

## High School Creative Writing Course

### The Short Story

The short stories, which follow the methods one should use to create a short story, were written by former students of mine at Scranton Preparatory School.

#### Step 1. Defining the Short Story

There are two definitions of a short story we will consider. The first is one we have learned from our years in grade school. There is a conflict between a protagonist and antagonist, and there is a resolution to the conflict. The protagonist succeeds or he fails.

Protagonist is a term we translate as the “hero” of the story, although the term “hero” is not meant to indicate a noble character, but rather the principal character who is trying to achieve a goal. The protagonist may indeed be a person who is striving to do something that is wrong.

The force opposing the protagonist, the antagonist, may be a person, nature, or the protagonist himself. In the first instance, a younger brother may be trying to beat his older brother in a race, or a game, or in winning the affection of their parents. In the second, a girl may be lost in the

mountains and trying to survive the perils of nature. In the third, a person may have lost his husband or wife or mother or father, and he may be struggling against depression.

Henry James, a major American novelist and short story writer, defined a short story as a “situation revealed.” This means there is no outcome to the conflict in which the protagonist finds himself. In some of the short stories in this book, we see a protagonist (hero) unable to solve the problem (conflict) with which he is confronted. There is no resolution to the conflict. At the end of the story, we know the problem will still be there because the protagonist is unable to solve it. In the short story, *Collecting*, for example, there is nothing the boy can do to help the old woman.

What we can get from this type of story is an insight into the human condition by which we see that not all problems can be solved. They do not result in success or failure. Some things in life must be endured since they cannot be changed. Someone leaves us. Someone becomes helpless. Someone dies. One of the most difficult things to accept in life is that we can't protect those we love against life and the pain it can bring them. (*Uncertain Morning*)

## Step 2. The Topic

Write about what you know.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” We’ve heard that expression over and over again in our lives. People argue about money, politics, sports, religion, work, education, etc., and one person accuses another person of a lack of knowledge, of not having his facts straight.

We’ve all thought the same thing about some teacher we’ve had. We’ve sat in the classroom, listened to the teacher, and decided the teacher had no idea what he was talking about. And so we daydreamed or took a nap.

When we write a short story, the reader demands the same thing of us as we demand of our teachers. We must know what we’re talking about. If we write about rich women in high society on New York City’s upper east side, about drug dealers pushing dope in the ghettos of big cities, about the intrigue among the staff at the White House, then the reader will realize we have no knowledge of these things because our prose will reek of falsehood.

We won’t have the details right. We won’t know how these people think. We’ll be fuzzy about what motivates them, what’s made them like they are. We won’t know their way of speaking, the way

they walk, the morality or amorality that governs their decisions. We'll be using our imagination, but not in the creative way that brings truth. We'll be creating lies about a real world that exists, and so the reader will put our story aside, saying, "she doesn't know what she's talking about."

We can create a world that doesn't exist, a world that we make up ourselves. A world where animals speak. A world where little people exist. A world of Narnia. A world of Hobbits. A world of fantasy. (*A Garden of Greeblies*.) But we cannot create lies about the real world.

"Truth is beauty; Beauty truth." The object of art is to create something of beauty, and the way to beauty, as the poet Keats say, is to reach the truth. If we write a short story about a lonely old woman who is a customer on our paper route, and if we can move our readers to feel her loneliness and her frustration, then they'll say, "This experience is true. I believe it, and I think it's a beautiful story."

So the truth we are looking for is the truth we, as writers, perceive about the people in our world. If we know them, know the way they feel, the way they talk, the kind of houses they live in, the principles they live by, the sins they commit, the guilt they feel, the pain they endure, the happiness they long for, the people they need to fulfill their dreams, then we'll know the truth about them, and if

we tell their story well, then we will have written a beautiful story.

K.I.S.S. Keep it simple, stupid. We can't compete with television and the movies. They have special effects, stuntmen, unlimited resources. They can make spectaculars. *Star Wars*. *Star Trek*. *Spider Man*. *Terminator*. *Batman*.

We have but a pen (or word processor) and paper. So don't write wild stories with melodramatic plots and daring rescues by larger-than-life heroes. They won't work. They'll sound phoney. And they'll pale in comparison to what the TV and movie studios can do.

We can, however, best them in our short stories if we concentrate on character, people living ordinary lives, lives which at times call for extraordinary courage. TV and movies focus on plot, adventure, action, but they're short on depth, on reaching into the mind and feelings and motivations of their characters to understand their depths.

And so this is the area where the short storywriter should concentrate. Write simple stories about people who feel deeply, who are sensitive to the world around them, and who care about what happens to both themselves and those they love.

We have to be on guard, then, about telling the truth. About people, about places, about

opinions, about what happens. If we're not, then we don't have the slightest chance of writing a work of art that is beautiful.

For a novice writer, it is much better to begin with a small canvas than a large one. Perhaps the primary virtue in writing is simplicity. The microcosm is a miniature of the macrocosm.

Just as every ingredient for an adult is contained in the child, so all the mighty truths in this world are contained in the most humble life. Pain, courage, sorrow, compassion, vengeance, love, self-sacrifice, cruelty—every human being is as capable of them as any monarch or dictator. The common man, although he may not have the power to shake the world's foundations, does have the ability to let us see human nature in all its weakness and in all its majesty.

### Step 3. The incident.

Once we have chosen a topic, the first step in writing a short story is to imagine an incident, something that happened or might have happened to us. If we come to school in the morning and we're "just dying to tell our friends what happened last night," then what we tell them about is an incident. "Guess what happened?" is what we say to them. And so we proceed to tell them a story.

In reality, things that happen are often not interesting enough that we can develop a story out of them. And that is where imagination comes in. Often when we tell people a story and we see they're enjoying it, we embellish the story. We make it "better," and the way we make it better is by exaggerating what happened.

The incident may be real, but we don't want the final product to be real like a photograph. We want it to be imagined like a painting, like a song, like a sculpture. We have the stone, the raw material, in the incident. This is the reality. We must now find the work of art within the stone and make it emerge by chipping away at what surrounds it.

When we choose an incident, it must be one that will interest the reader, make him wonder what's going to happen next, or how a character will react to the incident. The primary purpose of writing a story is to entertain, to give pleasure. And so the reader must find our story enjoyable, something that he is interested in reading.

Often we can think of something that happened to ourselves or to one of our family or friends or something we read in a newspaper. The source for the incident makes no difference. As long as we are familiar with the type of incident and the type of people involved in it, our imagination will supply the rest.

Consider the following incidents:

1. A young man, about seventeen, comes into a pizza parlor with a handful of red carnations, and he asks ten boys to pin a carnation on their jacket because he wants to play a practical joke on a blind date he is going to meet there. He has told her she'll recognize him by the red carnation he'll wear on his jacket. Is this her story or his? What is she like? How will she react? Will she think the boy funny or cruel?

2. A fourteen year old girl is persecuted by her classmates. They make fun of her clothes, make-up, hair, complexion, speech. They won't allow her into their social circle. What are their motives? Are they sadistic? She tells her parents she wants to transfer to another school. What will they say or do? Is any of this the girl's fault? What will happen to her?

3. A sixteen or seventeen year old girl/boy comes into her/his home, not making any noise because she/he is late. He/she hears her/his mother and father arguing in loud voices, saying they hate each other, and agreeing a divorce is the only solution to solve their problems. What is her/his reaction? Is she/he fond of both parents or one? Does he/she think of what will be the consequences to her/him, to their family? Why do they no longer love each other?

4. The week before graduation from high school, a girl and her boyfriend are going to meet other classmates at a shore house which the girl's family owns. While driving on a turnpike, the girl is texting her other friends to make sure they're on their way. Distracted, she crashes into a tractor trailer ahead of her. Neither is wearing a seat belt. The boy dies. What happens to the girl?

By choosing an incident, we will avoid a primary flaw of novice writers: telling the reader what happened, instead of letting him see what happened. Dramatize. Don't narrate. Show the reader. Let him watch the action unfold. Don't tell us how much your character loves someone. Show us the intensity of his love by what he does.

Example: Perhaps an argument between two of your characters has taken place. If one of the characters tells the story of the disagreement to her mother, then it is narration. If the reader sees both characters and hears their exact words, then it is dramatization.

The easiest way to avoid this flaw is to use dialogue. When a writer uses dialogue, his characters must confront each other, and any confrontation between characters is dramatic. Confrontation does not of necessity mean conflict. It means face to face drama, but the drama can also be within a character by using interior monologue and/or stream of consciousness. (*Nothing Gold*).

## Step 4: Point of View

Once we have chosen a topic and an incident for our short story, we have to decide on the point of view from which we will tell the story.

We can tell it from the omniscient point of view in which we have extraordinary powers such as knowing what is in the mind of every character in the story. It may be important for our story to know what more than one of the characters is thinking, and this may be the only point of view that will allow us to write it. Examples in this book are: *Pepper Plants and Tomatoes*; *A Garden of Greeblies*; *Battle Royal*)

Some writers choose a character through whom they tell the story from the first person point of view. It gives a sense of immediacy to the story because the character is telling us how he felt about each experience without having his feelings filtered through the mind of an omniscient author. (*Nothing Gold*; *Collecting*; *Uncertain Morning*; *Letter to My Mother*; *No More Chrysanthemums*)

The same effect may be also achieved by having the character tell the story, but using the second person. It is rare, but some may find it an interesting technique to experiment with. There is a sense of intimacy between the narrator and the reader because he is addressing the reader as “you.” Even though the “you” is a rhetorical use of the

word, much as we use “one” as impersonal, it still brings about a feeling in the reader of being a confidant. One of the stories in this collection uses this technique, but only in the first paragraph. (*The Scapegoat*)

Another point of view, but again one that is not often used, is the dramatic point of view. Dialogue carries the story, much as in a play. There is some description, but most of the story is told through dialogue. (*Ashes, Ashes*)

When we’re considering choosing a point of view, we should decide whether we have the ability to feel how the opposite sex feels. In other words, can we tell the truth about what a boy feels if we’re a girl, or what a girl feels if we’re a boy? If we choose to tell our story from the point of view of the opposite sex, will the reader believe us?

Will the reader find truth and beauty, or will he say to himself this writer has no idea of how a girl of seventeen feels; she has no idea of what it feels like to be a boy in these circumstances.

We must remember if we choose to tell the story through the eyes of a child, or an autistic child, or a mentally challenged adult, etc., we are limited by the intelligence of the person through whom we tell the story, by what they can know and feel and think. (*Blue-Green Love*)

## Step 5: Establishing our parameters

In the genre of the short story, the word “story” is the most important, of course, since what we do is weave a tale for our readers. But the word “short” is also important because it makes us aware of the limitations the genre places on us.

Since it is short, we do not have the space to develop a great number of characters such as we do in a novel. If we introduce more than two main characters, we won’t be able to develop them into complex and interesting people. The novel can span years, even generations, and we can watch characters grow and mature, but the short story is momentary. We must place our characters in a crucial situation at once, and one in which they have little time to deal with it.

And so time is an important element in a short story. A week or two is the longest span a short story should cover, and the optimum time would be within the context of a day or two.

Of equal importance is the concept of place. In a novel, we may move from country to country, but in a short story, we should confine ourselves to one place: a house, a garden, a pizza parlor, a room, etc. There is no time to roam about in a short story. Remember, keep it simple.

## Step 6. The World According to Me

What distinguishes one writer from another? It is the voice with which she speaks, the way she views the world. She looks at life, the good and the bad, the joy and the sorrow, and she has a unique viewpoint on the human condition. Since no one else in the world is exactly like her, she has a vision of the world which no one else has.

That is, if she pays attention to what's going on around her. If she's observant. Everyone sees the same things. Some people observe and make a judgment about what they see. Others don't even notice, nor would they care if something were brought to their attention. In order to have something to say, she has to pay attention to people and the things they do and the things they talk about.

We're going to write a story. So the questions we have to ask ourselves are: Why do I want to write a story? Why should people want to read it? What do I have to say that no one else has to say? What is so interesting about the world according to me? How do I see the world and the people who live in it? Do I view mankind and the human condition as tragic or comic? Do I view life in a serious or humorous way?

To some of us, the world is comic, and man, in his struggle to cope with the trials and temptations

of life, is risible because he does not have it within his power to achieve victory. If triumph does come, it comes by accident. (*Joseph Andrews*) And so we look at the human condition as the human comedy, man's struggling to achieve goals that seem within his grasp, but that in reality will forever elude him. (*Huck Finn, Catcher in the Rye, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*) In these three novels, what appears to be comic often turns out to be tragic.

There are, of course, many other types of comedy that don't aspire to become great literature, but to amuse: romantic comedy, (*Blue-Green Love; There He Is*); gallows humor, (*Over the Edge*); tall tale, (*Where are you, Roy Rogers?*); satire, (*Gretchen's Cake*); irony, (*Battle Royal*)

To others of us, the world is tragic, and man, though he may not be able to achieve his goals in life, is crowned with nobility because of his struggle. Being courageous, noble, loving, compassionate, and faithful is more significant and ennobling than success, and experiencing defeat may make a person wise. (*The Old Man and the Sea; The Grapes of Wrath; The Power and the Glory; The Scarlet Letter; The Bear*)

There are numerous ways of looking at the world, and I ask not that you as authors share my view of it, but that you have your own. So we have to have a point of view. Perhaps we see the world in romantic terms where everyone should be happy.

Perhaps we're cynical, and our characters have to be careful lest they be deceived and used by other people. Or as an idealist for whom there is no such thing as a bad person. Maybe we believe in environmental determinism, (*An American Tragedy*; *The Octopus*; *The Red Badge of Courage*; *West Side Story*) and our characters think and feel and judge according to the environment in which they live. (e.g. ghetto, poverty, drunkenness, drugs, molestation, abuse. (*Golgotha*))

When you're a novice writer, and in addition, very young, you may not think you have a take on life, but you do. And if, by chance, you don't, then you won't be able to write, to command the attention of readers because no one wants to read an author who doesn't have a viewpoint since it's boring to read someone who has no convictions.

Writers often use a method called "interior monologue" to express how they view the world. It is a technique by which we let the reader hear what our character is thinking, what he thinks about himself, his life, his relationships, and his world. He ponders the incident, and he tells us what he believes is the truth.

The theme of the story, the central idea we want the reader to grasp, comes from the "the world according to me." We present an incident, introduce our characters, and after the reader finishes the story, we want him to grasp our idea of the world. In the

incident with the red carnations, the theme may be: When we don't know a person well or not at all, it's a bad thing to trifle with her feelings; or, a person has to know how to handle a "joke," or she's going to have a lot of pain in this life.

Step 7. He's a real character.

All of us have used this phrase, and what we imply by it is that someone is interesting enough to hold our attention, to make us care about what happens to him. In colloquial conversation, we infer that the character is funny, but more often that he's different, that he's unique, that he has a view of the world and himself as a part of the world that is indigenous to him. No one else thinks the way he does and acts the way he does. Everyone else conforms to the expected norms, holds acceptable beliefs, answers society's questions correctly. An interesting character may be called an "outsider," one who functions in society, but who is uncomfortable with its norms. (Holden Caulfield, Huck Finn, Hester Prynne, Captain Ahab)

What makes a character interesting is the goal he wants to achieve. People who are apathetic, who don't care what happens to them or to the world around them, may be considered "cool" in life, but in fiction, they are boring.

“Incident reveals character.”

Once we have chosen a particular character, then he will be revealed by the incident we have chosen in step one. For example, if the female character in the carnation incident is strong and self confident, when she walks into the pizza parlor and sees so many boys wearing carnations, she may jump on top of a table and shout that any guy who’s wild enough to dream up this kind of stunt is her kind of guy. On the other hand, if she’s shy and sensitive, she may cry and run away, heartbroken that someone has played so cruel a joke on her.

The maxim is: given a particular situation and given a certain type of character, this is the way she will react. In writing this short story, we would describe what type of person she is before the incident takes place. Once she becomes involved in the incident, her reaction will be inevitable because of the character we have created.

“Character determines incident.”

If the same story were told with the boy as the main character, then we could tell from his character whether or not he would pull such a prank, and also, whether he would do it for fun, or whether he would do it to embarrass the girl.

And so a character must be consistent in his actions. We may conceive of our characters in any way we want. No reader can demand that we create this type of character or that, but what a reader can demand is this: Given this type of character and given these circumstances (incident), this is the way he or she would react.

Given a sensitive girl who is exposed to a practical joke, she would in all probability be hurt. And the key word in the way a character reacts is “probability.”

In real life the sensitive girl may react as if she were a fun-loving maniac, but in a story, what she does must be probable. In real life we have no choice but to accept what happens, because against fact, there can be no argument. The only thing you can say in real life is, I never would have believed she'd do such a thing. But she did, and so what you believe she would have done is irrelevant.

But life is not art. In art, the reader must be satisfied that each character acts according to his nature. And if I say to you, this mother you've described would never abandon her children; this girl would never talk to her father that way; this boy would never run away from home; this man would never hit his wife; what I'm saying is that you've created a character and a situation I can't believe in, that is not probable.

To create a character who comes alive, who becomes more memorable than a real person, is the goal we should aim for in writing a short story. The plot of your short story, therefore, should be subordinate to character. A short story based on character reveals a person in a particular situation, and more often than not there is no solution to her problem. There may be great courage in her endurance or black despair in her defeat, but whether she succeeds or fails, the primary focus is on her character. Remember the definition of Henry James: “A short story is a situation revealed.”

### Step 8. Concrete details

“Be one of those people on whom nothing is lost,” Henry James said.

Noticing everything is our business if we want to become writers. We have to be nosey, and we have to pay attention, to listen as well as to see. What we try to do as writers is to interpret the world for our readers, and we claim a right to do this because we observe and we understand the significance of things and we know the motives of people for doing the things they do. We claim not to know everything about everyone, but in the world we stake-out as our own (Step 1), we claim to be the interpreters of those who inhabit our world and the institutions in it.

