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julie deverich
To this day she didn’t know what color Neil’s eyes were. It seemed funny to think about this and to remember that she had never known. She could see his eyes in her mind, behind his glasses, and seemed to recall that they were dark, but she couldn’t say for sure. Sometimes she decided they must be blue, to match his light coloring—but come to think of it, Julie didn’t really know what he looked like at all, despite the fact that she could see him in front of her as plainly as if he had just walked through the door.

She tried not to spend a lot of time thinking about Neil. She was too busy getting up in the morning and going to bed at night, scrambling eggs and buttering toast, dancing in the kitchen, singing in the shower, or even reading a good book while curled up on the couch with a bowl of popcorn sitting within easy reach on the coffee table. Too busy living life to spare a thought for Neil. It was only once every few months that he would suddenly come into the kitchen, letting a breeze in through the door with him, and stand and look at her like it hadn’t been twelve years since the last time they’d actually met. The scene had played itself out so many times in her mind that she knew exactly what she’d do when it really did happen.

She’d continue with washing the dishes or cutting potatoes and say, “Hi, honey,” conversationally, without ever looking up. She’d dry her hands on the yellow dishtowel hanging from the refrigerator door and ask
him how his day went, just as if they'd been happily married for fifteen years with three kids, ages twelve, nine, and three in the front room playing or reading or doing homework. Then she'd turn around and give him her full attention and stare directly into those eyes and find out once and for all what color they really were.

Today had been one of those days.

She could think of no good reason for Neil to visit today. She'd been trying all morning to write more of her novel, hoping that being busy would keep her mind off of his impending arrival; but the pages were lying in piles spread out on the floor, very much the way they had looked yesterday, and the day before that too. It had been a while since she had last been able to really concentrate on her work. Little visions of him kept pulling at the corners of her eyes and the back of her mind. Who could write when Neil was puttering around in the kitchen, banging pots and pans and cutlery together as he made dinner for her? Or when he came and stood in the doorway, just grinning and watching her think? Or at night when he reached over to grab her hand while she was sleeping to see if she was really there? Even though Julie knew it was just her imagination, she still had to go look and see every time to make sure.

So this afternoon she had set down her pen and given up the pretense of diligence. She made a cup of hot chocolate—Neil would have had black coffee, but she could never stand the taste, although she did like the smell—and simply sat there, remembering him. And she had started by remembering his eyes.

She had never known what color they were because she had never actually looked him straight in the eye. She had always studied him sideways instead, so that he wouldn't be able to tell she'd been looking at him if he turned around suddenly. Julie knew she wouldn't have been able to return his gaze—she would have blushed too hard.

They'd known each other for what seemed like forever—had grown up together, talked together, walked together, laughed at old movies together, and even gone to a few dances together. She couldn't remember one minute of the entire span of their relationship that she hadn't known clearly that she loved him and felt just as clearly that he thought of her only as his best friend. So it made for an awkward moment when she had heard his voice on her answering machine three days ago.

"Hey, Julie!" The recording was fuzzy so it was hard to hear him unless you listened carefully. "I think this is your number. I hope so, but
it's been so long I wasn’t . . . Anyway, this is Neil. Maybe you don’t remem-
ber me after all these years,” he gave a little chuckle, “but I’m in town this
week for a business conference and wondered if I could drop in Friday after-
noon sometime around four, if you’re free . . . assuming you really do live
here,” another nervous chuckle. “Just to, uh, talk about old times. Um, let
me know.” She had jumped to grab a pencil to write down the name of
his hotel, then had listened to the recording several more times to make
sure she wasn’t dreaming this time.

But the recording was real. Neil was coming, really coming this time.
And she had no idea what to do with herself after she had sent a note to his
hotel room saying, “Friday’s fine, four’s fine, thanks for calling, see you then.”

She hadn’t been able to think clearly since.

She glanced at the clock. Three forty-seven. Thirteen minutes to
go. Neil would be prompt, as always. She knew the doorbell would ring at
four o’clock on the nose and not a moment sooner or later.

Twelve minutes.

It had been twelve years since they’d last seen each other face to
face, at the airport when she was leaving home to move to Seattle. She’d
told herself she was going because she needed to get out and get some
experience in the world. She knew it was really so she wouldn’t have to
stick around for Neil’s wedding, whenever it happened. Not that there had
been any immediate danger, but Julie knew that it would have killed her
to hear about his engagement and to have to go to his wedding and smile
and pretend she was happy. So she ran away.

At the airport, he had given her a little box. “For good luck,” he
said, then kissed her cheek and moved back as she murmured, “Thanks,”
and picked up her carry-on. As she walked up the ramp she turned and
called back, “Good luck to you, too!” And then was gone.

Safely in the air on the way to Seattle, she had opened the little
box and found a small ring: a thin silver band with a tiny amethyst, her
birthstone. She remembered the time they’d been walking downtown, three
years before, and had seen such a ring in one of the shop windows. She
had mentioned then that she would like a ring like that someday.

“What for? You mean, like an engagement ring?” he’d teased.

Flustered, she’d answered, “Not necessarily. For anything—for luck,
maybe.”

He’d looked sideways at her with his eyebrow raised but hadn’t
pushed the matter further after commenting, “I’d prefer aquamarine, myself.”
She had laughed and they walked on. “That’s because it’s your
birthstone, silly.”

And so he had given it to her three years later, for good luck. It
made her want to cry, get off the plane and go back and tell him every-
thing. It was too late for that, though—Neil was miles behind her now. So
she put the ring on the third finger of her left hand and imagined what
might have been as if it really had been an engagement ring. And that
had led to the three children, the yellow dishtowel, and the fifteen years
they hadn’t been married.

Remembering these stories as she waited, Julie started twisting the
ring around and around her finger. What had she been thinking, letting
him come? Twelve years with no contact at all—come to think of it, how
did he find her address? She had purposely not given it to him when she’d
left, so that she couldn’t be reached with a wedding announcement.

When the doorbell rang, precisely on time, she stood and unlocked
the door, arranging her face to greet him without betraying just how many
misgivings she was having about seeing him at all. When she opened the
door her smile was bright enough to blind anyone not wearing sunglasses.
She was surprised he didn’t shield his eyes—which she still couldn’t meet
as she casually said, “Hi, Neil. It’s been a long time.”

He laughed and stepped inside as she held the door open for him.
“I’d say a bit too long. It’s good to see you again, Julie.” He gave her a
quick hug. She couldn’t help stiffening up a bit at the unexpected close-
ness and closed her eyes to get her bearings again. He misinterpreted her
silence and let go quickly. She opened her eyes again, but he wouldn’t
meet her gaze, and the moment stretched out a little longer.

Julie broke the silence before it could become panicky, grabbing at
random small talk. “The weather outside today, you must be freezing. Would
you like something—hot chocolate, maybe?” She knew he didn’t like hot
chocolate. “Or I could get you some coffee, warm you up a bit.” She was
already busy getting mugs down as she spoke, starting up the coffee maker.

Neil laughed and took a seat on the couch. The tension had
passed. “Yeah, it doesn’t rain this much in Southern Utah, usually. It’ll
take me a week to dry out once I get back home.” He glanced around
her apartment as he spoke. She looked too, seeing it as he saw it: white
walls, mostly bare except for the print of Monet’s garden above the loveseat.
A dusty piano in the corner. The green stuffed pillows. The papers of her
manuscript in piles on and around the desk in the opposite corner. A few
dirty dishes in the sink and crumbs still on the table. “I didn’t think you liked coffee enough to keep it on hand,” he continued with that little crooked grin she had always loved.

“I keep it here for my guests. Most people seem to prefer the stuff to hot chocolate, don’t ask me why.” She didn’t say that her husband, Neil, drank coffee and that was why she had it there.

He accepted the mug she held out to him, looking at her with his eyebrow cocked upwards. She interpreted that look to mean that he knew she didn’t entertain much. One look at the place had been enough to show him that she was nearly a hermit now, which was true enough; but she wasn’t sure she wanted him to know that. He was practically a stranger to her now, after all. She didn’t have any clue what he’d been doing for the past twelve years or even what color his eyes were.

She tried to find out the latter, at least, by covert glances over the rim of her cocoa mug. No good. He wasn’t looking at her. She finished her drink, set the mug on the coffee table, and sat on her hands, trying not to fidget or draw any more attention to herself than absolutely necessary. She wished he would leave but wished even harder that he would stay long enough for her to work up the courage to tell him everything. She chewed on her lip, trying to decide what to do.

He spoke suddenly, bringing her back to reality with a jolt. “Listen, Julie. I have to apologize first off for ... I mean, I know you seemed to want no contact with me, but, I really need to ask you a question, so I whined and pleaded with your mother until I got your address out of her.” He ran his hand through his hair as he paused, collecting his words. The movement caused the light to catch a glint on his left hand. Gold. Her heart sank and she knew she couldn’t tell him anything.

Not wanting to hear what he was saying, she began to babble inanely, chattering about his business conference, offering him food. He was married. She started fidgeting with her ring again, trying to slip it off her finger before he noticed it, but it was stuck. Overwhelmed with embarrassment and frustration, she stood up to get the bread and hide her face so that she wouldn’t start to cry. For goodness sake, I’m a grown woman, thirty-four, this is ridiculous. He’s thirty-six, why shouldn’t he be married?

He grabbed her hands as she stood up, startling her and derailing her train of thought so that the string of words died away. “Julie, I know it’s been a long time since we’ve talked, but I wanted to ...” He trailed off and she followed his glance to her left hand, where the ring was still
there on her third finger. His ring. She blushed, knowing what he must be thinking. How could she ever explain to him? He’d only laugh, and it would make things even more awkward than they already were, with the two of them standing there in her front room, him clutching her hands so hard it was cutting off the circulation and her blushing and sniffing like an idiot.

“That’s a pretty ring.” He spoke slowly, in a tone she didn’t recognize. “Where did you get it?”

He didn’t even remember giving it to her. With a small catch in her voice, she tried to laugh it off, disguise the hideous irony of the moment. “Oh, a friend gave it to me.” Don’t you remember, it was your good-bye present. For good luck, you said. You don’t even remember. “Do you like it?” she finished weakly, trying to prod him into speaking again. He might as well finish what he was trying to say to her now.

He didn’t glance up from her left hand as he answered. “Yes.” She waited, but he didn’t volunteer more information. She tried to relax but all her muscles had clenched up. Her heart was pounding, and each pulse felt like a sledgehammer striking against the outlines of the world she had lived in for the past twelve years, breaking up her carefully constructed fantasy. And he still would not look up from her hand or say a word. Why couldn’t he just go and leave her to pick up the fragments of her life and move on? At least let go of my hands so I can wipe my eyes before my mascara runs all over. A small sob escaped with a squeak.

He did drop her hands then, and she tried to disguise her anguish by moving to the kitchen area. A dishtowel was on the counter, and, gratefully, she buried her face in it, gradually getting her breathing under control. Clutching the towel like a lifeline, she asked the space between them, “How long have you had your ring . . . I mean, how long have you been married?” The sound of her voice was startling and she realized he’d been holding his breath as he let it all out in a sigh.

“Fifteen years.”

Pause. “Me too,” she said.

He turned to go. As he reached the door, she asked on impulse, “What was it you wanted to say to me?”

He shuffled his feet. When he spoke, it was to the door, not to her. “Have you ever dreamt . . . imagined . . . wished for something so often that you began to almost believe it was really true?”

This was so completely unexpected that at first she had no reply to give. She simply stood there, staring at the floor by his feet, wondering
how he could always read her mind. Not wanting him to see how close
to the mark he'd hit, she tried to brush it off. "Wouldn't that be classi-
fied as hallucinations or something? I'm not quite as crazy as all that!" Her
laughter was forced and harsh in her ears.

There was a long pause as he rested his hand on the doorknob
and jiggled it slightly, as though he were debating what to say. It was as
if he hadn't heard her remark. Finally he spoke, but softly, as though to
himself. "You know it's impossible to hope for it, but you just can't help
it. It comes little by little and builds upon itself until your dream becomes
more tangible than your reality . . . and then you convince yourself that
you could make it reality, but instead of fitting together like a puzzle, your
two visions meet in a high-speed collision and . . . the dream lies broken
on the ground as reality tears off in the opposite direction." He came back
to himself with a small start and his eyes focused on Julie again, then
flicked away, ashamed. "I'm sorry to have bothered you."

His ring caught the light when he finally turned the handle and
opened the door to leave. The flash made her notice the stone for the
first time. Aquamarine.

Their birthdays had been close—hers in late February and his in
early March—so they'd usually celebrated with one big party on the twenty-
eighth. After they'd had the conversation in front of the ring shop, fifteen
years ago, she'd given him that gold band with an aquamarine for his birth-
day present. For good luck, from your best friend, she'd written on the
tag. He'd given her the same little crooked grin when he opened it, and
said, "What more luck could I need?"

"Neil." She choked out the one syllable.

He stopped in the middle of the doorway. She was having trouble
breathing because of all the words she wanted to say that were crowding
themselves up against the back of her teeth. She felt an inexplicable urge
to laugh.

He turned around to face her. He must have recognized some-
thing in the tone of her voice calling his name, because he gave her a
look, just as if it hadn't been twelve years since they'd last seen each
other and just as if this last horrible half hour hadn't happened. Julie
wiped her hands on the dishtowel and asked him, in her normal voice,
how his day at the meetings had gone.

He just stood there, grinning, watching her think. And then she
did the boldest thing she had ever done.
She walked over to him, slipped her arm around his waist and met his gaze squarely.

His eyes were blue.
Ron followed the same routine after work each night. He always went to the batting cages to hit some balls and then to Larry's Bar to drink and watch T.V. Tonight was no different. Ron carried his bat into the 90-mph cage, dropped two quarters into the coin slot, and waited at the plate for the first pitch. The ball screamed towards the plate. He waited on it until he could sense the direction in which the ball's seams were spinning. Ron rocked his weight away from the ball and calculated the ball's break before his entire body exploded forward. His level bat, at the end of his fully extended arms, sent the ball cruising for a hundred and fifty feet until the batting cage's net knocked the ball out of the air. He wished he could see how far the ball would go in a stadium, a stadium with no nets like the ones at the batting cages, but he knew he wouldn't get that chance again.

He left his cage, walked into the parking lot, and put his key into one of the few things he liked about his life, his 1974 GTO. His car looked like the one the Dukes of Hazzard used to drive, except it didn't have the flag of a loser painted across its hood. Ron pampered the GTO. He took better care of the car than himself. He fed it the best gasoline and oil, always let it warm up for a few minutes after he started it, and he hand-washed it at least once a week, twice a week in the winter. He loved to hear the engine start because each piston fired in beat. And when he drove
down the street the engine hummed. His car didn’t roar or rip; he wasn’t like those yuppies who cut holes in their car’s mufflers. As far as Ron was concerned his engine broadcast an ideal tone.

