

The Free Indie Reader #1



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An Anthology of Short Stories by Indie Authors

Featuring:
[Lisa Thatcher](#)
[Paul Samael](#)
[Carla R. Herrera](#)
[Giando Sigurani](#)
[Willie Wit](#)
[Michael Graeme](#)
[Judy B.](#)
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Since the online self-publishing revolution began a few years ago, I've been on the lookout for great indie authors, and my efforts have been rewarded many times over. Most of these discoveries have come from writers who have put their work out there for free. Motivations may vary, but they all share a common underlying impulse to help their stories find an audience. There is an enormous ocean of books out there, and each new one reminds me of a paper boat set out somewhere on a quiet stream full of dreams. Through various mechanisms of publicity, writers and their readers try to help those boats along their way, and I've tried to do my part. I've reviewed and blogged and tweeted and posted within my limited reach to assist these stories in their journeys. Most recently it occurred to me that I could do a little more, by gathering some of my favorites together and publishing an anthology. This collection contains some of my favorite stories by some of my favorite indie authors, and also one by myself. I'm grateful to all of the authors, not only for letting me re-publish their stories here, but also for all the joy they've given me through their wonderful writing.

Tom Lichtenberg

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Lisa Thatcher

The Previous Owner's Shopping List

The dandelion spore of a woman placed a precarious foot to the road, having parked her car and turned toward the bookshop. Inside the shop, a man of considerable girth made his way past War Stories to True Crime, promising today of all days he would answer literature's call, get his substantial carriage to the smaller aisles and take home a book that nourished his mind. Tonight both people visited the shop impulsively.

There existed between these two readers strange parallels that, despite the overwhelming differences, would bring them together at a crucial moment in time. Something superior to their knowledge and beyond the physical bonded them. The woman walked as if the tilt of the earth could topple her. Clutching at her large prescription-filled handbag, conscious of the elements and their personal vendetta against her, she wondered at the reckless decision made under inspiration in a safer space. Her mapped-out day didn't allow for this kind of spontaneity, preferring instead to act as a buffer against the regularities of life that could mean the end for a woman this frail. If her body provided no imperviousness against the elements, she had to use her mind to protect herself from them.

She'd assented to this early in life, and the recognition grew into a love affair with the fact. In her mid-twenties, not sure if she'd see thirty, she fancied her sickly remains separated her from the healthy herded masses of ordinary people preoccupied with instant gratification. With no real body to serve, no physical presence to mark her streak on the world, she felt forced to focus on the more delicate things of life. She fancied her immersion in frailty marked her as conscious; even superior. Tonight, uncharacteristically, she'd left her work as a political archivist ten minutes ahead of time, shocking her colleagues into checking the batteries on the hall clock. She'd go to the large bookshop on King Street on the way home, alone.

Now she stood beside her car, parked close to the shop's gaping, inviting front, a gentle thrill moving under her skin; a rare moment when her body spoke to her, from behind its glass; it's usually muffled message clear. She felt the immersed disquiet delight of being in a place usually attended in the day. The leftover from childhood subterranean excitement of doing something you don't have prearranged permission to do. She received an intuition of twisted vastness, connecting her via her mind's electric meandering through her body, with fields of hopeful emptiness. This emanated from the shop, she presumed. It was an aching residual trust that once and for all this place can change you and make you who you want to be.

The shop's awareness of its position in the street, the city, the world and time coupled with its invitation to be a part of its heaving expanse, its excited pant and its theatrical possibilities enticed any regular thinker into its seductive web. The shop not only sold books, but ideas. Ideas challenging enough to be burned, its writers murdered, for salacious content in days gone by. These were rich lives lived and jotted down in row after row of invitation to the alternative. Here it all rested, offered to you and you alone, the thinking writer's soul mate.

This shop, this testament to radicalism, this documenting of anti-establishment prancing through occasion, sold second-hand books. Ideas flowed—no, gushed—out of the busy pens of thinkers not bound by time into its goods. The building stood, magnificent in its dishevelled disdain, caring more for what lay between the covers of its wares than for its own physical presence. It held the books, not vice versa. You had to pay to take them away, out of its great dust-filled belly.

The structurally unsound woman standing in front of the store particularly enjoyed the idea that the shop collected the books for her. She liked to think they were friends, as if the bookshop had personal advice for her. They corresponded via an intuitive undercurrent passing between them; remarkably ensuring what called her next would be available on the shelf that day. The shop, also governed by life sustaining rules, knew her even when her body was elsewhere. It existed for her she believed, the other shoppers being a necessary evil; what it took to run business as business.

This afternoon she appeared, deliciously out of context, arriving at the pivot on which things essential and unseen tilted. Now was the moment of transition between the regular and familiar flow of the daily folk to the brash confidence of the wealthy workers freer to spend on that which they have no time to enjoy. She stood outside, aware she was an intruder because the shop knew her as a weekend visitor, always in daylight, always in sunshine. The store would have her anyway she knew. It would be glad to see a kindred spirit, shuffling its shelves to offer her its latest secrets. She allowed her gaze to settle on the other damp-coated, high-heeled, suited customers; those she knew to be competitors, wrestling for prize places in thin cluttered aisles.

This nervous fish out of water of a woman, felt more at ease with the thriving bodies in her world if they maintained a distance of several feet than pressed up against her; damp upon damp, breath sour effluvium, spoor, hair and cells mingling under microscopes with fragile skin. She ventured inside, tucking her woollens closer around her throat.

Inside, she moved with sureness, as if the building lured her with its confidence, her passive face set with a determined squint at the literature section at the back. Many long coats stood by the magazine rack, expanding into the territory they claimed. Their occupation meant sliding down a further passageway, the aisle where espionage and crime relaxed comfortably up against true war stories. It wasn't her usual aisle, but she remembered it to be broad. Quelling panic, she took a relatively deep breath, as much as she could handle, heard her feet walk toward the gangway, the river of unfamiliar books opening up to her like a grossly enthusiastic virgin.

She silently cursed the suits as she moved past, head held high, unnoticed. They bent over their magazines about money, politics and investment, seemingly oblivious to the momentous expanse of their bodies, preventing innocent needy folk from reaching the literature they craved. The bookshop towered over their perfection, dropping its dust, its ceilings a reaching ogre, its fluorescent lights muted

by the time they landed their electric blue on white skin. The hollow click clack of her shoes echoed out and out from the vinyl floor, as did the sigh of her coat wafting against the immovable mound of magazines, and the slight wheeze in her panicked breath. The strange silences of so many people standing adjacent, sensitive to disturbance, discouraged a request to move aside. The bookshop smelled of mouldy dust, the scent of age that can't be known but is the first thing to hit you in a retirement village, and an end-of-day reapplied male deodorant.

True Crime loomed ahead, making it larger, womb-like, welcoming a fresh new face. She felt a gust of breeze from the open staff door she knew to be at the top of the True Crime aisle, located furthest from the entrance, to entice traffic through the store, she'd always assumed. She shuffled through a strangely clear passageway as circumstance forced her to move that way, feeling obedient, the store laughing at her, knowing what she had to shed to get to her final destination.

Turning the corner, she almost bumped into the large man his open book held close to his face, his concentration endearing, and his fervour obvious. She stood for a moment. His stationary hull-like frame sat bulbous, broad, taking up the bulk of the walkway as if he were being prepared to be tugged out to sea. She found herself staring at the long leather belt, hooked through the eyes on trousers so voluminous, so broad; she wondered momentarily what possible threat could remove them and thus warrant the belt.

Her stare sparked the inevitable glance from him in her direction. A fleeting moment passed between them as each prepared for the conversational imperative faced by those suddenly wanting to be in the same space at the same time in a bookshop with its elegantly fragile silence; the obligation of communication without the preamble of intimacy, or even familiarity. They had nothing to share but the space.

Turning her gaze to focus on the floor she worked through her options, words neither dismissive of her intrusion, nor neglectful of her right to be there. She noticed his shoes shuffle toward a long row of encyclopaedic war novels, accompanied by a murmur of apology.

Relieved of the burden of directing their connection, she glanced up, flushed, and smiled at him: a smile containing the warmth of gratitude, without any hint of seduction. He caught her eye. She blushed again, and looked away as she moved into the space. A casual "thanks" had been on her lips, but became lost as she blew past him, her eye set against picture after picture of dishevelled mug shots on the covers of the books of True Crime. She drifted by without incident, leaving him to his books and her without further challenge on her journey to literature.

The literature section opened up toward her slowly, her feet echoing out into the silent store. Having explored the first few alphabetised shelves, she'd abandoned her previous hunt at the start of D, and it was here she chose to move forward. Here, where writers at their most dangerous lay packed back to back on thin dusty shelves, books sat in anthills scattered through the aisle, boxes of them forming a semi-solid base, while shuffled-through and rejected others, babbled their ideas up precarious towers ready to tumble if a mint of a breath brushed against them. Feeling her way, speculatively, through each shelf, she wriggled a small shimmy side to side, thinly avoiding brushing past and potentially toppling any teetering pile making its way to god.

The frail woman in a bubble felt her way through the titles, choosing to remove only those with a Kandinsky corresponding vibration in her soul. This book, this next that she'd read, needed to find her through the vibrations of energy, have the recondite ability to reach her without using the senses she didn't trust. The bookshop rained its dust, and she inhaled it, filling her wheezing lungs with fine particles, the smell of old leather, the dirty taste of the air, the high blue descending hum of the lights and the funereal silence challenging her, combining forces to prevent her feeling that still small touch as it tapped against her spine.

As she passed her dowser's fingers over the books, she felt for the subsonic disquiet she expected. She received it from a Marguerite Duras book, *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*; having never doubted the bookshop's message before she saw no reason to start, so she tugged at the book wedged between

various copies of *The Lover* and *Summer Rain*, slipping it off the shelf. She looked at the gentle pink of the cover, the thinness of the book, turned it to read the blurb and at that point decided the shop was again to be congratulated on its latest gift to her. So seduced was she by the prospect of starting a journey through Marguerite Duras that she ignored her own convention and reached out for *Summer Rain* as well, the intention to buy two contributing to the evening's madness.

This move, this one diminutive action that should have been uneventful, carried the weight of the penalty of recklessness. This sickly woman, a woman out alone in her freedom, this woman caged by conformity is thought to be free and therefore in tune with the finer things of life. The bookshop, always masked as friend, turned on her and her flouting of her own structure; that which was proven to be so should never have been ignored in favour of a supercilious haste.

It was *Summer Rain* that held the list and it fell out of the book, its feathered floating taking it to the floor, a side to side dance blurring the ink that sat on the paper, face up showing it to be a list. It pirouetted twice as it fell, smooth, a small kite with no string, no structure and no owner. It seemed to fall, the surprised weak woman thought, almost out of time, taking twice as long as one would expect to reach the dusty vinyl floor.

The Previous Owner's Shopping List, its stark purple ink glaring tattooed in single words down the page, lay graceless now that it stared at her from the floor. The woman who was not supposed to be there stared at it for a weightless moment, unsure of its origins, suspended in the dangling instant it took to recognise it as part of the book she held. Driven by nonsensical politesse, she bent to replace the list, as if its position were not equally the floor as between the covers of a book no longer owned by the list's maker.

As she bent toward what she recognised must be an inventory, script came into focus, letters made their way into words and the list broke into her consciousness revealing not just what it appeared to be but what it actually was. This list contained several items, seven to be exact, that were identical to a shopping list she had written only the day before. Leaving the list in its freshly made imprint against the dust on the floor, she brought her large prescription-filled handbag over it, and rummaged through, knowing in that unfathomable place where useless etching of trivial histories are stored, that she still had the list from yesterday. Her spindle fingers found it, lifting it so as not to tear it from her bag, flashes of green ink confirming it to be the list she sought.

Dumping her bag next to a teetering tower of books, she picked up the Previous Owner's Shopping List, and compared the two.

Toothpaste
Ventolin
Beige stockings
Comb
Mouthwash
Fendi
Valerian

Alert, composed, acutely aware, thin, without pre-plan or structure, in the wrong place at the wrong time, the completely sick woman stood holding each list at arm's length, her weak knees slowly supporting her centimetre by centimetre rise, her neurons working overtime to search cellularly for logic or sagacity in her body, or this structure, this reckless bookshop where anything could happen, providing no safe haven when anything did.

Even her mind let her down, its best offerings being the easily dismissed probability of television shows like *Candid Camera* or *Twilight Zone*. Her calculating neural pathways began the arduous organisation of figures, computing the unlikely chances associated with each list existing, and the least likely scenario of them meeting in a place soon after she wrote her list which would be torn and discarded in the next few days.

Her mind, upon which all her faculties hitherto relied, raced down a road less travelled. It was

the presence of Ventolin, Fendi and Valerian, marked of no consequence on her own list, a simple errand to the chemist, which pulsed with what she wanted most to avoid. These told her another woman, a woman who smelled of Fendi—the only scent to which she was not allergic—who had respiratory problems so common she took Ventolin regularly, had trouble sleeping and so consumed Valerian, no doubt according to the packet's strictest instructions. Worse than this, this doppelgänger had read Marguerite Duras before her, and seemed to be living her life, a few years ahead.