If our world is grade school and high school, for example, we know teachers and the way they act and why they act in a particular way. We know those teachers who are dedicated and would do anything to help a student. We know those teachers who can't control a class. We know teachers who don't like girls or don't like boys. We know those who can't wait to get out of school each day, and those who love the school. And we know their motives, sometimes pure and noble, sometimes selfish and immature.

We know our fellow students. Some of them are pure of heart, without guile, humble and helpful. Others are arrogant, perhaps violent, sometimes dangerous, often back-biting. Whatever they are, we understand them, and we understand why they are what they are.

Some try to "out-fashion" everyone by the clothes they wear. Some form exclusive cliques to keep everyone out but their own circle. Some are convinced they're important because their family has money. But whether they're good or bad, they're all human, and so they're all a part of our study of the human race and what it does and why it does it.

And we know family. We know what a good mother should be, and we have an image of what a good father should be. Some parents are strict, and we can see the good and bad effects this can have on their children. Other parents don't believe in

disciplining their children because they feel that restraint interferes with their children's self confidence and creativity. We can also see the good and bad effects of this approach.

We know the advantages and disadvantages of a large family or a small family, or being an only child. Place in the family may make a difference, being the oldest or the youngest or the only boy or the only girl. If the mother or father favors one child over another, we know the effect that has on the others. We know how we'll raise our own family when we have one.

Despite the few years you have lived, there are a great number of experiences you have had, and you can tell your readers about them because it's your world and you know it better than anyone else. You're the reporter from the front lines of school and family and growing up and falling in love and maturing into a man or woman. You know the joy and the pain, the agony and the ecstasy, and you can tell those of us who are older what it's like to be a teenager in your world.

What will make your writing sound authentic is writing from your own experience about the concrete details that you experience. If you're a girl, you can tell us everything about getting ready for a date or dance, choosing the right outfit, using or not using make-up, fussing over hair, crying over zits, choosing a perfume, etc. Bring us into your world,

and describe it to us in such detail that we can see it and smell it and taste it and hear it. Say to yourself: After they read this, they'll know what this part of the world according to me is like.

If you're a boy, tell us about a part of your world, perhaps your first date: trying to get up enough courage to ask a girl, how you'll die inside if she says no, how you wish you'd never fall for another girl again because asking her out is so painful, how it's not fair that a boy has to do the asking, how you're going to react if she says "yes," or if she says "no." Make us feel this part of your world.

Noticing everything is your business if you want to become a writer. When you see a girl, you have to observe whether her clothes: (color coordinated? out of style? expensive? sexy?) make a statement about her.

His looks: Does he have thinning hair? Are his eyes avoiding yours? Is his mouth closure grim? Does he slouch? Are his eyes startling? Is he tall enough, muscular enough, good-looking?

We should exercise the same close observation about nature, a school, a room, a church, about anything. Absorb every detail. Pay attention. Carry a small notebook and jot observations in it or unique expressions. Ask questions.

In life, a person's being slender or heavy, the way he combs his hair, his taste in clothes may indicate little or nothing about him, but in art, the good writer reveals something about his characters by the details he tells us about them. A constant repetition of "blue eyes, blonde hair, full lips, high cheek bones" is not only boring, but it's trivia that tell us nothing about his or her character.

What makes a character come alive is something distinct about him. When we mimic someone, e.g. a teacher, we pick out characteristics that are indigenous to that person and make him unique. We say, in effect, that no one else has these characteristic traits.

Example: She slouched in her seat, and her indifferent posture was a symbol of her apathetic attitude toward her teachers. The indifference she was prevented from expressing in words, she conveyed by positioning her body at an angle of boredom.

Hemingway believed that a writer reveals the truth only in concrete details, what the reader can see and hear and feel and taste. He distrusted abstract words such as "patriotism, bravery, honor," because he felt the bloody reality of war that lay behind these words was worlds apart from the romantic notions they inspired.

Whether he was right is moot, but the point is we can understand and approve or disapprove the things we experience better than the ideas we can only think about.

If you write from your own experience about the details you notice around you, then your writing will sound and be authentic. Readers will absorb the rich and varied details, and they will recognize them as true. And if you reach truth, you will have beauty, the revelation and manifestation of truth.

### Step 9. Control thyself.

A writer is not a preacher or a teacher, but an observer. We must look at the world and the human condition, and we must report what we see. It will be our own peculiar, unique vision of the world (step 6), but we should not have an axe to grind or a mission to accomplish.

As artists, we must be objective. To use a metaphor, ice water must flow through our veins. We must distance ourselves from the characters in our short story as a surgeon approaches a patient on the operating table. It is not that the surgeon is unconcerned with the person inside the body, but he can't allow his personal feelings or emotions to interfere with his objectivity.

There are enough people who spend their lives trying to change the world into a better place without the artist's joining their ranks. We should observe and report, and what we report, not our lecturing on it, should move the reader to feel, to experience what we have seen.

For the same reason surgeons don't operate on members of their own family, we should avoid any personal story about which our emotions and feelings run so high we may lose our objectivity.

All of us have suffered some pain or some injustice at the hands of other people, and it is a natural tendency to use our short stories as a pulpit for our own personal grievances. Art is not a forum for venting one's anger. If we want to tell the world about our anger, we should write an essay, or even more to the point, our autobiography, but in our fiction, we must control ourselves.

Parents, teachers, brothers, sisters—anyone whom we cannot treat with total objectivity should not populate our story. No one but our mother is interested in how sad our life may have been or is and how angry we may be about it. CONTROL— at all times and under all circumstances — is the key word for a writer. If we can look at things that have happened to us with a bemused detachment or with a sense of humor or with wisdom, then we have control.

At the opposite extreme of self-pity, we must be careful of sentimentality, of writing stories dripping with oleaginous and unctuous sentiments, trying to make the reader feel happy or sad, to make him fill up with tears and cry, to play games with his emotions.

We want the reader to feel and to care for our characters, but the emotion must come from the story, not from our writing it in a maudlin way. We're front line reporters. We tell a story about what we've observed, and what we've observed should move the reader. If it doesn't, we didn't tell the story well.

### Step 10. Compassion and Tolerance

God is the Creator of the world, and the artist is the creator of her world. God created out of nothing. The artist takes the real world, her experience of it, filters it through her imagination, and produces her own creation. It is not photography, reproducing only what is there, but it is art, the creative mind constructing something that has never been in existence before.

In his work, the artist should imitate God who saw all things he had created and said they were good. We are God's characters. We make mistakes and we fall, but we ask that he understand our

weakness because we are human. If we expect of him compassion and tolerance, then we should extend the same forgiveness to our characters.

We cannot condone the evil our characters commit, no matter what their reasons may be. But we must, on the other hand, understand their motives and their actions. We must be able to empathize with them.

If we cannot understand the opposite sex, if we cannot understand why people do evil, if we cannot understand even treachery, violence, and sadism, then the number of believable characters we can create is limited.

All our characters must be capable of redemption just as all mankind is capable of redemption. We should never create a black and white character, one who is completely evil or good. Human nature, as Emily Dickinson wrote, is “freckled,” but not cancerous. In each one of us there is some redeeming virtue that makes it possible for someone to love us. If we draw a character who is totally bad, the reader won’t care what happens to him. If, on the other hand, we draw a character who is morally perfect, no reader will believe in him.

Step 11. Imagination, for which there are no steps.

In the preceding pages, we have studied different ideas about writing. It is possible to learn how to write a good short story from a technical point of view by learning the rules, the mechanical aspects of writing. Although it is necessary to know everything we can about structuring a short story, in the final analysis, the better writer will be the one who has the most talent.

In art, talent is a creative imagination. In the language of metaphor, it is a whisper in the middle of the night. It is the spirit descending on us. It is a laying-on of hands, a gift freely given, that enables the writer to transcend the human condition and see beyond the pale of all the galaxies. It is a story like *A Letter to My Mother* which makes you feel that once again the word has become flesh. It makes you feel the majesty of language and the awesome power of the creative act.

Step 12. Art is Form.

In human history, things have a tendency to repeat themselves. There are very few things that are new in the world. From the beginning of humankind, there have been war, art, murder, love,

joy, self-sacrifice, worship, etc. Under the sun, except for technological advances, one can see little about human nature that has not remained the same.

We must come to the conclusion, therefore, that art is not what we write, but how we write. Art is not essence. Art is form. It is the placing of form on life.

Life is a series of events. To the mind of God, there may be order in the flux, but to the mind of man, there is merely movement which has no pattern to it.

In order to make sense out of the world around him and his own part in it, man has become an artist: painter, writer, sculptor, composer. By taking part of his experience and setting it outside time in a poem or a short story or any other kind of art, he has stopped the flux of time. He has been able to order the chaos of the world into a fixed form. And this is art.

It makes no difference that the artist concerns himself with the microcosm, the small canvas. Art is the perfection of form, not the perfection of matter.

Matter is imperfectible in this life, but paradoxically there can be no art where there is no movement toward death and decomposition. In heaven, there will be no art because there is perfection of the essence of existence. Only in a

world of movement and human frailty can there be art.

Life may be in shambles at times, but our songs can transcend reality to the perfection of form, to the creation of beauty.

Welcome to the world of the artist.

*Letter to My Mother*

...Erin Kelley

I come upon the kitchen, redolent with lingering odors of spaghetti sauce, the long narrow table like a battlefield. The enemy in this case was my ten brothers and sisters, using their voracious appetites as weapons against the limp noodles and unprotesting bread. It is late. I have been sleeping. Often I do this, escaping into slumber as the day dies, finding serenity only in that half-conscious, suspended state where all is illusionary and birthed from one's own brain.

...the sea is gloaming, naked shores and abandoned shells. Its ominous rhythm, waves increasing in fury as they stalk the shore, lashing madly as they break, exhausted, slipping crest-fallen away...

...angry shouts from the adjoining room, my mother's staccato and condemning, my father's a defensive snarl god knows where you go till two o'clock in the morning if I ever pulled that you'd gimme hell where are you going out now other women's husbands take them places I'm stuck in this house day in and day out I go out to get away from you and your bitching this last is roared from the car as my father brings the engine to life...

I begin to clear away the mangled, half-devoured bodies of rolls, to rinse clear motley bowls and plates of glistening, blood-red sauce.

...my mother's voice rises, murky and unreal over the blare of the television set. SAVE SAVE SAVE during SALE days at POMEROYS "Mrs. Humphrey...disconnected...telephone bills unpaid too much...tired." So half formed thoughts filter out to the kitchen as I sweep from the field all the shell fragments left from the recent battle....

"Renee, is that you?" My mother wanders vaguely into the kitchen as I empty the sodden black grains from the heart of the coffee pot. The older offspring among my mother's brood were christened with elegant romantic titles, Renee, Philip, Genevieve. She is less inspired in naming my infant brother, Joe junior.

"You've cleaned up already?" Mild surprise at this rare display of magnanimity is followed by suspicion. "I better finish the dishes. When you girls do the scrubbin', there's always scum left on the pots or ya don't wash the silver good."

...don't start mom not tonight mom. I'm weary and feeling so strange. I'm gonna die too. I'm dying from work and responsibilities and living. I'll get wrinkles like angry pen slashes in the paper of my skin, my stomach will protrude convex and my upper arms will grow wobbly with O.L.F. (old

lady fat, remember? Only it's not so funny when you have it yourself as you can see) I'll be fat and useless thinking only of the approaching meal like nanny living in a tomb of a house, a carpeted, luxury-crammed shrine to death. The flowers in her house are dying, dead brown and shriveled...

...so I sit on a kitchen chair and watch my mother scrub the dishes. Insidious slate-blue veins creep stealthily up her legs and her gray threaded hair hangs in loose limp strings over her bowed head. My mother's face is cast in gray shadows, distorted by the constant anxieties which torment her like malevolent mosquitoes, sucking youth rather than blood...

...i remember his veins. They stood out from his thin brown arms in an intricate vine-like pattern when he had to lift those heavy sacks. They were burlap sacks of clams and they weighed a hundred pounds. But he was strong and two cords bulged from his neck and sweat glistened on his temples as the veins writhed and shuddered up his arms...Summer died and so did the way his misty eyes used to glow when he saw me. He was restless and as elusive as a slithering eel and he was gone. No longer do I feel that aching need. It has been three months, the November sky gloats at me, black, and he will not return...

...i want to become a child again, years removed from the murky depression and demonic

fears that relentlessly pursue me. As a child she was to me omniscient, her solutions magical panaceas to all my hurts. I don't want comfort. I know now that no one can give me that. What they offer is fragile security, the illusionary comfort from an advice-oozing mother or the short-lived protection in a boy's strong brown arms from the howling fear of the night....

“Don't you feel good, Renee? Why are you staring at me? What's the matter?”

...nothing nothing nothing...

...no nothing is wrong. You stand there on tired legs with deformed and twisted veins and wrinkles crease your face like the punctuation marks of exhaustion and your eyes sea gray and uncertain reflect the futility of this kitchen and this life and there's nothing I can do to help mother...

...dad sits in his chair when he eats his supper. Sometimes I watch him eat, and do you know a funny habit of your husband, Mrs. Meyer? After thirty years of marriage you are probably unconscious of it. As Dad contently masticates potatoes a fat black horsefly hums by. Still chewing he drops his fork and reaches for it with his ham-like hand and mashes the fly good. Then he resumes eating as the black corpse descends to the table. I guess that's the kind of thing I want to get away from mother, dad killing flies with his hands,

hearing you two in your daily conflicts, watching life disintegrate until it's spread so thin it's unrecognizable. You loved him once mother, long ago. What happened?...

“Stop staring at me, dammit. Stop staring.”

...your face is a graphic picture now mother all vividly red-splashed. I bet I could paint you good now mother. I always could draw well. Remember the time you saw an ad for free art lessons in the newspaper and you called and signed me up? It sounded ideal, “Specialized instructions and individual attention from the illustrious painter Monsieur Cardin.” For a week before the first lesson I suffered from extreme delusions, seeing my work being exhibited at the Louvre, famous. Well, the illustrious instructor was a dipsomaniac whose hands trembled and who paid me a little too much individual attention. Only the first lesson was free and I never went back...

...you did that a lot to me mother, built up hope and conceived dreams then always the hopes exhaled and the dreams miscarried. It would have been better, mother, to leave me as once I was, blind, ignorant, yet content in my blindness, not realizing what lay beyond this scarred linoleum and stagnant air...

...your love for him now is stale and when you look at him watching t.v. with his eyes vacuous

and his bulging belly quivering and his mouth open in unthinking laughter at green acres don't you wonder what happened...

...it won't be like this for me, will it?...my love was lean and hard-muscled and he spoke to me in love-blurred tones and he entered me with love and our child was to be a love child...mommy I'm scared....

...will this child look at me as I look at you?...

...you never told me what it would be like. It happened in the country, down a solitary black tunnel of a road. You could compare it to the tunnel of love at the amusement part. Dead night it was and deserted, but the air rushing in from an open car window was alive and expectant. His face leered before me, grotesque as a clown's, grease-painted with sweat and saliva. We rollercoasted together, dizzily ascending, and the gaudy red blood and the swollen viper spit fire into the impotent gaping mouth of the sword swallower then the ride came jerkily and painfully to a halt and his body was heavy and inert...

...and do you know mother how easily I could kill you? It would be a justifiable vaticide, a purgative slaughter of my future. Your face forecasts what is to come for me. Your sagging body is mine...

...the kitchen door opens, beckoning, and outside harsh hope, and I leave. Outside the mutilated victims from two thousand years of legal murder lie accusingly on the lawn. Outside, a hundred million men sacrifice themselves for power and offer daily libations in worship of the great god money. Outside, love is cheap and feculent pimps wait in alleys as vacant-eyed prostitutes simulate ecstasy for frightened frustrated men. You have stripped me and left me naked to be crucified. You never told me it was like this...

...my mother stands forlornly in the kitchen and awaits my return. I know I will always come back for life is ugly and love grotesque...

...and the embryo rocks restlessly in the sea-green fluid and clings barnacle-like to me though I try to shake it loose as the insistent waves pound relentlessly upon the shore and all the words pour from me reckless as the salt spray and free as the gray call of the gull...

...i sit in the womb of the house, the insulated, warm-breathed kitchen, with my head buried in my arms, weeping. My mother's well-worn hand is strong on my back and her words are a salve. They are not profound for she is not a profound woman but she comforts instinctively in the language of love...

...cry you'll feel better if you let it out so cry and guilt flows from me and the disgust ebbs away and I can look clearly at my mother who sees me ugly and shame-reddened yet loves me still...

...my mother's brow is furrowed, with long aching guilt and her shoulders slump in exhaustion. Her exhaustion comes from forty-nine years of wrestling with life. Unconquered, conquered, varicose veins and deforming wrinkles and her scars, the eleven healthy children she birthed her triumphs....

...the baby, Joey, toddles uncertainly into the kitchen and demands to sit on my mother's lap, jealous of the attention I am getting. He is a beautiful baby with arms and legs like sausages and curly red hair. I cry and he howls in sympathy and my mother holds us both and mother I'm so sorry...

## *Pepper Plants and Tomatoes*

....Mark Scalese

She dipped the small brush into the paint and pulled it out, dripping patterns of silver into a pool of liquid metal. As she tried to apply it to the tall ribs of the radiator, silver rivulets ran down and collected on the cardboard below. Frances got up off her knees, wiping her hands on a rag as she went into the kitchen. She was a small woman, plump but firm, with grey hair and glasses which were always falling down her nose. The smell of paint was everywhere, so she opened the windows for air and then went outside.

It was one of those early autumn mornings, before harvest and the first frost. Heavy, hanging clouds dominated the sky and cast faint shadows across her yard. She trudged up the small flagstone sidewalk which led to her garden and gazed at it fondly, images of pepper plants and tomatoes reflecting in her grey eyes. She picked a tomato from its vine and examined it with affection. The fruit was big, shaped like a miniature pumpkin, gleaming in her pale hands with a deep red color.

Her Vito loved tomatoes and he had always planted a garden filled with them. He would come home from the mines night after night during the summer, covered with a thin film of black, coal dust.