It was dark when Ron pulled the GTO in front of the alley that led to Larry’s. He parked the GTO between a Ford Taurus resting on cinderblocks and a brand new Porsche. The Ford Taurus had been there the night before, but now it was missing its tires. The Porsche was in perfect condition, and its dark paint reflected the cigarette butts and empty bottles that littered the pavement. Ron figured that this had to be Kurt Mason’s car. Kurt was the only person that possessed a desire to visit this neighborhood who had enough money to buy a Porsche. Ron looked down the street. Most shopkeepers had already drawn their steel curtains shut. An image of himself keying the Porsche flashed through his mind, but that wasn’t right, even if he did hate Kurt.

Ron suddenly remembered he was going to Larry’s and looked up and down the street again. He had not seen anybody on the corner when he drove up, but Jones was now sitting at the corner on an upside-down milk crate. Jones’s palms were resting on the top of his white cane. Out-of-style sunglasses covered his eyes. A Styrofoam cup half full of dollar bills and change sat between Jones’s feet. Ron yanked the nickels and dimes out of his pocket—coins that wouldn’t make the batting cages work—and started to take quiet steps towards Jones.

“Howz you feelin’ tonight, Ron?” Jones said, turning his head in the direction of Ron’s feet.

“Jones, you sure you’re blind?” Ron answered back, “cause every night I see you here I try and sneak up on you and every night you know it’s me? How come?”

Jones turned his head towards Ron and said, “Cause of your car, there ain’t no car that sounds like that no where.”

“I can understand you hearin’ my car, but how do you know I’m walkin’ towards you?”

“Because I can hear your feet drag when you pick ‘em up and put ‘em down. You got a limp in your legs, not just one leg, but both your legs,” Jones said. He sat very still.

“That makes sense,” Ron admitted as he dropped nickels and dimes in the cup.

“You still bathin’ in hot water?” Jones asked. “You remember how I told you to stay away from hot water? It’s dirty and bad for the heart.”
“Yes Jones, I remember,” Ron said as he turned to walk down the alley. Jones always had strange advice and Ron wanted to get to Larry’s.

“Ron,” Jones called out, “I heard the strangest soundin’ car pull up a little bit go, you see any fancy lookin’ cars parked on the street?”

“No.”

“Why does everyone think they can lie to me just ’cause I’m blind? I bet I can name every car parked on this block. The Taurus hasn’t moved in days. Now I ain’t heard the fancy car pull away yet, it’s still here, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s a Porsche.”

“Sound to me like you don’t like the Porsche, how come?”

“’Cause I don’t like the person who drives it. He only comes here this time of year after the season has ended.”

“That car must really be somethin’,” Jones replied, still seated on the milk crate.

“Hummmm,” Ron spoke through tight lips. He wanted to talk about anything else, and Jones correctly interpreted Ron’s lack of enthusiasm about the car. Besides, Jones had wanted to talk with Ron about a particular topic for a few days now.

“You goin’ to drive in the Harvest Fair’s demolition derby again this year?” Jones asked.

“Of course,” Ron answered, but Jones was still talking.

“Now every night since I been here, whenever you come, you always help me out with a little spare change, but tonight I’m a goin’ to return the favor and help you out some.”

“What do you mean?” Ron said with a ‘here we go again’ tone to his voice. “Last week you told me to stop using hot water, wash my face with strawberry shampoo, and drink vinegar before I go to bed. Where do you come up with this stuff, Jones?”

“Maybe you ought to think about sittin’ this year’s derby out. Don’t leave base with the ball in the infield, don’t get caught in a pickle. It don’t feel right. That derby, it’s like a livin’ person and that person is holding your eyes in his hands, and them eyes are meltin’ like ice cream in the sun.”

“Yeah, I, uh, know what you mean.” Ron moved towards the alley.

“Hey, ain’t nobody ever listen to me, but this would be a good time for you to start.” Jones was angry, “Ain’t nobody listen to me just ’cause I can’t see, but let me tell you somthin’, a lot a things I see better than you.” With that Jones scooped up the cup, kicked the crate into the air, caught
it with his hand, and bolted down the street behind his probing white cane. "I warned you, mind the pickle and stay out of the derby." Jones disappeared around the corner, but Ron could still hear his cane slapping the sidewalk.

Ron thought about passing on Larry's tonight because he knew Kurt would be there. "He hates me as much as I hate him. He'll probably leave when he sees me anyway," Ron thought as he entered the bar. Ron walked through the door and half a dozen familiar faces turned to look at him including Kurt Mason's.

"Yo, Hop-along," Kurt said stupidly, "pull up a chair and join us."

"Sounds like you're still sore I broke up your no-hitter," Ron said calmly as he sat down and reached for the bottle Larry knew to put in front of him.

"You mean the no-hitter I had going in the state high school championship?" Kurt laughed. "Hop-along, that was ten years ago and you think I'm sore about that? I'm in the majors now. How are things at the tire factory? That game—"

Ron interrupted him, "Pretend you don't care if it makes you feel better about yourself, but if you're goin' to make us all listen to your explanation of the whole thing then you're going to have to buy us a round."

Kurt glanced around at the other men in the bar and nodded to Larry. The bartender dropped six more bottles on the bar. Kurt only came back to visit his home town during the off-season, and all of his visits had a few things in common—some free beer, Kurt and Ron both presenting their side of the 1992 Michigan High School 3-A baseball championship, and Kurt and Ron cursing at each other shortly before physically assaulting one another. In the minds of the other men at the bar, it was a shame Kurt only visited once a year.

After Larry distributed the beer, Kurt began to talk again. "That game is what made us what we are. We both knew that there was a major league scout there ready to sign one player. I pitched nine perfect innings, in fact, so perfect I was afraid the scout might think that the batters I was pitching to were no good. You got that hit off me because . . ."

Ron cut Kurt's sentence short, "I got that hit off you because you were trying to show off. You were trying to throw that fancy knuckleball of yours and it hung over the plate."

"Look Hop-along, any way you want to look at it," Kurt's words cut through the alcohol in his breath as he spoke, "all you did by getting a hit off me was make me look like I was pitching to guys that could hit.
You made me legitimate. The scout offered me the contract; I played half a season of triple-A and got called up to the Bigs. He signed you to play single-A ball, paid you peanuts, and you blew out both of your knees sliding into a fence after a fly-ball.” Ron sat silent as he stared into the giant jar of pickles marinating among jalapeño peppers that was always on the bar. With his eyes fixed on the pickles, his mind began to replay the day and events that ended his baseball career. Kurt was still shooting his mouth off, “Fate makes some men great and other men just live to make the great men look good. So I guess you could say I’m sore about the no-hitter, but you only went one for three that day. All that one hit did was make me look good.” The other men in the bar looked at the men anxiously, the room was tense and a fight seemed inevitable.

“Well, we’re honored to drink in the presence of the major league hotshot,” Ron said gripping the jar of pickles and peppers in front of him. “Give our ears a break and let’s see you down one of these peppers,” Ron said sliding the jar down the bar. Kurt opened the jar, grabbed a dark red pepper and bit down on it. He dropped the bare stem on the bar and slid the jar back. Ron caught the jar with his hand, grabbed a tiny orange-red pepper, put it in his mouth and started to chew. He felt the oil spill from the pepper onto his tongue. The liquid floated around in his mouth. The juice stung every pore on his tongue. He believed hot vapors were escaping out of his ears. His tongue and the inside of his cheeks felt raw, as if someone had placed a burning coal in his mouth. He looked at Kurt, his face was turning red but he hadn’t reached for his drink yet.

Ron, instead of reaching for his drink, slid the jar back to Kurt, who placed another pepper in his mouth and sent the jar gliding back. The other men taunted them. They had hoped for a fight, but the pepper eating was interesting. Ron started to chew another pepper, this one bright green. Terrific pain filled his entire mouth and throat. Snot ran cool out of his nose and over his lips. His eyes wanted to fill with tears, but he fought them back and hurled the jar down the bar back at Kurt, who put another pepper in his mouth and sent the jar back. The other men in the bar erupted in laughter and backslapping, and Larry regretted that there was only one pepper still floating among the pickles.

Ron picked up the round pepper near the top of the jar and threw it in his mouth. Both men’s faces turned purple-red and tears poured down their faces and skipped off their chins. Ron wiped the salty tears and sticky snot from his face and slapped the bar with his other hand. Kurt stretched
out his hand like he was reaching for his beer, but hit the bar with his fist in agony. The men in the bar began to guess who would be the first to take a drink. Ron swore his eyes were melting, he could barely see. He strained to look through his teary eyes to see if Kurt had taken a drink. Both men could feel the peppers’ acid searing the soft tissue behind their cheeks and both men desperately wanted to dilute the pepper juice in their mouths with beer. Everyone in the bar knew Ron and Kurt were suffering, even though both men tried to convince the other that they felt nothing. Neither man wanted to be the first to drink. Ron hoped to think of something insulting to say to Kurt, and the hotness in his mouth helped him think fast. “You know, Kurt, whenever I see you in town, I always know it’s the first of October, you sure hurry home fast.”

“Yeah, whatever, Hop-along. I didn’t want to miss the derby,” Kurt said as he rolled his eyes.

“You mean watch me win the derby,” Ron rebutted.

“Look, genius, I didn’t say I was going to watch the derby. I’m gonna drive in it this year. I already got myself an old Caddy that’ll knock the engine block out of whatever you dug up to drive.”

The other men in the bar turned their heads towards Ron to see how he would react. The renewed slander-filled dialogue, in the shadow of the pepper eating, once again had the men hopeful that they would see Ron and Kurt fight.

“If you get into the demolition derby I’ll mess you up,” Ron answered. The men, ready to witness unlawful physical violence, looked longingly at Kurt.

“Well you sound pretty certain about that, Hop-along, why don’t we make a little bet on it. As long as you’ve made enough money at the factory to keep the repo-man away from that GTO you drive then we can make that the prize. If I win, then I win the car, what do you say, Hop-along?” Kurt asked almost reaching for his beer.

“Sounds all right, but when I win, I want your Porsche.” As Ron said ‘Porsche’ Kurt’s face tightened. Ron could tell that Kurt hadn’t planned on including his Porsche in the bet, but Kurt couldn’t back out now.

“You got yourself a deal, Hop-along,” and with those words Kurt took his beer off the bar and walked towards the door.

The next morning was Friday, two days before the derby. It was time to prepare his car. Ron called into work sick and walked onto his front lawn
julie deverich
to inspect his would-be derby car parked next to the GTO. This year's derby car was a 1975 Ford station wagon. The engine delivered power to only one of the car's tires, the radiator was damaged, and it had trouble starting. It was not the ideal derby car. The old woman had sold it to him for 50 dollars just to rid her garage of the old clunker. Kurt's Cadillac would be in much better shape. Ron kicked the station wagon's passenger door. If he drove this station wagon in the derby he would lose. Ron's mouth still felt raw from the peppers he'd eaten. As he stood on his front lawn licking the sides of his mouth he made a decision. To beat Kurt he must drive the GTO in the demolition derby. If he won, he'd get Kurt's Porsche. If he lost, Kurt could have the demolished GTO. Ron figured either way things turned out, he would better Kurt.

Ron pulled the GTO into the garage and got to work. He cut the insulation around each window, removed each panel of glass and leaned them neatly against the garage's back wall. He removed the headlights and taillights off the car next, then the back seat. By the time Ron took the car's hood off the hinges he was no longer placing the discarded parts neatly against the wall, he just dropped them on the floor where he stood. He drained the gas tank and filled it with an alcohol blend, and he wrapped chains through the naked windows of the car doors so they would stay closed during the collisions. He took a can of black spray paint off the shelf and painted a large but crooked "7" on the car's driver and passenger doors. When he stripped the car's original vinyl interior he crossed the point of no return, the GTO was dead. The GTO had always pleased Ron, and the sight of his mutilated car hurt him. He wanted to fight the hurtful feeling. He wanted to kick and beat the car. The GTO represented a rare success in his life, and he had been forced to sacrifice it just to have a hope of beating Kurt.

Hours before the demolition derby started, crowds filled the grandstands. Earlier that day a tractor had plowed the field to soften the dirt, and a bulldozer had heaped dirt in a thick mound six feet high around the field's perimeter. Parked along the perimeter of the arena were twelve cars positioned like the numbers on a clock face with the rear end of each car pointing to the center. For the past hour, the crowd had an opportunity to carefully inspect each car. All of the cars were old clunkers on their way to the junkyard except for two: a large Cadillac and a GTO with sloppy 7's painted on its sides. A voice came over the loudspeaker
and announced the name of the drivers as they walked into the arena towards their cars. Between introductions, the loudspeaker reminded the crowd of the derby’s rules. “The rules are simple folks, last car running wins. When a car goes 45 seconds without moving, we will assume it’s no longer running, we will call out its number, and that car will be out. If a car goes 45 seconds without making contact with another car, then that driver is eliminated.” Nobody in the crowd was listening. Everyone in the crowd had seen the derby before. The loudspeaker continued, “driving car number 7, Ron Gallbasini . . . driving car number 13, David Hadfield . . . and driving the Cadillac, car number 1, Oakdale’s own, welcome home Kuuuurt Mason!” As Kurt walked across the grounds he waved to the crowd with both hands. Ron stared at him when their eyes met. Kurt recognized the GTO, and Ron could tell by the expression on his face that Kurt was furious.

“Drivers start your engines,” the loudspeaker called. Kurt raced to his Cadillac, and Ron fired up the GTO. With the car’s hood missing, Ron was able to watch the engine vibrate to life as he turned the key. The engine sang far smoother than the eleven other cars that had just started, and Ron gave it some more gas to make it hum. “Driver’s get ready and . . . Go!”

Every driver shifted his car into reverse and flew towards the center of the arena. Rear ends collided with rear ends as twelve cars met in the epicenter of the crash. Car 13 rolled over onto its topside, and as the drivers shifted their cars into drive to pull out of the center of the arena, the engines of cars 34 and 67 died. Tires in the loose dirt sprayed clods and dust into the crowd. The nine remaining each sought to attack the others. They reeled their cars around the arena in reverse, so that they could ram other cars with their trunks, sparing the more sensitive front ends that housed the engine blocks. Soon there were only six cars running, then five. Moments later, only four banged up cars remained running.