It was now that her body positively kicked in, and started to send messages clear as day. A thin sheen of sweat, never felt before, broke out over her all at once; a shake started at a fault line in her belly but shocked through her joints causing the papers she held to quiver; heart palpitations, sending her blood thudding through her veins; her mouth dry as a camel's; a numbness spreading its way through her hands and feet as though all feeling, sensory opportunity, were closing itself off to her.

She stood, face to face with the overwhelming fact that her illness did not make her unique; it had no bearing on her at all; it made nothing about her special. The list in all its simplicity told her she was not out of the ordinary and the illnesses, many and varied though they had been in her life, were not indicative of something else and did not mean she had been singled out for anything.

Standing in shock, the Previous Owner's Shopping List in her hand, she disappeared into eternity, seeing herself as a speck of meaningless dust, amid the millions of dust particles in the store, floating, inhalable, a place to make an imprint and nothing more.

She was so taken by the enormity of her moment that when the large man blocked the walkway in front of her, she barely noticed. When he moved toward her, brushing past three towers of books that tumbled in response to his girth, she didn't move. When he begged his "excuse me" with the intention of moving past her, she didn't respond. She stared, mesmerised by the identical shopping lists and the weight of all they contained.

She saw him in her peripheral vision make his way into her space, but she remained stoically unprepared with no structure to cope with what the world now offered her. She felt him, his firm jelly belly, pushing her back toward the bookcase, now her enemy, as she fell. Her bag splayed out, its contents spilling as the new body pushed her small thin frail one onto a large long waiting nail, sticking out of the old bookcase. She felt it enter her in the back, piercing her coat, her shirt and her skin instantly. He turned, a worried look on his face, not realising his bulk pressed harder against her with his turning, forcing her further back and deeper impaled on the nail.

She heard a faint 'pop', accepted it and dropped the two shopping lists together. She looked at him, no blush to warm her face, no recognition in her eyes as she felt the store take the last of what she had to give. She slumped but the bookshop held her in place, impaled on a moment in time, a sickly woman of no consequence after all.

Paul Samael

The King of Infinite Space

To his relief, the train was nowhere near full. Towards the middle of the carriage, there was a group of four empty seats either side of a table. He chose one of the seats nearest the window, putting his bag down on the seat next to it.

Other people did not always seem to like making long journeys on their own. It was as if they were afraid to be left alone with their thoughts for too long. But not him. What was that quotation from "Hamlet"? It was something about being confined in a nutshell, yet feeling that you had an infinite amount of space at your disposal. Or that was the gist of it, anyway. He could not recall it exactly. But he

had always felt that it summed up his own attitude to being alone with his thoughts.

The journey was supposed to last about an hour and three quarters; a generous expanse of time. He had bought a newspaper and had an interesting book to read. Or maybe he would do some more work on the novel he was writing. Yes, he would start with that.

The guard blew his whistle and a high-pitched bleeping signalled that the train doors were about to close. From further down the carriage, he heard someone panting heavily as they hauled their luggage onto the train. Evidently they had only just managed to board in time. He got out his notebook and pen.

The passenger was now advancing rather clumsily down the aisle in his direction, his suitcase bumping against the arms of the seats. At first, the man seemed to be heading for one of the four empty seats directly across from him. There was more panting and grunting as he lifted the suitcase onto the overhead luggage rack. He turned and was just about to sit down when a look of sudden recognition crossed his features:

“Excuse me,” he said, “but are you Peter Cranston?”

“Er, yes, I am,” he replied, feeling embarrassed, because he could not place this man who seemed to know his name.

“Long time, no see!” replied the man. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” he said. “Look, I’m really sorry – have we met before?”

The man grinned and ran his hand over his head. “Ah! I probably look a bit different now – got a lot less hair these days. And put on a bit of weight, as the wife keeps reminding me. I’m Tony Goodman – we were at school together, remember?”

Peter did remember him – but they had never had a great deal to do with one another. Tony had been good at sport, but not much else. The longest conversation he could remember having with him had been in the school library, where Tony was – uncharacteristically for him – trying to do his homework. He had exhaled deeply, shoved his books to one side and said:

“Cranston, how do you get such good marks all the time? I mean, tell me, how do you do it? What’s the secret?”

He remembered being at somewhat of a loss to know what to reply. He had mumbled something about there being no secret, it was mostly hard work.

“Bollocks,” said Tony. “It’s that you’re brainy and I’m not. I don’t know why I bother with all this,” he said, gesturing at his books. “I’m rubbish at it. I’m never going to amount to anything. It’s so unfair, you know, ‘cos there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s alright for you. You don’t know how lucky you are.”

“Mind if I sit down here?” asked Tony, drawing Peter back to the present.

“No, of course not – please do.” Although he was rather dreading the conversation which was bound to follow.

“Thought I wasn’t going to make this train – traffic on the way to the station was terrible. So,” said Tony, spreading his hands wide, “what are you up to these days?”

“Oh, I’m between jobs at the moment,” said Peter, doing his best to sound casual about it. “I’m having a sort of career break, while I think about what to do next.”

Tony nodded understandingly.

“Well, it was obvious to everyone at school that you were always going to be a high flyer. And these days, if you’re not careful, you can burn yourself out by your early thirties – I’ve seen it happen. So if you ask me, it’s sensible to take a bit of time out every once in a while. I’d do it myself if I didn’t think I’d lose all my clients.”

“What is that you do for a living?” asked Peter, anxious to shift the focus away from himself.

“Remember how at school, the only thing I was any good at was sport?” He reached into his pocket and handed Peter a business card which read: “Tony Goodman, Player’s Agent. Licensed by the Football Association of England.”

“Wow,” said Peter, genuinely impressed. “D’you act for any of the big names?”

“Not anyone in the Premier League – mostly I act for players in the Championship and League One. Although a couple of former clients of mine have gone on to play for Premier League sides.” He mentioned a couple of names, but Peter hadn’t heard of them.

Tony shrugged. “Anyway,” he continued, “there’s plenty of action below the Premier League – enough to keep me in business, that’s for sure.”

Peter felt that he ought to take up the slack in the conversation but couldn’t think of anything to say. He didn’t know much about football agents, except that some of them were rumoured to take bribes and backhanders – but that didn’t seem a particularly diplomatic thing to raise at this point.

“You know, it’s funny bumping into you like this,” said Tony. “I bumped into Giles Warren, the other day – remember him? I’d lost touch with him but guess what? He’s managing partner at a firm of lawyers in Guildford. I mean, Giles Warren – who’d have thought it? He was such a joker at school. But in the end, we’ve all done pretty well for ourselves, haven’t we? So tell me, what were you up to before you decided to have this career break?”

Peter explained in a slightly guarded fashion how he had been working at a well known firm of management consultants. This was true, although he omitted to mention that his job there had been a temporary one, largely consisting of editing spreadsheets along with other tasks of similarly mind-numbing tedium. He knew from experience that people tended to assume that he had been doing something rather more high-powered. He also omitted to mention how, prior to that, he had dropped out of medical school, tried but failed to become a TV scriptwriter and then re-trained as a teacher, before realising that it wasn’t for him. After that, he had worked in a succession of temporary office jobs while he attempted to finish a novel. He was now thirty four years old and no nearer being able to say that he had a “career” than when he left school.

“So what’s next?” asked Tony.

“I’m not sure, to be honest. There are a few possibilities I’m mulling over. I’d quite like a complete change of direction.”

“You know, I was always jealous of you at school,” said Tony. “It was because you were so bloody good at everything – well, maybe not sport, but pretty much anything on the academic side. But I can see that it makes things more complicated when it comes to working out what you want to do for a living. I mean, sport was the only thing I was any good at – so that made it a lot simpler for me on the job front. And ‘cos I never expected to amount to much, I’ve always felt a bit surprised at how well things turned out for me.”

Peter nodded. There were suddenly lots of things he wanted to say to Tony.

He wanted to tell him that he was on his way back to his parents’ house, because he could no longer afford the rent on his own flat. They would do their best to hide their disappointment, as they had for many years now, but he knew that they had expected better of him.

He wanted to tell him that school had not prepared him for the real world, where you needed to know what you wanted – and be prepared to focus on it. It was true that he had been good at lots of different subjects, but the world had no use for a jack-of-all-trades; you were much better off if you could find one thing you were really good at and specialise.

He wanted to tell him that he felt as if he had been born at the wrong time and in the wrong place. In the past, possession of a wide range of abilities might have been celebrated as a sign of accomplishment – but now it was more of a liability. It marked him out as a mere dilettante, flitting distractedly from one thing to the next.

And most of all, he wanted to tell him that despite his academic success, he had never been happy at school; that in fact, he had always been jealous of Tony and others like him, who were popular with the other pupils and never seemed to be at a loss for things to say.

But he didn’t say any of those things. There was another awkward silence.

“So, are you married? Got any kids?”

Peter shook his head.

Tony got out his smartphone and showed him pictures of his three children.

"You're very lucky," said Peter, his voice sounding slightly hoarse. He cleared his throat.

"Yeah, I know," said Tony, beaming as he flicked back through the photos.

At this point, Peter excused himself, saying that he needed to go to the toilet. By the time he came back, the train was pulling into the next station.

"You alright, mate?" asked Tony. "You look a bit off colour."

Peter assured him that he was fine.

"Well, here's where I get off," said Tony. "Got to go see a man about a footballer." He held out his hand. "Nice seeing you again though. And good luck with the new career. A man of your many talents is bound to find something sooner or later, eh?"

Peter watched him walk along the platform to the station exit, pulling his suitcase behind him. There was still over an hour of the journey left. He felt relieved that Tony had gone. It meant that he would not have to face any more questions. But he no longer relished the prospect of being left alone with his thoughts for the remainder of the journey.

He thought of the quotation from "Hamlet" again. He must have mis-remembered it somehow. He logged onto the train's wifi so that he could look it up on his smartphone.

It turned out to be largely as he had thought.

But not quite:

Oh God, I could be bounded in a nut shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

Carla R. Herrera

Bubble Gum Bicycle Man

The kids at the park--the little ones--seven and eight year olds--they would run up to him. The old guy riding the adult tricycle with the basket on it.

He looked wrong in our neighborhood. A dirty bearded guy. By dirty, I mean unshaven and rumpled. He had shaggy salt and pepper brows, in addition to the beard, it made him look as if he had just come from a hidden mountain cave. His wrinkled clothing appeared to hang from him, as if too large for his frame. He was thin too, skinny enough to make us all wonder if he was this side of starvation.

The kids didn't care though. Someone would see him riding by the park and the shout would go out.

"Hey, it's the Bubble Gum Man!" Then the call would be put out through the whole area. Kids would run over each other to get to the curb before he passed, so they could get a good look and a piece of Bazooka Gum with the Bazooka Joe comics inside. He had done this for years. When I was ten, I was one of the kids running as fast as my legs would carry me across the park, just to get a piece of gum before he ran out. It wasn't just the gum I wanted.

Like all kids at that age, we have the desire to be scared and safe at the same time. The Bubble Gum Man provided that kind of entertainment. We had all heard stories about him. Some said he really did live in some cave on Mount Baldy and came down once a week, just to lure some lone child back to

that cave. There, like Odysseus's Polyphemus, he would eventually cook and eat the child. bones would be strewn across the cave floor.

Countless teenage expeditions hunted for the cave and never did find it, but that didn't stop the story. In fact, with each generation the tale grew longer and more complicated. At some point, the Bubble Gum Man's childhood was introduced and it was said he was so ugly when he was born that his parents abandoned him on that mountain and he survived only because a mama bear happened to run across him and thought he was a baby bear.

But at fifteen, I no longer believed those old stories. I thought he was some old pervert that rode by the park on his bicycle hoping to find a lone child. That's why he never failed to have bubble gum on him. Though he had never done anything to any of us, that's what most of the kids my age thought. We believed that version of the story enough to keep an eye on the younger ones, from a distance.

"There's that old perv again," said Raley, my best friend Kyle's girlfriend. Though she wasn't my girlfriend, I went out of my way to impress her. Like other boys my age, I hung on nearly every word.

"Yeah," I said, watching the crowd that gathered across the park. "That's why I watch when my little brother runs over. Scared that old perv might do something."

If I was completely honest, I couldn't think of one child who went missing from our area. Though there were plenty of missing kids on milk cartons, they were always from somewhere else. If anyone had taken time to look at statistics, we would have seen our area was safe; not beset with missing children, you would think came from having a child predator who lived in a mountain cave nearby.

Toward the end of the summer of my fifteenth year, life was good. Thoughts of the Bubble Gum Man didn't cross my mind. My friends and I ran like packs through the park, on dark nights, playing spotlight, where we carried flashlights to tag our rivals.

We swam, took our turns at tentative and fragile romances, dreamed of a bright future and shared our hopes about escaping to the city one day. Though the small hamlet of Clearlake Highlands had a crime rate nearing one percent and offered nearly everything a person could need for a good life, we thought of having much larger lives than our parents. We hoped for more and wanted everything.

One night after a game of Spot, Kyle, Raley, a few other kids and I lay on the warm sand, soaking up moonlight, listening to the music drifting over from the nearby bar. We spoke in low tones, about graduating, leaving the Highlands, what we wanted to do with the dwindling days of summer. A perfect night by all accounts until one of the other kids spotted the one person no one wanted to see.

"Hey, isn't that the Bubble Gum Man over there?"