As soon as he had washed up and eaten, he would be out in his yard, working away.

Her thoughts were interrupted by piercing shouts. Looking up, Frances could see the neighbor's children playing another basketball game next door. Her features became alert, lips pursed with expectation as she saw them frolicking alongside her garden. The ball was held by a chubby child who dribbled his way about the other players. Going back, he shot the ball toward the basket where it bounced off the rim and into the garden. In an instant she was amid the waxy pepper plants and soon after held the ball high for the youngsters to see.

“What did I tell you about that ball in my yard?” she demanded, her eyes piercing the children with their fiery glare.

“I didn't mean to throw it in your yard, Mrs. Castalano,” replied the chubby boy, shrinking under her stare. “It was an accident. I didn't do it on purpose.”

She kept eyeing them with total disgust until they ran away. Then, keeping the basketball, she marched back into the house, past the paint paraphernalia, down the steps into the cellar where she deposited the ball on a shelf beside two others.

“Those people think they can take advantage of me,” she mumbled to herself. “Just because I’m a woman and all by myself, they think they can walk all over me. ‘Oh, the ball won’t go in the yard again. The kids’ll be careful, they say.’ Who do they think they are that they can go trampling all over my yard for a stupid ball?”

She labored back up the steps, her glasses sliding down all the way, and began cleaning up the paint. The little puddles had soaked through the cardboard and cemented it to the floor. When she pulled it off, the cardboard ripped, leaving puddle shaped remnants stuck to the floor.

In the midst of her frustration, she could hear rapid, deliberate knocks at the back door. Wiping her hands again, Frances went to answer it, opening the door to a thin woman with frosted hair who was obviously annoyed.

“Look here, Mrs. Castalano, I’m fed up to here with the way you’ve been treating my children,” she said, holding her hand perpendicular to her nose. “I want you to give me their ball now.”

“I will not,” she snapped back, her glasses sliding down. “Those brats of yours have been running through my yard long enough. They say, ‘Okay, okay, we won’t throw the ball in the yard,’ and when I turn around, they’re back at it again.” She poked her glasses back into place. “You people

think you can take advantage of me. Well, no more—no more,” and she slammed the door in the woman’s face.

“You better listen to me, Mrs. Castalano. I want that ball now! Do you hear me?” The woman was working herself into a rage, pounding on the door as she spoke. “Give me their ball! You took the other two, and we didn’t say anything. That’s a brand new ball, and I want it now.” All her shouting bounced off the door, for Frances didn’t open it again. She just sat in the kitchen, brooding.

---

Graying light streamed in through the windows as Frances stood over the stove, stirring a steaming pot of tomatoes. It had been a good time for her when Vito picked the tomatoes from the garden and she canned them for the next year. Their scent would fill the whole house with the ripe, fresh-picked flavor that she loved. Then with great patience she would drain them through a machine like a meat grinder and fill the mason jars. Those were good days.

While the tomatoes were simmering, the blaring clang of the telephone filled the air. Wiping her red hands on her apron, Frances turned the stove

on low and picked up the receiver on the fourth ring. “Hello?”

“Ma? Ellen. You doing anything?” came a patient voice over the phone.

“Well, I’m cooking some tomatoes, but they’re on low now,” she said in a noncommittal tone. “How you doing?”

“Oh, okay. I finally got the kids settled. How about you?”

“I’m okay, I guess. I painted the radiator in the dining room” she said, glancing at the cardboard stuck to the floor.

“How’d it come out?”

“It’s not too bad,” she said hesitantly. “These radiators haven’t been painted since your father died, and that’ll be ten year in December.” She took off her glasses and rubbed the two pink ovals alongside her nose. “How’s Joe’s cold, any better?”

“It’s coming along. We had to pick up a prescription yesterday at the drug store,” replied Ellen matter-of-factly. Then, as if she suddenly remembered something, added, “What else is new with you?”

“Oh, I don’t want to bother you with my troubles. You have enough to worry about,” she said, putting her glasses back on.

“What’s the matter, now? You having trouble with your neighbors again?”

“I told you the last time I wasn’t going to talk about them any more.” The room was getting dark with the fading light, so Frances reached over to the table near her and turned on a small lamp with a picture of Niagra Falls. Inside, a little revolving wheel played games with the light, and water appeared to cascade past faded rocks and people with dull yellow raincoats.

“Look, Ma,” her daughter began in a restrained voice, “you can’t let those little things bother you. Our neighbors could really make trouble for us the way our kids run all over the place. I talk to them, but you know it goes in one ear and out the other. I can’t be after them all the time. They were just over in Neary’s yard the other day. If he wasn’t a little patient, he could be over here complaining every night. What can you do?”

“So you’re siding with them again. Some daughter you are,” she said, getting louder. “The devil moved next door when they came here. Those people think they can take advantage of me just because I’m alone. Today she was pounding on the

door—‘I want that ball, I want that ball!’—What kind of a lady would go screaming and pounding...”

“But Ma, you have to consider they’re just children. You let all these little things bother you...”

“So what do you want me to do, let them run through my yard?” Frances was getting louder, her eyes inflamed with anger. “They’re just like Hitler. He wanted to rule the world and they want to rule me. They have all the neighbors on their side, letting the dogs loose through the yard. They’re the ones wrong, not me.” Her chubby hands shook so much she dropped the phone on the floor.

“Ma, you okay? What happened?”

“Nothing. I just dropped the phone,” she said sharply. Frances sat quietly, biting her upper lip, staring intently at the mouthpiece through damp glasses, not saying a word.

“Ma,” came a restrained voice into the receiver, “why don’t you just forget about the garden? Why do you have to go through all that trouble? You’re liable to get them so mad they’ll pull the whole thing out on you. You can’t fight them by yourself.”

“Well,” she started slowly, “I’m not going to let them get the best of me, Ellen.”

“Ma, one of you has to give. You can’t keep going at each other all the time. Pretend you don’t see the kids when the ball goes in the yard.”

Frances eyed the Niagara Falls lamp with searching eyes, helplessly trying to find words in rebuttal. Then she answered quickly, “Those people are no good, Ellen, and if I don’t want their kids in my yard, they better stay out,” and she slammed the receiver down. Tears flowed freely now as Frances sat alone beside the phone. What was she going to do? Her husband was dead, and her daughter just didn’t understand.

She gazed around at blurred images of the dining room, at the table they had bought when Ellen got married, and the new carpet purchased just before Vito died. Then her eyes wandered through the kitchen door and she remembered her tomatoes. With a sigh, she pulled herself up and went back to the stove. Sniffing as she worked, Frances poured the soft tomatoes through the strainer and filled up the canning jars. Then she went to bed.

---

Bright soft light filtered in through her bedroom windows when Frances woke up the next morning. Quickly getting dressed, she went into the kitchen and was met by a row of red mason jars

which lined her countertop. Instinctively she began to fix breakfast—two slices of toast and a cup of tea—the same one she had made Vito every morning for thirty-six years. Her eyes looked tired and worn out, evidence of a bad night’s sleep. With her forehead resting against her hand, Frances was slowly munching the toast when something outside caught her eye.

Rushing from the back door into the bright sunlight, she moved her plump body as quickly as possible up the flagstone sidewalk until she could see her garden. It was ruined. Tomatoes, big and red and ready to be picked lay strewn all over her yard. The vines which had worked their way up poles to the sky, hugged the ground with broken stems. The peppers’ waxy surfaces gleamed in the sunlight amid smashed plants and splattered seeds.

As she stood before the scattered vegetation, Frances’s eyes grew glassy as scalding tears welled up from within and overflowed in a torrent down her face. Her whole body shaking with grief, she plopped herself to the ground and buried her sobbing face in trembling hands.

Suddenly anguish gave way to an anger which took hold of her like wildfire. “Those people!” she thought to herself. “I’ll fix them.” Getting to her feet, she scooped up a mass of crushed tomatoes and marched next door where she smeared them against the side of the house. Then she went back and took

some more, and more still, her hands trembling with emotion as she plastered the lower portion with drippy, seedy tomatoes. “They think they can take advantage of me?” she sputtered with tears still in her eyes. “I don’t need that kind of treatment. I don’t need it.” She was completely breaking down, her glasses sliding down her wet nose until they fell off. “I wanted to make it on my own. Then they had to move here. They can’t take advantage of me like that, they can’t,” and she slumped to the ground, sobbing away in her loneliness.

---

The days were getting much shorter now, but somehow they seemed to drag by. Frances sat near her dining room window and gazed next door. The tomatoes had long since been scrubbed off, and the only evidence remaining was a faint reddish tint. The thin lady worked at it for about half an hour, and Frances was glad it took so much trouble to clean off.

Getting up, Frances drifted into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. It needed to be defrosted since furry white blankets were wrapped around the coils and funny looking icicles hung from the ends. The milk was low—so was the orange juice. Now what did she come to the refrigerator for? She couldn’t remember. Oh well, it didn’t matter.

There was something in the mailbox for her. It was a nice envelope--blue with little leaves and flowers around the end--really cute. Going back to the dining room, she dropped it on top of a stack of others, then sat near the window again, running her fingers through her hair. The days were long.

Suddenly, the blare from the telephone broke the dreamy silence. From where she was sitting, Frances could see it perfectly, clanging away. Why wouldn't it stop? Finally, she picked up the receiver on the seventh ring. "Hello."

"Ma, Ellen. I wasn't doing much so I decided to give you a call. How you doing?"

Frances stared blankly at the phone. "Huh? Oh, I'm okay, I guess. How about you?"

"I'm not too bad now. Anna Marie was home from school for a couple of days with a bad sore throat. It seems like there's a lot of that going around," she said. "I'll tell you, these kids can take a lot out of you. It'll be a relief when they're all grown up. I never seem to stop. Today's the first time I've had a moment to breathe in weeks." She paused a second, shifting gears. "How about you? Are those kids giving you any more trouble?"

Frances was gazing out the window at her yard. The tomatoes were almost all brown and wilted. "Huh? What did you say, Ellen?"

“Are those kids giving you any more trouble?” she asked with concern in her voice. “Ma, what’s the matter? Something’s been bothering you lately. You haven’t been yourself.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, hardly on the defensive.

“Like last week when you were over here—I was telling you how the kids were doing, and then a little later you asked me how they were. I’ll be saying something to you and it’s like you don’t even hear me. Now, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Frances answered quickly. “I just haven’t been feeling up to par lately. I guess it’s this change in the weather.”

“You better take care of yourself,” her daughter replied. She didn’t seem convinced of her mother’s response. “Things’ll work out for you. Say, you doing anything much today?”

“No, not really. Why?”

I thought maybe I’d take a ride over. I’m not too busy now,” she said anxiously.

Frances just sat playing with her glasses. Without them, everything was a blur. She could only make out general colors, like the white sunlight from

the windows, and the green from the carpet. “Well, you can come over if you want to,” she said, remembering the conversation.

“Okay,” Ellen said, concerned, “I’ll be over.”

The connection went dead in her ear and was replaced by a droning buzz. She put her glasses back on, listening to the empty phone. Buzzzzzzzzzz. Slowly, she set the receiver down and went back to the kitchen where she sat near a window, gazing at her garden.

Some leaves had fallen and made a vain attempt to cover the decaying vegetation, flying about the yard in flashes of yellow, orange, and red. Without warning, a football flew into view and landed with a splash of color. Two children strolled into the yard, laughing playfully and glancing toward her window with little concern. One of them bent over to pick up the ball. His brother jumped on his back, and they started to wrestle each other. Tumbling amid a whirlpool of leaves, they rolled over and over in sheer delight, totally absorbed in their fun. After awhile, the two made their way back to their own yard and continued their playing. Without a glance backward, they left the yard as they found it—empty.

## *Collecting*

...Chris Roe

I remember she was a skinny old woman with large scabs on her arms that looked to me like leprosy. Every morning I would reach her dull-gold, wooden house at just about 5 A.M. In the summer the sky would be pale with dawn, but in the winter it was always dark, and sometimes there would be a light in Mrs. McAndrew's kitchen. I never saw her in the morning, even when the small light was on. Some mornings I worried about this fragile, arthritic woman alone in her dark house, but usually I just left the paper under the old, black-rubber mat on the small porch off her kitchen, and went on and finished the last part of my route. I was only eleven years old, and to me Mrs. McAndrew was the oldest woman in the world.

I can still remember the first time she let me in her house. It was a Saturday afternoon early in November, cold and windy as I stood on her porch waiting for her to reach the door. I expected to wait a few minutes, as I had done the previous times I had collected from her, but I was sure she would be home.

“Paperboy,” I said. “I’ve come to collect for October.”

“I know,” she said with a smile across her wrinkled face. Then she shook for a moment with the cold, and wrapping a black shawl tighter around her thin shoulders, she said, “winter’s come early. Come in out of the cold.” She slid back behind the door, and I followed her in.

As I looked around the room, I began to feel the presence of a whole life I hadn’t seen from the other side of the door. Small religious mementos: pictures, statues, crosses, and candles were everywhere. There were palms folded behind a mirror and a large picture of the Bishop on the wall.

“He’s my son,” she said as she fumbled through the top drawer of a large dresser across the room from where I was standing.

“Who?” I whispered, as I scanned the room for a clue.

“The Bishop,” she said, looking at me from the mirror atop the dresser. “Bishop McAndrew is my son.” She turned to admire the picture on the wall to her right. “He said he is coming home to visit me very soon.”

I was amazed by this and thought of doubting her, but it was too much for a young boy to lose faith in so sincere an old lady. I looked to the picture on the wall and tried to imagine them as mother and son. He was dressed in fine scarlet and white, and

she wore a simple, dull, dark green dress, thick nylons, and sturdy black shoes. I couldn't form a clear picture in my mind, but I still believed her.

"He's so busy. He needs a rest," she said sadly. "He needs to come home." She looked down again into the drawer and pulled out a white envelope with "The Newspaper: \$2.60" written neatly, but not smoothly, across it. She lay the envelope on the dresser top and searched for and found a religious card among the items on the dresser. Stiffly she opened the envelope, slipped the card in, turned and slowly walked over to me by the door. By now her shawl was loose again about her shoulders, and she held it at her chest with one knobby, brown-spotted hand, while from her side she extended the other and held out the envelope to me.

"Here's what I owe you for last month, and I put something special in there for you. The Bishop, my son, has blessed it, so please take care of it. It's the holy card of Daniel and the Lions. Take it home and read it and keep it in a safe place." She looked down at the envelope and added, "It will give you courage. Someday you'll need that courage."

I took the envelope, heavy with sixty cents change and stiff from the card, from her outstretched hand. "Thank you Mrs. McAndrew. I'll take good care of it. Thank you."

With that she stepped to the door, and rattling the knob and pulling it open, she let me out.

“Goodbye, son. God bless you.”

“Goodbye, Mrs. McAndrew. Thank you.”

I walked down her steps and across the street. Looking back, I saw her peering from the side of the curtain, not at me or any other specific object, just down the road.

I went home that afternoon and asked my mother why the Bishop’s mother was so alone and forgotten. She told me the mother of the Bishop lived in Philadelphia and was probably well taken care of. She laughed a little when I told her about my conversation with Mrs. McAndrew.

“She can’t be the Bishop’s mother. She must be teasing you,” my mother said.

I didn’t show her the card Mrs. McAndrew had given me. I just didn’t mention Mrs. McAndrew to anyone again.

I didn’t see her again for another month. I laid the paper under her mat each day and often wondered if that day was the day the Bishop would come home. But there was never a car in front of her house or a light on anywhere inside. Every

morning of November had been as silent as those of October.

On the first Saturday in December, I went to collect from her. It was cold and snowing lightly. By the time I reached her house, I was alternating my hands from my pockets to the small moneybag I carried, and my face was burning. It seemed like an eternity waiting for her to come to the door. Finally the knob turned and the door swung open. Her face looked thinner now and her eyes more tired as she stood there in a wrinkled, black winter coat.

“Paperboy,” I said.

“Yes,” she said, “come in.” As I closed the door behind me, I noticed the air wasn’t much warmer inside than it was outside. The only warmth it contained seemed to be from the smell of burned milk.

“Please sit down,” she said as she shuffled from the door to the kitchen. “I’ll only be a minute.”

I sat down in a simple wooden chair and rubbed my hands over the cold smoothness of the dark wooden arms. I looked straight up into the picture of the Bishop which was on the wall directly across from me.

From the kitchen came the rattle of metal and the thud of a heavy pot on the linoleum floor. I got

up quickly and ran into the kitchen. There she stood, helplessly clutching a dishcloth, staring down at the mess at her feet. She didn't turn to see me come in.

"I'll get that for you," I said.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded as she half-turned to me. "I thought you left this house forever. You went to be on your own. I don't want your help." She lifted her foot and stomped it down in the hot milk. White spots landed on her stockings and ran off her shoes.

"I...paperboy," I said.

"What?" she said as she turned and faced me. "I thought you were gone. Why haven't you gone?"

"You asked me to sit and wait a minute," I said timidly. She looked away from me. The smell of burnt milk filled the air. I'd like to help you with that," I offered again.

"Oh, I thought you were my son," she said in a low voice. The rage in her eyes turned to sorrow, and then to tears, as she looked down at the milk splashed all over the stove and floor. She cried softly into the dishcloth.

My eyes swelled as I watched her. Looking around the room to avoid crying myself, I noticed a cheap sponge mop leaning against the sink. I moved

around her, and taking the mop in my hands, I began to push the milk around. I was afraid to look up. I cleaned up all the milk farthest from her feet. I rinsed the mop in the sink and turned to see if I could finish. She still stood in the mess, one hand to her face, the other supporting her on the stove-top.

“I gave him so much, and I’m left with nothing.” She weakly banged her fist on the stove, then pulled it away wet with hot milk. “I’m so tired of this.”

She stood for a moment in her worn black coat, looking down at the floor. Then wiping her hands and her eyes with the dishcloth, she looked over at me. “Please help me with this mess. I haven’t been bending very well lately.” She took a step back out of the splashed milk. I bent down and tried to pick up the pot, but it was still very hot.