Ron and Kurt had collided a few times but were now on opposite ends of the arena. Cars 33 and 88 streaked towards the center of the arena and collided head-on, killing both of their engines. As the two drivers frantically tried to restart their cars, Kurt drove to ram them with his Cadillac. The crowd rose to their feet in anticipation of the collision. Ron shifted the GTO into reverse, weaved in-between two other dead cars, and T-boned the passenger side of the fast moving Cadillac. The crowd cheered as the rear end of the GTO sent the Cadillac sliding into the piled dirt.
Cars 33 and 88 remained stalled at the field’s center, and the Cadillac buried deep in the dirt pile was going nowhere.

Ron slapped the ceiling of the GTO with sheer delight as he realized that the next 45 seconds were his to ram the immobile Cadillac at will and then he would go home the derby’s champion. Ron pulled away from the Cadillac and pointed the GTO’s rear end at the driver’s side panel shielding the Cadillac’s engine block. He stretched his left hand out his window playing to the crowd, asking them if they would like him to ram the crippled Cadillac. The crowd cheered madly and many of them threw their fists into the air with their thumbs down. Ron stepped on the gas, sped towards the Cadillac and hit it hard. At impact he watched Kurt’s body jerk against the seatbelt and twist around in the cab. Ron laughed and pulled away from the Cadillac once more. This time he pointed the front of his car at the front of the Cadillac. He wanted to commit the full weight of the GTO’s engine into this collision. He floored the gas pedal and roared towards the Cadillac. In the short second he closed on the Cadillac he noticed it was moving towards him. His last collision with the Cadillac freed it up from the dirt pile. Ron didn’t have time to react before the GTO and the Cadillac struck one another head-on in the most violent collision of the evening. Both drivers were thrown forward against their seat belts and their seat belts slung them back into their seats again. Flames shot across each car’s engine. Ron’s immediate instinct was to jump out of his car, but in the same instant he moved towards the door, he also realized that both he and Kurt had initiated the last collision. Ron knew that if he exited his car before Kurt did, then Kurt would win. Kurt must have realized the same thing because when Ron looked into the Cadillac he noticed that Kurt wasn’t budging. Small flames still burned above each car’s engine block. Men with fire extinguishers ran towards both cars. The GTO’s engine no longer hummed, all Ron could hear from the engine was a hissing, and then a loud pop! A fireball shot out of the GTO’s front end, the crowd roared. In an instant both cars were engulfed in vapor and heat. The men running towards the cars with the fire extinguishers turned their heads and shielded their faces from the intense heat with their forearms. Their fire extinguishers did not cool the flames. The intense heat licked Ron’s cheeks and he looked towards the Cadillac to see if Kurt had moved yet. Kurt sat, still staring at Ron through the flames. Both Ron and Kurt knew that the first man to leave his car would lose. The men with the fire extinguishers yelled for the drivers to get out just as a second fireball, larger than the first, shot
out from the GTO’s engine. Ron’s clothing snagged the flames and burnt like a giant match head. He felt an intense burning pain over his entire body, but only for an instant. The flames singed every nerve in his extremities, and soon his arms and legs felt nothing. Flames leaped down his throat, chasing the oxygen in his lungs. His dry eyes filled with water. All he could smell was grease and burning hair. Through the vapor he could see a flame shaped like Kurt stiffened inside the Cadillac. That was the last thing Ron saw as the heat melted his eyeballs and extinguished his life.
dave hown
Sarah went to India. That’s what she always told people. In all the stupid get-to-know-you games where everyone is supposed to say something unique about himself, hers was always, “I lived in India for three years.”

And well-meaning people always asked, “And how did you like that?”

Her placid blue eyes would look off just above their right shoulder and she would say, “It was a good experience,” which is what she had learned to say when asked to describe something difficult and confusing to someone who didn’t care anyway. And they would nod as if that was an adequate response because it was really all the response they wanted.

Sometimes they would follow it up with, “Was your dad in the military?” and she would say, “No, it was just my dad’s business that moved us around a lot.” Sometimes she just said, “Yeah.”

She had lived in India and Texas and L.A. and now she was in Ridgeland, South Carolina, living on the edge of a saltwater river in a house her grandparents bought decades ago. She was staying with her aunt and uncle and her cousin Annie until her parents found a house. She remembered she had liked her aunt when they came for Christmas a few times when Sarah was younger, but, for the most part, they were strangers
to her. Sarah supposed that South Carolina was her home when people asked because she was born there and had aunts and uncles and cousins there, but the Spanish moss hanging from the trees and the white, waxy magnolias didn’t bring a feeling of familiarity. Nothing really did that. Her dad told her that people who moved around a lot were well-rounded individuals and good at making friends. Her dad also said they would stop moving some day.

2

Sarah pulled out a navy blue address book from her suitcase and flipped through the pages. She saw addresses and phone numbers from India and Texas and California, but she knew she’d never use them. It was just part of the ceremony of moving away.

The people she didn’t really know yet would say, “You’re moving? Already? You just got here. Well, here, let me give you my address. Keep in touch.”

And they smiled while they said it, but something inside her would always feel uncomfortable and hot and strained as they wrote in her navy blue book and when it was over she would feel tired and she would hope no one else would try to be kind because it always made her so tired.

A few reckless, impulsive times she had dialed one of the telephone entries in her book. She would fill up with a strange excitement at the thought of talking to someone as a friend, of asking and being asked genuine questions, and for a few moments she would almost believe it. So she would pick up the receiver and dial, but always, just before the last digit, the play would run through her head.

“Hello?” Let’s say it was Becky from Texas.

“Hi, is Becky there?” Sarah would nervously fidget with the address book or a loose thread on her pants. And she would always be pacing.

“This is Becky.”

“Hi, Becky. This is Sarah.” Then nothing. There would be a pause and Sarah would hear maybe a weather forecaster’s voice floating in the background.

“Um . . . Sarah Robbins,” she would stammer as the blood flooded to her cheeks.

“. . . Oh . . . uh . . . Sarah! Hi, how are you?”

And that was when she got tired, when she heard the tension in the girl’s voice and could even see the polite, forced smile as she tried to
think of the right questions to ask. She could even hear her after she hung up the phone, talking in the kitchen to her mother.

"Becky, who was that?"

"This girl named Sarah Robbins. Her family moved a couple months ago. Do you remember?"

And Becky's mother would scrunch up her face and look up to the ceiling and then shrug her shoulders and continue peeling potatoes.

"Were you very good friends with her?"

"Um . . . She was nice."

Sarah slumped down in the far corner of an old booth at Mudcat's Diner observing the new arrivals. Annie had overlooked Sarah's reluctance and dragged her out of the house insisting that meeting new people would be fun. Sarah had her doubts. The plastic covering on her seat was in the process of disintegrating and the rough edges rubbed against the back of her legs. Annie had left her seat next to Sarah to mingle with the rest of the group.

Annie was easy with things. She was good at talking. She drew people in with her words and intense, bright eyes.

"Like one of those Sirens in the Odyssey," Sarah thought. "The Sirens probably had beautiful hair flowing down beautifully feminine shoulders too."

Sarah watched a boy walk confidently into the diner and immediately approach the group, which had been slowly gathering for the past fifteen minutes. Sarah watched him go from one person to the next, meeting them and then carrying on a perfectly appropriate three-minute conversation before moving on. Annie was talking, but Sarah wasn't paying attention. She was vaguely aware that she was being introduced to the group and Annie was making some reference to India. Sarah uncomfortably smiled at the listeners as if to confirm whatever Annie had just told them.

She suddenly realized the boy had exited a conversation and was making his way to her corner booth. She involuntarily shifted her legs across the rough seat. Her breath shortened and she turned to stare out the wall-length window at the drizzling summer rain, pretending not to see his intimidating figure in her peripheral vision.

"I'm Adam. What's your name?" he said as he plopped down across from her as if she were an old friend. Sarah knew there was no question
in his mind whether Sarah, or anyone else for that matter, wanted to have a conversation with him and even share their booth with him. He had never encountered an exception and his ease mocked her discomfort.

His question was simple, but apparently overwhelming because Sarah couldn't speak. She mumbled something in response to his few polite questions and then sunk further down in her seat as he touched her elbow with a "Well, it was nice to meet you," and moved on to the next person, which happened to be Annie still jabbering in the neighboring booth.

"So natural," she thought, while she mentally crucified herself for the completely forgettable first impression she had just made. She let all her air out with one frustrated huff. "Why should this time be any different?" She watched him the rest of the night as the newcomers of summer were introduced to the regulars. And she envied everyone who felt his equal. The chief offender, of course, was her own flesh and blood, her cousin Annie.

4

After they got back from the party, Sarah tried to escape off to the marsh behind the house to breathe, but Annie accompanied her without an invitation. Once each month, during spring tide, the river receded and left a long stretch of marsh naked and muggy. Annie plopped herself down next to Sarah and they watched fiddler crabs run in and out of the sandy black mud while Annie effortlessly carried the conversation. Sarah admired and hated her ability at the same time. It was undeniably comfortable around Annie, not like around other people when awkward silences hung in the air and everything felt so forced. They tried too hard. But as the two oddly paired cousins sat together, Sarah didn't try and Annie didn't have to.

"So what'd ya think of the party?" Annie asked as they settled down in between the wildly positioned weeds. A few random raindrops were still falling.

Sarah shrugged.

"Don't you hate those stupid get-to-know-you games?" Annie laughed.

"Yeah," she mumbled. "I do." She absently scanned the horizon and the slow pace of the river.

After a dozen more attempts at trying to get her cousin to talk, even Annie began to feel a slight challenge. She shifted her position on
the ground and watched a floating branch passing by out on the river. She thought hard until she found something and began again. "And what I really hated was when they had us all go around and say a memory cue to help people remember our name. Man, I couldn't think of anything." She turned to Sarah for a response.

But the summer humidity was pushing down too hard and Sarah suddenly jumped up and bounded across the marsh, stomping pointlessly on as many fiddler crabs as she could. Silhouetted against the fading sky, trampling through the weedy marsh, Sarah looked rough, exasperated. And Annie, for maybe the first time in her life, felt inadequate for the situation.

"Sarah," she called, her smile fading, "what are you doing?"

Suddenly Sarah stopped, spun around, and shouted across the marsh, her voice muffled by the humidity, "I don't CARE if anyone remembers my name! I couldn't care less if ANYONE EVER remembers my name!"

That night was almost awkward at dinner. Nothing could ever really be awkward with Annie, but for once Annie hadn't known what to say out on the marsh.

Annie's mother set down a plate of biscuits next to the greasy fried chicken she was famous for. The table was loaded and Sarah wondered when her aunt would stop bringing out steamy dishes. Sarah had realized soon after she came to Ridgeland that it was a Southern thing, this mass amount of food at every meal. Apparently, it was a point of pride with every Southern cook. She didn't understand it, coming from a world of microwaveable dinners, but she liked it. Sometimes her aunt's frequent stomachaches prevented her from making dinner, but she always apologized profusely and went on and on about not being a decent hostess.

Her face was always pink, permanently tinted, perhaps, by her pots of green beans and black-eyed peas through all those years of cooking luscious Southern meals. She also never quite quit talking and her abundant questions about the party caused Annie to become quieter than usual, while Sarah consumed herself with the movement of the brilliant beta fish swimming around the plant bowl. Finally, the focus of the questions shifted and Annie and her mother carried on in their usual, pleasant manner, joking and laughing and thoroughly enjoying each other's company. They talked about the preparations for the upcoming crab boil, the leather sandals Annie had just purchased, and the stomachaches Sarah's aunt seemed to never be
rid of. As soon as Sarah felt she had stayed long enough to avoid any pleas for her to stay longer, she excused herself from the table and left them laughing together in the dining room.

Sarah stood awkwardly next to the piano, not quite sure what to do with her hands. It was a late Tuesday afternoon. Her uncle was working and Annie was at volleyball practice. Her aunt was playing the piano, and when Sarah walked through the living room to get a drink in the kitchen, her aunt had asked her to come and sing with her. Sarah tried to refuse, but her aunt seemed so oblivious to any awkwardness inherent in the situation that quite a bit of the awkwardness Sarah was feeling seemed to dissipate. Her aunt swung into “Moon River” and her low alto voice was full and calming. Sarah began singing softly, lips barely moving. She cringed and waited for her aunt to look over and evaluate her poor posture or deliver a reprimand to sing louder. She always got that. “Stop singing like a mouse! What are you afraid of? Just shout it out!” and Sarah would try and fail and get hot inside as everyone gathered around and tried to give her singing tips. “It’s all about support from the diaphragm.” How many times she had heard that!

But as they sang together through “All the Things You Are” and “When I Fall in Love,” Sarah’s aunt never once stopped to critique so Sarah forgot about her volume and posture. As they sang, a gentle smile tugged at the corner of the older woman’s mouth and Sarah wondered if the light reflecting off her glasses looked a little more like a tear. Sarah listened to the words and the harmony her aunt filled in around her soft soprano, and, as the last note faded, Sarah was vaguely aware that her voice had grown almost loud enough to match her aunt’s.

Sarah threw Annie’s bedroom door open and then threw in the words, “Adam called for you,” as fast as she could before whipping around to return back down the hallway. She thought she heard Annie say something but decided to ignore it as she headed back to her room.

She sat down at her desk and began her reading assignment: A Tale of Two Cities. She realized after three pages that she hadn’t understood a word and determinedly slammed the book open flat against the desk and bore into the sentences with her eyes.
It wasn’t really Adam. It wasn’t really the boy who came last night. It wasn’t really even the other five people who’d been by in the last forty-eight hours. It was why Annie possessed the innate ability to connect and Sarah didn’t and it was why Sarah knew it would always be that way.

Then came the sound of the doorbell, then the creaking screen, then her aunt’s cheerful Southern greeting, and then . . . Adam’s voice, like all the other voices before, comfortable and excited.

Something rose up through her and stopped at her throat. It was tight and it hurt and she couldn’t swallow as the sound of a third voice, Annie’s, floated down the hallway intermixed with Adam’s laughter. She had said something funny. Annie had said something perfectly funny.

She slid her chair over to the window and watched the mosquitoes buzzing outside. The trees and the river looked beautiful from where she sat in the air-conditioned house, but she knew its deception. The stifling heat and suffocating humidity would drown anyone who stepped outside. Sarah could almost feel it through the window. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe.

Adam and Annie walked outside and into Sarah’s view. Sarah watched the circle of fog on the glass expand and contract in front of her mouth. Annie climbed into Adam’s car and they drove away, neither of them noticing her face in the window.