All heads turned to look at the freckle-faced girl pointing to a lonely stretch of beach. We sat up, curious, looking intently, for that familiar and strange figure. Even in the dim light, I knew from the bearded profile, the rumpled clothing and hunched shoulders, it was him, absent the bicycle. It appeared as if he had found something interesting in one of the garbage cans. Though no one had ever seen him going through trash before, the behavior fit with the countless stories we had heard about him over the years.

"I think he's dumpster diving," said Kyle.

Raley elbowed him and smiled. "That's not a dumpster, Dummy.

It's a trash can."

Kyle shrugged, glanced back at the man. "Same thing. Ugh. The guy is so gross. I wish he'd just leave."

"How 'bout we tell him to leave," said one of the other boys. I didn't know him well. Kyle had introduced him as one of Raley's cousins, visiting from the city.

"He's not bothering anyone," said freckle-face, an expression of calm marking her features. Sitting there, in her turquoise patterned summer dress, she looked even more beautiful than Raley. I smiled at her.

"That's true," I said, agreeing, trying to impress again. "He's not bothering anyone. Just leave him alone."

"He's bothering me," said the cousin, standing now, with hands on his hips. "I see enough of this in the city, don't want to see it while I'm on vacation."

The boy was large. He looked big enough to be on the high school football team, which is something most of the crowd I hung around with didn't know anything about. We were the nerdy adventurous types. We did our work through the year, got good grades, worked on the year book, took journalism or photography classes and wished for adventure. We read National Geographic and Smithsonian.

He began striding down the beach toward the hunched figure, the rest of us rising from the sand like rabbits tentatively poking noses from burrows. A common element of fear and surprise ran through us. I felt it, glancing around at the faces of those around me.

"What's he gonna do?" asked Freckle-face. That same fear I felt, sounding in her voice.

Without realizing it, I had begun moving, following in the cousin's footsteps. All of us followed, perhaps out of perverse curiosity, to see how this would unfold, but also to stop the boy who would disturb our strange little world with his city ways.

Kyle finally replied. "He's not going to do anything. He just likes to talk big."

I nodded, hoping my friend was right, a tight knot forming in my chest. Wishing I could turn around and run home, tell an adult, or someone who would take responsibility. We stopped far enough away to mark ourselves divorced from the situation, but close enough that we could hear the conversation. The cousin stopped several feet from the Bubble Gum Man. "Hey, Old Guy," he called.

The older man, glanced up, his beard seeming much longer than it usually was. He stopped rummaging, looked at the cousin, waiting.

"You shouldn't be on this beach by yourself this late at night. Go on home."

The Bubble Gum Man appeared to consider this for a moment, then turned his attention back to the garbage and continued his hunt for whatever it was he had been looking for. I noticed a small bag held in one withered hand, probably for his nightly cache--whatever that might be.

"Billy!" Raley called out to her cousin, but he didn't seem to hear her. Perhaps he was just ignoring her, we weren't sure.

"Hey Man, I said beat it. You need to leave now, or I'm going to have to escort you off the beach myself." "Billy!" Raley called again, as she began moving closer to the figures. "Come on now. Leave the man alone. Let's go."

The Bubble Gum Man seemed to have found something, pulling it from the trash and dumping it into his sack. I heard the tinny sound of metal striking metal.

"He's collecting cans," I said, to no one in particular.

"That's probably how he pays for the gum," said Freckle-Face, quietly beside me. I glanced over and saw she was watching Billy with a worried expression.

"We can't let him hurt the old guy. My mom said he's retarded."

This was the first time I had heard that part of the story. So in addition to living in a mountain cave, Bubble Gum Man had become a disabled individual. Was he still a pervert? I didn't know. What I did know, was that despite the stories, this man had lived within, but just outside our community for our entire lives. In reality, he had never done anything malicious to any of us. In fact, he had always been a benevolent figure who simultaneously terrified and amazed. We smiled when we thought of him, but shivered in fear when listening to the tales about him, grateful we were the fortunate ones who had not been taken to his cave.

Billy moved in, just as the old guy reached into the trash can again. Time slowed, the rest of the world fell away from our little group and every bit of my attention focused on that hand reaching for the old guy. I knew then, the Bubble Gum Man was harmless, and trying to fit in the best way he knew how. What Billy intended was worse than bullying. By the look on his face, the grim set of his lips, he

wanted to hurt the man.

"Stop it!"

Kyle and I screamed the command in unison. Raley had come up behind her cousin and slapped his hand away. "Stop it right now Billy, or I'm going to tell your mom."

The sound of another can dropped into the sack caused me to glance at the older man. He looked up and met my eye. Nodded. "You a good boy Joe. Tank yoo." He turned and began hobbling up the beach with a slight limp. His voice held that familiar speech pattern of those who were mentally challenged. Freckle-Face's mom was right. I glanced at her and saw she was watching curiously. Glad for the cover of night, I colored and glanced away, but let her know I was paying attention.

"Your mom was right," I said. She nodded, but remained quiet.

Kyle yelled again, breaking into my thoughts. "Stop him!"

Billy had broken away from our group and sprint down the beach after the Bubble Gum Man. Kyle on his heel, me tagging behind. The girls brought up the rear, screaming for Billy to stop. By the light of the moon, we saw Billy reach the figure limping across the sand. He did not stop running though. Instead, he crashed into the man with an elbow jutting into the back of the old man's neck. Both figures crashed to the ground, aluminum cans clattered in the sack flying across the beach. Kyle was there first, pulling on Billy, who seemed bent on pummeling the old man, who now had his hands up to cover his face, shrinking against the beach floor, as if he could somehow become invisible. The sight fueled my own anger and like Kyle, I grabbed at Billy. Anything I could grab was fine with me, as long as I could pull him from the Bubble Gum Man.

The boy's hair locked in my fists, I pulled hard, jerking his head back as Kyle pulled an arm. Raley and Freckle-Face moved past us, a glance in their direction and the girls both told us they were taking care of the old man.

As we pulled him toward the water, Kyle shouted, "Stop fighting," to no avail.

"Screw you guys. I'm gonna kill that guy." There was no doubt in my mind the boy meant what he said. Face contorted by rage, eyes glazed over, he still searched for his prey.

When we reached the water, we glanced at each other and were of the same mind. We pulled him out, Kyle holding one arm, a grip on the back of the boy's neck, me holding the other; every bit of strength I had going into pushing my weight on to his back to hold him down. Billy was large and strong, but working together we managed to keep him under until he stopped struggling. Then we let him go.

Soaked, we moved back on to the beach where the girls comforted the old man. He sat with his sack in his lap, rocking back and forth, emitting a cry that reminded me of a wounded animal, knowing it was about to die.

"It's okay John. It's gonna be okay. We got rid of that guy. He'll never bother you again," soothed Freckle-Face.

After several minutes the old man finally looked up at us standing around him. When younger I had been fascinated with taking in all the details of his dirty beard, the weathered face, the rumpled clothing, but had never looked into the man's eyes before. Like the sound of his cry, this man's eyes were pure soul. The eyes of a child wounded and alone. Years of sorrow dwelt there. I knelt next to him. "No one will ever hurt you again," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. "I promise." I meant it too.

Raley glanced out at the figure floating back up toward the beach. "I guess he tripped on a rock or something, huh?"

Kyle and I looked at each other and nodded, unsmiling. Today, the kids know the Bubble Gum Man's name is John. He collects aluminum cans to buy bubble gum for anyone who asks for it. That's why most of us save our cans and set them out on the curb for him, when we know he's coming by. No one really knows when the tradition started, or why, but there are still stories about him. Some say he began giving out bubble gum when he just happened to have an extra piece, and handed it to a child.

When he saw the smile lighting up that kid's face, the tradition was born.

Freedom

The screen blinked twice and Ally's lips moved, but no sound issued forth. The children on the screen, stood with hands placed over their hearts. "I pledge allegiance..."

Afterward, she hurried into the bedroom and lifted the side of the mattress. Hurry, hurry, she thought.

They would be coming. She had made a mistake during last assembly and read aloud.

Hurry, hurry.

She pulled the long white roll from the space between the mattress and box spring and began unfurling it. Then began wrapping it around her body. Voices in the hallway. Hurry. Wrapping, round and round.

She laughed when she heard the knock. She had anticipated this. Growing more anxious she stepped to the bedroom window and looked down, then placed the edge of the wrap against the inner sill, clamping the metal rod into place.

Another series of rapping, "Ally Benton! Come to the door. We know you're in there."

This time she laughed loud, "Fuck you!" she screamed and stepped out.

As she fell, she looked at the building opposite and could see her small body, falling, falling on the screen. Someone down there was videotaping. Round and round she went, unfurling and smiling.

"Haha!" She screamed when she saw the letters revealed. That would teach them.

Then she hit the pavement.

Jacob Hinter still videotaping and walking around the scene, got it from each angle. This was the second jumper in a week. Crazy days we live in, he thought.

He panned upward at the banner. There were several symbols. F-R-E-E-D-O-M. He had no idea what they meant.

Stairs

Eyes wide from fear, Veronica pulled the car to the side of a red brick wall and curbed it. She let it idle, keeping her foot on the brake as she looked at the time on the cell phone screen. Four p.m. The girl was supposed to be picked up at three.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the rear view mirror and winced. She looked frightened, pale and thin. She took a breath and looked away from her reflection to the road.

Worse than late, she had no idea where the school was located. One school was across town, but she didn't think it was the right one. She could not remember seeing children playing in the area. She pulled away from the curb speeding toward the only school she knew and wishing she had taken more information down.

Emily, the social worker had said it was a Lindsey School. Not that that meant anything to her. She would not know a Lindsey School from any other school.

She pulled into the parking lot. A few people milled about, coming and going, but they were adults. She hoped it was because the kids had been let out. Maybe the girl was inside waiting for her.

Inside, turquoise walls bordered in white were adorned with large, elegant splashes of color on canvas. Though it had been several years since she had been inside an elementary school, this did not look like any she had ever seen.

A short, but rotund woman behind the counter and glass window, greeted her smiling. "Hi there.

What can I get you for?" The woman rose from her seat with some effort and moved to the window, sliding it open.

She returned the smile, but already her hand-wringing had started. What could she say? Her stomach threatened to heave its contents and she saw the woman glance at her hands. Another smile.

"I'm looking for my daughter," she started.

The woman moved to a door separating them and stepped out, one hand on her left hip. She looked Veronica up and down, grinned sideways as if she found something amusing about her appearance. "Follow me," she said, moving down a narrow hallway.

The floor was shiny red, walls covered with what appeared to be weaved fabric. Again, she thought this did not look like any elementary school she had ever seen.

At the end of the hall, they moved through a door into an open area, an exact duplicate of the office they had just left. A middle-aged woman with dirty blonde hair stood directing a couple of teen boys to move things around. She glanced toward the two women as they entered and nodded at her co-worker, grinned at Veronica.

Veronica glanced at the woman beside her, but she was already moving back through the door. "She'll help you," she said indicating her co-worker and disappeared behind the door.

Suddenly a package was thrust into her hands. She held a large bag of hamburger buns. The blonde woman holding another bag motioned her to follow. "We're having a picnic tomorrow at the park, so we're getting everything loaded tonight. Really appreciate your help."

Another parking lot sat out front and they moved off the sidewalk, across the asphalt, toward a moving truck with two men standing at the rear. "I just need to find my daughter," she said following the woman. "I'm late. Was supposed to pick her up at three."

The woman stopped and turned to her smirking, "Give that to one of the guys, then you can follow me."

She sighed thankfully and handed the buns over to one of the men and followed the woman back to the office, falling in step beside her. "Do you know where she is?"

The woman glanced at her and pulled the door open. She pointed to an area where several old air coolers sat rusting on the ground. "Can you lift? We need some help moving those..."

Veronica felt her face grow warm. She grabbed the door handle, pulled it open, tearing it from the woman's hand. "Can you help me find my daughter or not?" Frustration sounded and she willed herself not to start crying.

The woman stood back, placed one hand on her hip and rolled her eyes. "I don't think so. Not with that attitude!"

Veronica wanted to strike the smug face. She imagined grabbing the woman by the hair, slamming it into the concrete floor. She turned and walked quickly away. Swearing under her breath as she looked at the time on the phone again, she hurried. She had wasted thirty minutes here and cursed herself for not calling Emily to begin with. She had not wanted to appear in need of help. If she called, maybe the social worker would think she was too stupid to raise a child.

The responsibility felt like too much. The girl was like a weight around her neck, dragging her under. She looked across the parking lot trying to spot the car, realizing she was on the wrong side of the building.

Moving down the sidewalk, she came to a set of concrete stairs. Ascending them, she was suddenly overcome with fatigue and sat down, broke into long sobs of frustration. The thought of the girl waiting for her moved her once again, but she felt herself sinking, drowning. The stairs seemed too tall, had grown too steep.

Still seated, she turned and attempted to crawl up the next step still sobbing. A young man approached and stopped not far from her. He fumbled with his car keys, looking uncomfortable. He was small and thin, a shock of dark hair tumbled from his head. A binder stuck from under one arm as he wrung his hands, played with the keys.

Then he moved again into the parking lot to a small turquoise car. He opened the driver's side door, hesitated still eyeing her. "You'll make it," he said, "just keep moving." Then the door slammed and he was pulling from the space.

She continued to stare at the empty space and a strange thought worked through her.

