”

Doris simply nodded.

“Did you read any of it—I mean, you had to have looked at some of it.”

Doris shook her head. She still didn’t say anything. Lord, he hated it when she needled him like this. Milt’s curiosity bump was very nearly as big as he was.

He couldn’t stand it. “Dammit, Doris. Say something. Say anything. Don’t just sit there.”

“I’m not. I’m feeding a fire.” She grabbed another handful and stuffed it into a convenient location between a piece of two-by-four and the log. She watched it for a second. “How did your fire go?”

Milt sighed. “Total loss.”

“Did you know Alice set it?”

Milt looked thunderstruck and then morphed to perplexed. “Alice was at the station?”

“She showed up with Mummy Dearest and confessed to poisoning Norm and torching her place. By now Fred has her over in the county lock-up but I think she’ll get sprung as soon as the D.A. looks at the particulars in the case. I can’t feature anybody prosecuting her. I can think of a number of people who might even applaud her.”

“So why did you have her locked up?”

“To make damned sure that Alice didn’t off Mummy or vice versa. I’m hoping by tomorrow morning that the two of them have cooled off enough to resume their normal, probably sick, family relationship.”

Milt took a deep breath, assimilating things at a quicker rate than most people would have expected. He caught his mental breath and then asked *the* question. “Why?”

“Why what? Why am I dumping the entire case into the nearest facility that won’t chuck it back up at me? Because there *is* no case. Attempted murder is the worst we could go for and I think a smart lawyer could convince a jury it was just a case of mercy attempted murder. Corpse desecration? How can I go for that when *I* want to do things to Lilly’s corpse myself? And if any of

the particulars come out, you bet half the town will feel that way too.

“How can I burn Norm’s *evidence*? How the hell can I *not* burn it? It’s about as close to a pure act of evil as anything I’ve ever seen.”

“But evidence?”

“Evidence of what? And when does it actually become evidence of other crimes? The way I see it, only after somebody reads it. Nobody but Norm knew what was in there. He’s gone. Ipso facto, it’s not evidence. Not the way I see it.”

Milt swore softly to himself. “That’s convenient—and that’s sophistry.”

Doris grinned. “You know that. I know that. But I don’t think the paper knows that.” She shoved the rest of the sack into the fireplace, watched until it caught fire and then went over and sat in Milt’s lap. She looked at Milt, gave him a quick kiss on the forehead and then looked back at the fire.

“God, I hope that somewhere, somehow, good old Norm knows just how *warm* his little gift has made me feel.”

“Not possible.”

“Don’t count on it, Milt. If there is any justice, anywhere, ever, he will.”

The fire flared up, a sheet of yellow that blocked out the soot-black behind it as it danced and spun and reached for the sky beyond the chimney. The log caught and the crackle of pitch pockets chuckled softly to the night.

For a very long time—an eternity, perhaps.

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Is a traffic engineer in Oregon and has had several stories published via the web, although he generally spends his time writing novels. His first novel, Wired, is scheduled to be published this fall. He writes a column for the e-zine Dark Moon Rising on book collecting.