Sarah’s aunt looked beautiful under the big live oak trees. She just did, beautiful in a motherly way. She was spreading newspaper over three wooden picnic tables in preparation for the crab boil. Sarah was watching from the window. She had gone out earlier to help shuck the corn alongside her aunt, but the mosquitoes had eaten her alive in a matter of seconds, so she was instructed to go inside and apply calamine while the South Carolina “natives” got everything ready. They had been talking about the crab boil for days now and Sarah couldn’t repress her curiosity and even excitement about this family tradition that had never been a tradition for her. Her dad said it was better than Christmas.

Unknown and semiknown relatives slowly gathered to the open yard in between the house and the river. The men were filling up the huge metal pot positioned over the stove while the women brought out cut sausages and corn on the cob. Sarah watched the sun going down behind the river and decided the stinging bugs had reduced their numbers sufficiently for her to
attempt another outing. As she pushed through the screen door to the back porch, she was met by her aunt coming inside, one hand over her abdomen.

“What’s wrong?” Sarah asked as her aunt swept past her into the kitchen.

“Oh, nothin’,” she called back over her shoulder with her same easy smile. “Just these stomachaches. They come and go, usually at the worst times. I’m fine. Just goin’ to lay down for a second.”

Sarah knew there wasn’t much she could do for a sick adult who refused to admit she was sick, so she continued out to the backyard to watch the lively chaos up close. She observed with a smile that the men were decidedly more excited about the live blue crabs in their wooden crates than the children, although all took turns sticking a small twig in the box and watching it break under the crushing power of the claws. The kids would squeal and the men would jump but pretend not to. Sarah peeked over the edge of the crate in time to see one crab grab hold of another crab’s claw and snap it in half. She looked at the exposed gray flesh as the injured crab sunk out of sight beneath the crawling crustaceans. She wondered if it hurt.

Annie walked up to the boiling pot and stole a piece of sausage. She shoved half of it at Sarah and dared her to eat it. A man called LeGrand, apparently Sarah’s great uncle, had dumped an entire bottle of cayenne pepper into the pot to spice things up.

“You gotta know how to flavor it,” she had heard the old men discussing earlier. “That’s what makes all the difference.”

As Sarah bit into it, her eyes began watering and the numbness started to spread to her cheeks and the inside of her lips. Conscious of the eyes upon her, she determinedly ate all of it, trying very hard to act as if she was capable of eating another piece if so called upon.

“Oooh, just like a born and bred crab-eater!” Annie announced loudly. “Mom should’ve seen it.”

Once Sarah could feel her mouth again she said, “Your mom went inside to lay down. She said she had a stomachache.”

“Oh, yeah. She gets these stomachaches lately. Don’t really know what they’re from, but they go away after awhile and she’s good as new.”

“Don’t stick yer fingers in there now. They’ll come right off, ya hear!” the old men warned the little boys who would never have thought about placing their chubby, pink fingers into the mess of vicious saltwater creatures, who sometimes fell to attacking each other while they waited for their imminent death.
Sarah was a quiet but contented observer of all the latent excitement in the humid air. She loved the accent, the slowness, the hospitality of the distantly related Southerners surrounding her.

For the evening’s climax, the men opened the wooden crate with adolescent joy and dumped the frantic crabs into the boiling pot. They struggled silently for a while and then just floated in and among the reddening shrimp and spices. The cooking was timed to perfection, and then the whole lot of boiled sea life was drained and dumped in large piles over the news-covered tables.

A second cousin once removed, Eugene, took great pleasure in showing Sarah how to thrust her thumbs into the middle of the crab’s shell, right between the eyes, and rip back the top to expose the sweet meat inside. There was something disgusting and utterly splendid about it all to Sarah. She ate with fervor and imagined an awakening inside her, true Southern blood flowing a little more freely through her veins.

When she couldn’t eat anymore, she pushed back from the table and surveyed the carnage. Piles of crab and shrimp shells, empty cobs, and sausage skin sat in front of each eater. The reddish-haired man next to her, either a relative or a neighbor, glanced over and declared for the rest of the group to hear, “Well, looky there! Not a bad pile for an India girl. Not bad at all.”

Sarah beamed and felt her face getting red, partly from the spices, but mostly from something else and, in spite of her swollen stomach, she reached out for another crab.

“What?” Sarah looked up in confusion. Cancer. She’d heard the word cancer.

“They’re all at the hospital. She was having those stomachaches and finally went in and they found a tumor. She has a two percent chance of surviving according to one of the doctors. The other three say there’s no way.”

The neighbor lady, possibly a relative (it seemed, last night, that all of Ridgeland was somehow related to her), kept talking as if the talking would help things, but Sarah just stared at a spot on the kitchen wallpaper that was tearing away from the ceiling. The paint was a baby blue underneath. The scent of spicy crab and shrimp still permeated the room from the night before.
“She should be around a couple more years if she starts heavy Chemo,” the concerned neighbor continued. “I just feel so awful about the whole thing. It was just so sudden . . .”

After that, the lady went on forever. The neighbor had accosted Sarah as she walked up the sidewalk to the back door and just spilled everything out before Sarah had a chance to realize that she was being told her aunt had cancer.

“My aunt is going to have Chemo therapy and she will lose her hair.” For some reason, the hair was all Sarah could think of. She kept trying to picture her aunt without any. As the woman continued on with her heartfelt sympathies, Sarah mentally compared it to what it must be like to change an elderly person’s diaper—painfully undignified.

The front screen slamming shut behind someone interrupted Sarah’s Pythagorean theorem exercises. She heard the voices of her cousins talking in the other room and then the door shut again and things were quiet. A few minutes later, banging noises came from the kitchen. Sarah got up and hesitantly walked into the kitchen. Annie turned around with a large smile on her face and a fork in one hand.

“Do you know how to make guacamole? Adam said he loves guacamole and I have no idea how to make it.”

Sarah looked over towards the table at a half smashed avocado, its green and yellow guts clinging to the sides of a bowl.

“So . . . how’s your mom doin’?”

“Isn’t there some kind of mix you’re supposed to use? I can’t find it.”

Annie was attacking the contents of the cupboard with such force that Sarah thought it would come off of the wall. When Annie saw her staring she casually said, “They said we have another two years. She’ll be here for at least one more Christmas. It’s not like I’m losing her right away. I’m staying in school and everything. She’ll probably even be around for graduation . . . .I mean, of course, I wanted my mom to be there for my wedding and my first kid and everything, but . . .”

Annie might as well have been lamenting the fact that a sweater had shrunk in the drier; the emotion just wasn’t right. She sounded, to Sarah, like she was reading a script from a play and doing a bad job of it.
"So Adam asked me if I knew how to make guacamole. I guess he really likes it. You know how to make it, don't you?"

Something seemed wrong with making a chip dip when her aunt was just diagnosed with cancer, but there was a frantic, pleading look in Annie's eyes that Sarah had never seen before.

"Sure," she said as she reached into the next cupboard and brought out Produce Partner's Great Guacamole mix. She brought it over to the table.

"Just finish mashing it up while I get the mix ready."

Annie started to stab at the avocado with her fork and then began laughing again. It was a strange laugh, choked or muffled, not like her normal laugh that was always free and uninhibited and filled a house.

"Is it supposed to be this hard?"

Sarah looked over at it and took a couple stabs herself. She bent down and smelt the acidic scent of premature produce.

"Well, maybe it's not quite ripe? Let's try another one," Sarah suggested. She became aware of the distinct feeling that she was talking to a child, being careful not to disappoint her. The fate of the whole world suddenly rested squarely on the shoulders of the unripe avocado.

"This is the only one I have. I just bought one on my way home today." Annie's smile was fading.

"Well, I'll pick another one up tomorrow."

"No! I have to . . . I mean, I want to make it now. This one will work," Annie said as she tried in vain to control her rising voice. She picked up the fork and began stabbing away again. Sarah stood silent on the cold kitchen floor for what seemed like a long time.

Annie's head bent forward and the fork dropped to the floor. She crumpled into a chair as her arm fell against the messy bowl, sliding it across the table. Sarah started for her. She felt like she should touch her but didn't know how. Standing there while Annie cried was awkward, but leaving the room didn't feel right either. After three minutes or so, Annie raised her red, streaked face. She apologized as she left the kitchen and headed down the hall to her room.

"We'll make guacamole tomorrow," she said.

The next few days were strange. Adam stopped coming over, probably because he, like Sarah, had no idea what to do. Sarah didn't blame
him, but still found herself hoping, for Annie’s sake, that he would come to see her or at least call. Annie acted differently, of course. She always held on to herself, but it was a delicate balancing act to Sarah.

One night, a couple days after her aunt had begun Chemo, Sarah woke at 1:30 in the morning. It took her fuzzy mind a second to identify the sound that had woken her. Quiet sobbing was coming from Annie’s bedroom. Sarah lay on her bed staring up at the ceiling as the yellow porch light shone through the window. She listened to the sound for a few minutes and turned to watch the giant bugs flying around the light in the hot summer night outside. Her throat got tight again. Tears ran down her cheeks and landed on her pillow.

It was hard for Sarah to slowly pull back the blanket and walk down the hall to Annie’s room. She felt like an intruder, trespassing into a private world, not knowing if there would be a place for her when she got there.

Annie was on the floor, face buried in the mattress. Sarah stood still in the darkened room for a minute and watched the movement and rhythm of Annie’s childlike shoulders as they rose and fell with her sobs. Finally, she reached out and touched Annie’s arm.

Annie immediately whirled around and began wiping her face as she said a little too quickly, “Oh, Sarah! You scared me. What’s up? Whaddaya need?”

Sarah felt the power of the temptation to just let Annie carry it as usual. Annie was the one good with words. Annie had other friends and people to lean on. She would be fine. Sarah knew Annie would let her leave right then if she wanted, both pretending, and both knowing it.

Instead, she looked at her cousin, straight in those intensely bright but reddened eyes. Now it was Annie’s turn to make a decision and Sarah was waiting for her to make it. Both cousins stood facing each other . . . hesitating . . . awkward. Even though the room was dark, Sarah saw it happen. Annie’s face lost the smile and her chin began to quiver. They both bent down to the edge of the bed. Annie slowly crumpled down onto Sarah’s lap and cried for a long time. Sarah felt the dampness of the tears spreading out over the leg of her pajama pants. Her face trembled, but she was very still, afraid something would break if she moved.

After a while, Annie turned to look up at her. The sound of the buzzing mosquitoes outside filled up the room.

“Will you tell me about India?”
Sarah’s usual, preconstructed answer came to the tip of her tongue, but then it stopped. She sat for a moment on the bed while Annie looked at her and waited. Annie’s eyes had the same intensity Sarah had always seen in them, but they were more searching and somehow more familiar than before.

Still being careful not to move, Sarah told Annie about India until she was stopped by the sound of slow, heavy breathing.
andrew ballsteadt
“Answering the phone today, are we?” Julia asks in a sarcastic tone. “Absolutely, between the hours of eleven and twelve anyway. ‘Lucy’ starts at noon though, so then the phone comes off the hook.” “Are you still in bed?” “Where else?” I can hear Julia clicking her tongue and I can see her shaking her head in pseudo-disappointment. “Oh, like you aren’t!” I shoot back defensively. “As a matter of fact, I’m not,” Julia proclaims, brimming with feigned pride. “I made it all the way out to the couch by ten-thirty this morning.” I try to lift my free arm out from under my enormous down comforter in order to clap for her grand accomplishment, but somewhere in the middle of my mocking gesture, it feels too heavy. I am powerless to stop it from dropping back to my side. “Forgive me if I don’t bound out of bed and do the dance of joy; I’m a little tired today. So, what’s up, Juj?” I try to sound enthusiastic about this morning’s conversation, although I know it will be the same as it was yesterday and the day before yesterday and the day before that. “Well, not much really. I woke up super hungry and . . .”
“Yahoo!” I interrupt. “Waking up hungry is the best. Remind me again what hungry feels like.”

“Well, usually I’d be jumping for joy too, but I’m fasting today for a blood draw this afternoon. The good doctor said that if I ate anything this time, he’d be forced to keep me overnight under constant supervision. He says that I purposely keep trying to sabotage the test results. As if!” Julia says in her best Clueless voice. I never get tired of that impersonation; it’s one of those timeless things, like Disneyland and The Beatles.

“Oh, hey, before I forget,” I begin, sounding more excited than usual, “I found the funniest picture from Girl Scouts stuffed in an old notebook. We’re at the beach house and everyone is wearing their tiny swimsuits and I’m dressed in, like, full body armor . . . those faded olive green jeans I used to have and a long sleeve shirt. But get this, I’m carrying an umbrella.”

“And you wonder why I used to make fun of you so much. You were such a freak when you moved here. Well, you still are really. Wasn’t that the weekend that we made Melanie wear her underwear on the outside of her clothes?” The mental picture that came back to me made me start to chuckle and Juj could never resist playing for a laugh. “I think that was also the time we spray painted our . . .”

And so we started to play the memory game for the thousandth time because sometimes, that’s all we’ve got. And probably all we’ll ever have, I think to myself. As Juj rambles on about the ‘old days,’ I have trouble focusing. I miss seeing Juj tell these stories face to face. Her eyes are so big and expressive, her head softly shakes back and forth when she laughs, her bouncy hair always in that same disheveled bob. I remind myself for the thirtieth time that she doesn’t have hair anymore, but somehow Julia is not Julia without that coarse brown hair. Some days I can hardly remember what she looks like. I can’t believe it when I remember that the last time I saw her she was visiting me at school from a couple hundred miles away. Now she is just a baseball diamond and a catwalk away and they won’t let us get closer than a phone call. Mom used to say “life is never fair” when I was a kid, but I think that if she’d known how unfair it would turn out, she might never have said it. It doesn’t matter anymore; I don’t need anyone to tell me of the inequities of life. I want out as it is.

“. . . that was just the best,” Juj chuckles as she concludes her reminiscences. “Hey, Em, I’ve gotta go. I didn’t realize what time it was. I’ve got a date with the needle.”
“Give him my regards. You know what . . . don’t. I’ll see him soon enough myself.”

“Okay, b . . . later.” Juj tries to cover her slip, but I know what she was going to say. She doesn’t want to be the one to break our no-goodbyes pact. She doesn’t want to remember that there are such things as goodbyes, especially not permanent ones.

“Hello.”

“Hey you.”

“How in the heck are you, Juj? I was just going to call you, but . . .”

“Sure you were, Em. Do you even know how to dial on a touch-tone phone? You know my Mom saw your Mom at the store yesterday. Your Mom is spreading this horrible rumor that you actually got out of bed this week. I just thought that I should let you know, so that you can stop this before it gets out of hand.”

“Cute. Real cute. Not only did I get out of bed, but Wahpidi and I went for a brief stroll around the cul-de-sac. I wanted to stay out longer but Wahpidi was just getting so tired. I was heading for the catwalk to revisit our hobo days, but he practically begged me to turn around.”