What if? What if she was someone else for awhile, she wondered. What if she had grown up in the perfect family and had none of the problems that plagued her life? What if she could do everything other people who grew up like that did?

She stood, looking around attempting to get some idea of where she was. Why was she wasting time like this? She was not weak or stupid. She looked at the phone again, opened it and hit the code for Emily's phone.

"Hello?" from the other end. A small woman's voice. A kind voice.

"Emily, I'm in trouble. I've made a huge mistake and need your help."

Tesla's Secret: Part One

1985 article.

Siloam Springs, AR-- Interesting discovery in historic building attributed to Nikola Tesla

After the purchase of a historic monument and hotel, local developer, Moroni Cally began exploring the basement and found, to his surprise, a strange looking mechanical contraption that appeared dated.

"The previous owners said they rarely went into the basement and when they did it was only during tornado warnings," he said. "They never mentioned this machine--or whatever it is."

After some research, a local reporter found that the dating of the machine corresponds to a lengthy stay at the hotel by Nikola Tesla, a Serbian-American inventor.

"Sometime in 1893, Tesla had come into the area and found the place to his liking and decided to stay for awhile. Unfortunately, it was to the detriment of the hotel owners as he was a very demanding guest according to the notes found in the (previous) owner's journals and reports in a small local newspaper called the Sun."

A collector of Tesla objects and artifacts, Chin Trine, examined the machine and reported that though it probably could be attributed to Tesla, the machine was unlike any of the inventor's other contraptions, which generally had to do with energy production.

He also offered to purchase the machine from the new owner. Currently, the machine remains in the basement of the hotel. The owner has no intention of selling, but has said that anyone who would like to examine it, may do so by appointment.

Since the 1985 discovery, the mystery machine fell into obscurity with the hotel changing hands three more times. The machine has remained where it was initially found, probably because the thing looked so forbidding. I happened to find out about it, because one of the hotel owners, a regular at the corner coffee shop, overheard me mention a story about Nikola Tesla.

A conversation ensued and from that, an invitation to view the machine.

Gloria and I arrived at the hotel around noon, on a sunny Wednesday afternoon. The owner of the hotel (preferring to remain nameless) escorted us to the basement, but asked us not to take photos. Thankfully Gloria brought her Iphone and managed to sneak a couple of shots.

"I have no idea how the contraption works," said the woman. "There is no electricity down

here.”

I moved closer to a console which looked to me, like something out of a 1950s science fiction movie. Glancing across it, I noticed several buttons, but no visible cords or wires. Given the absence of power, I did not see how the thing could work. A large red button, sitting at the end of the panel seemed to call to me. Not sure why I did it, but I pressed the darn thing.

A whirring sound, from somewhere in the guts of the beast sounded loudly. Gloria backed away toward the basement door.

"Mom! What did you do?" she yelled over the cacophony of sound that ensued. The owner of the hotel bolted out the door, shoving Gloria aside, nearly knocking her over.

I stood looking at the thing and wondering what just happened. The whirring, was now eclipsed by a loud hum and vibration directly under our feet. "What is that?" I asked.

Gloria and I exchanged a look. "Mom, lets get outta here." She motioned for me to come with her, but I could not move. I had to know what the inventor had done.

My father had begun telling me about Nikola Tesla when I was but a pup. If this truly was his work, it could mean something crazy wonderful for the world. A new technology never before tapped.

Though he was not in the soundest of minds, especially during his later years, I wondered about many of the projects he had worked on. Most specifically the material and equipment the government confiscated after his death. *Could this be something he had tried to hide?*

I glanced back at Gloria and shook my head. "I've gotta know Honey. You go." I waved her away. "I have to know..."

She must have thought I had gone insane. The conflict showed on her face. Something between shock and curiosity was quickly replaced by anger. "Are you nuts? This thing is doing something--"

She was cut off by a sudden wind that blew through the room, hitting me full in the face. I went to my knees, smelling and tasting metal.

"Mom!" Gloria, her voice shrill and down on the ground, pointed to the wall behind the console. I peeked around the console and saw that part of the structure fading in and out. It was there, then it wasn't. Replacing it was a large, dark hole.

My immediate thought was that Tesla, in all his wisdom had created a black hole. *Could he have?* I felt sick with the thought, but knew I had to get out of there quick.

The wind stopped. The room grew silent but for our heavy breathing and the whirring of the console in front of me. I looked back at my daughter standing again near the entrance, clutching the door frame, as if afraid she would blow away.

I held up a hand to indicate I needed her to wait a moment. Obviously the thing had stopped working for some reason. But then a motion in the hole caught my attention and I panicked. I meant to hit the red button again to shut off the machine, but instead hit a white button next to it. Suddenly, the hole lit up and I saw it was not a hole at all, but a tunnel.

Behind me, I heard Gloria's exclamation. "My God! What is it?"

Moving to the other side of the room, afraid to get too close, I needed to get a better look. There was no 'light' at the end of the structure. In fact, it appeared to be a replica of one of those carnival fun house tunnels, with light panels imbed into the side. It also appeared to rotate.

"Hello!" a weak voice called from the tunnel.

"What the--" Gloria appeared even more startled than before. Her eyes grew wide as we both saw a tall figure emerge.

As we stood there, rooted to our respective spots, the late, great Nikola Tesla stepped from the tunnel. I recognized him only from his height and stark features. The man was hardly the fastidiously dressed individual I had read so much about. Neither was he the aged Tesla I would expect to see. But a younger, less vibrant specimen of what Tesla had been.

His tattered suit, an old standby of mid-nineteenth century business men, was not only worn,

but ragged. Pieces had been ripped from the gray fabric and large tears showed in the legs. Threads had come apart at the seams. He appeared to be nearly bald, but I noticed clumps of hair had been taken from his head. As if, like the fabric, something had ripped it away.

Despite his slouching posture, he stood over six feet. His thin neck craned forward, bird-like, looking at us from eyes gray with age. Though younger, there were 'aged' traits to his appearance. He limped and I thought for some reason, this to be a result of the process that had brought him here.

Standing just outside the tunnel, he did not move forward. "Who are you?" he snapped.

Gloria had let go of the door frame. "Is that T-T-Tesla?"

I glanced back at her and nodded. "I don't think it's really him though. It's some kind of hologram or advanced imaging." I shook my head, disbelieving. "How could he have done this back then?"

"Of course it's me!" The Tesla image responded looking directly at me. "And you have used my Resurrector to bring me back. What is it you want?"

"Resurrector?" Gloria wondered, stepping closer behind me.

The man swiped the air in front of him, as if swatting a fly. "Yes. I have created a device that can tap the ether and bring back the consciousness of those who have passed over. Unfortunately, is--ggg-- not a-gugugu-- per--gugu--fect process. gugu-- problems." A gurgling began to sound in his voice.

A resurrector that could bring back the consciousness of the dead. What did that mean? "What kind of problems?" I asked.

He glanced down at himself and spread his hands, which appeared to be withering in front of us. Flakes of skin rose like dust and floated away. "We gugu--an still feel our bodies, despite the fa--gugu that we have been dis--gugu--orporated. And the body that I'm in is ban--gugu--rupt. I am fading."

He paused as if exhausted, then looked back up at us and smiled sadly, shaking his head. "I am a failure eh?"

"No sir!" I said. "You are a legend Mister Tesla. Everyone knows who you are, as they did when you were alive. But today people see that some of the things you spoke of like the wireless technology... well, it has come true."

His smile grew wider at that, then his glance fell on the console in front of me. "I gugu--annot move gugu--loser, or the effects of the tunnel will dissipate. I will be blown to bits." He gestured to the console. "You see the bla-- gugu-- nob's with numbers? There are green and red lights over them..."

I nodded. He swatted at the air again and I wondered what it was he saw that I couldn't. The thought caused me to pause and I hoped I would never find out.

"Turn those nob's to increase the amount of energy needed to amplify the effe--gugu--ts of the tunnel. Turn the bottom nob to six."

I reached over and noticed this was the highest setting. "What will this do?" I asked, hesitant.

"Woman!" He snapped at me, swatting the air once more. "It will gugu--eep me from falling to pieces. Please..."

I turned the nob and noticed an immediate rise in sound of the whirring from the console. The man in front of us changed. He stood straighter, tattered clothing repaired and he took a breath.

"That's better. Now," he gestured to the console once again. "to call back someone specifically you must have a photo of that individual and use the thought connector." He waved toward an area of the basement that was unlit. "You will place it on your head and use the photograph for visualization."

Gloria stepped next to me now. "You mean we can call anyone we want?"

He nodded. "Yes. You must have a clear image of an individual in your mind, or you will get me again."

"Kind of like a default consciousness," said Gloria, beside me now.

Tesla nodded, his head full of jet black hair now. "The consciousness you call last is stored in

the machine. If you have no other individual, you will get that consciousness."

He swatted at the air again and I realized his hair was thinning once more. So the effect did not last long. "How long do we have before people we call begin falling apart?"

Shrugging his thin shoulders, "I don't know. Not long. Perhaps five minutes. Some are worse than others. "I suggest you do not call Friedrich Nietzsche or other disturbed individuals. They are unstable and may somehow escape the tunnel. In that case you could have problems."

"Ahhhh...agghhhh..." He groaned and put a hand on his chest. "Please let me go back now. Turn the power all the way down or hit the red button." The gurgling in his voice again caused me to shiver. I did not want to know what caused it.

I had to know one more thing. "How is this powered?" I asked. "There are no wires. No cords. Where does it get the energy to run?"

"The... a-ay--air!" He waved his hand in front of him. Energy is everywhere Child. Now let me--me-- go!"

I hit the red button and the man vanished. The tunnel disappeared. Gloria and I were alone again and rain had begun to fall outside.

Giando Sigurani

The Chicken Nugget of Peace

George Smith woke up in the usual way, with the sun shining into his eyes from the window next to his bed, and against all reason, he smiled.

He knew what day it was. It was the day he had marked on his calendar two weeks previously, the day he looked forward to every time he threw himself upon the lumpy mattress within his tiny studio apartment to catch a few snatches of sleep before the next shift.

It was a Sunday. It was the only day off he would have from both his jobs for a very long time, and he was going to spend it doing something spiritual.

Not spiritual in the same way most people consider it to be. He would not spend his morning going to church, to be followed by donuts in the lobby and a discussion about the family picnic to be held next week, no doubt the sort of things God wanted of him. No; today, George had a much more important goal. It did not sound as significant or profound to other people as it did to him, but he was not in the least bothered by this. It was significant to him for the very simple reason that he planned for it.

He did so when he noticed that the two jobs he had, the shitty retail one, and the other shitty retail one, had coincidentally given him the same day off-- Sunday-- which had inspired him to rush off to his little black book and crack it open.

The little black book was nothing special. Within it was a list of things he wanted to accomplish in his lifetime. They were not spectacular achievements: about as exciting as British cricket, as one co-worker had put it.

He picked the item that occurred furthest up on the list that was not also crossed out, and marked it on his calendar.

The task was this:

He was going to be first in line at the Chicken Emporium when it opened.

He was going to buy the freshest batch of chicken nuggets.

He was going to take the first chicken nugget made that day.

He was going to dip it in Honey Mustard sauce.

He was going to eat it.

That was it. It was not by any means an amazing feat, but it was special to him in that very same way it was not special to absolutely everyone else.

As it happened, not only did George have among the most boring names in the history of uninteresting nomenclature, but he himself was also a very uninteresting person. Even when his co-workers pestered him to get out more, he would tell them that he had no intention whatsoever of becoming even remotely compelling.

Stamp collecting, birdwatching, chess, even the hobbies that were regarded by most of society to be terribly dull were each shunned by George, for fear that they might interfere with his personal beliefs.

His personal beliefs were another thing that raised eyebrows. They were concerned with everyone's particular purpose in life, including George's. If, George reasoned, there exist those with great, world changing, awe-inspiring purposes (Einstein, Gandhi, Genghis Khan), then there are those on the opposite side of the spectrum that didn't have one at all.

George firmly, adamantly, and passionately believed that he was one of them.

He had explained it, painfully thoroughly, so many times and to so many people that he had very nearly gotten sick of it. It seemed that each time he did, someone would tell him that he had a terribly bleak outlook on life, and each time he would turn his nose up and say that it wasn't the point. George's purpose in life, he constantly attested, was to not have one. He was there to balance the scales. He would be trite, bleak, and plain so that some day, somewhere else down the line somebody else could be fascinating.

When asked if this upset him in any way, he would say no to that as well. Does a bolt get tired of holding things together? Does a hairpin grow weary from keeping hairstyles in shape? Does a hammer, God forbid, ever get sick of having to hit things? No, he would say, they did their jobs without protest, and so did he.

It was for this reason why all the appointments in his little black book were not even slightly exciting to the average person. George did not want any of them to be unique or fascinating for fear of taking the glory away from someone else in the future, and that's how he wanted it to stay. He had designed his agenda so that each seemingly un-fulfilling appointment would make him think he was unique, without actually being so. It was the closest thing he allowed himself to do without getting a hobby.

He grinned widely as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. The Chicken Emporium did not open until 8:00 A.M. and the sun was just starting to rise, so he was safely going to keep his schedule. He showered, brushed his teeth, donned his plain clothes, put on his large plain glasses, and fed what he could only presume to be his cat.