“Here,” she said as she handed me the wet dishcloth. “Use this.” Taking the cloth from her, I wrapped it around the pot-handle. I lifted the dripping pot and brought it over and set it in the sink. Again I took the mop to finish cleaning up the floor. She just stood watching me.

“You’re a good boy,” she said. “A nice boy. I bet you make your mother happy...don’t you?”

I looked up at her for a moment from mopping. “I don’t know. I suppose, maybe. Maybe I do.”

“Well, do you think she’s happy?” she asked.

I felt uncomfortable and kept mopping the same spot. “I guess she is,” I said. “At least sometimes she’s happy.” I took the mop back to the sink. I was sweating in the cool air.

“I can remember having a little boy around my house,” she said. “I used to read to him. He dreamed of being a priest, even pope.”

There was a loud crack as the mop handle hit the floor. Quickly I bent down and put it back up against the sink. She looked at the mop and then quickly at me.

“Thank you for helping me,” she said.

“Sure,” I said softly.

“I’ve got to keep the house clean. He may be coming home any time. He needs a good rest before Christmas. The house should certainly be clean for the Bishop, shouldn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Of course it should. And thank you again for helping me. Come in here. I’ll get your money.”

She went back in the front room and I followed.

“It’s nice to have the Bishop for a son, but you don’t get to see him very often.” She pulled the white envelope out of the top drawer and handed it to me. “Now I’m all paid for November,” she said. She opened the door for me to leave.

“Here,” I said, reaching into the pocket of my coat. “We give each customer a calendar for the holiday season.”

“Thank you,” she said, looking down at it. “I guess I’ll need a new calendar.”

“I hope he comes home,” I said cheerfully.

“Who?” she asked with a confused look. “Oh. He will. He promised. I’ve just got to be ready.” She smiled at me. “God bless you. Have a merry Christmas.”

“Thank you, Mrs. McAndrew.” I stepped out on the porch and she closed the door behind me.

## *Uncertain Morning*

...Michael Kelley

She plays with her coffee spoon, twirling it between her fingers, gently stirring the blackness. It is one of those strange days of spring, a day that hints at the changes to come, but still allows the grey clouds to rule the skies. In the still of this morning, there is a sadness hanging about my mother's face, like a dark storm cloud, a brooding sadness which finds its source in the passing of time and years, and in the passing of love and youth...

“Well,” my mother sighs, “it has just come to that. I mean, I told him last night. Either we get a separation or things have to change. I can't take it any more. He's trying to rule my life.”

A strange feeling sweeps over me. In my life, I see and know my parents as middle-aged and relatively happy. I never worried about their quarrels and arguments, but somewhere I must have missed something for I am beginning to notice for the first time the small creases around her soft hazel eyes...loose strands of grey hair curling in circles near her ears. Her innate beauty seems worn and tried by the years and her children. I wonder why I've never noticed these things before...

“We can never talk. I guess we never really communicated very well. Your father bottles things

up inside of him and gets these resentments. He dislikes all of my friends and is barely civil to my relatives.”

A bit of anger, frustration in her voice. She wavers a note and I glance at her face. For a moment, she looks as if she is about to cry, but just as quickly it passes and in my ears her voice becomes a wearied droning, listing my father’s child-like habits, all of which I am painfully familiar with. I sit there at the cluttered breakfast table, watching her small debate with life and weariness, and I am able to understand how this has happened...

When I was small, I always wondered why there were no wedding pictures of my parents. At my grandfather’s home, all my aunts and uncles are displayed on a shelf, silent memories of their wedding days. It seemed strange to me that there were never any pictures of my parents upon the shelf until the other day my sister told me they had eloped in the summer after their senior year. I try to imagine them as they might have been then, perhaps young and believing, but I can’t escape from the present, and I realize I don’t know half the story of their lives together.

“Mom, why did you and Dad elope?”

“Who told you that?” Seeing that I already knew, her face softens, and she tells me. “Oh, we

were crazy back then. We never should have married so young. We should have waited for a little while, at least until your father had finished college. He wouldn't have had a family to tie him down. Things might have been so different....”

Her voice trails off, leaving me to wonder about their lives long years ago on a day when the world seemed right and nothing could stand in the way of what they thought was love.

I remember stories about how hard it was when they were first married. My father was a pre-med student at the University of Brewster, and they lived in one half of a rickety, old, grey house in the part of town where all the poor whites lived. Their furniture consisted of a table, a couch, and a bed. Most of the time there was no electricity or heat because they didn't have the money to pay the bills. My father worked at different odd jobs, anything to keep them going. Whenever we drive through that section of Brewster now, I see poor white houses and their failing dreams. I picture my mother there, aged beyond her years, the seeds of sadness and frustration already beginning to take root, but still the comfort and solace of her love is alive in her heart. I think that perhaps things should have been different.

“Mom, why didn't Dad stay with pre-med? He'd be a doctor now.”

She pauses for a moment, looking for the answer. Then she remembers, her voice hesitating with vainly disguised sorrow.

“That was one of the worst times. He wrote to all these medical schools for acceptance. The ones that answered said he would need the recommendation of his Chemistry professor, Mr. Mandel, or something like that. That was it. Your father just could not get along with him. They used to argue for hours after class, sometimes about the smallest things. They were both so stubborn.”

“What happened? Did the guy recommend him?”

“No, no, he didn’t. It was strange. I remember the day your father was supposed to ask him. He was going to see him after class. But he didn’t come home until very late and I was so worried. When he did come home, it had been raining and he was soaked. I asked him if he got it and all he said was no. There was something wrong, I could tell. I wasn’t sure whether he had been refused or maybe he had never asked. Something was going on inside of him, but I didn’t know what to say. He’s always been very proud, especially back then, and I think maybe it was his pride that held him back. I don’t know....”

My father was born the son of a successful small-town lawyer. He idolized his father and even

now puts him on this exalted pedestal above all other men. The stories I hear from my father are all about the kindness and the goodness of my grandfather, all the times he did favors for people, or the times he didn't charge for his services because he knew the person couldn't pay. But I sense that father and son were never close, were never able to talk to each other. The time my grandfather spent with other people was time not spent with his son. Then my grandfather died the year after my parents were married, and I suppose his death left a lot unsaid. My father seems to be living his life in pursuit of the ideal which my grandfather was to him, in pursuit of time lost. It was as if a shadow hangs over his days, and when he returns home from his job, tired and older, the darkness lengthens and blinds him a little more. The small failures he has faced in life, the worldly success which eludes his grasp, they haunt him, reminding him of what he once hoped to be...

“I remember the Easter we spent in Pittsburgh,” my mother begins. “You were just a baby then. The Saturday night before Easter Sunday, I wanted to go downtown and buy the girls hats for Mass the next day. Oh God, I was so stupid back then. I mean, we barely had enough money for food, and all I cared about was getting Easter hats. When I asked your father to take me, he was furious. I remember we had such an awful fight. Finally, I called a taxi. It was pouring rain and I bundled everyone up except you. You were asleep upstairs.

When the taxi came, we were still arguing and I was crying. That taxi driver must have thought I was out of my mind.”

She laughs, trying to cover up her embarrassment, and I notice that mixed with laughter are light tears edging from the corner of her eyes.

“Then we got downtown and made it into Woolworth’s just before the store closed. After I bought the hats, I didn’t have enough money for the taxi home. I remember standing under the awning in front of Woolworth’s with the rain coming down. I was trying not to cry because I had all of the girls with me, and I didn’t know what to do except walk home. Then your father pulled up in this old blue station wagon we had, with you propped up in blankets next to him. I was so relieved to see him that I forgot all about the argument. I haven’t thought about that in a long time.”

Somewhere amid the rhythms of time, there is a gap which I can never fill. My mind struggles with this empty space, trying to recall the events of long ago in order that I might better understand the two people in the world closest to me. She is lost and confused with the passing and aging of her children, having spent her life responding to their needs. He is dominated by a dark sense of failure in life, of never having been able to climb the heights, doomed to play the role of Sisyphus. Somewhere their roads

have converged and the two have known each other. But now their ways are vague, the future is cloaked in an uncertain mist, and nothing is clear.

The clock hanging on the wall in the kitchen suddenly seems inappropriate for this still morning. The soft incessant ticking belittles the role of a timepiece, even reduces somehow the role of time itself. The past of sorrows and fallen hopes, and the future of vague dreams are contained within the small maze of gears and springs while the present is but a passing moment to be held, felt, perhaps cherished, then vanquished into the nothingness from when it has sprung, leaving only memories to sustain life...

“What’s going to happen?” This is said only to break an unbearable uncertainty, an unshakable feeling that this silence must not be kept.

The hand holding her coffee spoon is idle now, resting on the table. The last of the winter storm clouds is pushed across the face of the sun by some unknown wind. Her eyes are gazing somewhere else, past the walls of this room, past her children, past even time itself. Somewhere she sees a place which I can never know, a place bordered by memories and fragments of life past, and for the moment, in this impenetrable land, the answer lies hidden, and waiting to be found.

“I don’t know.”

## *A Garden of Greeblies*

...Carl Gillick

Surrounding a dilapidated house, the yard, so neatly planned and groomed, looked quite out of place. The front hedges were about chest high and so perfectly trimmed they resembled a wall. Lining the walk going to the front porch steps, the tulips on the left seemed to lean over and whisper to the violets on the right. In the same fashion, all the roses on the bush looked over expectantly at the apple tree on the right, perhaps waiting to see the huge apples that would weigh down the branches later in the year. From the front, the rows of flowers and vegetable gardens looked like a jungle of wild colors. As the breeze swayed the plants back and forth, the yard came alive with masses of fighting, struggling creatures. Even the stone goddess, leaning gently on the dry birdbath, showed the scars of battle, a chip taken out of her face.

Lost amid the rows of vegetables and flowers, Mr. Beacon wandered with the purpose of perfecting the carefully plotted garden. Finally, satisfied with the job of weeding, trimming, and cultivating, he sat under a gnarled apple tree on a rotting oak log near the back gate. At first he sat perched like a gargoyle watching over his kingdom, with his feet on the log, knees bent so his buttocks barely touched the log, and his arms between his knees with hands on the

log between his feet. Wrinkled and weathered, his skin was like stone as he sat motionless.

Relaxing at last, he leaned back and kicked his feet out so that he sat upright on the log. He folded his hands and rested his elbows on his knees. Listening attentively, he peered into the flowers.

“And how are you today?” he asked happily. “I’m glad to see you.” He strained forward to hear what the flowers had to say. “I hope the sproingies didn’t give you too much trouble last night. I heard they injured the greeblie chief.” Only the silence in the garden answered him, but he continued the conversation. “I could put up barbed wire if you’d like. That might keep them out.”

“Mr. Beacon,” yelled a young boy as he hopped over the wire fence. “What are you doing? Talking to the other plants?” he asked as he noted the absence of any other person or animal. “My mother always talks to her plants when she waters them,” he added, trying not to embarrass the old man.

“No, no, Joey,” Mr. Beacon replied rather upset. “It’s the greeblies. Didn’t you see them?” he asked, disappointed

“What are greeblies?” Joey asked, confused. Nothing was there except flowers and other plants. There were no other creatures to be seen.

“A big tribe of greeblies lives in my yard. I make the best garden possible for them, and they keep me company. They’re very small, but they’re very sociable. I enjoy having them around.”

“What do they look like?” Joey asked, caught up in this amusing game.

“They’re very much like a sroingie. Surely you’ve seen a sroingie. They are much more common,” he explained.

“Oh, sure, I’ve seen lots of them,” he answered, now a bit frightened at Mr. Beacon’s imagination.

“But greeblies are smaller and purple, whereas sroingies are green or brown,” the old man continued, spurred on by the boy’s interest.

“Oh! Yes, I see,” the boy said, pretending to understand.

“Greeblies are very polite and friendly. Sroingies, on the other hand, are vicious and destructive by nature. They have rotten dispositions. I think the greeblies are coming back. You scared them away before.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Beacon. Do you think I could see one now?” he asked expectantly.

“Sure! Can you see them yet?” The man watched the boy’s expression. After much silent pointing and gesturing, Mr. Beacon looked at Joey in disappointment.

“I don’t see anything, Mr. Beacon. I’d better go home now. It’s getting dark,” the boy sadly explained.

“Okay, Joey, I’m tired now anyway. Why don’t you come over again tomorrow morning? I’ll be down here.”

After a moment of indecision, Joey decided to visit Mr. Beacon in the morning. “See you.”

Dragging his feet, Mr. Beacon made his way to the house. He was thinking about Joey. Either the boy was too young to understand this world, or else he lacked any type of imagination. But he would not give up on him yet. Perhaps the child was just a little slow, although he did not give that impression. He always seemed like an intelligent boy. As he thumped up the back steps and entered the house, Mr. Beacon finally decided that Joey was a product of modern schooling and needed his help.

Walking quickly to escape the fall of darkness, Joey sped along the path that ran behind the row of houses. He was upset with Mr. Beacon’s apparent Alzheimer’s. Never before had he noticed the aging man’s mental deterioration. It was hard to

understand what had happened to him. If only he had spent more time with Mr. Beacon! Perhaps he was just lonely. The boy decided to talk to him in the morning and jogged up the sidewalk to his house.

---

Morning came fast after a night of sound sleep. Mr. Beacon had been exhausted by worry about the boy. As he crawled out of bed, the man yawned and shook his frosty head. Walking stiff-legged as he stretched, he made his way to the bathroom. By the time he was finished and dressed, it was too late to eat his breakfast. He had to meet Joey who was probably already waiting for him. With spirit and determination, he marched out of the house to confront the boy.

Morning had also come quickly for Joey. Since he was hoping to be at the garden first, he skipped breakfast and flew out of the house as soon as he was dressed. Joey ran down the sidewalk to the gate which opened onto the path. Hopping over the gate, the boy began running. After stumbling and almost falling several times, the boy slowed to a jog. As he approached the old man's fence, he increased his speed and hurled over it sideways. Quickly brushing himself off, he strolled over to the log to catch his breath. Sitting there quietly, he noted the precision used in caring for the garden. Every plant

and flower appeared in perfect health and in an exact line with the others in its row.

Mr. Beacon strode down the walk into the garden. “Joey!” he cried happily at the sight of the boy. “I knew you’d show up.”

“Good morning, Mr. Beacon,” the boy said. “How do you feel this morning?”

“Pretty good, Joey, and yourself?” he asked as he shook hands with his young friend. Joey’s delicate hand was almost lost in the big gnarled hand of Mr. Beacon. The two returned to the log and sat facing each other.

“Mr. Beacon,” Joey began nervously. “I’ve been worried about you. You’ve changed so much lately. I hope you’re not sick,” he said.

“No, I’m fine. As a matter of fact, I’ve been worried about you.”

“Really, Mr. Beacon!” Joey exclaimed. “I’m not the one talking to greeblies and sproingies. It’s you. You’re the one who has a problem,” the boy responded in anger.

“Why, Joey, don’t you understand?” Mr. Beacon snapped back. “There’s nothing wrong with me. It’s only fun. You’re the one who has no imagination. I realize that’s all it is.”

“But it’s not normal, Mr. Beacon!” The boy was almost in tears.

“What is normal, Joey? Have you taken a look at this world lately? There is little left that is considered normal. A sane person couldn’t survive.”

“Well, forget it then,” the boy screamed. “I was only trying to help.” Joey stood up and walked away slowly.

Remaining calm, Mr. Beacon called after him. “You’re still welcome here, Joey, if you want to come back.”

The boy continued walking without looking back. When he was out of sight, Mr. Beacon turned to his garden. “The poor boy, he has problems,” he announced sympathetically. “He just doesn’t have the imagination for it.” Brushing off the seat of his pants, the old man strolled slowly up the walk as he looked over his garden once more. When he was about to enter the house, he turned and smiled. With a friendly wave at his garden companions, he closed the door behind him.

*Ashes, Ashes*

....Cindy Hamm

“Ring around Aunt Rosie, a pocket full of posies. Ashes, ashes....”

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women...”

“Aunt Rosie, what’s a woman?”

“A woman is what you call a little girl when she grows up.”

“Are you a woman, Aunt Rosie?”

“Yes, baby. I’m a woman.”

“Is it nice to be a woman, Aunt Rosie?”

“Yes, dear. It’s very nice.”

“Was Uncle Tony a woman too?”

“No, dear. He was a man, a very good man.”

“Does that mean he used to be a little boy like Tommy Burke?”

“Oh, a long, long time ago he was a little boy, sweetheart.”

“I wish Uncle Tony didn’t go to heaven. He was so nice. Sometimes I cry because I miss him. Do you miss Uncle Tony?”

“Yes. I loved Uncle Tony very much, dear. He was a very good man. He’s happy in heaven, baby. Don’t worry, he’s very happy.”

“Are all of the people in heaven happy, Aunt Rosie?”

“Oh, yes. Heaven is a very wonderful, happy place.”

“Do you want to go to heaven?”

“Someday, but not for awhile. C’mon, baby, let’s go play with your dolls.”

The people in the room are dolls. They sit and don’t speak. Some cry. They are sad dolls.

The room is green, a mint green. Not the kind of green that smells of spring, but the kind that smells like the wilted stem of a rose.

Roses fill the room. Most are dead and hang and beg for life. Others cling desperately to whatever life is left in them.

“....and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”

The room is filled with dolls, and tears, and dying roses, and prayers, and sadness. Here the dolls are sad and want to be somewhere they can be happy. Maybe they wish they were home. Maybe Aunt Rosie wishes she were home.

“Aunt Rosie, how come I have to live so far away, and I can’t live here with you?”

“Because you have wonderful parents who love you very much and want to take care of you at home.”

“Does God love me too, Aunt Rosie?”

“Oh, yes. God loves all of us.”

“Would God love me if I liked to live here better than I liked to live at home?”

“Oh, baby, c’mon over here. Lemme give you a big hug and kiss. Aunt Rosie loves you so very much.”