“So you’re still referring to your wheelchair as if it were a living thing? And you wonder why they make you go to therapy, you freak.” I love it when she calls me that, it feels like old times.

“Oh, you should talk, you’re the one who announced in your Homecoming speech that you were delivered to your parents by an alien spaceship from the Planet Vulcan. You were wearing the most hideous lime green excuse-for-a-dress I’ve ever seen.” My grin is getting wider and wider as I remember how funny she looked next to the other girls in their maroon, navy, and black formals. “And anyway,” I continue, “you were the one who came up with the hobo idea.” We both laugh for a few minutes, thinking about how much trouble we got into for dropping all that garbage in the catwalk and pretending we were homeless. You just don’t mess with the richest-city-per-capita-in-California like that, unless you want to become eleven-year-old criminals. We never did clear out everything; we left some miscellaneous booty underneath one of the loose bricks, promising to come back periodically and maybe even bring our kids sometime to tell them about our hellion days. It seems farther away now than it did when I drove cross-country for college. And the days of making promises seem even farther.
Okay, so maybe I came up with the garbage caper. But at least I wasn’t the one who burned the lamp shade in that motel room, lit Ryan’s pine tree on fire, and burned all the plastic forks at Girl Scout camp, you pyro! And come to think of it, I never stapled my hair to the top of my head so that it would stay ratted during the ’80s dance either.”

“You know that would’ve worked, if...” I am interrupted by my alarm clanging from across the room.

“Time for your meds, is it?” Juj knows it well enough.

“Yeah, it’s time to pick my poison.”

“Go take your Prozac, you need it.” She always tries to play it off, but we both know it’s true. I turn my head and look at the bright orange buffet that hugs my bedside. Pick my poison, indeed. I ceremoniously breathe out before swallowing my handful of pills. I flip on the TV to check the Sports Center highlights while I wait for my pain pills to kick in. When the umps make a bad call, I shout at the television, imagining that I can change the outcome. Really, I don’t even think I can change the outcome of my own life. But I never give up, on the Red Sox at least.

“I thought that we agreed that you’d never sing in my presence again,” I laughingly respond, when she finally finishes her off-key “and many more.”

“So, tell me, what exciting things do you have planned to celebrate the big one-nine?” Juj asks with genuine excitement in her voice.

“Oh, well, where do I start? First, I thought I’d do some resting and then some TV watching and then, just for a change, I’ll probably rest some more. And if I get really ambitious I might just go downstairs to watch the Laker game so that I can actually read the score off the bigger screen.”

“Whew, it sounds like your day is booked solid. Do you want me to get off the phone now so that you can get started?”

I pause for a while, pretending that I’m really giving it some thought. “Well, since it’s ‘Andy Griffith’ hour, I guess we can talk for a little while.”
“So guess what I’m having my Mom drop off at your house today?” Juj asks, sounding like she can hardly wait for my guess before blurt ing the answer out.

“Well, let’s see, it is my birthday and,” I slowly begin, trying to drag out the suspense as long as possible, “often on birthdays people tend to . . .”

“Okay, okay, I can’t take it anymore. Just let me tell you,” Juj finally interrupts. Juj can never keep anything to herself for longer than a couple of minutes. She doesn’t know what secrets are. “I looked all over my room; well actually, my mom looked all over my room until I finally found your official birthday hat. You know the one Christine and I made for you for our special ’70s flashback birthday celebration? Do you remember which . . .”

“Of course I remember. Are you kidding? That was the best birthday ever. Didn’t it say ‘Spank Me’ on it? I remember that one lady at Olive Garden who came up to me and said ‘Do they call you Spanky?’ and we all just sat there like ‘what?!’ That was just the best night ever.” I can’t help smiling as I remember the details of my sixteenth birthday. I remember how perfect the night was. I thought that if I never had another birthday that great again, the memories of that night would be enough. I really believed that once.

“Yeah, dinner was great, but the Land of the Lounge Lizards was even better. We finally forced you to go to a dance to find out how much fun they were, and every time you moved, the pin holding up your bell bottoms came popping out.” I can hear Julia huffing as she tries to stop laughing. As our laughter winds down, we ease into a calm silence.

“Em, when my T-cell counts get a little higher, promise me that we’ll go out and celebrate and you’ll wear your birthday hat.” Juj has a quiet hopefulness in her voice, not her usual blatant defiance.

“I promise,” I say, hoping that she will believe me.

“Hello.”

“What’s up, girl?” Juj asks, leaving little time for an answer before continuing, “Have you been keeping your phone unplugged or what?! I’ve been trying to call you for like ten days. I really needed to talk.” A pang of remorse shoots through my body when Juj says those words. She hardly ever wants to talk and I promised myself I would always be there when she did.
“Sorry. Last week was pretty bad and you know me, always trying to cut myself off from the human race whenever I’m feeling crappy.” I have to use words like ‘crappy’ because Juj can’t stand ‘suicidal.’ Perennial optimism is her creed; I think how much like my Mom she is.

“Anything in particular happen, or just general badness?” Juj asks, probably praying that I don’t get too somber all at once.

“Actually it all started out kind of funny. I went in for my draw on Tuesday morning and Verna wasn’t there . . . ”

“I thought Verna worked every morning.”

“I know, so did I. But they have this new girl, still wet behind the ears. Usually I won’t let anyone touch my veins but Big-V, except the good doctor said I had to get the blood taken by noon, so I was trapped. Anyway, she is sticking around in my arm and she says that she’s sorry, but they’re all collapsed.”

“Even your money vein?”

“Yep, even my beautiful money vein. So finally, she gets out this little pump thing with a needle attached and sticks it into the top of my hand and starts pumping.”

“Ow! That is harsh.”

“I got my payback though. It hurt so much and it just kept throbbing as she kept pumping and the room started spinning and the next thing I knew I was staring at her shoes and yacking my guts out.”

“No way.” Juj starts to laugh and I can hear her head gently hitting the phone. “You puked on the new girl.”

“All over her little, white Keds.”

“Now tell me again how a week that starts out like that could get bad.”

“Well, the blood work came back: IgM skyrocketed, IgG plummeted.” Julia is silent, which hardly ever happens. I think she realizes that our joyous reunion has just been pushed back indefinitely. I hope she does anyway, because that’s not something I can tell her right now.

“That sucks,” she finally says. The resignation in her voice makes me want to cry. Juj was not meant for sadness like this. Juj was not meant for any kind of sadness. I suddenly flashback to that picture from when she was named ‘Spartan of the Year.’ Nate and Michael were hoisting her up on their shoulders and we were all standing around looking up at her in awe.

“As long as we’re sharing bad news, I might as well tell you that the chemo was a bust.” This quiet statement abruptly shakes me out of my
memory. I know the words but I can't seem to line them up in my mind. I feel the blood rush out of my hands, as the phone slides down my cheek. I quickly grab for the phone; I feel like I have to hold on to something. I try to think of something funny to say. We both like to laugh when we should cry. All I can think is how scared she must be. Juj has so much fear of death and I have so much fear of life. I always think that together we should be able to get through anything, but somehow we just end up in silence, lost in uncertainty. I cannot even see her face.

"Remember what it used to be like?" I finally begin to speak.

"When?" Julia wonders, anticipating what memory lane we will stroll down today.

"When we were alive."
andrew ballsteadt
Sixty-Four Years

Jessica Scoville

In the spring Grampa used to drag his chaise lounge onto the back lawn for his naps. This spring the chaise lounge was empty, standing in the middle of the grass. I walked up the driveway past the chaise to the back door and pushed it open.

"Grampa?" I called.

"'Ello," Grampa said.

I put my jacket over a chair in the kitchen and walked to the back room. Grampa was sitting on the old leather couch trying to pull on his left shoe. His mass of white hair stuck in different directions and his sharp blue eyes peered out from underneath a curl that was dangling down his forehead. He was wearing a blue mechanic jumpsuit with his name, "Marv," embroidered above the right breast pocket. A red cotton tie was slung loosely around his neck. He smiled at me.

"Well, Jessica," he said, patting the couch next to him.

I sat down and gave him a hug. He smelled of peanut butter and car oil. I looked down at his feet. They were swollen to nearly twice the normal size. His toes were like marbles stuck on the end of a balloon. As I watched, he shoved his right foot into the other shoe, grimacing. He tied the laces loosely and grabbed onto my shoulder as he stood up. He turned, picked up his suit coat, and put his arms into the sleeves.

"How about a little walk?" Grampa asked. I nodded.
It was only a few blocks to the nursing home where Grama lived, but it took the two of us nearly a half an hour to walk there. I held Grampa's rough hand in mine, smoothing over the knuckles and joints with the tips of my fingers. Grampa grunted as each foot hit the ground.

The doors of the nursing home slid open for us and we walked past the front desk, taking our time.

"Sir? Would you like a wheelchair?" the receptionist asked.

Grampa paused long enough to raise his hand in a polite decline and continued walking down the hall. Our footsteps echoed on the linoleum floor as we walked into Grama's room. She looked up from the window and smiled.

"Ethel," Grampa said when he reached the side of her bed. He took her hand and pressed it to his cheek. He closed his eyes and stood in silence for a moment.

"How about a little walk?" Grampa asked. Grama nodded. We helped Grama into her wheelchair and tucked the red afghan from her bed around her legs.

"I'll drive," Grampa said. I stepped back from the chair and Grampa took the handles. He pushed her slowly out of the room, leaning on the back of the chair for support. His breaths were deep and heavy, gasping for air. I followed behind as Grampa pushed Grama down the sidewalk to the roses and gardenias. Grampa reached out and cupped a pink gardenia in his hands, pulling it closer for Grama to smell. She bent her head forward and buried her nose in the petals, smiling.

The gardenias had already wilted before Grama left the nursing home again. We brought her home to her living room for the afternoon. She sat near the bookcase in her wheelchair, fussing with the edge of the afghan on her lap.

"Where's Grampa?" Grama asked.

"Still getting dressed," my pa answered. Grampa's heart was failing. Blood and fluid had pooled in his legs and feet making it almost impossible for him to put on shoes or get dressed. Diabetes left him too weak to walk to the nursing home to visit Grama. They hadn't seen each other in months.

The door to the bedroom opened and Grampa shuffled out. He was wearing a wrinkled suit and a tie that I had never seen before. His
back was curved and he looked at the floor as he came into the room. His feet were shoved uncomfortably into a pair of dress loafers and the laces hung loosely at the sides.

"Let me get you a chair, Dad," my pa said, getting up from his seat near the wall. Grampa waved him away with his hand and moved slowly toward Grama. He stopped near her wheelchair and moved his eyes along the length of the room. He smiled, but his mouth was slack, his lips chapped, and his breath went in and out in quick, deep rasps. He lifted one hand, put it on the back of the wheelchair, and kissed Grama. The kiss was long; I felt like a voyeur and looked away.

After at least a minute, Grampa looked up and said proudly, "We didn't even have to come up for breath."

It was already winter before we saw them again. The chaise lounge in the backyard was frozen into the snow. My pa and I walked up the cement driveway; Pa pushed open the back door and I followed him onto the porch. Pa knocked softly on the peeling wood of the kitchen door. I stood behind him, looking at the yellow insulation dripping out from underneath the eaves. No one answered. Pa knocked again and then pushed the door open. Grampa was sitting at the kitchen table in his underwear, sucking brownish-colored water out of a mason jar with a straw. There were two purple grapes sitting on a little china plate next to the jar of water.

Pa walked over, "Hello Dad," he said, putting his hand on Grampa's back. Grampa looked up at him with his glassy blue eyes. "Oh hello," Grampa said and turned his head back down toward the table.

"That is quite a big ouch," my pa said, pointing at Grampa's left hand bound up in a red bandana, soaked with blood and pus.

"Does it hurt much?" Pa asked.

"No, not unless it bumps something, then yowee!" Grampa said, peeling back the bandana to show a brown crusted ulcer the size of a ping-pong ball.

"Would you like to say a prayer over supper with me?" Grampa asked. Pa and I nodded.

Grampa lifted a grape off his plate and put it in his mouth.

"Father," Grampa said, "I thank thee for the grape in my belly, for the grape in my mouth, and for the grape still on my plate."
He opened his eyes and lifted a trembling hand to put the last grape in his mouth. We watched as he chewed. He swallowed, wincing, and took a long drink from the straw.

“Let me help you to bed, Dad,” Pa said. Grampa hung his head and didn’t answer. Pa put his arms around him and lifted him from the chair. Grampa didn’t protest as Pa carried him into the bedroom.

I sat at the kitchen table, tracing my finger along the familiar brown flowers in the formica. I looked around the kitchen, from the faded curtains above the window to the top of the mustard yellow fridge and the cookie jar in the shape of a cow. A calendar from 1978 hung on the wall with letters from grandchildren and pictures of smiling stick-people families attached to the bottom. Dishes were piled in the sink where Grama and I used to soak our hands in the hot, soapy water until they wrinkled up like prunes.

“Jess,” Pa said, “Come say goodbye.”

I pushed away from the table, scraping the metal chair across the floor, and walked into Grampa’s room. He lay on his side, hugging his shrunken legs to his chest. The pillow and sheets underneath him were soaked with blood—even a lock of his white hair was now a ruddy brown. He had stuffed a tuft of cotton up one of his nostrils to stop the bleeding. I wanted him to see me, but his eyes were closed and a small trail of drool ran from the corner of his mouth.

“I love you, Grampa,” I said, leaning against the side of his bed. “That is why we are here,” Grampa said without opening his eyes.

My pa wheeled Grama through the snow in the parking lot, up the sidewalk into the mortuary, and then right up to Grampa’s casket. Grampa’s lips had been stretched and his arms were pinned like straight sticks to his sides. The mortician had tamed his wild locks of hair by gelling them back away from his face.

Pa held Grama underneath her arms as she leaned over the edge of the casket and kissed Grampa on the forehead. She brushed back a few strands of his loose hair and sat down again.

My brother and I decided to visit Grama even though it was late. She hadn’t been too keen on living since Grampa had passed away, even
though autumn was her favorite season. While we stood in the doorway, she opened her eyes and smiled at us.

"How are you Grama?" I asked, walking to her and taking her hand in mine. The capillaries underneath her parchment-like skin had broken leaving red spots dotting her hands.

"I've been better," she said. I nodded.

"What did you do today, Grama?" my brother asked.

"I'm so tired. So tired," she said.

"A lot of therapy today?" my brother asked.

"I think I could sleep forever," Grama said.

"I think I could too," I said, laughing.

"Hmmm," she said, "Do you know what tomorrow is?" My brother and I shook our heads.

"Tomorrow is our anniversary."

"Whose anniversary?" I asked.