At least, he was pretty sure it was a cat. All he knew for sure was that every now and again the litter box that he kept in the bathroom needed changing, the food tray he kept near the kitchen occasionally emptied itself, and the water bowl next to it had to be refilled every once in a while. The cat in question, however, had not been seen for more than two years.

He was fairly certain that it was a black, female cat of indeterminate size and even less determinant breed. He had deduced that it was black because in the summer seasons, when most domesticated mammals shed their fur to prevent heat stroke, he had found black cat hairs sticking to nearly every surface in his apartment that only ever yielded to the industrial-strength vacuum cleaner he often borrowed from a co-worker. He was certain it was female, because on one occasion, when he was cleaning out his closet, he had discovered a box of kittens.

It was unsettling, to say the least, to discover a cardboard receptacle filled with not one but in fact twelve mewling, purring balls of fur that he was certain were not there before. The most interesting part, though, is that they had been there for more than two weeks, and already had their eyes open. He didn't dare throw them out, but on the other hand he couldn't look after them either, so he decided to

wait and see what happened.

What happened was whenever he returned from his shitty retail job or his other shitty retail job, they were all still alive, energetic, and well-fed. There were still no signs of their mother as far as he could tell. They were getting their sustenance from somewhere, though, there was no doubt about that.

After a few weeks, the kittens started leaving the box and eventually the apartment, fully-grown adults. There were grays, oranges, whites, and one or two black cats, but still no sign of their mother.

He decided that the cat might be invisible or, as a more logical explanation, only came out when she was certain he was not in the apartment. Eventually, the last kitten left the box a fully-grown feline, and he was forced to leave it as a mystery unsolved.

Now, he just put out the food, refilled the water, and changed the litter box without any questions. It was not a good idea to become fascinated by the whereabouts of his cat. That might lead to himself becoming fascinating, and he simply could not have that.

When the water bowl was filled and the food tray was teetering, he put on his coat and left to stand outside the doors of the Chicken Emporium. The walk was only a few blocks, and the wind was not as relentlessly unpleasant this day as it was the day before, so he figured he had ample time.

At last the drab gray walls of the Chicken Emporium loomed ahead of him. He chattered with glee as he approached his goal, his destiny. Eating the nugget in and of itself would not fill his heart with the serenity he desired. Rather, the very idea that he planned something and got it done is what would do it for him.

He got to the door first, just as he planned. He could see the unhappy employees sponging down the counters as they prepared for the flurry of greedy, messy customers that were surely about to flood the place. George glanced at the windows, noticing with interest the “We Begrudgingly Serve Starbucks Coffee, Because We’ve Discovered That You Can’t Possibly Sell Anything Else To People These Days” sign that accurately summed up the emotional atmosphere of the Chicken Emporium.

At last, an employee came to the shiny glass doors with a ring of keys, and George was free to fulfill his two-week-planned destiny. The girl at the counter was a tragic case of teenaged angst stuffed in a fast food uniform and given a slight acne problem. She gave a horrified sigh and asked him what he would like to order, and he gleefully told her that he would like the freshest batch of chicken nuggets, please. He handed over his money and craned his neck into the back of the shop, where the unhappy fry cooks unhappily fried things. He saw them dump a fresh batch of week-old chicken nuggets into the greaser, noticing the shape and size of the one that touched the grease first. The girl at the counter handed him his change, arched an eyebrow in inquisitiveness, scoffed, and served the next customer. George just stood aside and watched as his fresh batch of chicken nuggets were prepared.

After what seemed an eternity, the fried goods were ready and the cook slid them across the counter in their shiny white box. To George it might as well have been a polished limousine.

He was almost in tears when he thanked the expressionless gentleman that handed it to him, and walked with a steady, majestic gait as he made his way to the eating areas outside. The building blocked most of the wind, and it was a rather cool day.

He glided into his seat and stared at the box. If he were a religious man, he would have prayed. He watched it for a few seconds as he tried to take in the idea that something he did, something he planned for, was about to go right. At last he opened the box.

He peeled off the wrapper on the cup of Honey Mustard sauce.

He took the chicken nugget.

He dipped the chicken nugget in the Honey Mustard sauce.

He opened his mouth, closed his eyes, licked his lips, and prepared as the chicken nugget inched slowly toward its goal—

“Mr. Smith.”

The very serious voice came from somewhere above, and George noticed that it was not the least bit inquisitive. It was a voice that knew precisely whom it addressed, and did not like to be

ignored. George delayed eating his chicken nugget for just a moment as he beheld the speaker.

He was blocking the sun. In rather the same way the moon looks during a solar eclipse, the front of him was darkened while the edges of him were brightened as the light bent around his large, broad-shouldered backside, revealing that his skin was colored emerald green. He was wearing what looked like a large, hoodless ski parka that looked like it was capable of insulating a delicate snowflake from a direct hit by a solar flare. He was also wearing pitch-black sunglasses and a very solid frown.

He had someone with him, a smaller person with the same complexion standing directly behind him and dressed in exactly the same manner, but instead of looking at George he was looking at the chicken nugget and biting his lip with nervous anticipation, a bead of sweat forming on his brow. The sweat was electric yellow.

“Mr. Smith,” repeated the eclipsing figure. “I will be blunt, because I am fully aware you appreciate that sort of thing, and because I don’t think I have a lot of time to explain myself. We have come from a very, very long way away on a mission of universal peace, and we would very much like to talk to you.”

George’s chicken nugget remained poised inches away from his mouth, and as it wavered from his unsteady arm the eclipsing visitor’s friend seemed to grow even more nervous. “Er,” he said. “You do?”

“Yes, Mr. Smith. As you might be able to tell, we are not exactly from your world. You can understand how the matter we are about to discuss might be a matter of great importance.”

George appraised his new visitor from top to bottom, noticing that he had to sweep his head such a wide angle to accomplish this that he felt a painful pop in his neck. The visitor didn’t look human. His arms were proportionally longer than they should have been, his head was slightly smaller, and he was more than eight feet tall. The muscles in his neck seemed to have eschewed the basic principles of muscular structure and instead seemed to follow the laws of industrial hydraulics. All these things, even without taking the green skin into account, seemed convincing enough.

“Oh really?” George said. “And who are you? How do you know my name?”

“We are a usually peaceful race from a large planet approximately 19.5 billion billion billion light-years away, Mr. Smith. It was no small feat arriving on your tiny blue-green homeworld. We have developed monitoring skills and information gathering techniques that most races can’t even fathom, much less develop. We have been watching you, Mr. Smith.”

The chicken nugget wiggled a little more, and the smaller of the two figures winced. “I see,” said George. “You’re space aliens.”

“Yes, Mr. Smith.”

“What do you mean by usually peaceful?”

“We are usually peaceful in the same way that your kind is usually not peaceful,” said the alien calmly. George thought about this, and shrugged. He didn’t pay much attention to the news, but even someone as uninformed as he knew that there always seemed to be at least one disgruntled, heavily armed interest group fighting another disgruntled, heavily armed interest group somewhere.

The chicken nugget moved towards his mouth again, and the smaller alien let out a little cry of pain. George frowned, and raised an eyebrow. “So if you’re both space aliens,” he said, “then how are you talking to me? Shouldn’t you be speaking another language or something?” George, like most people, had not been in many situations involving creatures from outer space, so he decided to get a feel for his current one by including as much research he could remember about such matters into the conversation, which for him consisted of the times he flicked to the science fiction channel whenever the local news was talking about something interesting.

“When one’s entire culture and technology are devoted towards the integration of every single creature in the universe into a boundless state of universal peace,” the alien answered, “one of the first barriers that society learns to break is the language one. It is also, as we have discovered, the easiest.”

George nodded again, his chicken nugget following him. The smaller of the pair of creatures

looked like he was about to burst. "Why are you wearing those jackets?" George asked.

"This planet is very cold compared to our homeworld," the larger alien responded. "We are much closer to our suns."

"And the sunglasses?"

"It is much brighter here, as well."

"How can it be hotter and darker at the same time? If your planet was so close to the sun, wouldn't it be brighter?"

The alien smiled. "A rather astute observation, Mr. Smith. Our planet is darker because our suns are darker. And we have a lot more birds."

George decided to leave it at that, and waved the chicken nugget around in the air as he spoke, noting that the smaller of the aliens was grasping his head and hopping on one foot. Despite his personal beliefs, he was becoming very interested in these creatures. It was then it dawned on him that a visit from space aliens might make him into a unique or interesting person, so he moved to get rid of them. "So you're on a quest for universal peace," he said. "What does this have to do with me?"

"He's just... waving it around like that!" the smaller alien blurted suddenly.

"We have discovered that the best way to establish universal peace, Mr. Smith, is to first acquire ultimate knowledge," the larger alien said without even acknowledging his companion.

"Is that why you have developed all that monitoring equipment?" asked George.

"Partly, yes. But another part of it, Mr. Smith, is the tracking, documentation, and collection of samples from every single element in the Universe."

George just stared politely. The Honey Mustard dripped off the end of his chicken nugget, and the smaller alien let out a frightened squeal. "All right," he said, trying not to notice it.

"It is very simple, Mr. Smith. The Universe is made up of mostly empty space, and the occasional particle of matter. Empty space and its properties are fairly easy to comprehend. It is the matter, actually, that has proven to be more difficult.

"Through our extensive research, we have been able to understand and collect samples of almost every single type of matter and every single combination of it in the Universe. It was this way that allowed us to develop our superior technology. When one knows exactly how every single particle in a device will function, it is much easier to build it.

"As our technology expanded and our research grew, we became aware of a new type of element, a new molecule we had not yet encountered. The problem was its rarity, Mr. Smith. This molecule, this element, is so rare that in fact only one particle of it exists in the entirety of the Universe. As our research neared completion, we realized that it would not be possible to reach our goal of universal peace without it. It is essentially the center of the Universe."

George nodded. Despite his best efforts, he could not help but find this fascinating. He almost dropped his chicken nugget, but allowed it to only slip a moment. The smaller space alien turned a noticeably paler shade of green.

"We are now proud to say," continued the larger alien, "that we have collected samples of every other type of element in the Universe. When we got that far, we redoubled our efforts for finding this rare element, this incredibly wonderful particle, the last piece to our puzzle, and are even prouder to say that we have found it."

"Really?" asked George, and he simply couldn't hide the fascination in his voice. "Where is it?"

"We detected it traveling through space, passing one of our information probes a short while ago. We got an idea of what direction it was heading, and followed. We have measured its trajectory, taken every single variable into account that might affect its path, that is, wind speeds, gravity, light, heat, popular television shows, local politics, and radio traffic, and we are certain we know exactly where it is."

"Yes? You are?" asked George, excited.

"Mr. Smith," said the alien, "I'm afraid that the last remaining piece to our puzzle and

ultimately the secret to universal peace, prosperity, happiness and enlightenment is, in fact, your chicken nugget.”

George could not hide the surprise. He nearly dropped his food, causing the smaller alien to cover his eyes in fright. He wondered what on Earth his chicken nugget had to do with any part of this conversation. “What?” he asked, and instinctively lowered the fried food to his napkin, but did not let go. The smaller alien deflated like a balloon.

“Mr. Smith,” the larger space alien said slowly, “This rare particle, this amazing element, the one we have been searching for, has just embedded itself in the food you hold in your hands.”

George looked at the piece of food in his hand and wondered how, exactly, something so banal and uninteresting could be so terribly important that an entire race of creatures would travel mind-boggling distances just to see it. “But,” he said, “This is my chicken nugget.”

“We understand that, Mr. Smith,” said the eclipse. “And that is why I and my cohort have come to this planet. We are here to negotiate with you.”

George idly turned the food around in his hands, and the smaller of the aliens started to sweat again. “You don’t understand,” he said, “I’ve been waiting two weeks for this.”

“We understand perfectly, Mr. Smith, and we have not come empty-handed. We have vast reserves of knowledge that will take your civilization an innumerable measure of years to achieve. We have technology the likes of which will never be seen in this planet’s lifetime. All, Mr. Smith, in exchange for the piece of food you were just about to eat.”

“No, you really don’t understand. This is something I have to do. I have to eat this, I’ve been waiting ages. You don’t get why I have to.”

“I assure you, Mr. Smith, that we are perfectly aware of the situation you are in. All of us have reviewed the black appointment book in which you keep your lifetime goals. All of us understand the pressure you are under. I would like to remind you, Mr. Smith, that we are willing to accommodate you greatly for this reason.”

“Really? You’ve seen it?” George frowned; he didn’t think anybody would care about his calendar, of all things. He’d only shown it to a few people, and their interest was not piqued in the slightest.

“Yes, Mr. Smith,” the alien said. “We have seen it.”

“And?”

“We find everything in it to be terrifically, staggeringly, enormously dull, Mr. Smith. But that is not our concern. We are willing to do quite a lot in return for a very simple service. We beg you to consider what we are offering. Would you like to box worlds? Bottle stars? Leap to distant galaxies in the blink of an eye? Would you like to know the meaning of life? Would you like to know the truth behind the Kennedy assassination? Would you like to know,” the alien said, “where your cat is?”

George was listening with quiet interest, but was suddenly caught off guard. “My cat?” he asked.

“We understand you’ve been taking care of a small quadrupedal feline and have been befuddled about its whereabouts for approximately two years. We know exactly where she is, Mr. Smith. We will share this information with you if you are willing.”