A man dressed in white walks into the room. His hair is white. Aunt Rosie would like him.

“Aunt Rosie, why’s your hair so white?”

“All old people have white hair, baby.”

“Are you old people, Aunt Rosie?”

“Yes, baby. I’m old people.”

“But how come you have white hair?”

“So that when God gets lonely in heaven and wants company, he will be able to tell who will visit him by looking at the color of their hair.”

“Does God like to visit with people who have white hair, Aunt Rosie?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Are you going to visit with God someday?”

“Yes, dear.”

“I hope that when you visit him, he invites me, too. I could put baby powder in my hair like I did at Halloween, and then he will think I’m old people too.”

“...and now I invite all of you to join with me in prayer.”

A man in black is in the room. He prays for Aunt Rosie. He prays that God will take care of her in heaven.

“Are you afraid of the dark, Aunt Rosie?”

“Sometimes, hon. Are you?”

“Yes. Is that why you’re plugging the night light in? So I won’t be afraid of the dark?”

“Yes, honey. I never want you to be afraid of anything.”

“I don’t like to be afraid of the dark, Aunt Rosie. Sometimes I close my eyes and try not to be afraid, but then I get afraid. Do you think I should be afraid of the dark?”

“No, honey. There’s nothing in the dark that will hurt you. Aunt Rosie will protect you, baby. Don’t be afraid.”

“But how come it gets dark outside at night time?”

“Because God gets tired at night, and he turns the lights in heaven out so that he’ll be able to rest.”

“Oh. I think maybe I’m like God too. Cause I get tired at night time. Night, Aunt Rosie.”

“G-night, honey.”

The dolls rush from their bedside chairs to Aunt Rosie. She moves so wretchedly that she seems to know she is dying. She tries to cling onto the life she loves so dearly. The man in white gives Aunt Rosie a pill. She calms down and sleeps quietly, like the sea does after a rainstorm.

“She’s peaceful, thank God. It won’t be long now.”

“God! Aunt Rosie, don’t leave me. Not now. Stay with me. Watch me grow. You don’t know me anymore. I’ve changed, Aunt Rosie. I want to talk with you, to tell you who I am. Oh, God, don’t leave me. I love you. Watch me grow!”

“Aunt Rosie, what’s it like to grow up?”

“It’s very nice, dear.”

“Did you ever grow up, Aunt Rosie?”

“Yes, baby. Everyone grows up.”

“Will I grow up, Aunt Rosie?”

“You are growing up, precious.”

“Tommy Burke will never grow up, Aunt Rosie. Miss Rogers always says so in school. When Tommy Burke throws pieces of eraser into the fish tank, Miss Rogers says he will never grow up.”

“He’ll grow up someday, hon.”

“She says he’ll never learn. Do you learn things when you grow up, Aunt Rosie?”

“Oh, yes. The biggest part of growing up is learning new things.”

“I’ve learned a new thing, Aunt Rosie.”

“What did you learn, Babe?”

“I learned a song.”

“Will you sing it for Aunt Rosie?”

“I only know a little bit of it, so I’ll keep singing it over and over. Then it will sound like a real song, like the kind you sing to me before I go to bed. Listen now?”

“Sure, honey. Aunt Rosie’d love to hear it.”

“1-2-3-4-5-6-7 All good children go to heaven. All the bad ones go below, to keep company with Jumbo. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 All good children go to heaven. All the bad ones go below, to keep company with Jumbo. 1-2-3....”

“1 - 2 - 3 Push! 1 - 2- 3 – Push!”

The man in white is in the room. Aunt Rosie’s heart has stopped. He tries to make it start beating again.

“God, don’t let her die!”

“What’s this, baby? For me?”

“Yes, Aunt Rosie. It’s a heart. I made it for you in school. Miss Rogers says it’s called a valentine. Miss Rogers says today is Valentine’s Day, and she told us to make valentines for people we love. So I made one for you.”

“This is the nicest valentine I’ve ever had, hon. Thanks so very much.”

“You’re welcome, Aunt Rosie. Aunt Rosie, d’ya know what Tommy Burke did? He gave a valentine to Melissa McCarthy. Yuk! I’m glad he didn’t give one to me. I hate boys, ‘specially Tommy Burke.”

The room is quiet now, except when the dolls cry. They don’t cry that much anymore, though. They are tired, and their heads droop. They have their heads in their hands and mumble prayers.

“Down in the valley where the green grass grows, there sat my baby, pretty as a rose. Along came Aunt Rosie and kissed her on the nose...D’ya like that song, baby?”

“Yes, I like it when you kiss me on the nose, too, Aunt Rosie. Know what? The other day, Janie Gallucci told me that Tommy Burke kissed Melissa McCarthy under the mistletoe in our classroom! Yuk! Boys sure are yucky, aren’t they Aunt Rosie?”

“Oh, baby, boys aren’t bad. They’re just as nice as girls. Someday you’ll understand.”

“Oh, no! I’ll always think they’re yucky!”

“How come you think so, babe?”

“ ‘Cause they like frogs and worms, and stuff. And sometimes Andy Petrucci pulls my pigtails.”

“Maybe Andy Petrucci is trying to get your attention, hon. Maybe he thinks you’re pretty.”

“Am I pretty, Aunt Rosie?”

“More than that, angel, you’re beautiful. You’re the most beautiful little girl Aunt Rosie’s ever seen.”

“Even prettier than Melissa McCarthy?”

“Oh, yes. Much prettier than Melissa McCarthy.”

“D’ya really think that Andy Petrucci thinks I’m pretty?”

“I’m sure he does, honey.”

“You’re pretty, too, Aunt Rosie!”

Aunt Rosie looks pretty, lying there with a gold cross around her neck. She looks happy. Her lips almost smile.

A lady in white is in the room. She is looking at her watch, and she is holding Aunt Rosie's wrist. The lady in white is pretty, too.

Aunt Rosie sleeps peacefully.

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

“How come you say that prayer, Aunt Rosie?”

“I always say it before I go to bed, hon.”

“What does it mean, Aunt Rosie?”

“Well, it means that if God wants me to visit with him in heaven, I will go with him.”

“I don't like that prayer, Aunt Rosie. I don't ever want you to die. I don't want people I love to die.”

“Her death is inevitable. It won't be long now. Why don't you go and get some rest, and I'll call you as soon as something happens?”

Say he's only kidding. Say it's a lie. Mommy says that pretty soon Aunt Rosie is going to visit God. There is no baby powder in the room. He can't call her now. I wish she didn't have white hair.

The room gets darker and sadder. God is tired. He shuts the lights off. It rains outside. Maybe God is sad. Maybe he is crying. The man in black puts oil on Aunt Rosie's forehead.

"Aunt Rosie, who was that lady at the door before?"

"She was selling flowers, honey."

"How come she came into the house?"

" 'Cause she was thirsty and asked for some water."

"Did you give it to her, Aunt Rosie?"

"Yes, honey."

"Is that what kind means, Aunt Rosie? In Sunday school Mrs. Jennings says to be kind to our brothers. Were you kind to that lady?"

"Yes. It's kind to give things to people."

"Even if she isn't our brothers?"

“Our brothers are everyone. It doesn’t mean just boys or girls. It means everyone.”

“Are you my brother, Aunt Rosie?”

“Yes, honey.”

I want to be kind to Aunt Rosie. I want to give her something that will make her happy. Aunt Rosie likes chocolate chip cookies. They would make her happy. But the man in white says no.

“Aunt Rosie, could Andy Petrucci come over tomorrow after school for milk and cookies?”

“Sure. But, honey, isn’t he the boy who used to pull your pigtails in school?”

“Yes.”

“And you still want him to come after school?”

“Aunt Rosie, you said he pulled them ‘cause I’m pretty. And sometimes we trade at lunchtime. I give him chocolate chip cookies, and he gives me oatmeal cookies. Know what, Aunt Rosie?”

“What, honey?”

“I think Andy’s pretty. Could a boy be pretty, Aunt Rosie?”

“Well, when a boy’s pretty, that means he’s handsome.”

“Well, I think he’s handsome, then, Could he come after school, could he?”

“Oh, sure. And you know what I’ll do, babe? I’ll make chocolate chip cookies and oatmeal cookies too so you won’t have to trade.”

“I love you, Aunt Rosie.”

“I love you too, baby.”

There is not a sound in the room. The dolls are staring. They are looking at the ceiling. They have tears in their eyes. Aunt Rosie’s eyes are closed.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of death, Amen.”

“Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.”

## *The Scapegoat*

....Sarah Kelley

You shouldn't think too much. If you do, everything becomes absurd, and you are caught in a deep web of human questions without answers. I don't know when you start questioning everything, perhaps when you realize your parents aren't God and kindness is not a common trait; when you draw the line between pessimism and optimism to decide the course of your life. The pessimist sees no good, and the optimist sees all good. Which is better? I don't know. To me, words are enemies that tangle up and refuse to say what you want them to say. You're powerless over words. When you tangle with words, you realize you know nothing. You get bored telling a tale over again, especially if it's not good.

I would like to kill this winter, its grinning face a mask of malice and darkness in evening which comes too soon. The leaves are taken and stripped from the trees, their colorful gaiety trampled upon and saddened by the harsh rain that slashes in torrents. Black trees live, hollow like statues and mossy with decay. All is still, waiting. I remember days of unchecked freedom, thoughts unrestrained, when a God was a God was a God, and my life was mapped out like an architect's drawing. I remember the warmth of the sun in childhood. Winter, this dark, brooding spirit, did not exist, and spring was at hand. I remember.....

Water gushes from the overflowing creek. The rocks are slippery, and my red boots slide over the patches of wet moss. “Brogan!” I yell over the roar of the waterfall. A small boy dressed in a yellow raincoat and hat and black boots walks down the muddy dirt path, carefully splashing each puddle. He carries in his hand a green beach pail and several small toy boats. “What took you so long?” I yell again. You had to shout to be heard over the rushing water.

“I had to find these things, and mommy had to dress me. She says it’s too rainy, and I might catch cold so I can only stay out for an hour and fifteen minutes.” He grins.

“Oh, God,” I say. “How am I ever going to get anything done in an hour and fifteen minutes? Brogan, your basic problem is that you don’t know your parents. Why didn’t you just sneak in and get the junk rather than make it the production of the century? Here.” I hand him a shovel. “We’ve got to get to work. This bridge has got to be up by sundown.” I use the words with increasing bravado. People are always telling me what to do. I’m older. I have the privilege now.

I assume an air of vast importance as I haul a cracked old two by four down the bank of the creek. “Get the other end! NO, THIS end, stupid!” I scream over the sound of the water. The board is heavy. My boots are slippery, and Brogan has come behind me.

The board slips, grazing his head, producing a gasp, followed by loud ridiculous baby tears.

My anger boils at the accident of fate. In my selfish nine year old mind, things happen because God is an annoying force that hates to see me having fun. Today is a rare day, an exception. Usually, I don't have anyone to play with. The neighbors' children have parents who are born again Christians, and they object to their children doing anything but hard work, endless labor. And Brogan comes only once a month from New York, and now he'll spoil everything by telling on me.

"I'm gonna tell on you, Rachel! You did it purposely 'cuz I didn't know which end to take," he sobs. "I'm telling,"

....why do I have to play with you anyway, Brogan...something always happens....now you'll run home and tell, and I'll be in trouble, and mom will say, 'what were you doing at the creek anyhow?'...and I'll have to tell and they'll all laugh...as if a nine year old person can't even have a good idea because of her age...I don't need their ridicule...this is a serious project....and this bridge will be a good one....I will make it good....

"Brogan, do you want a band-aid?" I ask.  
"Where does it hurt?" I control my anger.

“You should have worried about that before you hit me!” he weeps, automatically bringing about my vehement denial that I hit him, even though I should have. A person like him has to be knocked around before he knows who his friends are.

“Look what happened to my new Snoopy raincoat!” he sobs. “It’s all dirty.”

“We can wash it,” I say, trying to get him not to tell.

“It won’t be the same. I’m telling. That’s it. And you’re going to be killed. And I’m glad.” He picks himself up from the muddy earth and starts to stumble up the path.

“Wait, Brogan! The bridge! I can’t build it myself. C’mon, Brogan, I’ll pay you if you stay.”

He turns around from the top of the path, still sobbing, but adding fake tears. “Shut the hell up, you moron!” he screams as he runs.

“Brogan, we didn’t even get a chance to build it, and I didn’t mean to hit you with the board. I slipped, that’s all. Brogan, come back!”

“Shut the hell up, you moron!” he keeps chanting as he runs.

“Brogan,” I say firmly, “all right. Be a little fairy and go running home to mama to tell on me for something I didn’t even do.” I assume a fake falsetto. “God help us if Brogan should catch a cold in the horrid rain. How are you ever going to be a mountaineer if you can’t take a whack on the head every once in a while?”

He stands there dubiously. “How much will you pay me if I stay?” he says.

“Pay you, Brogan....?”

“O.K. then.” He starts up the path again.

“No, wait. I need your help. I’ll pay you all the cash I have in the world, two dollars.”

“What? Not good enough,” he says, shaking his head.

“What do you want me to do, sell my soul?” I ask. With this little idiot swindling me, it would be better to build the bridge myself, but I’m sick of doing everything alone, plus he can do the dirty work. “What?” Brogan has said something the water carries away.

“I said you’ve been hanging around with those born again Christians again. Sell your soul? What a laugh! My mommy says there is no God.”

“Good for her,” I say, “but she better not say that to God’s face. And besides, I’d rather have a bunch of born again Christians help me build this bridge than a bunch of atheists.” I spit the word out joyfully. “At least they know when to talk and when to keep their mouths shut. At least they’re good workers.” But I’d rather have one atheist help me build this bridge than no one, I think.

“I’ll stay,” Brogan volunteers, “if you give me your treasures.”

“I could care less if you stay, but if you do, you’re staying for free.”

He stays. He is too dumb to leave.

“Get some mud. We have to pack in the sides,” I order him. He does as he is told. It proves my idea that this kid has to be pushed around before he gets in line. This is the way to control him. Just tell him what to do, and he’ll do it.

“Where are you going?” I call to him. “Why are you going so far, Brogan?” He is walking toward the summit of the steep falls.

“The mud’s not good here,” he says.

“Brogan, mud is mud. Besides, it’s deep down there. You better come back up.” He ignores my commands, as usual.

“I’ll be O.K.” He grins. “I know the doggy paddle, Rachel.” Suddenly, he stops. “I’ve got a great idea. Let’s build the bridge across the pool above the falls. That’ll be really cool. Just like a diving-board.”

...no, Brogan...it’s a good idea, but I should have thought of it first....but he’s right...it would be like a diving board...we could play Olympics....

“No, Brogan. What good would it be? I can’t swim.”

“So what? I can...”

“I know, I know. You can doggy paddle,” I interrupt....rub it in pal...the fact that I’m nine years old and can’t even stay afloat...but he has a good idea, for once...

I begin to drag the hulking board again, this time to the deep pool above the falls. “Brogan, help me with this board.” I climb over the falls. Balanced upon the slippery cliff, I try in vain to maneuver the short board across the two banks.

“No, Rachel,” Brogan says. “Let me do it.”

“No....no, Brogan.” Suddenly he lunges at the board from the other side of the rock.

“Brogan!” I try to grasp the board with both hands. “It’s my idea. I’ll put my bridge up!” I scream, struggling in vain.

“You always have to do everything. You think you’re so big,” he cries out as he loses his footing on the mossy rock.

“Brogan!”

His eyes are like blue lanterns, begging me to help, but I stand stricken and helpless. The cliff is not big, but big enough. He smashes his head hard on the side of the rock and falls into the swirling whirlpool.

“Brogan!”

His eyes are closed, unconscious, as his body is sucked in by the water.

....a dozen vapid thoughts flow through my mind...help...if I get him out I’ll be in reader’s digest drama in real life...what can I do....home is a mile away, up the stern unrelenting hill....God, God, God, if there is a God...of course there’s a God...why shouldn’t there be...help me, God, I say as I run down the awful rocks....how can I save him....help, me God...

I stand at the edge confronted by the deep pool....stupid me, can’t swim, can’t swim, can’t

swim...the words mock me in clever phrases as I stand, helpless...blood is red and so is the water surrounding the deep gash on his small head..."Brogan," I scream, "do your doggy paddle"...if only I could swim...nothing I do is right...a moron...you were right, Brogan....

He does not answer. He is submerged in the deep pit of the pool by the merciless water.

Gingerly, I hold a stick out over the water. It does not reach him. "Brogan, wake up!" I scream over the rushing water. "Goddamit, wake up." I throw the stick at his lifeless face.

....valuable time lost...what can I do...my breath comes in ragged gasps as I run back up the hill, toward home...having to stop, cursing my futile headway...my wet boots slip on the sopping gravel as the gray dusk of a rainy day falls steadily....

## *No More Chrysanthemums*

....Lee Ann McCoy

If the candy store had a name, I never knew it. There was no sign, just a set of crumbling steps leading up to a heavy glass door on a quiet street where lanky houses stood shoulder to shoulder and their roofs touched to form a zigzag pattern in the sky.

Inside it was dark and cool, and the smell of dust and spilled coca-cola hung heavy in the air. It was hard to see after coming in out of the sun, and at first you could make out only the two gleaming white display cases, one empty, one filled with candy melting into crooked patterns.

Once we were inside, a hush fell over us as if we were intruders in a church. We kept quiet and counted our change until we heard scurrying on the stairs. It might have been a mouse or the wind in the trees, it was so faint, but then she'd appear in the doorway which separated our lives from hers. She was about our height, with wispy white hair teased away from her face, and glasses, and flowered skirts that touched the top of her sneakers.

“Well, what would you like?” Her voice had the business-like quality of crisp leaves crunching under your feet on a fall day.

“Coke?” one of us would ask.

“I don’t have cold coke, not today. I have birchola.”

“7up?”

“No, not today. You kids didn’t buy much last week. I didn’t bother putting any in the fridge. I have cold birchola.”