"Your Grampa and I have been married for sixty-four years tomorrow." She closed her eyes and let her head fall back on her pillow.

"Wow. Sixty-four years," my brother said.

"Tomorrow is our anniversary. Sixty-four years," Grama said, with her eyes closed.

"Maybe we should let you rest. We'll come back next week," I said.

Grama opened her eyes. She reached up, pulled my face down close to hers, and kissed me on the cheek. "Sixty-four years tomorrow," she said, twisting her wedding ring around her finger.

"We'll come again in a few days, Grama," my brother said.

"I love you Grama," I said. She had closed her eyes again. We started walking away but we turned back at the door. I blew her a kiss. She opened her eyes and smiled.

After a breakfast of hashbrowns and orange juice the next day, Grama settled back into her pillow and closed her eyes, as the nurse explained it. She didn't wake up again. After the phone call, I drove down to the little white house and parked by the curb. I walked along the driveway and into the backyard. The chaise lounge was still in Grampa's favorite spot underneath the elm tree. I climbed onto it and sat there with my legs sticking straight out in front of me, crying. They had been married sixty-four years today.
juCie deverich
So, Kant's talking about this empirical realism thing, right? Well, he makes a point of combining that with transcendental idealism using this new thing he came up with called, um, the transcendental unity of apperception. Pretty cool, huh?"

Oh, no, I think as we step into the grocery store, here we go. In case you couldn't figure it out from all that highbrow mumbo-jumbo, my husband is a philosophy major. Yep, that's right—not only does he read Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saint Augustine, and Husserl, but he enjoys reading them. And, lucky for me, he loves to talk about them too—constantly, in fact. He calls it pontificating. I call it intellectual diarrhea. Fortunately, I learned early on in our relationship that if I nod my head about every fourth sentence, add an occasional "uh-huh" when his verbal stream slows to a trickle, he doesn't even notice I'm not listening.

This is the technique I immediately employ after hearing the phrase "empirical realism," leaving his words to brush over my shoulder and float down the salad dressing aisle, where hopefully Paul Newman is more interested than I am. With that taken care of I'm left to focus on something much more important—where my grocery list ended up. As my hand wanders blindly around my purse, brushing against keys, melted chapstick, some still juicy a.b.c. gum, and a nail file, I wonder how Mary Poppins ever found anything in that bottomless carpet bag of hers. After examining three
or four different crumpled sheets of paper, I look up at Lane to give him
the intermittent head nod and notice a small white triangle poking out of
his breast pocket.

“Earth to Lane,” I say, yanking the grocery list from his pocket.
“I’ve been looking for that for the past five minutes. Look, Hon, I have a
ton to do tonight and I really just want to get through this. Do you think
you could focus for just a few minutes?”

He looks at me, startled. “Oops, sorry about that,” he says, smil­
ing sheepishly. “It’s just that I was still thinking about Kant and the whole
empirical realism thing. The guy had some great ideas. Every time I go to
that class I end up thinking about it for hours afterwards.”

I push a cart towards him.

“Well, actually,” he continues, absentmindedly fingering the handle
of the cart, “that’s not entirely true. There was that day that Dr. Pope
dressed up as a woman to demonstrate Kant’s belief about the discrepancy
between appearance and reality. I can honestly say I’ve tried as hard as pos­
able to never think about that class period again. Talk about a terrifyin­
g experience.”

“I know, I know. ‘Spandex is a privilege, not a right,’” I recite,
rolling my eyes and giving him a gentle push in an attempt to establish
some sort of forward momentum.

“Exactly,” he says as he begins walking toward the produce section.
“And that goes for everyone,” he adds, eyeing a portly woman clad in biker
shorts at the deli counter. I giggle, in spite of myself, and place my arm
through his.

“I suddenly feel inspired to knock sausage from our list,” I whisper.
“I second that motion,” he replies.

We continue toward the produce section and I double check the
list as we go.

“Do you remember what we needed canned artichoke hearts for?”
I ask.

Lane, however, is busy examining a green bean and doesn’t
respond.

I repeat the question, louder this time. Still no response. The cor­
er of my list begins to crinkle as the pressure between my thumb and
forefinger increases.

“What is it this time?” I ask, folding my arms tightly against my
chest. “The metaphysical qualities of linoleum?”
Lane looks up at me startled, dropping the green bean. "Oh, sorry," he says, grinning. "Actually, I was thinking about how all the ancient philosophers used to do brain push-ups by going around trying to find the essence of stuff. It wouldn't be a bad thing to try. So, what's the essence of a green bean?"

For a moment I wonder if black stretch pants, a turtleneck, and a beret wouldn't suit my husband better than the loose jeans, the t-shirt, and the baseball cap he's currently sporting. I also wonder if maybe he should be at Berkeley instead of UCLA. I mean, did he just ask me about the essence of a green bean?

"It's green. It's a bean. There's not much else to it. Let's get on with our shopping," I say, pulling him away from the produce and towards the meat section, hoping he'll feel less inspired by shrink-wrapped fish with eyes still intact.

"C'mon Brooke, there's a lot more to it than that," he says, refusing to follow my lead in the direction of the fish. "Socrates set up a whole method for determining the essence of an object. I'll explain it to you, and you can try it."

"Don't bother," I say, cutting him off. "I told you, I don't have time for stuff like this today. I have a ten page paper to write tonight. I just need to get the shopping done and get home. So do me a big favor and grab some of those beans you're so fascinated with and some milk, and meet me up front," I say, shoving a plastic veggie sack into his hands.

"Sorry," Lane responds, his arms dropping to his side. "I thought you liked talking about stuff like that."

"Yeah, well right now I have more important things to worry about," I retort. "And, all this theoretical bull doesn't get us much of anywhere."

Lane gives me a long, silent stare, then turns and begins slowly placing beans into the bag I gave him. Feeling guilty, I reach out to put my hand on his shoulder, but he steps forward, avoiding my touch. I quickly jerk my hand back.

I don't have time for this, I think as I grab the cart and head for the canned goods. It's his fault anyway, I add, bumping a tomato soup display as I round a corner.

Fortunately, I arrive at the front of the store in a much better mood having been able to finish without interruption and place a neat check next to each of the items on my list. Lane, who beat me there,
ke m s l e y

avoids eye contact and starts placing our items by the register. I walk up without a greeting and busy myself with reading the magazine headlines around us.

“That'll be $43.37,” the cashier informs us. Lane hands him our card. I start loading the groceries into the cart.

“Um . . . .,” the cashier begins after a moment, “Sir, I can’t take this card. It keeps coming up as ‘insufficient funds’”

My face feels warm and I give Lane a questioning look. He shrugs and asks the cashier to run the card again.

DECLINED.

I notice the man behind us in line rolling his eyes. The woman behind him is giving us an appraising look as if to determine whether we’re poverty stricken or just plain stupid. I quickly turn my gaze to the parking lot, trying to avoid their stares.

Lane, however, is unfazed. “Maybe could you try it one more time?” he asks. I groan inwardly.

DECLINED.

“I’m sorry, sir. We can hold your groceries at customer service for an hour or so if you want,” he says, handing the card back to Lane.

I grab Lane’s arm and give it a violent tug, barely giving him a chance to decline the cashier’s offer before dragging him out of the store.

“Lane, why isn’t there any money in our account?” I ask as soon as we reach the car and are safely out of the hearing range of our fellow shoppers.

“I have no idea, Brooke. I got paid four days ago. I told you we should switch banks. This one keeps screwing up our records.”

I sigh and start the car. The friendly customer service representatives at our local bank branch would be hearing from me. Lane opens his wallet to put away the worthless card.

“Oh damn,” he says. I look over to find him holding a check.

“Please don’t tell me that’s what I think it is,” I say, tightening my grip on the steering wheel.

“Uh, Brooke, honey . . . ” he starts out, and I know it’s going to be bad. Terms of endearment are always a tip-off with Lane.

“I may have forgotten to deposit my paycheck.”

I bite my lip and look for a place to pull over, remembering the lessons I’d had in Driver’s Ed. You should never drive when angry because you might come across a small child on a tricycle and want to take it out
on him. Their advice had been to get out and kick a telephone pole. I have something else I want to kick.

I swerve the car into a nearly empty church lot and come to a stop. Lane tentatively places his hand over mine.

"I was really busy that day and I must've just forgot."

I stare out my car window. The yellow parking lot line I'm staring at begins to blur.

"Really, Brooke, if you think about it, it's not that big of a deal," he says, attempting to lighten the mood. "I mean, we don't even know if what we perceive as reality is real anyway, so something like this is entirely insignificant."

"You really are unbelievable," I snap back. "You know, after two years of marriage I still have not ceased to be amazed at how inconsiderate, how out of touch with reality, you really can be."

"C'mon, Brooke," he says, rolling his eyes. "Don't be all fatalistic on me. I know I screwed up, okay? But it's not like we can't fix it."

This is where I lose it.

"You don't get it, do you?" I yell, suddenly very grateful there isn't a bike-riding child around because I really might have gone for him. "I mean, not only was what you just put me through a totally humiliating experience, but it's not going to stop there. I've written checks, Lane, checks that are now going to bounce. There's going to be fees, and fees on the fees, and our credit rating will be hurt. Oh, and seeing as this is our second offense, our landlord will probably blacklist us and start making us pay cash. It's going to end up costing us so much in the end that I can forget about a new coat. So, damn it, Lane—it is a big deal!"

Lane shrinks back against the car door, looking shocked and stung. The force of my anger pushes me forward anyway.

"Look, I'm not your babysitter. I'm not up for that task. I have too many things to worry about without the electricity getting turned off because you forgot to pay the bill or the car brakes going out because you kept putting off getting them fixed. I'm tired of the laundry molding because you forget to take it out of the washer, and I'm sick of never getting messages because you're too involved reading Nietzsche to write them down. I can't deal with it anymore, Lane. Something has got to change."

I pause, catching my breath, and wait for him to retaliate—wanting him to retaliate. I want him to lash out at me, so I can demand that he show me more respect. I want him to try and justify himself, so I can tear
apart his attempts. I want to hold onto my anger, to savor it, to make him feel as bad as I do. I want to keep fighting him.

But Lane doesn’t yell. He doesn’t defend himself. He doesn’t retaliate. Instead, he apologizes.

“I’m sorry, Brooke,” he says softly. “I mean, you’re right. I guess some of the stuff that should be priorities in my life just aren’t. Philosophy is what I love and sometimes it takes over, you know? I just never realized it bothered you so much.” He pauses for a moment. “Anyway, I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’ll fix it, okay? I’ll fix it.”

He does fix it, in fact he fixes it good. The car is now washed regularly, the dishes get done, and the bills get paid—all without a word from me. It’s beautiful.

Beautiful and kind of quiet.

Lane doesn’t really talk about philosophy anymore. I tell myself it’s good riddance to bad rubbish, and I’m pretty convincing—most of the time.

A few weeks have passed like this and, after finishing one of our now weekly family finance discussions, we are heading to bed a little earlier than usual. I have an exam tomorrow. All I want to do is fall asleep and be free of the facts I’ve been cramming into my head all day.

Lane wants to talk.

“Hey, you asleep?” He asks.

I grunt something unintelligible that I hope will come across as a yes. He doesn’t seem to notice and keeps talking.

“Remember when we used to stay up all night just talking?”

I am jolted by the question. Of course, I remember. It seemed like we always used to have stuff to say. We’d talk about how much I hate the Romantic poets or about how incredibly pedantic Husserl is. We’d complain about teachers, classes, and tests. We’d argue about stupid things, things like who deserved to win the World Series or what the best Ben & Jerry’s flavor is. For some reason, we couldn’t get enough of each other back then. Somehow I had forgotten about all that. Thinking about it now made me want to curl into him, rub my stocking feet against his and ask him, as I always used to, to tell me something exciting. Tentatively I reach out my hand, searching for his. I find only the cool sheet that lies between us.

So, turning my back to him, I whisper, “Goodnight, Lane.”
The Art of the
Neurotic Love Letter

jason ludlow

I fell in love for the first time in tenth grade. Everyday at 1 pm I trekked up two flights of stairs to my marine science class, and everyday I died a little bit more. I would walk into the room with its whale posters and dried seahorses and anatomical oyster models, quietly take my assigned seat, and wait. The bell would ring as she walked through the door with an insouciant expression on her face. Jessica Beck didn’t so much as enter as slide into the classroom, and I, paralyzed, watched every day for an entire semester. I couldn’t help myself. I was sick.

The details of the exact moment when the infatuation took hold are lost. There were, however, certain moments in which I could tell I was shifting emotional grades. Take for example, a class discussion of The Matrix, a film which had recently come out. As one might expect, the praise was entirely lopsided in favor of the film. I recall such pithy comments as “It totally owned” being thrown around the classroom with the total abandon of group hysteria. Our chairs were all gathered towards the center of the room and I was close enough to hear what came next. With a bored expression on her face, Jessica said, “I thought it was terrible. How could anyone wear that much black?” This was followed by a brief silence in which time the rest of the class digested, dismissed the criticism and returned to spewing out lofty panegyrics. Not that it mattered to Jessica; she simply rested her head in her hands and stared at a downward angle with that
bored expression still on her face. I thought her words had been iconoclastic; I thought they had been lovely. As the lights turned off and the video on plankton reproductive habits came on, I was still lost in her words which had seemed so important at the time.

So many things: she was different, she was an artist, she appreciated dark humor. She listened to abstruse industrial music. I heard that she smoked marijuana. She was so different from me that nothing could have been more perfect.

Jessica also wore the most amazing clothes imaginable. I remember an inspiringly low, blue halter-top. I remember her wearing a loose, collared shirt with corduroy pants, and, on more than one occasion, a slim, yellow dress that could have been an antique. I remember that once she wore those polyester pants which had bright flames running down either side of the white fabric. It was my conjecture then that those pants must have been sewn onto her body since no force on earth could reasonably have squeezed her into them, in spite of the fact that she had an elfish build. Those pants were a gift from God. The depth of her wardrobe was dizzying. Some days she could've walked off a slide from the summer of 1969, while others she seemed to be a character in a play who was suffering from amnesia: an impenetrable expression on her face, someone else's clothes on her body.

In contrast to her eccentric style of dress, she rarely adorned her own skin. I don't remember her wearing rings on her thin, rose-stem fingers and she never wore makeup. Her blonde hair hung straight down to the middle of her back. She had a mole on the right side of her face which occupied that undefined space where the upper-lip ends and the cheek begins.