George almost let go of the chicken nugget at this. He would like to know where his cat was, actually. Would it hurt to find out? “Yes,” he said, “yes, why don’t you tell me where my cat is?” He was, he was very shocked to find, very interested in this.

“Your cat has dug herself an alcove behind the water heater,” the eclipse said. “We understand that she does not even know you are there. The fact that you haven’t seen her in two point three years is purely coincidental.”

“She doesn’t know I’m there?” George asked, horrified. “Who does she think is feeding her?” He was actually glad that this was the reason. It seemed like an appreciatively dull and uninteresting explanation.

The alien didn't waver an instant. "Your cat believes that God is feeding her, Mr. Smith."

George gaped. "God? My cat believes in God?"

"Yes, Mr. Smith. Your cat does not know where the food or water is coming from. She has put her faith in a higher power so that the Time of the Next Feeding or the Cleaning of the Great Litter Box will occur if she is faithful and virtuous."

"Faithful and virtuous? She's a cat! And she's had kittens, I found them!"

"We understand that the idea of feline sin and virtue does not involve its more basic instincts, but rather more worldly behaviors such as restraining the urge to deface furniture or learning to relieve one's self in the litter box instead of the potted plants you keep by your kitchen."

"Is this... normal cat behavior?"

"We have discovered that when one is faced with an occurrence that they can't immediately explain, it is not unusual for them to put their faith in an omnipotent deity and leave it at that. Your cat, Mr. Smith, is no exception."

George started to rub his temple with his free hand. Here he was, trying to live an uninteresting life, and now he was talking with aliens from outer space who were trying to get his chicken nugget and telling him that his cat was religious. "Look, I've been waiting a long time for this," he said. "It's the only thing I've planned for in years. Can't you just let me eat my chicken nugget and leave?"

"Mr. Smith, I believe I have established that this is a matter of utmost importance," said the alien with a tinge of impatience. "Have I not offered you enough incentive?"

George twirled the chicken nugget in his fingers, much to the chagrin of the smaller of the aliens, who was biting his nails. Ultimate knowledge? Since where did he care about such things?

"Mr. Smith," said the alien. "I would urge you to consider making the right decision. We have been searching for this element for quite some time. Ultimate knowledge. The most sophisticated technology imaginable. The possibilities are endless."

George twirled the chicken nugget thoughtfully. Just this morning his life had been so wonderfully dull, so joyously boring, and now he was holding the secret to universal enlightenment in his hands. Where had things gone wrong? Why should he believe these aliens? Why should he believe his chicken nugget had something to do with universal peace? He had enough trouble as it was trying to believe in his cat's piety

He had been first in line at the Chicken Emporium when it opened.

"Do you need more time to consider our offer, Mr. Smith?"

He had ordered the freshest batch of chicken nuggets.

"We are waiting, Mr. Smith."

He had taken the first piece fried that day.

"We have not been unreasonable, Mr. Smith. We are willing to conform, whatever your requests."

He had dipped it in Honey Mustard sauce.

"Mr. Smith, need I remind you that we are a usually peaceful race?" said the alien sternly.

George snapped his head up, his decision finally reached. "No," he said. "You said that bit already."

He popped the chicken nugget in his mouth, closed his jaws around the secret to universal peace, and swallowed.

The two aliens were far too stunned at this act of outrageous stupidity to move or even speak, and George, who could have known the meaning of life, who could have had unimaginably powerful technology at his fingertips, or who, if he really cared about such a thing, could have been told that there wasn't really a Kennedy conspiracy after all, stood up, put on his coat and walked home.

When he got back, the first thing he did was pull out his little black book and cross out his newly completed task. Next he checked behind the water heater. Sure enough, there was a large, black, and very surprised cat there. She had been wagging her tail slowly and dozing, but froze when he

opened the closet door and turned on the light. Her wide yellow eyes dilated in complete shock as George reached down to pat her, to finally reach out and touch the mysterious feline he had been caring for all this time. When his hand touched her, every single muscle tensed in her small furry body, and she darted out of the apartment never, as usual, to be seen again.

He spent the rest of the day rocking in his rocking chair and looking out the window. He drank some water, went to the bathroom, and picked out a few apples from the fridge. He was about to get back to his chair when he heard a knock on his door. Strange, he thought, today seems to be full of surprises.

He gasped when the door opened, and backed up slowly when he saw who it was. "What are you doing here?" George asked.

"You should have found a better purpose, Mr. Smith," the green, eclipsing figure said with menace. "You could have brought greatness to your world, but instead you chose to keep things exactly the same."

George pressed his back against the wall, unable to continue further.

"Don't worry," the alien said. "We'll take care of the cat."

Nobody really noticed anything unusual that night, or even the next day. There was just a brief flash of light that spilled out into the parking lot of George Smith's apartment complex, but that could have been a camera flash, or a light bulb burning out.

The rest of the night was silent, except for the quiet return of a small black cat who seemed to have calmed her nerves enough to return home. It was empty again, which was fine with her. The apparition that had disturbed her peace only hours before made her question things she did not want to question.

She was surprised to find her food bowl full and her litter box clean. This miracle filled her with joy, and she renewed her faith in the higher power that was surely looking after her.

The only difference from before was that this time, she was right.

The Devil Still Has My Lawnmower

"Hi Lou," Alan said one morning while retrieving his newspaper from the driveway. He was clad in a bathrobe and waddling in slippers, blinking at the sun. Lou, his next door neighbor, a handsome bachelor who seemed far too young to own his own house, was outside inspecting the hedges in his yard critically.

"My yard needs work," said Lou. "My shrubs are looking ragged, weeds are taking over and my lawn's overgrown. I thought I was a better caretaker than *this*."

"That's a bummer," said Alan. "Better fix that before the Homeowners Association gets word."

"My thoughts exactly," said Lou. "I don't want to get fined again."

"You got fined?" asked Alan. "I'm sorry to hear that. I hear they've got lawyers for their lawyers."

"Yeah," said Lou. "It was before you and your family moved in next to me. Some kids performed some damned satanic ritual on my yard."

Alan blinked a few times. "And the Home Owner's Association fined you for it?"

"They've never been lenient in the time I've known them. Didn't matter that it wasn't my fault."

"So... what'd they do?" asked Alan with a humorous smile. "Draw a big pentagram on your yard? Cover it in trash? Thrash some lawn ornaments?"

"They built a stone altar and burned a lamb alive on it," said Lou.

"Jesus Christ," said Alan.

Lou sighed. "What can you do?" he said. "When kids get an idea in their heads, they just can't

get 'em out. It doesn't bother me so much that they found me; the part that bothers me is that Leviticus 1:9 clearly states that burning lamb entrails creates a pleasing odor for the Lord. *I'm* not the Lord."

"It says that in the *Bible*?" said Alan.

"It says a lot of things in the Bible," said Lou. "It's three-quarters of a million words long. Depending on the translation, that is."

"Wow," said Alan. "Well, I'll leave you to that yard work." He peered at Lou's lawn, still squinting from the bright light in the sun. "Your lawn's pretty long. I haven't seen it that long before."

Lou shook his head. "Wouldn't you know it, my lawnmower broke. And my warranty expired. I knew I should have bought the extended coverage. A friend of mine got his tiller in 1802 and they still covered it when it broke last year."

Alan chuckled. "Nothing's built to last these days. Tell you what. Why don't you borrow *my* mower?"

"That'd be awful swell of you," said Lou.

Alan shook a warning finger at Lou. "But you better give it back. My wife doesn't want me lending out any of my garden tools. And my twelve-year-old son needs to earn his allowance *somehow*."

Lou chuckled. "Tell you what. Why don't I get in writing?"

"Oh, that's not necessary," said Alan. "You've been my neighbor for- what is it- two years now? I know you're good for it. Besides," he added, "I know where you live!"

The two neighbors laughed at the joke. Lou reached into his back pocket. He pulled out a piece of brownish paper and a pen. He started writing. "No, I insist," he said. "I'd like to get it in writing. I've got a reputation as a liar at my old work and I'd like to clear my name."

"Sounds like you need a new job, Lou," said Alan.

"Don't have to tell *me* twice. But it still managed to pay for this nice house!"

One last time, the two neighbors laughed. Lou placed the piece of paper in Alan's hand, and Alan went out to drag his mower from the garage. He didn't even bother reading the piece of paper Lou had given to him, and simply tucked it into the belt of his robe.

Alan retired to his living room to have his morning cup of coffee and read the paper. His wife, Betsey, trotted in moments later. "Lovely day out," she said, giving her husband a peck on the cheek. "Good way to start the weekend."

"Can't say the same of our neighbor Lou," said Alan as he took a sip of coffee. "Poor fellow has a lot of yard work to catch up on."

"Oh, I sure hope the H.O.A. doesn't report him," said Betsey. "He's such a dear, that Lou."

"We were talking about that this morning," said Alan. "Did you know he got fined once before?"

"I heard about that. Poor dear. Some kids come by and wreck his lawn, and not only does he have to pay to fix it, but he had to pay the Association as well."

"That H.O.A.," said Alan, "They're devils, I tell you. Charging a young guy like Lou for something he didn't even do. A fine how-do-you-do."

"Money is the root of all evil," said Betsey. "I think it says that somewhere in the Bible."

"I wouldn't doubt it. It's three-quarters of a million words long, you know."

"So what are your plans today, dear?" asked Betsey.

"To enjoy a weekend like it's meant to be enjoyed," said Alan. "Read my paper, drink my coffee, and *not* think about my job."

"Good for you," said Betsey. "Thomas, meanwhile, will be mowing our lawn this weekend."

Alan looked up from his coffee. "Looks like our son has earned a lucky break. I just loaned my lawnmower to Lou."

Betsey looked upset. "What have I told you about loaning our expensive tools to neighbors?"

"It's all right," said Alan, pulling out the slip of paper from his bathrobe. "I got it in writing."

"Oh?" said Betsey. "He promised he'd give it back?"

"I insisted," lied Alan. "Now he is required by powers far greater than myself to return my lawnmower."

Betsey smiled. "Well, good," she said. "I'm glad. Thomas will get to the lawn later, then. I don't want the H.O.A. fining us. Anything good in the paper?"

"Just another crazy group of nuts claiming the apocalypse is coming."

"That's nice, dear," said Betsey, and went out of the kitchen.

* * *

Alan watched Lou perform his yard work. He would have offered a hand, but he was tired. His joints were not like they once were.

Lou started with the hedges, pulling out a pair of sharp-looking shears. He gently trimmed each leaf with the care of an experienced botanist, sometimes measuring branches with a ruler. He took ten steps back to admire his work, and took a short break. After a few minutes, Lou emerged with a glass of lemonade in his hand. It was shortly after this time when a black car pulled out in front of Lou's yard.

The man that got out of the car to talk to Lou was very... strange-looking. He had a slick Hugo Boss fashion sense, a wide-brimmed black fedora, and a dominating swagger in his step. But there were one or two things that seemed off to Alan, like his towering height and the fact that his skin wasn't strictly the color of flesh, but instead a very convincing mockery of it, like a painting on canvas.

The man tapped Lou on the shoulder, and Lou almost jumped from surprise. The tall man began to speak, and Lou sipped his lemonade with one hand and put his other in his pocket, listening with interest. The two had a conversation that became progressively more heated with every moment. Lou started shaking his head violently and gesticulating so rapidly with his lemonade that he spilled most of it on his as-yet unmowed lawn. Finally the tall man quickly spun around, walked aggressively to his car, and pulled away. Lou, obviously still upset about the encounter, began the process of weeding his lawn before the mowing.

"Dad. What are you looking at?" came a voice.

Alan jumped at the interruption. In his doorway stood his twelve-year-old son Thomas, leaning against the doorframe and glowering.

"Good morning, Thomas!" said Alan cheerfully, folding up his newspaper and pretending to look at a story on the back page, which was indeed a full-page grocery store spread.

"You're spying on the neighbors again," said Thomas. "Geez, you never mind your own business."

"I was just staring into space," said Alan defensively. "I wish you would say good-morning to your father, Thomas."

Thomas walked over to the refrigerator and violently plucked it open. "Whatever," he said. "I wish you would stay out of my room."

"Maybe you should be a little more appreciative of the people who house and clothe you," said Alan gruffly.

Thomas withdrew an entire quart of orange juice and started drinking straight from it. He walked over to the bay window in the kitchen, through which Alan had been watching his neighbor do yard work. "What's so fascinating about Louis anyway? He's so cheerful and *boring*."

"Watch how you speak about your neighbors!" snapped Alan. "And don't drink from the carton either! What's wrong with you?"

Thomas threw out his arms, almost spilling the orange juice. "Why do you have to talk to me like that, Dad? I feel so antagonized by you."

"Stop talking to me like that!"

Ever the angry pre-teen, Thomas turned around and resumed watching Lou. Alan angrily resumed reading the paper. He wished the child-rearing books he'd bought had mentioned *this*. Thomas

has a mean comeback for everything, it seemed.

Thomas giggled. "What's so funny?" asked Alan, still gruffly.

"Looks like our neighbor has a bee problem," said Thomas. "They're all over the place."

"Why are you laughing about that?" said Alan angrily, getting up from the kitchen table. "That's not funny! He could get really hurt!"