“O.K.”

“O.K. what? Birchola?” That’ll be thirty cents plus five cents deposit. Who’s next? How about you?” she’d ask as if we had a choice.

Then the door would creak open, and he’d enter in his black suit, complete with a hat that he wore even in August. His hair was white and soft like a Christmas tree angel’s, and it had no intention of staying under his hat. He must have been very tall when he was younger, but years had twisted him to the shape of the cane in his hand.

“Well, hello there, I mean, good afternoon, ma’am, children,” he’d say with a tip of his hat toward the woman behind the glass case. “Can’t you see she’s not open for business?” he’d say to us. “She’s dressed up like a package on Christmas. You’d better run along home.” Then he’d wink,

several times with both eyes, lest we take him seriously. Then he'd pull on one of my pigtails. "Where'd you get that long hair, girly?"

"Well, what do you want?" she'd snap, and she'd narrow her pale blue eyes. But I think she did it only so he wouldn't see the spark he caused in them when he walked through the door.

"Me? Well, ma'am, I was just about to get some oatmeal over at the A&P, and I wondered if you might need something?" Then he'd motion toward his grocery cart outside the door, as if proving the legitimacy of his presence.

"No, I certainly do not," she'd reply without hesitation, folding her skinny wrinkled arms as she spoke.

He'd flinch, almost imperceptibly, but continue gallantly, "If you're positive, ma'am, then I'll just leave you with these." And from behind his crooked back he'd produce a slightly squashed bouquet of orange and pink chrysanthemums.

I'd smile, knowing he had picked them from her flowerbed next to the steps. She wouldn't smile, but force the corners of her mouth down and answer, "I'll thank you to stay out of my flowerbed. You have no place there. Picking them right and left as you do, I'll be left with no chrysanthemums." Then she'd flush, having said more than she intended.

“My apologies, ma’am,” he’d reply. “One beautiful thing deserves another.”

I’m sure he knew, like I did, that chrysanthemums grow better when they’re picked, because they’re picking flowers and perennials. But he never corrected her, just tipped his hat eloquently and wished her a “most pleasant afternoon” before hobbling out the door.

Once my friends and I were outside, they’d imitate him with his slouching walk and solitary black suit and say, “Where’d you get that long hair, girly?” in giggling unison. But I never mimicked him because I liked him. I liked what he did to her eyes.

And although she never touched his offering at it lay on the top of the display case, more than once I thought I saw pink and orange chrysanthemums in her window.

---

I gaze up at her windows now, but they are empty. I was hoping to see chrysanthemums, hoping for a tell-tale sign that she lives here, that there is still a candy store. A lot may have changed in the five years since I moved away.

The store looks dark and empty, but it always did, I reassure myself. I climb the crumbling steps and pull on the door, reluctant to discover things have changed. But as the door opens, my fear disappears, replaced by awe. The store is exactly as I remembered it. I stand motionless for a moment, taking in the familiar smells and sights. The place is so still it seems almost unreal.

“Yes? What do you want? What are you doing here? Do I know you? I was lying down.” She startles me. It is the old woman, her hair whiter and wispier than ever.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...” I say.

“Can’t get up as fast as I used to. Doctor says I should rest. ‘Close the store,’ he says. What does he know? ‘Hire help,’ he says. Help for what? There’s no little children anymore, no, not for awhile. Just big ones. Boys. Play basketball behind the A&P and come here for soda. Still come here for soda. What else do children your age like? I don’t know. It’s been awhile.”

“Well, gum, I guess and...”

“Gum. Yes, gum. Ordered some of that new soft kind. I could sell it cheaper than the A&P, but...” She stops, and her tiny finger picks at hard pink scabs the size of quarters on the shelf beside her. “It melted,” she says.

I remember she used to give us candy from the shelves behind the display cases because whatever she put in the cases always melted. I always wondered why since the store was dark and cool.

“Shouldn’t you be in school? How old are you?” she asks suddenly.

“I’m fifteen, but it’s August.” I wait for her to interrupt me, but she is silent for a moment, absorbed with realigning her glasses on her nose.

Finally she asks, “Are you from around here? I used to know all the boys and girls....”

“I used to be. I live on Long Island now,” I say, and I try to think of something that will make her remember me, but my trademark elbow-length pigtails have long since been cut.

“I had a sister who lived on Long Island. She died, musta been twenty years ago. She had cancer. Cancer in her blood,” she says.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t concern yourself. Now what would you like? I don’t keep much candy now. The man from the company doesn’t think he can keep taking my order because it keeps getting smaller. He says

I'll have to buy from a store. It's not worth the money to have it delivered here. But that will raise prices, so I don't know what I'm going to do. I told him..."

"Does your friend still come here?" I ask.

She stops and looks at me sharply. "What friend? I have no friends," she says.

"The man. He used to bring you such lovely chrysanthemums."

Her gaze, once so piercing she could see your soul, grows distant and turns toward her beloved, but empty, flowerbed, then somewhere beyond it.

"That was a long time ago," she says, still looking out the window. "A different August."

"He's....?" I try to ask.

"A long time now. He never told me certain flowers you have to pick or else they die. There are no more chrysanthemums."

The air is hanging heavy now, dripping with silence. I try to think of something to say.

"I'm sorry," I say finally, but she is oblivious to me. "I'm really sorry, but I have to go," I say and start to pull myself away.

As I'm part way out the door, she mumbles something, and I turn back, expectantly. She is muttering to herself, "No more chrysanthemums. No more chrysanthemums."

I leave, the door closing softly behind me.

## *Golgotha*

....Jennifer K. Graham

I stood there, within the wall, watching her and waiting for him to leave. He had not come into my room for six days, and I thought he had stopped. But now as I watched Stephanie writhing in pain between my mauve sheets, I decided my uncle was an evil man.

Every time he felt like it and aunt Joannie was not around, he would come in and begin by putting his hand over my mouth. It hurt because he covered my nose too, and I could barely breathe, let alone cry for help. I never hurt much after that. I would make Stephanie take the pain while I crawled into the wall. God, how I hated myself for doing that to her. When I watched them, I wanted to save her, but I couldn't go through it even one more time.

---

I woke up later than usual, and after tossing my mauve sheets aside, I limped to the kitchen where aunt Joannie was reading last night's paper.

“Well, good morning, sleepy-head. You got a good night's sleep, didn't ya?”

“I don’t know. I can’t remember falling asleep. Where ‘ja go last night?”

“You know I bowl on Saturdays. Your aunt wasn’t lookin’ too shabby out there either. They asked me to join Wednesday’s league...”

“No!” I interrupted.....my god don’t be gone two nights a week please steph is hurting....

“Why not? I really like to bowl. I like being out at night. Cass, you’re not afraid, are ya? You know your uncle is here every night. Granted, he isn’t the most pleasant person sometimes, but just make sure there’s a six pack in the fridge, and you’ll get along great with him.”

That was all I needed to hear. I ran to my room. It was the time of morning the sun shone so bright it scampered around the room, bouncing off the virgin white walls. Everything in the room was pure white except my bed. The room seemed so bright and cheery during the day, but at night it was different. I felt safe now, but sometimes, this room was worse than hell.

---

Wednesday came. I pleaded with aunt Joannie not to go. “I have a spelling test tomorrow. Won’t you please help me with the words?”

“Uncle Al will help ya. Now I have to go.”

I once asked aunt Joannie for a lock for the door to my room. She didn't know how to put one on so she told me to ask my uncle. I never did ask him.

---

It was ten-thirty two. Aunt Joannie would be home in an hour. I had been praying for an hour and a half. I prayed out loud. I knelt by the side of my bed, reciting every prayer I knew loud enough for him to know that I was still up. I got too tired to keep it up though, and after “God blessing” everyone, I climbed beneath my mauve sheets, and I fell asleep.

I wondered why he waited for me to get in bed. Maybe because I could get away if I wasn't. I felt a hand go over my mouth. I escaped just in time though, and I watched Stephanie open her eyes. She was like me. She'd pretend she was still sleeping until he started.

Steph was looking more and more awful every time I saw her. She had brown eyes and jet black hair. It used to be like the Barbies we'd play with when we were four. That night she looked really thin, and she had dark circles under her sunken eyes. I decided not to watch.

I woke up at three A.M. I felt nauseous, and I wanted something to drink. When I opened the fridge, I saw two bottles of Genny and some ketchup. I brought a glass of water to my room and read.

Stephanie staggered into the room. She was black and blue and crying. Jeez, she looked scary. I hated when she showed up like that. I felt so guilty for the terrible things I was doing to her. She told me she didn't mind, but she sobbed, and her frail body shivered beneath my arms.

The next morning I woke up because the harsh sunlight was in my eyes. I let go of the teddy bear I was clinging to and watched the light bounce off my virgin white walls.

## *Nothing Gold*

.....Erin Kelley

...Lukewarm sunshine, the remnant of a bitter and bright November day, illuminates the shabby dining room gently. The rug we once had upon the floor had grown so stained and threadbare, its wine-colored surface worn white in well traveled paths, that even my mother admitted the room looked better without it. I do not like to switch on the harsh electric glare of the light bulb above my head. The naked quality this want of carpet gives to the room is intensified by the unblinking bulb, but is not apparent in the blurred soft light of late Sunday afternoon. Lists of Greek verbs are spread before me, arrogant in their irregularities. The Greek instructor, a small-framed neat man who speaks and thinks in logical, grammatically correct English sentences and dresses in varying shades of gray, promised a difficult test for tomorrow on these smug, ridiculously complex verbs. But Michael is coming over tonight, and the aorist passive of “didomai” goes out of focus, replaced by his face....

...sensitive generous mouth and his eyes innocent, under softly waving hair if I don't study this greek I won't have time to wash my hair it looks terrible now all different lengths and oily at the part and I wonder what time he will be here he should have called by now there is so much I have to tell

him that I don't like how much I need him but there is never time anymore or never the right time oh Michael remember the night of the carnival...june and the air held a promise of summer...

...small children, eyes wide with hope spend dimes warm from sweaty curled palms and throw rings at the gaudy colored stuffed animals crouched beneath the tents. Their high pitched squeals of excitement are lost in the boisterous restless crowd drunk from the cheap beer sold at the food stand the sweet scent of summer. You fish me out of the river of humanity and we walk in the tree studded field where the grass waves gently beneath a canopy of sky...

...the brisk snap of the light switch and the room is hideously exposed in its bareness by my mother....

...how can you study in the dark you'll ruin your eyes and glasses cost forty dollars she scolds in passing what are you studying do you have a test you had better finish or your boyfriend can just stay home....

...my mother's worried rapid voice lingers in her wake sending small spurts of anxiety toward me but these cannot dissolve the transparent barrier through which one person only is permitted to pass...

...and Michael remember how we talked that night sitting up on the hill so we could be as close to the stars as possible and we spoke at first gropingly of other people and school things afraid to grasp too tightly or quickly like a child who sees a bright colored bird paused in flight on the grass and creeps to it silently Indian style...then the child after approaching so carefully makes an impatient snatch for the bird and is left staring skyward and alone...you lay on the grass with your hands beneath your head as you spoke of yourself and your dreams...I remember how easily your relaxed eyes closed and limp as a baby but for a long time I sat rigid hugging my knees bent before me aching from remaining statue-like in that position worrying that what I said sounded ignorant or nervous or...then your arm curved warm and safe around me and the thickening darkness absorbed those choking worries about myself until I spoke to you loose and free...it seems we never talk like that anymore...

...hey Leah phones for you and my brother's head vanishes from the doorway...

...god let it be him god please...

“Hello?”

“Hi. Lee, what's up?” His voice smooth and nonchalant.

“Michael, hi.” I cradle the telephone in my hand, close my eyes and block out the blare of the television with one finger wedged in my ear. I am not alone now. His voice and mine connect in a warm secret world. “I was thinking of you just now, Michael. Remember the night of the carnival last year, you know, how happy we were and...”

“Yeah, Lee, but what I wanted to tell you is I can only come over for an hour.”

“But I haven’t seen you in a week and you promised me tonight...”

...oh Michael why don’t you want to see me don’t you love me Michael disappointment seeps like black ink through the boundaries of our world staining the edges black and then they tear because everything is weaker when it’s wet hair people paper everything...

“Look, Lee, you know I’ve had basketball practice every night and all the homework they give you in college. A lot more than last year so...I have to study tonight. You understand. I have something important though that I have to talk to you about.”

“I’m glad I can see you anyway, Michael. Will you be here soon?”

...three seconds would not be soon enough Michael come quick because you have to but I look so terrible now so come as soon as I look better...

“About half an hour and...forget it. I’ll see you.”

“Goodbye, Michael.”

...goodbye goodbye only why do you sound so strange almost as though it hurts to talk to me don’t you love me say it please say it before you hang up...

“So long, Lee.”

...a sharp click and I stand alone clenching with a white knuckled fist the telephone, my finger pressed so hard into my ear that the only sound I can hear is the dry unbroken buzz of the receiver...

...I start upstairs, carefully cutting a path around the prone bodies of my family sprawled in front of the television set....

...you’re in my way, Leah, my brother shouts irritably as I cross his line of vision his face is contorted in the shadows lit by the ghostly bluish glare of the t.v. he does not resemble me none of the five faces so absorbed in this box’s spewing reflect my own features I watch them as they sit in various slumps, round shouldered bodies supported by well-

used chairs...my father, bare infant pink feet in ludicrous contrast with the rest of his massive hairy body lies full length on the couch my mother leans forward, intent on the drama, mouth gaping slightly they sit there...I think, so contentedly, satisfied to see second-rate actors go through the motions of loving or hating while they watch, mesmerized, and eat and sleep and grow old...

...the anger fades as it always has and I am in my room getting ready for him it seems the habitat of a schizophrenic, this bedroom I share with my fourteen year old sister her walls blaze with gaudy and vibrant five foot posters of current television and rock stars Elton John in living color and the ever leering face of Donny Osmond surround Cindy's bed, the hot pink bedspread nearly obscured by its clutter of teen magazines, with their smooth haired relentlessly smiling cover girls, hastily thrown clothes, and gothic novels... Cindy's half of the room smells of the musk she liberally uses, the powerful stench trapped by her always closed window....this is the only link between my sister's portion of the room and my own, this suffocating aroma that invades the entire room her life seems to be stealthily encroaching upon mine in the increasing stream of music coming from her transistor radio and the ubiquitous odor of musk....

...I painted my own walls white and they are as virginal as the walls in a convent cell... Michael's face in its small cardboard folder adorns the dresser

and its back is reflected in an ancient mirror hanging behind it...it is a narrow, gilt-edged mirror with delicate black veins patterning the yellowed glass, and near the top there is a brownish drawing of grand powdered lords and ladies dancing the minuet the corners of the etching have begun to curl toward each other in miserable old age despair but I like the kind reflections it offers, the way it softens the irregularity of my skin, a welcome contrast to the make-up mirror with its double row of bright bulbs glaring so calmly and unmercifully from my sister's bureau....there is an air of transience in the bareness of my section, suggesting an overnight guest...

...remember Michael the time we found out that we both wanted an English Tudor house and five children to put in it.....five because everyone else wants four or two or ten...the house will be pale colored with mahogany brown criss-cross beams and the windows small leaded glass panes, and trees around it, and an acre of grass...inside I want mostly sunshine and fern type hanging plants I guess we need some furniture but I think we could get by on big bright cushions and a couple of tables and bookshelves...all the floors will be carpeted because it's the best feeling to have a rug under your bare feet when you first get out of bed.... we won't ever buy a television. Instead we'll read or go to the theater and oh Michael it will be beautiful...

My hair has finally submitted to furious strokes of the brush and curls obediently at its end.

Michael likes it when it curls like this and he likes me in a dress as opposed to my usual apparel of jeans. I survey myself, not quite satisfied with my appearance, until I realize that his class ring, which because of its wider diameter I wear around my neck, is missing. I remove it only before a bath or washing my hair. I search for it, panic starting to flutter within me, finally locating the gold set ruby-studded ring under the sink pipes where it had inadvertently fallen.

...do you remember Michael that dark night in your car when you commanded me to close my eyes and I felt around my neck cold hard metal weighing down a slithery chain and then you fastened the clasp and kissed me very solemnly and I couldn't decide Michael which was sweeter the fact that you loved me enough to want me to have your ring or the way your thick shovel shaped brown hands clasped it clumsily around me or the expression on your face so little boy eager and all of a sudden shy...but you are waiting Michael and memory the souvenir of yesterday slips unobtrusively away as I go downstairs....

“Hi,” I say and try to focus my eyes on yours.

“Hi, Leah,” but your eyes won't cooperate. They slide and slither around the room and the floor seems to have become most interesting. He has never acted so strangely before, and suddenly I am afraid.

“Look Leah, I’ve got to tell you something,” he begins, but I cut him off in mid-sentence.

“Let’s sit down.”

And so we sit on two stiff unused living room chairs, facing each other uncomfortably. I try to dam his impending words with a flood of my own.

“Did you have any trouble driving over, Michael? My father says the roads are really icy and they never plow them or ash them enough.” Michael starts to reply, but I do not let him and chatter frantically on. “I’m supposed to be studying for a Greek test so if I flunk, it’s all your fault. How is the basketball team this year? I always feel so proud watching you play. I haven’t seen you this year, have I, although I guess since all the games are away you said it’s better that...oh Michael I’ve missed you so much.”

...I know that a naked look of love must be written across my face and I grow hot seeing him shift uncomfortably and start to nervously massage his forehead back and forth with his index finger and then the hand stops, forming a shade so I cannot see his eyes....

“Lee, you’re making it very hard for me to tell you what I have to tell you. Listen to me for a couple of minutes, okay?”

“But...”

“Just listen.”

And his voice is curt and still he avoids my eyes.