These aspects, these descriptions, the sum parts that make up the memory of a person whether fresh or, as in this case, five years old are still essentially meaningless in conveying how hard I fell for Jessica or why. I loved the loose straps that looped over her tanned shoulders and how thin her wrists were and the pensive expression that she had while writing. I loved the way that she would remove her shoes and sit on her chair cross-legged as though it were the most natural thing on earth to do, her cutoff jean shorts riding up and always drawing my attention away from Ms. Stockdale, our teacher, as she tried to teach us about the migratory patterns of salmon.

Then there was me.
It would be an understatement to say I did well in high school: 4.0 GPA, soccer player, extracurricular activities, AP classes. I aced the SATs. Not that any of this was particularly fulfilling, or that I especially enjoyed being a model student; rather, it was expected of me, and so I took my orders and delivered the goods. I was Going Places. Doing well in high school came as naturally as a quarterback delivering that perfect, effortless spiral. The difference, of course, is that a quarterback finds himself with the admiration of his peers and a cheerleader girlfriend. For my academic efforts, I, of course, was relegated to walk the halls of Geek Hell, pathetically misunderstood. They say that those teen years are bad for everyone, but they’re worse for some. Here I was, bright, nice, shy. I could tell you who Sisyphus was, I had read a fair share of Hemingway and Steinbeck, and there wasn’t a single essay or test that remotely challenged me. In short, I knew everything there was about life except how to enjoy it. So I began walking between classes with my eyes cast down, filled with so much foolish angst mentally and a brew of hormonal chemicals physically that I was an utter wreck of a person. How, I reasoned, could things have come to this? How, I wondered, could such a well-read person as me be utterly useless at interacting with other people? It was around this time that I fell in love with Jessica Beck.

This didn’t mean that the questions stopped, if anything my relentless introspection and analysis of this confusing world around me increased in their intensity. Now I was asking, “What can I do to make her like me? To let her know I like her?” My favorite was, “How can she help me?” As if it was that easy. I was too stupid to realize that I should’ve helped myself, too naive to realize it was hopeless from the start.

As the owner of an overactive imagination I can say with great certainty that the amplified ability to make stuff up is a mixed blessing. The more love you are capable of feeling, the more pain you are capable of feeling. It’s like a homeostasis thing, you know, that sense of balance which pervades everything.

At times I wished that I was too ignorant to feel bad. The more I learned, the more disillusioned I became. There is, I would reflect, unimaginable suffering occurring all over the planet at this moment and I’m powerless against it. That someone was being raped or murdered at that moment was not actual knowledge, it was imagined, but that didn’t make it any less valid in my mind. I was drowning in apathy and false monstrosities. There was nothing sincere and beautiful left in the world.
Eventually, everyone I knew and everything I cared about would be dead. None of these thoughts were particularly unique, but they did have the effect of keeping my mind in a state of permanent burnout.

I couldn't make up any happy endings for myself, so I didn't have any. This applied even to my feelings towards Jessica. Some might be content with the simple pleasures of sexual fantasies, but not me. There was no pathos involved and thus no interest for me personally.

Hint: the most vivid time to create realities for yourself is in the moments where you're lying in bed with the lights off just staring at the ceiling and waiting to fall asleep. There are no noises to distract you, no images. This is a fecund environment for the mind that is only too happy to provide false sensory input, provided that you're willing to fill in the details. A typical story arc would go something like this: the unthinkable occurs and I actually tell Jessica how I feel about her, and the even more unthinkable occurs when she reciprocates these feelings. In my mind this was not imagined as a simple situation. Homeostasis: the less likely the event I imagined, the greater the required contrivance. I've saved her from her abusive boyfriend. I pushed her out of the way of a runaway semi. Sometimes she received a marring injury to her face (nothing too grotesque) and I still accepted her because I saw into her heart, because I was a savior, because I couldn't imagine myself doing otherwise in the situation. We marry in spite of the reservations of my parents and show them up by living happily, secure in the bonds of love, freed from financial constraints. We have a child perhaps.

This is when things go awry. My mental outlook on life refused to accept such a happy ending, real or not. So she died. Sometimes she got in a car accident. Sometimes she was murdered in a robbery that went wrong. The child, if there was one, always died with her. I would come home from work and the police would already be there, a young officer nervously toying with his hat would tell me the news about my wife and child. I would drive to the morgue to identify the body and the coroner would ask me if I had known she was pregnant to which I would numbly shake my head from left to right once, twice maybe. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding Jessica's demise, I would invariably collapse, devastated beyond saving. I would shun the efforts of my family and friends to heal. I would refuse to move on because ours was a love they couldn't understand, because they had disapproved of the union in the first place, because I couldn't imagine myself doing otherwise in the situation. Lost in a spiral of nihilism I
would either kill myself immediately (i.e., fatal gunshot wound) or gradually (i.e., drug addiction). My death was always tragic, always elegiac. Thousands would mourn my passing.

When I reflect on my younger self and his thoughts now, it is always with a mixture of antipathy and compassion. He was in love with self-destruction and didn’t know it. He was sick, sad. He was lonely. I wish that my younger self would have understood that no-strings-attached, happy endings may not exist, but that’s no reason to give up. I wish that someone, anyone would have given him hope. Of course, no one helped him and, more importantly, he refused to help himself. Instead, he did something melodramatic. He wrote a letter.

I’ve always had a reasonable, if not damaging, understanding of my limitations. I can’t bench press my own weight; I can’t grow any taller; I can’t dance; I have a tendency to be aloof; I am, on occasion, quite condescending; I’ll never be more than moderately attractive. In light of these setbacks, reversible or otherwise, God did grant me one great mercy: I can write, I’ve always been able to. I understood this back in tenth grade and decided that Jessica should too. Secretly, I was hoping to impress her to the point where she might abandon logic and go out with me. Cute, huh?

So I wrote a letter—a billet-doux, if you must. There was, of course, the risk of intense rejection and embarrassment. Therefore, I wrote the ultimate neurotic love letter. For those of you who have never written one, letters of this nature quite often end up becoming Zen koans of a sort. They go round and round in all directions and maybe there’s a meaning in there somewhere, but it’s never explicated explicitly. Stating exactly what you mean is inelegant, it’s doggerel, not to mention risky. A good neurotic love letter should be dense and impenetrable, use more recondite symbolism than a T.S. Eliot poem, and hedge its bets to the point where if rejection seems imminent you can always say, “Well, I didn’t mean it quite that way,” with the inherent suggestion being that the problem lies with the other person’s perspective. They might point at the letter, “Well what about this line, ‘Your breasts, like fresh fruit . . .’” Whoa! I just was trying to say that I think you’re pretty cool. That’s all.

Armed with the literary faculties that I possessed at the time this task was just slightly past the point of Absolute Impossibility. The end result would have been laughable if it weren’t made with such sincerity. Ladies and gentlemen I present to you the romantic cipher: pointless, brainless, replete with popular clichés that begin with words like, “From the first
time," and unwieldy metaphors, "Your presence, like a sun-dappled whatever reminds of something." Oh, oh, the tragedy of it all. Amazingly, at the time I thought this was brilliant, step one in my sweep-her-off-her-feet strategy. The two page paean fit into my wallet after some nifty folding and I swore that the first chance I got I would hand it to Jessica and then run away very fast.

The letter never got to her. It's not that I was a coward, well; okay it was because I was a coward. In class I would rehearse various approaches and outcomes in my mind. None of them turned out right. At best she would reject me; at worst I would lose consciousness, slip over the railing and plummet two stories to my utterly, utterly banal death. I'd probably land on an orphan or a kitten to complete the scene. So I waited and watched with a leaden tongue as she rose and left the classroom, another missed opportunity, another wasted chance. Someone had to take the blame for this and since God was (a) available and (b) probably not going to do anything about it, He became the focus of my frustration. I began to antagonize God, shredding him for not granting me a fortuitous situation to resolve my feelings of affection. Let me prove myself I would plead, one serendipitous meeting, a sign of interest from her, anything, and I would take the initiative from there. Apparently, as strange as this might sound, He listened.

And that, as they say, is when things went from bad to worse. To be fair, though, they were better for a few seconds, much better. Then I screwed up everything.

That day I had been in a mood. I don't know if it was school, trouble at home, or whatever. The bottom line was this: I was torqued. For the first time in forever, Jessica wasn't at the forefront of my mind during class, which is probably why things happened the way they did. If you read Siddhartha there are all sorts of allusions to the philosophy of pacifism, water is stronger than rock and blahblahblah. It's funny because it's true, the closest I came to having a chance with Jessica came on the one day when I wasn't thinking about her at all.

I stormed out of the classroom and was so preoccupied with my torqued-off thoughts that I didn't realize I was walking right next to her. Our paces were evenly matched. I seized up internally; I began to feel the exterior of my skin grow warm and embarrassed. She was wearing a pair of faded, torn-up jeans and Doc Martens, an irresistible combination. I remember the lower half of her body quite distinctly since my eyes were
virtually plastered to the floor. I had to say something. This is the point
where I draw up those hidden reservoirs of courage, those lost vestiges of
will that supersede shyness, right? This is where Clark Kent becomes
Superman, right? Then, to my wondering ears, she spoke first. “Jason
Ludlow,” she said in an amused manner as though she was privy to a joke
that I couldn’t hear. My brain, in light of this unprecedented event, went
haywire: my name, she’d said my name, she’d said my name and initiated
the conversation process, oh man, oh man, oh man. I struggled stupidly
for the part that was supposed to come next. Say something back you idiot.
Oh, right. “Yeah,” I said in reply. At least, I think it was “yeah.” It was
“yeah” or some equally meaningless affirmative and I didn’t so much say
it as mumble it.

We completed the walk down the stairs and headed in opposite direc-
tions. I went left and she went right, swaying her voluptuous hips from side
to side. I turned to watch her move away. There was so much lateral move-
ment it was like she was standing in the same spot while her figure receded,
it was like some sort of optical illusion. I stayed there even after she had
disappeared from sight and did what I did best: I thought, I dissected the
situation coldly, critically. This is the actor who forgets his line. This is
the baseball player striking out in the bottom of the ninth. This is the doc-
tor who severs the vein he was supposed to reassemble. When I got home,
I threw the note away and committed myself to erasing her memory.

I couldn’t have chosen a more otiose task. Granted, the memories
of Jessica eventually lost their color and the infatuation dried up, but what-
ever was left persisted. Eleventh grade, twelfth grade, whenever I saw her
it was electric heat as all of the emotions attempted to return. She never
lost her charm. Even on the night of graduation, the last time I saw her,
there was still something flowing from me to her although now it seemed
as though all I wanted was an acknowledgment, I wanted her to validate
my vain pursuit. We didn’t even make eye contact; she breezed by in that
easy manner and I haven’t seen her since. How abnormal is this? Why do
I feel so drawn towards the memory of my disappointments? Like a
scab I continue to pick at it, this person, this ideal. Her figure occupies
a shadowy and largely dormant portion of my mind that continues to flare
up on rare occasions, although now the memory is tainted by the bitter,
certain knowledge that since that day when everything came crashing down
with a weak monosyllable from my lips, I haven’t been in her mind at all.
andrew ballsteadt
Haggling in Addis
margaret h. manchak

We played on a red dirt court. Every morning some unseen worker must have come into the tennis arena and meticulously brushed out our footprints from the day before, because it always looked brand new when my PE class arrived. I had only played on cement courts in the States, but they used dirt in Ethiopia. It was the best court in the city because it was housed in the International Community School.

Like the tennis courts back home, these had tall chain link fences surrounding them. Right outside the fence were tall eucalyptus trees, sardined together to block visibility to the world beyond. This American school worked hard to cocoon us in a make-believe world. But Addis Ababa was dry and the trees were sparse enough that small street children could squeeze between the low branches to watch us. Their little dark faces and thin bodies were hidden in the shadows, but their teeth and eyes glinted their presence in the sunlight, silently watching us play.

Tigist squatted down a little, holding her racket out in front of her in a ready stance that showed her tennis training. She wore matching Adidas shorts and shirt, and her dark hair was plaited into a crown on her head. I theatrically wiped my brow in the hot sun and threw the ball up in the air, trying to perform a serve like Ato Terrefe, the eighth-grade PE teacher, had just demonstrated. The ball made it over the net, but it was a lazy volley and my Ethiopian friend decided to take advantage of
the easy bounce by trying to spike it back at me. Once I saw what she was going to do I wrapped my arms around my head, hoping not to get pegged. She hit it so hard that I could hear the ping of the ball against the chain-link fence before I even turned to see. Instead of bouncing back, the yellow ball was perfectly lodged in one of the chinks.

"Nice," I said, and we shared a laugh.

As I went to retrieve it, there was a face on the outside of the fence peering in at me. Little dark fingers reached through the wire and started violently working the ball so that it would pop out on his side. He was a small boy with no shirt to speak of and ragged pants, maybe six years old, maybe seven. I remember his eyes, wide and coffee-colored; they were glued on me as his hands continued to work, pulling back and forth. I stopped walking towards him and we watched each other. He rapidly pulled the ball out on the other side, and for the first time he broke our gaze to look for an escape route. He scooted backwards under the tree and then ran wildly to the street, jumping and shouting to his friends with the ball in the air. It seemed so vibrant compared to the landscape he carried it into.

I looked back to Tigist. She sighed as she dropped her racket on the court and sauntered off to get us a new ball. Despite our different backgrounds she and I got along well. I was at ICS by the grace of the U.S. government—she was there because her father owned Phillips Electronics. All the wealthiest Ethiopians sent their children to ICS since it was the best and most expensive school in Addis, which actually didn’t say much. The rest of the students were Americans, black and white, and Europeans whose parents worked in the city. We walked out of class together as a fat rain started to fall.

"Do you want a ride home?" she asked Britishly.

"Why not?" I said. I lived only about a block from school, but I was lazy. We strolled into the school parking lot, where her driver was waiting with the family Mercedes Benz. It was identical to the other fifteen Mercedes Benz’s; the rest of the cars were typically Toyota Land Cruisers. The ride was painfully slow, but nonetheless jarring, because the city pavement consisted of dirt, rock, and ditch. Anyone who cared about their car didn’t go over seven miles per hour, slow enough for kids in the street to race along side the car, whipping their heads back and forth between looking at their course and looking into the windows of the car. I tried not to watch, but I always did.
The driver spun his back wheels hard to get over a particularly stubborn rock and as I looked back, a gray-bearded old man, holding his grass-loaded donkey aside, bent his body down to the rut the tire had just created and put his lips to the rain that was collecting there. I quickly turned back in my seat.

"Having money isn't a bad thing by itself, Mindy," my dad had once observed, "it's just a bad thing when some people have it and others don't have enough. That's a big problem here." If I had understood him correctly, our having money was a bad thing. After puzzling over this paradox for a few minutes, my thirteen-year-old mind would move on to easier, more pleasant ideas, like boys or basketball.