"They're not stinging him," said Thomas. "It looks like he's talking to them."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous-" said Alan, but he stopped. It was true. Lou was indeed talking to a swarm of bees.

The conversation seemed just as unpleasant to Lou as the one with the tall man in the Hugo Boss suit. The swarm of bees maintained a cylindrical pillar shape, instead of a shapeless cloud like the swarms Alan was familiar with. It contracted and expanded in controlled ways as Lou spoke, displaying a wide range of flight patterns. The bees flew in graceful spirals and drifted into lazy loop-the-loops; then progressed into urgent swoops and again into angry, jagged vibrations. If Alan didn't know better, he would have thought that the swarm of bees was trying to express different emotions.

Lou, apparently no longer willing to be buzzed at in such a rude way, angrily strutted towards Alan's lawnmower. With a single, powerful pull on the rip-cord, it roared to life. The swarm of bees, recognizing the battle cry of its natural and hated enemy-- the lawnmower-- rapidly dispersed in a state of panic.

"Dude," said Thomas. "That swarm of bees was fucking *pissed*."

Alan resolved not to discipline his son for such harsh language. "Poor Lou. First, an overgrown lawn, and now, *bees*."

"Isn't that our lawnmower?" said Thomas.

"That's right," said Alan sternly, looking over at his adolescent son. "I've loaned it to him. The only thing preventing me from sending *you* out there with it to do *our* lawn is that Lou's broke last week. You should be thankful."

"Wow!" said Thomas, excitedly. "Maybe he's not such a boring, white bread, goody-two-shoes after all. Thanks Louis!"

"*Watch it* how you talk about people!" snapped Alan.

"Sorry, Dad," said Thomas, who turned around and started walking out of the kitchen, orange juice carton still in hand. "I'm going to go play video games!"

Alan sighed as his son left the room, and resumed watching his frustrated neighbor drag the lawnmower back and forth across his lawn.

Lou shook his head angrily, gritting his teeth as he forced the lawnmower across his lawn. The visit from the tall man and the swarm of bees seemed to make him quite angry indeed, angry enough that he was missing entire rows of grass with the lawnmower.

Alan resolved to give Lou a helping hand to cheer him up, but he wasn't about to do it in his bathrobe. He went to his bedroom and changed into a pair of ruddy jeans and a stained T-shirt. When he went to the back yard to get his straw hat, he heard the lawnmower stop. Alan didn't think anything of it. He thought Lou must have stopped to empty the grass-catcher.

Alan walked through the house and into the front yard, whistling cheerfully as he went around the hedge and into Lou's yard. It wasn't until he was halfway down the lawn when he realized that both his neighbor and his lawnmower were nowhere to be found. He looked left, he looked right. There was simply no way that Lou could have managed to sweep up all the grass clippings from the sidewalk, put away the lawnmower, and go back inside in the time Alan had taken to change into work clothes. Furthermore, the lawn was not by any means finished, and the missed rows of grass were still unkempt.

Alan walked up to Lou's door and knocked. There was no answer. He waited a minute or two and knocked again. Still nothing.

Alan walked back into his own house and continued his day. Perhaps Lou had an urgent errand to attend, and had stashed away Alan's lawnmower in the backyard until he was finished. In either case,

Alan was sure that his lawnmower was safe, and whatever was bothering his polite and unassuming neighbor would surely be resolved.

* * *

A week later, Lou was still missing, and Alan's lawn was now starting to look like it needed attention. Alan knocked on Lou's door, and was treated with the same silence he had experienced the weekend before. Nothing seemed to have changed, except a notice from the Homeowners Association taped to Lou's door notifying him that if he didn't mow his lawn soon, he would be faced with a fine.

Alan turned around. Lou's lawn was still unmowed, and in fact, since it had been a week, was now even worse. He went back to his house and woke up his wife.

"Dear," he said, "have you seen our neighbor?"

"Lou?" asked Betsey. She was still groggy with sleep, and rolled over to rub her eyes in protest of the unwelcome consciousness.

"Yes," said Alan. "I think something might have happened to him. I haven't seen him since I loaned him my lawnmower."

Betsey frowned. "I *told* you not to loan out our tools. I *told* you."

"He was just right next door, all right?"

"Well you need to get our lawnmower back, Al," said Betsey. "Our yard has to be done *this* week, or we'll get fined."

"Looks like they already fined Lou," said Alan. "I saw a notice on his door."

"But he was taking care of his lawn last week, wasn't he? You should call him."

"I'd call him, but I never got his phone number. He didn't finish. His lawn is still terrible."

"Well, that's not *our* fault," said Betsey. "Get our lawnmower back. Thomas needs to do some yard work if he's going to get an allowance from *us* this week. Maybe Lou's at work."

"Where does he work?" asked Alan. "Do you know?"

"Some office on Seventh Street," she said. "The one with the ugly architecture."

"All right," said Alan. "I'll check it out."

Alan took a shower, got dressed, and got in his car. Seventh Street was only half a mile away. The office building with the ugly architecture was immediately apparent: While the surrounding buildings were easy to look at with a nice desert motif, Lou's workplace was painted a bright, obnoxious red. He walked up to the building and paused at the glass door, chuckling at the address printed on it: 666, Seventh Street.

Alan went inside. The lobby was completely and alarmingly bare. There wasn't even any furniture to sit down in while waiting: Just a single desk and a single chair, occupied by a single receptionist.

The room was red. The desk was red. The paintings hanging on the walls had red frames and held nothing but canvases painted solid red. The receptionist had red hair, and was even wearing a red dress and a red pair of glasses. Alan walked up to address her. "Um, hello," he said.

The receptionist was silent.

"I'm here... um..." Alan continued. The receptionist pursed her cherry-red lips and her thin red eyebrows started to slowly sink into a frown. "My neighbor works here. I just wanted to see if I could talk to him."

"If he *does* work here," said the receptionist rudely, "and it's doubtful, I promise, then you can't see him because he's busy."

"Um..." said Alan, "How would you know? I need to see him. It's kind of urgent."

"We're all busy," said the receptionist. "We have a deadline we're trying to make before our competitors, the firm on 777, Sixth Street."

"His name is Lou," said Alan.

"Definitely not someone who works here," said the receptionist. "Please, leave."

Alan hung his head forlornly, and reached into his pocket for his car keys. He felt something in

his pocket that he was sure he hadn't put there. He pulled it out. It was a folded piece of paper; the contract that Lou had signed, stating that he promised to return Alan's lawnmower.

Alan handed the paper over to the receptionist. "He gave me this," he said. "Do you recognize the signature?"

For a moment the receptionist did nothing, but then she reached out and snatched the paper from his hands impatiently. With complete disregard for the condition of the document, she unfolded it roughly and read the first few lines. Then, she screamed.

It was like a thousand damned souls from the depths of Hell crying out in simultaneous and incalculable surprise. Alan jumped two feet in the air from the noise, and stared at the receptionist in sheer astonishment. She still had the document in hand, but her eyes were brightening up in excitement. Something was lighting up her face, and it took a few moments for Alan to realize that the light was coming from the document itself.

The receptionist snapped her head up. There were tears rushing from her eyes. "Where did you get this?" she asked. Her voice was a strange cross of hopefulness and desperation.

"I told you," said Alan, still startled from the reaction of the secretary. "From my neighbor, Lou."

"*Lou*?" asked the secretary. "Why do you call him Lou?"

"He told me to call him that," said Alan with a shrug.

The secretary got up out of her seat. There was a brightness in her eyes, and it wasn't a figurative one. Her eyes seemed to be replaced with a pair of twinkling stars. "Well, your neighbor is not named Lou. He is Lucifer, the First of the Fallen, the Last to be Saved. He is the Prince of Darkness, the Father of Lies, and the ruler of Hell! Your *neighbor*, sir, is the *Devil*!"

Alan stopped backing towards the door. He thought about Lou, how he seemed so young and so successful. He remembered the tall man with the fake skin and the Hugo Boss suit, and the swarm of bees that could talk, and the fact that Lou had vanished without a trace and had taken Alan's lawnmower with him. And for these reasons, Alan thought, it made absolute, one hundred percent, perfect sense that his neighbor, Lou, was actually Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness.

Alan put his hands on his hips. "Well," he said authoritatively, "I'll have you know, ma'am, that the Devil still has my lawnmower."

* * *

Alan was escorted into an elevator that revealed itself when a regular-looking bit of red wall slid away. The secretary shoved him in roughly, and glowered at him. "Please hurry up," she said. "We're almost done preparing."

"What for?" asked Alan.

The receptionist just smiled as the elevator door closed.

The elevator was also red. It had two red buttons, oriented vertically, without labels. The elevator only stopped two places, it seemed: on the top floor, and on the bottom. Alan hit the bottom button, and the elevator started its hellish descent.

It seemed to take hours. No fewer than ten times did it seem like the elevator would finally stop, only to accelerate again. To pass the time, Alan unfolded the signed document that seemed to cause so much distress to the receptionist.

If he had any doubts that his neighbor Lou was in fact the ruler of Hell, they vanished at that moment. Firstly, when he had first been given the paper, it was scarcely larger than a typical sheet of folded notebook paper, yet when he opened it, it unfurled all the way down to his feet like an ancient scroll, complete with luxurious crimson tassels.

Secondly, the words inscribed on the parchment were made entirely of fire. Alan read them aloud.

"I, Lucifer, Lord of the Nine Circles, the First of the Fallen, the Last to be Saved, the Abaddon, the Leviathan, the Antichrist, the Lawless One, the Serpent of Old--"

--Do Solemnly Decree That I Shall Return My Neighbor Alan's Lawnmower Upon Completion of the Caretaking of My Yard." Alan read it over and over again. When he saw Lou scribble the contract out, it hadn't taken more than half a second. How he had produced such an enchanting legal document was beyond Alan's comprehension.

Alan was agnostic. He had attended church when he was young, because his parents thought it was something that families ought to do. Alan could never quite understand how someone could love a being who had no physical form, never spoke, and who didn't even attend his own worship ceremonies. As he grew up, though, he would never flat-out deny that some kind of spiritual connection existed in the world, but also acknowledged that such a connection could not be proven in any way.

He nodded, folded up the contract, and put it back in his pocket. Once again, the document assumed the form of a regular sheet of folded notebook paper. He put it back in his pants pocket just as the elevator finally came to a rest and opened its doors into the yawning depths of suffering and misery that was the final resting place for the souls of the damned.

It was pleasantly warm, actually.

Alan, confused, stepped forward. The elevator closed and ascended behind him. He turned around and stared back at it. "Hey!" he shouted as it disappeared into the blackness above. "Come back here!" He accidentally bumped into something. It was a stalagmite. It had an elevator call button on it. "Oh," he said.

Hell, it seemed, was not how most people let on. It looked like a reddish, well-lit cave. There were rocks and stalagmites everywhere. And nothing else.

He was expecting lakes of fire from which legions of tortured hands protruded, their owners forever burning, screeching, reaching for the heaven they had been denied. But there were no screams, nor was there anybody to make them.

"Hello?" called Alan. Nobody answered. He walked forward. "Hello?" he called as he walked. "Is anybody there?"

For ten minutes he walked, until he finally met someone. It was a janitor. He was dressed in a blue jump suit and had a white mustache that could easily sweep the cave floor as efficiently as the broom he was holding. "Um, excuse me," said Alan. "Do you know where everyone's gone?"

The janitor stopped his sweeping and stared at Alan alarmingly. "What're you still doin' here?" he asked. "Everyone's gone. Yer late."

"Where've they gone?" asked Alan.

"Don't mock me," said the janitor, and resumed sweeping.

"Look," said Alan, withdrawing the contract from his pocket. "I'm Alan. I've got a signed document here from your boss."

"Boss ain't here," said the janitor. "I'm just sweepin' up after everyone so when they come back it'll be nice an' clean."

"But where have they gone?"

"You work here," said the janitor. "You must've gotten the memos."

"No, I don't work here," said Alan.

The janitor paused his sweeping again. He stood up and looked Alan up and down. "No," he said. "You *don't* work here."

Alan once again offered the signed document, and this time the janitor took it. He unfurled it, and read the fiery letters. A faint smile could be seen under his enormous mustache. "Lord," he said. "You must really want yer lawnmower."

"Not really," said Alan. "I'm more worried about my neighbor. He disappeared one day. He never told me he was the Devil."

The janitor folded up the document and handed it back to Alan. "Yer a good man," he said. "Nobody every worries about the Devil. Who says he doesn't need lookin' after?"

"Well, where's he gone?" asked Alan.

"Same as everyone else here," said the janitor. "Off to purgatory to fight the Apocalypse."

"The *Apocalypse*?" asked Alan. "You mean that group of religious nuts I read about in the paper was *right*?"

"There's *always* someone proclaimin' the Apocalypse," said the janitor. "One of em's gonna be right eventually. Can't beat *them* odds."

"Well, then, if they're fighting the Apocalypse, what are *you* doing here?" Alan asked. "If it's the final battle, they aren't coming back, are they?"

"Oh, they never actually *do* it, y'know," said the janitor as he swept. "Somethin' always comes up, and they get interrupted. Then, they come back and wait till the next End of Days."

"Something always happens?" asked Alan. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, if I'm readin' that there document correctly," said the Janitor, gesturing with his broom handle towards the folded contract in Alan's hand, "Looks like *this* time, that somethin' is you."