“I know I’ve made you a lot of promises, Lee. We’ve been going out for a year and a half, and I guess there was a time when we both felt it would be forever. But college has changed me. It’s opened my eyes to things about myself that it was easier and more convenient to overlook last year. You see, Lee, I’m just not ready for our type of exclusive relationship. I was starting to feel married and when that happens...” He gestures significantly and continues. “I’m sorry, Leah. What can I say? I think you must feel the same way. You just wouldn’t admit it to yourself.” There is no reaction from me, and growing more confident, he finishes. “You know, of course, that if anyone asks me who broke up with whom, I’ll say it was mutual and you should too.”

...break up? I don’t want to...I gaze at this smooth talking stranger who has just terminated ‘us’ as easily and indifferently as he would close a bank account....

...you are the we of me as Frankie said you can’t Michael...you can’t...shock then his words begin to register...

“Michael, why? What did I do?” I ask slowly and watch an annoyed expression briefly veil his features.

“It’s nothing you did and I was afraid you’d take it that way. It’s not some other girl either,” he added quickly.

...his annoyed expression and his last words force me to salvage my pride I breathe deeply and numbly agree yes it’s the best thing to do under the circumstances naturally...

...yes Michael I saw it coming in the phone calls you promised and never made in the wandering glances and indifferent kisses but I wouldn’t believe it Michael because I couldn’t don’t leave me please....

...and then after breaking up so amicably Michael relaxes....I smile now through unnaturally locked teeth and remind him that I really have to study you understand and his face as he pecks my forehead and assures me that we’ll still be great friends is a study in relief and his step out the door is almost gay...

...I believed what I wanted to believe as you do...you leave thinking it doesn’t hurt Michael...

...friends great friends...

...friends are friends and pals are pals but buddies sleep together and this charming little jingle dances persistently in my mind...what's the use god...he came and went so quickly and now there's nothing left....Michael you didn't leave me anything at all...friends are friends and....

...the sun has at last stopped struggling with night for possession of the day....this dark room, so empty now that you have left it is like a trap, four thin cardboard walls rundown and beat up and tired tired...trapped in it are all those words, those empty farce-filled words...you were relieved when I didn't cry Michael when I sat there wooden and taking it and not even crying...why couldn't I cry...I can't believe it Michael...no more long night-softened conversations with you and I the stars of the universe or hold on to you when I get scared or watching you play ball and being so proud and happy not corny proud small smile proud...no more English Tudor houses or...no Michael you're saying it's over can't make me stop loving...I'm not too proud to call you Michael...

...I dial your number and the phone rings nervously twice your mother's voice breaks in on the third her hello is breathless and a little impatient as though she had been busy I am afraid of her disapproval and disguise my normal slightly quavering hesitant voice so it sounds smooth and hard and couldn't care less just called because I had half a second hi Mrs t is Mike around by any

chance????? hello Tina no Mike left about an hour ago he said he had to drop something off didn't he tell you he'd be late that boy is becoming so...

I seal the end of her sentence forever, placing down the monstrous black receiver.

...Tina who is Tina I think, my mind thick and custard like.... he never told me...he said there was no-why...how could he...and the sentences mock me accusing and incomplete and I am tired I don't care I tell myself he is not worth it...I can't cry...my hand reaches out of habit to finger the ring around my neck... I used to think of it, so gold and perfect as an amulet to ward off bad luck....beautiful shining gold and some half forgotten verse about gold teases me...gold...I loved you Michael but I didn't know you...nothing gold lasts Michael...I think it was frost that said nothing gold can stay and I am surprised to see the greek verbs before me being waved in an uneven pattern of miniature mountain ranges and tear filled valleys....

## Over the Edge

....Caralyn Gilotti

In the bustle of a metropolis like New York City, often no one notices a fly on a wall. On the other hand, it's difficult to miss a man on the ledge of the Chrysler building. It's amazing how you see people go about their daily rituals, never looking twice at a homeless beggar or an old woman being mugged. But a suicide, now that's an attention-getter! What's even more amazing is how people react to it.

I believe it was Friedrich Nietzsche who said, "The thought of suicide is a great consolation. By means of it, one gets successfully through a bad night." This guy obviously had had a bad night.

Walking by a window in the hallway of the twenty-eighth floor of the Chrysler building, I saw a bit of what looked like a tan overcoat flailing in the wind outside the window. Being the nosy New Yorker I am, I had to check it out. What I saw was something I'll never forget. A man no more than five foot two was flattened against the wall on a nine inch wide ledge overlooking the street below. He was dressed in a brown suit, the kind you see in the second-hand shops along the sidewalks of forty-second street. I never thought anyone really bought those ugly things! Anyway, he kept looking down

with one eye opened, as if he couldn't bear to open both. When I crept over to the window and cracked it open a few inches, he turned his head toward me and told me to go away.

Now this isn't something you see everyday, I thought as I chuckled to myself. I realized the man was still staring at me, and I tried to put on a straight face.

"I thought I told you to get lost! Now just leave me alone," he shouted at me.

Although he was rude, I felt bad for him. I wanted to do something to help. I mean, I just couldn't allow a man to plunge from a building right in front of my face. Hell, he might land on someone on the sidewalk.

"What's wrong?" I asked, ignoring his orders.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

"Well, if I were your mother, you wouldn't talk to me like that, now would you?" I said sarcastically. From the look of disgust on his face, I gathered he didn't enjoy my humor as much as I did.

Then I did something I never thought I'd do. I opened the window all the way and began to climb out.

“Are you some kind of nut or something?” he shouted nervously.

“Shhh,” I whispered. “If you keep screaming like that, someone’s going to think there’s a problem here. So what’s your name, buddy?”

“WOULD YOU GET OUT OF HERE?!” he yelled, but I continued to stare at him until he answered me.

“It’s Horace,” he finally said. “Horace Sutton.”

“Wow. I’d jump too if I had a name like that. I think I had a frog named Horace once, but he got run over by a car.”

“Great,” he replied. “Now if you don’t mind, I’m kind of busy right now.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said as I looked down at the crowd of people that had assembled below us. “Well, Horace. That is your name, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“Oh lord,” he groaned as he rolled his eyes. “I guess you’re not going to leave until I tell you, are you?”

“Nope.” I waited for him to reply, if you’ll excuse the pun, on the edge of my seat.

“I just can’t take it anymore,” he said desperately.

“Come on, now,” I said. “That excuse really sucks.”

“What the hell do you want from me, you looney?” he screamed.

“Hey, what did I tell you about screaming? And anyway, you’re about to jump down twenty-eight floors. Who’s the looney here?” I replied. “Now look, Hor—can I call you that? Never mind. The point is, nothing could be worse than splattering all over a crowded New York street, now could it? People staring at parts of you scattered all over the sidewalk, pigeons picking at your insides, not to mention once you start coming toward the ground, you’d probably lose control of all your bodily functions, and we all know how embarrassing that can be.”

“Enough!” he shouted. “You’re making me sick.”

“It’s making me sick, too, but have I got a point?”

“I guess so,” he said, shaking his head, “but you don’t understand what it’s like to be Horace Sutton. My job sucks, my wife is fat and ugly, but she’s fooling around on me anyway, and to top it all off, I just found out the price of quarter-inch nuts is going up three and a half cents.”

“I hear you, man...wait, who cares what the price of quarter-inch nuts is?” I asked.

“You see, I own a hardware store...,” he began.

“*Horace’s Handy Hardware*, is that you?” I exclaimed.

“Yep, that’s me.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve seen your commercials,” I said. ‘*Horace’s*, we’ve got the cheapest nuts in town.’ Wait, I thought you had hair.”

“It’s a toupee, but it blew off. It’s kind of windy up here,” he said.

“So I’ve noticed,” I said.

“Anyhow,” he continued, “when I woke up this morning, I just decided I couldn’t make it through another hopeless day.”

“Look, Horace,” I said, “it was Nietzsche who said, ‘Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman, a rope over an abyss.’ ”

“What in God’s name are you talking about.” he asked.

“Don’t you see it, Horace. No one expects you to want to go through another day. In the words of Nietzsche, ‘Is not life a hundred times too short for us to bore ourselves?’ Don’t even think about it. Sure, your life sucks, but who cares?” I said, attempting to console him.

“You are absolutely crazy. And what the hell is it with Nietzsche?” he demanded.

“I just want you to know I’m with you, man,” I said. “You’re either part of the solution or part of the problem.”

“Let me guess, Nietzsche again, right?” he asked.

“Nope. Leroy Cleaver. Ever hear of him?” I asked.

Without replying, Horace slowly inched away from me until he was by a window farther down the side of the building, and then he began to climb back into the building.

“Hey, where you going?” I asked.

With an odd look on his face, he said, “You need more help than I ever will. You’re totally screwed up.”

After Horace crawled in through the window, I glanced through the window I was sitting by, and I watched as he gave me one last look before he entered the elevator. I couldn’t see whether he was headed up or down, so either he changed his mind about committing suicide, or he just moved up to a higher floor to jump from. I guess I’ll never know. Then again, as Nietzsche said, “If a man has a strong faith, he can indulge in skepticism.”

Where are you, Roy Rogers?

....Anthony Munchak

“Hurry up, Lone Ranger! They’re pulling too far ahead. You hafta’ catch up and arrest those bandits. Look out for that rattlesnake. Silver! Good jump!”

The picture fades.

“We’ll be right back to our ‘Lone Ranger Marathon Weekend’ right after this. So don’t go away.”

The phone rings. “I’ll get it, y’all,” I scream. “Hello?”

“Hey, Betty –Joe. What ya’ up to?”

“Nothin’ much, Sue. Why, what’s up?”

“Well, what are ya doin’ tonight?”

“I’m gonna watch the marathon.”

“Well, listen. Remember when we were at the horse show auction last week? Ma cousin Jack was there. He saw you with me, and he was askin’ about ya. He’s free tonight, and I knew you’d be too, so I set ya up.”

“What! No way, Sue! I ain’t gonna this time.”

“Why not? He likes ya.”

“Are ya out of yar cotton-pickin’ mind? That’s like askin’ a sheepdog to round-up a herd of piglets!”

“Betty-Joe, don’t ya think ya’re exaggeratin’ just a wee bit?”

“I don’t even know the guy. He’s probably some loser who carries a pocket protector in his shirt to guard himself against vicious pencil points.”

“He’s a great guy. He’s tryin’ to grow a mustache and everythin’. If we weren’t fourth step-cousins from ma ma’s third husband, I’d probably ask him out maself.”

“But the marathon is on and I...”

“Look. Forget the marathon and just go out with him. You won’t regret it, I promise.”

“Well, Sue, do ya really think he’s Mr. Right?”

“He sure ain’t Mr. Wrong.”

“I hope he’s at least Mr. Half-Credit.”

“I guess that means he’ll pick ya up at seven. See ya.”

“Yeah, see ya.”

Ma ma walks in with six bags of groceries. “Sue, don’t make any plans for tonight. We’re havin’ a big dinner. I’m makin’ yar favorite, pork-n-beans with ma famous little chili sprouts.”

“I have a date tonight, and we might be goin’ out to eat.”

“Well, who’s the date?”

“He’s Sue’s cousin. It’s a blind date, so I don’t know what he’s like or anythin’.”

“Betty-Joe, dear, you know what happened on yar last blind date. The guy said he was a horse salesman, and ya believed him even though he was only in the tenth grade. He was just after yar body.”

“Ya’re right on that one, but I can’t shut maself in because of one guy.”

“What about the one before that? That one claimed to be a blacksmith. I remember ya cryin’ for weeks. Ya tried to kill yarself with an electric razor. When are ya goin’ to learn?”

“Ma, Sue wouldn’t set me up with someone like that. I have a feelin’ this one’s gonna’ be different. Just like what Wild Bill Hickock said while changin’ his pants one mornin’. “Denim’ll be in style again. I promise ya.”

“I pray ya know what you’re doin’. Just don’t get yar hopes up.”

....Maybe ma’s right. I hope I’m doin’ the right thing. I guess I’ll go upstairs and see what I’m gonna’ wear....Oh, no! Mom’s vacuumed my room again. Now I’m gonna need more sawdust for the floor. And look! Even the tumbleweed’s gone...I better get a lock for ma door....sigh...I have a little time to kill before I get ready...I’ll just lie on ma cot and scan ma corral...

Rusty walls absorb the late afternoon sun. ‘The Duke’ looks on with indifference. A deep, brown shag rug stretches wall-to-wall and swallows ma cold tired feet. Ma favorite lantern, flawed with a crack from a poor lasso throw, sits content on ma nightstand like a sheep let out to pasture after a summer rain. The walls make a home for Hopalong Cassidy, the Lone Ranger, and Gene Autry. I won all the posters at the annual county BB shoot-off, and now they surround ma bed. A dark corner isn’t so pretty with ma rolled-up sleepin’ bag. Whenever I’m done with a weekend of campin’, I always throw it there. Ma wrangler alarm clock, near a

lassoed bedpost, makes punctuality a law which's never broken.

Tickets from rodeos past consume a dusty shelf. They contain memories of broken records in the calf-ropin', bareback-ridin', steer-wrestlin', and other tests of skill. I was there. I saw them. Underneath that shelf sits ma pair of monogrammed, pure cowhide leather boots, displayin' a fashion that's been long forgotten. Willie Nelson tapes clutter the top of ma stereo. Hung above ma stereo is ma prize brandin' iron I won at the last bronco bust.

Another glance at ma clock. It's 6:15. I almost forgot. I better start gettin' ready for ma date.

“Great! Now she's done it. She's been in ma make-up again. Where's that dog-gone Jenny? I'll kill her! And where's ma Stetson hat? I wore it to church just the other day.”

“Betty-Joe, dear, I forgot to tell ya, but yar little brother borrowed yar Stetson for a costume party. I said it was O.K. for him to take it. Why don't ya wear yar ten-gallon suede hat instead? I hope ya don't mind.”

...Sure, ma, I don't mind. It's only the best Stetson this side of the Lackawanna ya let him take. How could ya do that to me? Don't ya love me anymore? If my darn brother comes back and the hat's ruined, so help me! What a day! What else can

go wrong? I better not ask. My date with Jack tonight? It better not be a waste of time. I'd hate to polish ma boots for nothin'. Now what'll I wear? My Wranglers, Levis, or Lees? Decisions. Decisions. I wonder what he's like. I hope he drives a Pinto. If he doesn't have a car, a Colt's bus wouldn't be bad. I hope he's tall and likes corduroy. Ya' know. Yar basic stud that likes to do things on the spur of the moment. I wonder what we're gonna do tonight? I hope we go to a nice restaurant like *Roy Rogers* and then maybe a movie. I think *In Pursuit of a Roundup* is playin' at the *Ritz*. Or we could just hang out at the saloon and spend all our quarters on the mechanical bull. Cowchip throwin' contests are fun too. There. Not bad at all. Now all's I need is my bandana belt and my rhinestone earrings. O.K. I'm all set. I'll just go downstairs and wait. I hope I like him....

“Dad, do ya have an extra pouch of Red Man tobacco? I have a date tonight, and I just ran out after breakfast.”

“I'm afraid I don't, Betty Joe.”

...This day sure needs a happy endin'. Let's hope Sue doesn't let me down. When's he gonna get here anyway? I hope I like him. Wait! Is that him. Oh, ma God. It's him. And he drives a Mustang! Here he comes. He's gorgeous. I hope he likes me...

“Howdy, Betty-Jo?”

“Jack?”

“These are for ya.”

“Gosh darn, a dainty arrangement of yella roses nestled in a spittoon. Ya didn’t have to do that.”

“Wow! Sue said ya were pretty, but she didn’t say ya’re gorgeous!”

...He’s starin’ at me and his eyes are buggin’ out like a stomped on toad. Oh ma God, I love him...

“Sorry about yar mailbox. I hit it when I was parkin’ the car.”

“Don’t worry about the cansarned thang’. I wanted a new one anyway. What’re we doin’ tonight?”

“I was thinkin’ we’d go to ma uncle’s farm. He has some sheep we could shave, or maybe we could ride the horses. It’s up to ya. Whatever ya want.”

“Sounds great. Let’s go!”

“Leema’ get the door for ya’ Betty-Joe.”

“Yar car has a great interior. These bucket seats feel like the saddle I have in ma room.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“Did Sue ever tell ya about the time I got bit by a giant rattlesnake?”

“No, Jack, what happened?”

“I was hikin’ the Northeastern Pennsylvania Outback when I stopped for a short rest after a good fifty miles. All of a sudden a rattlesnake jumps out of a tree and bites me. I tied a rag above the bite, very tight, and then I sucked the poison out. I went to the hospital and told them I drank poison.”

“Pretty intense story. I bet ya weren’t scared at all either.”

“Just a little bit. Look, we’re here.”

“Let’s brand those piglets first, or should we ride the horses cause it’s startin’ to get dark?”

“Let’s ride first. You can ride Brandy, and I’ll ride Whiskey.”

“This is great, Jack. I’m havin’ a grand ol’ time.”

...sigh....This is just like the endin' of *A Branding of a Bronco* where the two lovers ride off into the sunset without a worry in the world...This is great...I like him and he likes me...And he sure knows how to make a girl melt...Who could ask for more?...Sue, ya sure came through this time...

## *Gretchen's Cake*

.....Suzanne Vanisky

Gretchen had finally done it. She stood tall and thin in front of her full length mirror in the corner of her room. Her black and white dress never looked better as she struck a pose, arching her shoulders and back toward the wall behind her and raising her toe to a slight point. She had shed twenty-five pounds.

“Wooooeee! Gretch, you’re looking mighty fine today!” she said. “Move over Cindy Crawford cause here I come.”

After four months of cutting out fat, looking up every item of food in her calorie-counter book, and strenuously working out to her “Get in Shape Girl” tapes, Gretchen was finally slim.