As long as we were careful not to contract malaria, we could take weekend trips as a family into the countryside and beyond. These excursions were food for my soul because the city was such a grim place. The breadbasket of Africa was starving and had been for years. The tourism industry and expatriate community, however, were thriving. From where I now stand, it seems to me like I had stepped into an old National Geographic, where bare-breasted women were acceptable, even intriguing, because they were brown. Only in Africa could a city such as Addis Ababa be called exotic. For Victorian England it was called the worst age of history on Earth, but I guess Ethiopians don't have a Charles Dickens to say it so people will listen.

In the country the people seemed untouched, unaffected by the world at large. They had oxen, donkeys, farms, and little green thatched tukuls. They made art—baskets and beautiful jewelry; things to make a tennis ball look about as exciting as a napkin. The people outside the city had stories.

They let me make pots with them, or, I should say, they let me try. And after I had been sufficiently examined, my hair handled and my skin pinched, I could play sock-soccer in the street with the kids. They didn't call me "white" in Amharic—they called me "clear." And that was probably a better description. Even my friends at school noticed my particular whiteness. Ahmed, a boy who grew up in Colorado but was actually a Muslim from Yemen, sang to me one day, "M-i-i-indy, the friendly ghost," snorting at his own witticism. When I told him I was offended he said, "No, no, no! You can just sing back—'A-a-a-hmed, the burnt-up toast!'—see?" I wasn't sure that I saw.
Still, I felt better about that than I did about some of the things my Black American classmates would say. They were always busy letting me know that “black is beautiful” and “the difference between us is we got soul and y'all whites don’t.” But they seemed basically apathetic about Ethiopian culture—if we ever went out to eat, they picked the one KFC in the city, but I would put money on the claim that it was not real chicken. And I always went bowling if I hung out with them. Even at the bowling alley though, it was Ethiopian. After each bowl, a small man in a dirty jumpsuit would cautiously peak out from behind the pins and reset them by hand.

Saturday morning was my mom’s appointed time for downtown ventures and our favorite spots were complete dives. Literal holes in the wall were stuffed with boxes full of artifacts worthy of the British Library and selling for less than a stick of gum. As one of the earliest Christian nations, Ethiopians have ancient scriptures, hand written and illustrated on leather pages, bound with wood worn from a century of use. Silver jewelry is also a big industry for the shopkeepers—that and Italian war vestiges. My mom once bought a bracelet that was made entirely of bullet shells melded together in a row and shaped to fit a wrist.

We also took interest in the Saturday bazaar at the Mercato in a field downtown. My sister, Erin, came to visit from college in Boston for a couple weeks and she loved a hard bargain. One time as we made our way through a Saturday market, she almost traded me away. An older man, with crusted eyebrows and eyelashes had spread out a blanket in the dirt, on which he displayed beautiful woodcarvings. She asked the artist how much they were. He gave these two blond American girls a toothless grin.

“I will take your sistah!” he enthusiastically told Erin.

“I can’t give you my sister.” We smiled.

“She will live nice, my wife, in the desert. I give you beautiful camels!”

“No thank you,” Erin said, and she maneuvered me by the elbow away from his blanket.

He shouted with a big gravelly laugh as we walked away, “I like her hair!”

The natives were always having a party as they set out garish blankets with Coptic crosses, painted icons, silk, and silver. There was always
food—big injera makers frying up the fermented bread—and music, mostly Bob Marley, blaring on little boom boxes set in the grass. The foreigners bustled around, looking for which wares would look good on a living room wall.

If you could take an aerial view of the field it would have looked like a crazy quilt with little ants marching over the top. What a place, what a place, in the horn of Africa; the breadbasket, thirteen months of sunshine, the bird-watching capital of the world.

On our next visit Erin found a gorgeous bugle made from a ram’s horn that she wanted to bring back to her trombonist-fiancé. She bartered with our sunglasses, a calculator, and a little money in coins—he could pick, she said. Personally, I was irritated that she was risking our calculator. It helped us to make quick computations into American dollars. The vendor seemed skeptical but he did gingerly pick up one pair of shades and as he put them on he struggled to explain in English:

“My son, his head . . . hurt, he has headache. This might help?”

He looked up toward the sun with them on and moved them up and down a few times by the earpieces, absorbed in the possibility. Erin’s eyes widened and her face immediately flushed red. Blinking quickly, she pushed the money, the other pair of sunglasses, and the calculator across his table to him. The man pulled off the shades and stared perplexed as she pressed my shoulder to leave. I don’t even think she took the bugle, though I can’t remember.
dave bown
Poetry
Three Witnesses
erin tuttle

In the very middle of a field of dirt
Three palm trees stood abreast in Honduras
And I from a bus window,
Two afternoons a week,
Passed them on the cracked road home.

In that distance between us,
The aching heat made illusions of their forms—
Softening and stretching them
To brown and green memories of dreams
While I watched,
My eyelids falling in indiscernible blinks, exhausted,
The same way darkness does in the late afternoon,
Unable to be blue or gray but hovering under nighttime’s black
Until vision and reality are subjective and
Solid ground exists only directly under foot.

Two years removed now,
The past comes in threes
In the short blue-gray blinks between asleep and awake;
Me and them and the sky
Or God and them and me
Or just them,
Or just God—

Their anomalous stance,
Half illusion, half parental,
Swaying there in the middle of nothing,
Calls me to the place where I walked
On a line under their gaze,

Between the cracked dirt of a road and a mind
So remote, a cool breeze could not find it.
You look so pleased with yourself
And now you think you deserve to be painted,
Lying there, drowned, or crowding library shelves.
Your silly suicide cost me 6.95
At an art sale. I get jealous of you each morning
On the wall, resting there below the ferns.
Your arms are open to something, foolishly:
That prick prince isn't coming back.
They never do once you're dead. They never do anyway.
Still, everyone should have your painting,
A print for every room of the house.
For the bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen,
For the garage where they get the rope or leave
The motor running—to prove
You keep floating, shining in bright pastels,
Thoughtful flotsam till the resurrection—
A sort of conquest.
I try mirrors and shoe stores
And can't equal your confidence.
I can't throw myself in the river, you know.
Something must be done. A haircut, perhaps,
A few hours of sleep, a prayer.
An

Incident of Blindness

joshua weed

My talisman eyeball nests in
Its grainy socket. It’s my rotten jewel.
Light pervades with such fluidity
And soggy flesh shrouds it
Like baby kangaroo in maternal pouch.
Why, it represents so much of me!
Grass-green iris lacerated so to pluck
Out the nepheloid innards with more ease;
Dear, poisoned grape, slowly baking
Into raisin by and by with sun.

“They don’t leave bleeding people
To die in the streets even here,”
She says as I come to. I only
Remember a hazy vision:

Empty streets
Four lanes

Small friend, young boy, aside, aside.
And the one defining forward step

Past me as we crossed
The highway. And my eye!

I heard the motor, but could not see. I instinctively
Stopped. I was frightened by traffic for weeks,
Every timid pace reminiscent of
What might have been his last.

The motorcycle breathed bird-like
Life into his raily body.

What disturbing physics! That
Sickening collision, the horrible flailing.

That drastic, metallic rag doll-
Puppeteer inflicted such sad abuse!

Foul ill of gut emerged in me
As vision of his mouth and nose

Entered my good eye. They jettisoned
Sticky, red blood and his eyes spewed their

Saline waters. What faucets his
Face appeared to have,

Opened by brief contact with scorched
Pavement. My puke wouldn’t come.

I was somehow paralyzed and ambulant.
Parked cars, moving traffic, green trees

General blur. How was I walking?
It all unglued itself from itself and spun.

I was favored with a full spectrum of
Shining stars before came my momentary night.
"Are you with me? Look at my face."
Grave heads hover above me like silly balloons.
"Hey, why is one eye dilated and the other normal?"
Panic, panic—
Head hit floor.
Don’t worry.
Don’t worry. I’m fine. I’m perfectly fine.

That eye is blind.
On Tenille and Nat
as I watched from the
Bathroom Mirror

jenny rebecca griffin

They laugh together,
just two of them—they laugh like they
are mad-crazy
at something I know if I asked, it
wouldn't be funny because it is between
him and her.

In the mirror my stomach
bulges pregnant
as I watch; it increases in size
and in resemblance to all the cakes
I must have eaten in my life.
I turn sideways to assess.

She sits in his lap and curls
her fingers into his malleable hair,
gently holds, massages his arms
as if to say nothing has ever fit
more perfectly in her hands.
One arm and then the other.

I brush my teeth
to a dismal pulse, incessant
stresses of tedium,
ignoring the toothpaste
dribbling down my chin.
He sings bluntly into the serene night. She nestles next to him, close enough that her heart’s cadence becomes his metronome, her breath now feeding his music.

I think there is more to me than this face and body.

I pant as I reach my tongue out as long as it will go, try to see past the mirror’s fabricated copy of my face, into the blackness of my throat.
Close your eyes and don't peek—but I peeked.
I expected angels:
smiling down,

slapping high fives,
reeling in the words
like rainbow trout.

Instead, it was like swimming underwater:
I could stare where I wanted, make faces,
wiggle my tongue.

The woman next to me
whispered amens. I thought about
kissing her,

laying a wet smack on her lips
and watching her wake
like snow white.

A girl my size swung her legs
on the back row, looked around like this
was a baseball game—

an easy afternoon,
warm, breezy.
I wanted her

to see me, to reach out
across the deaf sea of people
and mouth hello.
I close my eyes under the covers and see this:
Two million seraphim in Speedos, on God-errand
Freestyling through the ether. Their jaws
Slice further with every stroke, them
Gasping for divinity on alternate hands.
Some three million-odd others are butterflying
—Because they can—to unurgent callings.
I wonder if also God tolerates
Fat stupid cherubim blowing bubbles in the deep end.
Between Us

missy ward

Between us was a frozen street,
shining in the dawnlight
like a dark solemn river.
From across the span of eternity,
I watched the bent limping man
scatter seventeen scavenging crows
and dip his battered bucket deep
into the belly of a dumpster.
I saw it come up empty.
I saw him turn around.
And as I walked down the street,
I imagined him fording the
slippery river, more alone
than the first time he crossed it.
as a long pale bed
glowing like moonlight
under a window that is being
peled and smeared silver
by forlorn angry raindrops.
And the wind is heaving the trembling trees
while a tiny frightened star peeks out
of the cloud-ridden purple Bangkok sky
and cries

But child, you've never been to Bangkok

Shut up. This is not so much about
where I haven't been as it is
about where I have been.

Regardless, you've never been there.

And neither have you. So
for all you know, I'm right
about the way leaves shaped like valentines
are thrust from their comfortable perches
by teardrops that echo like
deep rain in stone corridors.
Contributors

Andrew David Rufus Ballstaedt is doing a BFA in painting and also a BA in art education. He lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, and commutes to BYU. He hopes to go to grad school in painting.

Sara Blaisdell is a sophomore from Portland, Oregon, majoring in English. Two of her poems appeared in the last edition of Inscape. She can be contacted at colorofwood@juno.com

Dave Bown has studied art in East Africa, Poland, and Germany. He's graduating with a BFA in sculpture from BYU this April after which he will go to Peru to study art and launch his 'fame or bust' campaign, though he's not too worried about becoming rich.

Julie Deverich is a junior majoring in humanities and minoring in studio art. She spends most of her time contemplating the complexities of life and has come to the conclusion that contrary to the discoveries of Sir Higgy Boffo, the moon is indeed made out of limburger cheese.

Jenny Rebecca Griffin wishes she could drop out of school, move to London, bind handmade books, and sell them at a booth. Instead, she is majoring in English teaching at BYU and loves it.

Janelle Kemsley is a senior majoring in English. After graduating in April she's moving to New York City to (hopefully) work in publishing.

Lindsay Larson, from Orange, California, is a senior majoring in history. She plans to attend law school in the fall of 2004 and become a civil rights advocate.

Jason Ludlow, regardless, after graduating with a degree in English, plans to move to Paris and live in squalor like any good artist.

Elizabeth Luker is a junior majoring in English. When she's not writing, she enjoys dancing in the living room and singing very loudly. She wishes she had a secret identity as a crime fighter, but is usually too busy going back and forth on the bus, visiting her family in Salt Lake City.

Margaret H. Manchak is a junior majoring in English. She might as well be a philosophy major, too, since that's her husband's area of
study. They are traveling to South-East Asia this summer, where she hopes to soak up culture and further material for writing. She likes chocolate, her trumpet, and, of course, reading.

a. e. marlowe was born, will die, and is currently occupied in living.

David Nielsen lives in Salt Lake. He completed his undergraduate education at Westminster College. Currently he is a graduate student at BYU.

Audrianne Porter was born and raised in Mesa, Arizona, and has never really done anything exciting enough to include in a bio. One of her greatest accomplishments was deciding a major. She’s hoping to study in New Zealand next winter in the Elementary Ed program. She’s considering someday graduating from college.

Jessica Scoville is a senior majoring in English and minoring in microbiology. She calls Littleton, Colorado, home. Other people just call it Littleton, Colorado. When she isn’t reading books, she is writing books. And when she’s not reading or writing or playing in the mountains, she is usually asleep.

Erin Elaine Tuttle will graduate in April from Brigham Young University with a major in English and a creative writing emphasis. She is getting married on July 26th to the best man on the earth. She grew up in North Carolina and has written poetry for as long as she can remember but never submitted anything to be published. This year for a New Year’s resolution she promised herself she would conquer that fear and it proved fruitful. Maybe it’s the beginning of success or maybe it’s her swan song but any and all things good from writing are forever dedicated to her dad, Lewi, her biggest fan.

Missy Ward is a senior studying psychology and international development. Her favorite things include foreign films, live indie rock music, green mango shakes, trick or treating for UNICEF, the coldness of the Baltic Sea, grilled cheese sandwiches, harmony, the Philippine island Boracay, volunteering, brain anatomy, Picasso’s blue period, springtime in Russia, Chopin’s Nocturne in E flat minor, museums with secret rooms, riding on small boats on the ocean at sunset, looking at maps, and listening to people who at first seem too different to be understood. Her least favorite things include saying goodbye. Impending post-graduation plans include a
contributors

health internship in the Marshall Islands, a mission to Brazil, and ultimately marriage to Joe, who likes reading her poems.

Joshua Weed writes poetry when he's not playing the violin his grandfather made for him or hanging out with his beautiful wife, Laurel. He's also on the verge of allowing his friend Steve to convince him to buy a dirt bike and a gun so as to adopt more masculine pastimes.

Aaron Welling married Natalie Marston (now Natalie Welling) two years ago. Aaron is a senior majoring in English.