Feeling confident and cool, she was ready to do some heavy duty flirting. She had watched all the other girls arch their backs and flip their hair. Now it was her turn. After reading every issue of *Teen Magazine*, she knew every makeup tip and beauty secret available to the race of women. After watching every episode of *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Studs*, and *Love Connection*, Gretchen now knew exactly how to flirt. It was very hard and time consuming, but Gretchen was finally prepared to enter the dating world. It was time for her to meet



She couldn't take the pressure. Her mind went blank. She couldn't remember any of the lines she had rehearsed for so long. Help! Help! Anyone! Anything! Just then she saw a box of chocolate chip cookies sitting in the next room on her brother's dresser. She grabbed for the box. NO! NO! They weren't reduced fat. Where was that damn calorie-counter book when you needed it? No time to look. She had to say something fast. She reached into the box and popped a cookie in her mouth. She felt a little bit calmer.

“Nothin' much, Bobby.”

Oh, no! She had said the wrong thing. He'd think she was a boring loser with no life. She popped another cookie into her mouth.

“I mean I was just getting' ready to go out,” she said, her voice a little shaky, hoping he'd think she had a life and didn't sit home all the time.

Oh, no. Another thought crossed her mind. What if he wanted to ask her out tonight? She blew it. Really blew it. She popped a handful of cookies into her mouth.

“Oh, I was just wondering if you knew what our French homework was,” Bobby asked.

Figures. Who would ever ask her out? He probably thought she was a nerd on her way out to a

French club meeting. Where was the fudge? She had finished off the box of cookies.

“No, sorry, I don’t. I never pay attention in that class. It’s so boring,” she said, hoping he wouldn’t think she was some French fanatic.

Oh, wow! What was she doing? He called her for help, and she couldn’t help him. He’d hate her. He’d never want to call her again. By this time, she had made her way down into the kitchen. Opening the fridge, she pulled out some ham and cheese and started munching.

“That’s O.K.,” he said. “It is a little boring. Mrs. Todsky’s so weird, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she really is. She’s such a ditz. She doesn’t even know how to grade. I don’t think she even corrects our test papers. She just passes everyone.”

Oh, good grief. What if he’s failing French? He didn’t even pass English last year. How could he be passing French? She had just insulted the boy of her dreams. The boy who had been known to curse in front of teachers. The boy with the best body she’d ever seen. She needed Doritos. But the Fat! The craving! The pressure! Her nerves!

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Gretchen had gone off the deep end. She madly stuffed her mouth with cheese flavored Doritos.

“Listen Gretch, my buddies and me are throwing a party next weekend. I was wondering if you’d like to go.”

“Ah, yeah. Sounds fun.”

“O.K. I’ll pick you up about eight on Friday?”

“Yeah. O.K.”

“Well, then, I guess I’ll just see ya in school tomorrow.”

“O.K. Bye.”

Gretchen hung up the phone in shock. Her first date! What was she to do! She had never been so nervous. She never talked to guys much before. Her appetite grew more and more. It all seemed so easy when other girls talked to boys. What was wrong with her? Food. Food. Food. She needed more food.

He said he’d see her tomorrow. She’d have to talk to him tomorrow! What could she say? What if she went blank again? What would she do about next weekend? She’d have to face him face to face. He’d see her blush. He’d see her shaking. What if

she needed to use her inhaler every time she saw him? He wouldn't like her. She'd blow everything. Food. She was so damn hungry.

Every time Gretchen thought about Bobby, she had to eat. It was the only way she could deal with things, with life, with boys.

---

By the time Friday came, there was nothing left in the fridge. Gretchen's stomach had grown like an ulcer. She was fat again. Back to her old, huge self. After managing to avoid Bobby all week, Gretchen would now have to deal with the big night. The thundering, rumbling, whamo supreme pressure would all soon hit her.

Gretchen sat in algebra class thinking about the coming night. The night to remember forever. The first night of the rest of her life. All Gretchen had to do now was make it through the rest of the day without seeing Bobby. She couldn't deal with any more pressure. At least not before tonight. Could she do it? Could she pull off her plan to avoid Bobby for just a couple of more hours? What about tonight? Would she be able to put her well-rehearsed dating techniques into gear? Gretchen had come to school prepared for these moments of anguish and deep thinking. She cautiously snuck a half-eaten Butterfinger candy bar out of her purse and started to munch.

The bell began to ring. Gretchen gathered her books together and raced down to lunch. She would sit in her new seat again in her plan to escape any encounter with Bobby. It was the end seat at the end table in the last row on the left side of the caf opposite where Bobby normally sat. Her nervousness grew as she hid behind her huge paper lunch bag that she placed in front of her face.

When she had finished devouring her lunch, Gretchen got up from the table and was heading toward the door to exit the caf when she saw him. He was headed right for her. What could she do? They made eye contact. There was no turning back now. She looked at Norma Jane Parry who was stuffing her face with a big chocolate cupcake. She wanted that cupcake. She needed that cupcake. He was getting nearer and nearer. He was now approaching her. Help!

“Hi, Gretchen,” Bobby muttered, his face a ghostly shade of white. “You look different.”

Ugh. He noticed all the weight she had gained back. What could she say? How could she get out of this mess? She wanted Norma Jane’s cupcake so bad!

“Ah, well, my asthma’s been pretty bad lately. All the air I’ve been inhaling must have caused my skin to blow up a little.”

A puzzled look appeared on Bobby's face. His face seemed to be getting whiter and whiter.

"Bobby, are you O.K.? You look a little pale."

"Yeah, ah, sure. It's just a little stuffy in here."

What could she do? Maybe if she could help him feel better, or something, he might like her.

"Here, Bobby. My inhaler's in my purse. Maybe some air would help."

Bobby got even whiter. He just stared at the inhaler. Then he noticed me staring at Norma Jane's cupcake.

"Ah, listen, Gretch, I'm glad I ran into you. I was meaning to tell you I can't go out tonight. My cousins are comin' to visit for the weekend. They live fat away. Ah, I mean far away."

"Oh, O.K. No problem. I wouldn't want your cousins to get mad at you or anything."

"Yeah, they're the type that holds a pudge. Ah, I mean grudge."

He hates me! I knew it. I'm sooooo fat. I want to die! No! I want that damn cupcake! Wait! I think

it was *Teen Magazine* that said guys love it when girls ask a guy to call them.

“O.K. Well give me a call then tonight, or somethin’.”

“Ah, I can’t. I have to pig...I mean pick my cousins up at the airport. I probably won’t get a chance.”

“Oh. O.K.”

“Well, I’ll see ya around.”

“Yeah, see ya around.”

---

Gretchen could hardly hold back her tears. She ate and cried the rest of the night. She cursed those slim fast commercials. She smashed her “Get in Shape Girl” tape against her fat stomach. She ripped out each page of her calorie-counter book one by one. She knew she could never give up food. She needed it too much. What could she do? How could she have a boyfriend and her food too? Yes, yes. Gretchen got a wonderful idea. She would find a fat boy. Someone just as fat as her. They could be a fat happy couple just like the couple on *Roseanne*. They could eat together. It would be a dream come true. Who needed those guys with the gorgeous rippling muscles? They weren’t worth it. No! No! Gretchen could have her cake and eat it too.

## *Blue-Green Love*

....Ellen Kalaus

It was a hot spring day. The smell of melting crayons clung to the humid air. We were working on an original art project, trees standing in a meadow. This unique scene, two green trees standing on two green mountains with four pink flowers circled by a halo of one yellow circle that was supposed to resemble the blazing sun, was duplicated by Picasso-like first graders on thirty white sheets of paper.

Then it happened. Our eyes met. I noticed him, and I think he noticed my intense stare, though I'm not sure because the gleaming sun struck the glass of his glasses.

....those wonderful handsome glasses that were pushed up by those powerful pudgy fingers....those ten gripping fingers holding his crayons with such tyrannical force...clutching his Batman book bag with an incredible fierceness....

He, Harvey Bellwall, was walking toward me.

....oh my gosh are my knee socks straight...are my pigtails even...is there some peanut butter and jelly on my chin....

Harvey was about to say something to me.

....what am I going to do...he is definitely too good to be true....he has it all....the looks, the charm...the fact that he is always the last one to remain in the dodge-ball games....I love him for his rebellious side too....he is the only boy who has enough courage to clap the erasers against the back wall, even though Sister Bernard warned us not to....

“Sarah, are you finished with the blue-green crayon? If not, I’ll use the green-blue one.”

Those words will live in my mind forever, ‘blue-green, green-blue.’ Like the blue and green of the crayon, our love would surely interlock for all time.

---

Our love affair flourished for weeks. Harvey and I shared our lunches and sat next to each other during story time. Summer was approaching. We talked of romantic nights when we would trap fireflies and play dodge-ball until the sun came up.

Then that evil day came, the day when Harvey learned there were other women out there, women more sophisticated than I, one in particular, a third grader.

She, Jessica, wore her hair in one pigtail. She had pierced ears. She could even cross the street by herself. Jessica's trademark color of green-blue was smeared all over her artwork that hung proudly in the hall. Her renowned reputation for having lost all of her baby teeth had gained her a place of respect among all her classmates. Not only did Jessica have the respect of her peers, but she was worshipped by the younger students for her fantastic ability in hopscotch.

Harvey left me in his blue-green past for this third-grade beauty marked by a green-blue façade.

I learned to love again, but to this day, I still can't use a blue-green crayon without having my vision blurred by a tear.

## *Battle Royal*

....E.J. Vanisky

Chuck McCormick dashed to his car from his kitchen with pieces of a jelly doughnut still in his mouth. He was late for school.

As Chuck was closing the door of his car, a fly darted in. He shook his head, mumbling to himself, "I don't need this. I really don't need this now."

He pulled out of the driveway, almost hitting the garbage cans that sat, full of trash, on the corner. As he started down the road, he rolled down a few windows, hoping the fly would depart. Instead it landed on his nose. He raised his hand to slap it, but it flew off toward the back seat. He ended up slapping himself in the face.

He rolled the windows back up. He did not want the fly to get away. Now he wanted it dead. He calmed himself by concentrating on how he was going to pull out the fly's wings and legs and let it roll around on his desk.

"Hee, hee, hee. I'm gonna have a good time with you today."

The fly was back up front now. Chuck's left eye watched the road, and his left arm steered as his

right eye watched the fly and his right hand tried to grab it. It was too fast, though. He knew he needed a weapon. He took the owner's manual from the glove compartment, rolled it up, and used it like a fly swatter. After a few swings, the fly landed on the gear shift. He swung hard, but the fly moved to the back again. His fist hit the stick and knocked it from D right through N to R. He flew forward, hitting his head on the steering wheel as his car rapidly slowed down. He was relieved when he saw no cars in the rear-view mirror. He shifted back to D.

“You're in big trouble now,” he yelled.

The fly remained in the back for a few minutes, and Chuck began to fear it had escaped. Then he saw it. It was resting on the passenger seat. He lunged at the fly. It shot into the air, ricocheting off his right palm into his left. He clenched his fist and squeezed with all the strength in his fingers. He felt as if all his finger-tip pushups for the past three years were for this moment. He began to laugh.

“I finally got you, you little....”

A horrible thought crossed his mind. He peered up over the dashboard to find the car had swerved to the left of the yellow line and was speeding toward an oncoming bus. He did not have time to hit the brakes.

“C’mon, Bob, open that fist. His mother wants him to look at peace for the viewing.”

“I’d have better luck opening a can of beans with my teeth. His fist was the only body part not broken in the accident.”

“Step aside. I’ll do it.” He took a screwdriver and began prying Chuck’s fingers open one by one. While he was on the third finger, something flew out of the body’s hand. Both men were startled.

“It’s just a fly,” Bob said. “It must have been in his fist all this time.”

“Interesting, Bob. The kid probably saved it from being splattered all over the dash.”

## *There He Is!*

...Lisa Kelly

I think it was around 9:38 P.M. on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1992, when it finally happened. He talked to me at last. I couldn't believe it! That husky voice, whispering (well, yelling) in my ear. Those sweet words! O.K. Wait. Let me start at the beginning.

It was March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1992, and my friend Karla and I decided to go to this dance club we'd been hearing about. So we went, and if I remember correctly, we were dancing. Then, as if in a dream, I saw him across the dark, sweaty room.

“Oh my God, Karla, do you see that guy? OOOOOO, he is sooo hot! I wonder who he is? I just have to know! I absolutely love him!”

“Geez, Tina, could you be a little more specific? I mean, there's only like five million guys in here.”

“That guy right there with the Red Cross Colors jeans on. The H.O.B. (Hat on backwards).”

“Oh, you mean Adam? That's Chris's friend.” Chris was her boyfriend at the time. “He works at a gas station. I see him all the time.”

“What?!?!” I was frantic now. This was not fair. He was just the hottest guy I had ever laid eyes on, and Karla already knew him, which was usually the case. She knew all the guys. Well, all the guys that mattered, anyway. “O, wow!” I screeched. “Where does he live? Does he have a girlfriend? Where does he go to school? Does he like redheads? What’s his favorite color? When’s his birthday? What days of the week does he work? Do you think he’d like me?”

“Tina, slow down! I don’t really know how he’d feel about you. I mean, I don’t even know him, for cripe’s sake!”

“You don’t have to yell, Karla.”

“Why don’t you just talk to him, Tina?”

Oh yeah. As if it was that easy. She might be able to do something like that, but I just couldn’t. Karla had long, luxurious, straight brown hair that always behaved and was never frizzy. She had sparkling green eyes that shot through people like laser beams. Guys always approached her, and she never had a problem talking to them.

I, on the other hand, had kinky red hair that fell in stringy spirals about my shoulders and boring blue eyes. Guys like to call me “carrot-head” which I did not find funny. Whenever a guy would talk to me, which was usually to gather information on

Karla, I would stand there, blushing and looking stupid. Or, on rare occasions, I would just laugh like an idiotic hyena in heat. Whatever the situation happened to be, I usually managed to make a complete fool of myself.

“No, never mind. I’ll just stand here and observe his divine beauty.”

“Well, do you want me to talk to him for you?”

“NO! Then he’ll think I like him!” Did Karla think I was a complete moron? I didn’t want him to know. Besides, with my luck, he’d probably fall in love with Karla.

“Well, all right, Tina. Have it your way. But how about this? I’ll ask Chris for Adam’s phone number, and then you can call him sometime and just talk. It’ll be easier than in person, ya know?”

“Well, I don’t think...” Wait a minute, I thought to myself, his phone number could be a good thing. That way, I could hear his sexy voice without having to say anything in return, and I’d know when he was home. And if he wasn’t home, I could find out where he was, who he was with, and when he would be back. Yes, it was definitely one of Karla’s better ideas.

“I’d love to have his phone number. But don’t tell Chris why you want it because then he’ll think I like Adam, and Adam would find out, and then I’d have to die! But, Karla, do you like Adam?”

“What’s your point?” Karla could be so dense sometimes.

So, I got his phone number. I would call every so often, just to see what was up and how he was doing or if he was home. Of course, if he answered the phone, I’d hang up right away. I didn’t want him to get suspicious. I knew by now he had at least two sisters, a mom, and either an older brother or a dad living at the house. Sometimes, I almost talked to him, but I never did. Then, I found out where he lived.

“So, Chris, are you going over to Adam’s house now?” I asked, innocently, one day after school.

“Yeah. Why?”

He was playing right into my hands. It was almost too easy.

“I’ll give you a ride. I hear it’s going to rain.”

Karla started to laugh, but I ignored her and left with Chris.

Now, not only did I know Adam's phone number (553-1212), where he worked (Hess's gas station at the corner of Silver Avenue and White Horse Boulevard), how many people were in his family, but I also knew his address. After a week, I figured out which car was his. It was a silver Toyota Corolla with two doors and tinted windows. Only the coolest guys had tinted windows. That was the clincher. I was totally in love. I professed my eternal love for him to anyone who would listen, such as Nikki, my sister.

"Guess what, Nikki? I'm in love with the man I'm going to marry. I'm going to love him forever."

"Again? What's his name this time? Bob, Larry, Jeremy, Frank?"

I detected a note of sarcasm in her voice. "Wrong! It's Adam."

"Adam who?"

"Ummmm. I don't know." All right, so I didn't know his last name. It was a minor detail.

Every time we'd go to the club where I'd first seen Adam, I'd stare at him intensely until he'd notice, and then I would look away. I was always on the lookout for him. Whenever I spotted him, I would scream, "There he is, there he is," while jumping up and down. I don't think he suspected

anything, although he would peer at me with hot, boiling, silky brown eyes as if he did. He had long, skinny legs that seemed endless. He always wore black Reeboks, laces untied, of course. He usually wore an acid washed Levi jean jacket, two buttons unbuttoned, cuffs rolled up. At times, he had a moustache, but usually he sported a smooth, ivory complexion.

On May 21<sup>st</sup>, Chris, who had somehow figured out I liked Adam, decided to introduce me to him. Karla and I were just standing around when I saw Chris and Adam approaching.

“Karla, what’s going on?” I sucked in my breath and began to blush. He was drinking a Mountain Dew. How manly of him.

“Hey, guys, what’s up?” Chris said with a grin.

I got lost in Adam’s chocolate brown eyes. It was the first time I didn’t look away when he looked at me.

“Adam, this is Tina. Tina, this is Adam,” Chris said.

Adam smiled a wide, toothy grin, and stuck out his slender hand. “Hello, nice to meet you,” he said, rather loudly in my ear.

It was the moment I had been waiting for all my life. I had to say something flirtatious, yet not too pushy. I thought of saying, “Hey, baby, your legs must be tired cuz you’ve been running through my mind all night;” or “Your name must be Candy because you are so sweet!” I had come too far to screw up now. Well, under all that pressure, I managed to utilize my extensive vocabulary.

“Hi,” I said. Not wanting to spoil the moment, I grabbed Karla’s arm and said, “Let’s go to the bathroom.”

Later that very same night, my dreams of Adam and myself running toward each other in an open field were shattered. He danced with Janet Michaels, a thirteen year old eighth grader. At first I was devastated, but then I saw David, the most beautiful guy I’d ever seen.

“Wow, Karla, did you see that guy? He’s beautiful!”

“But what about Adam?”

“What about Adam? He’s jail bait. I want David. He’s the man of my dreams!”

“Oh, Tina, you’re a riot,” Karla said.

I don’t know what she meant by that.