Alan thought about this for a good long while. He nodded, and put the contract back in his pocket, knowing what he had to do. "Well, then," he said, "Can you tell me how I get to Purgatory?"

"If I didn't," said the janitor, "I'd be out of the job."

* * *

The written directions from the janitor were both well-illustrated and tirelessly explicit. He had clearly drawn them much, much earlier. Either that, or he had the same time-defying hand as Lou. It wasn't that far-fetched.

As Alan walked, he passed many things that he thought didn't belong in an eternal pit of suffering at all: A courtyard with chess tables, a Squash court, even an arcade with pinball tables and a popcorn machine. But as fascinating as he found these, he had somewhere to be, and therefore didn't stop to inspect any of it. He looked down at the directions the janitor had given him:

Turn left at the stalagmite that looks like it has a big bite though it. Check. Keep walking twenty paces until you find a stalagmite that's twenty feet tall and looks like it's covered in dragon claw marks. Good. Now spin left three times, close your eyes after the second turn, and say--

"Too bad for Heaven, too good for Hell;

"What place can there be for a soul like me to dwell?"

As Alan said the words, he felt some kind of disturbance, somewhere between a headache and a gust of wind. And then there was a door.

It was the plainest door that Alan had ever seen in his life. It was inoffensive, unobtrusive, and unspectacular. It must have taken a group of twenty bureaucrats to design such a door, and not one of them must have been allowed to have a hobby.

Alan reached out and opened it. He couldn't see what was on the other side. It was just a blinding glare of shapeless, white light. He had to go in.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and entered Purgatory.

At last, he could see the denizens of Hell. He was expecting pitchforks. He was expecting forked tongues, flaming tongues, mangled flesh and burnt hair. He was expecting impossibly ugly creatures a thousand times stronger than men, he was expecting the smell of rotting flesh and the screams of mortal torment. He received none of these things. The Denizens of Hell were no more remarkable than any other random sample of the human population. Hell is where people go when they die; it never occurred to anyone that they might remain people.

Alan pushed his way through the throngs of standing bodies. It was amazingly hard to navigate, considering that there was no way whatsoever to tell where he was going. The ground was gray. The sky was gray. There were no stars in the sky or markings on the ground. There wasn't even a breeze. He tapped a demon on the shoulder.

"Can I help you?" asked the demon. He was an elderly, cheerful black man with a sparkle in his eye and the blues in his voice.

"Yes," said Alan. He held up the contract. "I need to find the Devil."

The demon eagerly grabbed the document and read it. "My stars," he said. "You is him! You is him!"

"I think... yes," said Alan. "I'm me, last time I checked."

The demon held up the contract for all to see. "Bless my stars, son! You came!"

Other demons started turning their heads. Their eyes went wide, and their mouths opened with smiles and laughter.

"It's him, man!" the demon continued, this time shouting so that everyone could hear. His voice was clear and could be heard all throughout Purgatory, as it was no longer constrained by the pesky laws of physics. "I got 'im! The Contract Holder! HE DONE COME AFTER ALL!"

The demon pressed the document back into Alan's hand. "Go on, son," he said. "Go and sing your song, man."

Alan felt hands pushing him and shoving him, guiding him and leading him. He drifted through the crowd, awash with smiles and shouts of excitement. Whispers of things to come drifted all across Purgatory.

And finally, Alan could see something ahead. A small hill right in the middle of the crowd. The Epicenter. The start of the Apocalypse.

The last gentle hand escorted Alan to the base of the hill, and he was on his own. He looked up. The hill was tall and steep. He couldn't see the end of it. But as he started climbing, it was easier than a set of stairs.

Finally, he reached the top, and was greeted by several figures. The first was a blond man clad in white, with blue eyes and a melancholy look on his face. Standing behind him were two more white-clad figures, equally solemn.

It surprised Alan to find a pair of figures he recognized: A tall man in a wide-brimmed black fedora, and a swarm of bees in shape of a column. The last figure at the top of the hill was Alan's long time, cheerful neighbor, Lou. Lou, as it was now powerfully clear to Alan, was the Devil.

Lucifer was a powerful, imposing figure, who emanated might with every inch of his body. When he moved, his muscles danced and writhed like snakes in an earthquake. Lou turned to Alan, the ground trembling with every tiny step, and smiled.

"There you are," said Lou. "I was wondering when you'd get here."

"Is this him?" asked one of the men in the white robe.

Alan looked over the man in white robe's shoulder and tried to find Heaven's army, but all he could find was a small, pathetic group of people in white robes near the base of the mountain. There couldn't have been more than a hundred people, and not one of them looked happy to be there.

"Alan," said Lou, gesturing towards the taller of the white-robed people, "I'd like for you to meet my good friend, the angel Gabriel." He pointed to the other two white-robed figures. "And here's Ezekiel and Elijah," and at last introduced Alan to his own cohorts. "And here's the Tall Man, and my second-in-command, Beelzebub."

The Tall man nodded once, and Beelzebub buzzed, "*Pleazzed to mzzeeet you.*"

"Have you got something for us, Alan?" asked Gabriel expectantly.

Alan smiled. "Yes," he said holding out the contract to Lou and giving Gabriel a smile. "I think I do."

Lou opened up the document, and showed it to Gabriel. Gabriel practically wept with joy.

Lucifer turned to the denizens of Hell. "My friends!" he shouted. His voice boomed and roared loudly and clearly, thundering across the skies of Purgatory. "We have gathered here to initiate the final battle at the end of the world. We have waited century upon century to raise our swords and lay waste to the human world."

There was a steely silence from the army of Hell. Each and every one of them was listening with all their might. Lucifer continued talking.

"And as much as I'd love to give the word and start the Apocalypse--" Lou held up the contract

and unfurled it, its fiery letters shining like a beacon upon the armies of Hell. And he finished. "--But I'm afraid I have to return a lawnmower!"

And with those words, everybody cheered.

* * *

Alan pulled the last bit of crab grass from the yard, surveying his work. There wasn't a weed in sight. Not even a dandelion. He dared the Homeowners Association to find something wrong with the yard.

Lou emptied the grass-catcher into the garbage can. "It sure feels nice to get something done with my own two hands," he said.

"What we obtain too cheap," said Alan, "We esteem too lightly."

"Thomas Paine," said Lou. "He's a good man. A bit racist, but he's just as smart as everyone thinks he is."

"Named my son after him," said Alan. "Maybe that's why he's such a smart-ass."

Lou laughed. "Well, if it's any consolation, the real Thomas Paine isn't the most humble human being in Hell either."

"He's not in Heaven?" asked Alan. "He doesn't seem like a bad person."

Lou grabbed the garbage can and shook it. The grass clippings settled at the bottom of it. "Almost nobody gets to heaven, Alan. Hate to break it to you."

"Why is that?" asked Alan. "I was wondering why Heaven's army was so small."

"It doesn't have much of one," said Lou. "Just Gabriel, Ezekiel, a few other names that I can't remember, and a few humans that managed to get through."

"How come?"

"God's law," said Lou. "We all have to follow God's law to the letter, I'm afraid. Though, as I'm sure you've guessed, some of us read between the lines."

"But God says people can get into heaven, doesn't he?"

"Yes," said Lou. "But it's such a strict set of rules one has to follow-- some of which I *know* were thrown in there to fuck with me-- that it's quite literally a miracle when someone manages to follow every single one."

"That's hogwash," said Alan. "Something I'd likely hear from Richard Dawkins, not the *devil*."

Lou shuffled the garbage can again. "You know how when God created humankind, he gave each of you free will?"

"Of course," said Alan.

"Well, he didn't do that for *us*," said Lou with a shrug. "We can't help but play by the rules."

"That hardly seems fair," said Alan. "Have you talked to God about it?"

"Would if I could," said Lou. "But he's not been around since before the Bible was written."

"Why not?"

"Perhaps he's grown up," said Lou.

"You're saying God was a *child* when he created the world?"

"I like to think," said Lou with a knowing grin, "That our world is just sitting at the bottom of the Lord's toy box."

Alan wiped off his dirty hands on his trousers. "So since nearly *everyone* goes to hell, you punish them all?"

"Only the bad ones," said Lou. "We still have to follow all of God's commandments. And it says in the Bible that Hell is a place of fire. It's a bottomless pit. There is torment and there is the gnashing of men's teeth. There is weeping and misery and sorrow."

"Jesus Christ, that's terrible," said Alan.

"But," continued Lou, "There is also swimming and ping pong. There is chess and Subbuteo and shuffleboard and skydiving. There is a lending library with every book in the world, and the tallest rock climbing wall you've ever seen."

"So even the damned get to play ping-pong from time to time?" said Alan with a chuckle.

Lou looked deeply and seriously into Alan's eyes. "Eternity is a long time, Al," he said. "Not everyone who goes to Hell deserves to suffer for *that* long." He looked down and inspected his hedges. "There are kids down there, you know."

Alan felt a tinge of discomfort and embarrassment. "Well, at least God says you can still play ping pong in Hell."

"Not exactly," said Lou. He smiled warmly, cheerfully, and earnestly. "He just didn't say I couldn't."

Lou and Alan laughed. Then they both looked at Alan's lawnmower.

"So once I get this back," said Alan, "What's to stop you from starting the Apocalypse?"

"The window's closed now," said Lou. "The Apocalypse can only be fought when every member of each army has completed all their obligations, and there is *literally* nothing left to do but fight the battle at the end of the world. You and your lawnmower prevented that this time. And while we were doing yard work, the Denizens of Hell started borrowing and trading and doing favors. It won't be another thousand years or so until *all* of us have got no obligations left, and there's nothing else to do except fight the Apocalypse."

"What happens then?" asked Alan. "Are you going to borrow a shovel?"

"It's not my turn," said Lou. "It'll be up to Gabriel."

"What do you think *he'll* do?" asked Alan.

"Hopefully," said Lou, "There will still be Homeowners Associations. And they will still be bastards."

* * *

Alan wiped his feet on the welcome mat. He opened the door, went inside, and washed his hands.

"How's Lou?" asked Betsey, who was cooking a stew.

"Not too bad," said Alan. "I'm glad he didn't have too much pride to let me help with his lawn."

"Is he going to be fined?"

"We managed to avoid the end of the world," said Alan.

"As long as we got our mower back," said Betsey.

"Of course, dear," said Alan, pecking his wife on the cheek.

Alan wandered into the living room, and collapsed into his favorite chair. He heaved a sigh of relief. He was exhausted.

"I wanted to help," said Thomas. He was lying on the couch with his Game Boy. "But Mom said you didn't want me to bother you."

"Oh?" said Alan.

"Yes... I wanted to make up for being a..." Thomas swallowed. "For being mean to you earlier."

"Oh, it's all right," said Alan. "Lou and I were just catching up. We had a little guy time while doing the yard."

"I still think he's boring," said Thomas. "I mean, not in a mean way. He just seems so *normal*."

"Oh, he's really interesting," said Alan with a chuckle, "Once you get to know him."

Willie Wit

Siddhartha

The atmosphere, and mood in the temple was as it should be, calm and serene. A group of men

clad in drab colours are spread across the main area, kneeling, intense with concentration. Sweat forms on brows, muscles flexing as great changes are taking place within.

This daily ritual had been carried out over months and years. Some had begun this journey as soon as maturity had been reached. Others now near old age still knelt daily, something they had done for decades. This action provides the food on their plates, and the luxury of life's simple pleasures. Occasional groans could be heard but the general tone was a positive one.

The drinking of tea was an important part of the day, steeped in ritual, it gave the passing of time a defined structure. Some believed they could taste this constantly, always during lapses in concentration though, one of the dangers of daydreaming. The strict times for this ceremony were adhered to, regardless of other duties needing to be completed. A much needed respite for knees that would ache as the day progressed. Younger students secreted soft pads under loose garb, something frowned upon by the more mature. Generally seen as an unnecessary frivolity.

Silence was the norm, unspoken words passed between all. Gestures, a subtle nod, and the briefest of looks belied great understanding. This atmosphere was often found oppressive by outsiders looking in, but it was something borne of countless hours in each other's presence. They had now completed the day's tasks, incense holders were returned to their time honoured places, candles were lit once more, and flower vases filled with life's colour again. The mood changes subtly as the day's work now ends. The simplest daily celebrations are restored once more, the old would now be experienced as new; as is the way.

A silence now fills this space, not unlike the one found after a tree falls in an empty forest.

The group quietens, tired legs are stretched, a feeling of satisfaction is shared communally. Unspoken thanks are given, as weary, yet fulfilled souls shuffle towards the door. The temple bell sounds, as if to announce their departure, now moving into the entrance area as one. The leader of the group stands waiting, his demeanour one of substance. Posed in front of a statue of Buddha, his bald head shines despite the low illumination. He strokes his long grey beard, allowing them a chance to relax and be still.

A voice as deep as a cave now speaks, one with a timbre that brings weight to anything said. He begins...

"...Sid, Arthur... The new carpet is laid, great work — the furniture is back in place... Job's done; It's Friday, so get the gear in the van — and let's get back to reality!"

Overtime... Part 1

I suppose he was lucky to get a job at his age really, but realistically it is more suited to someone with a lot of life experience. So I shouldn't complain... it's just one of those things. It's not something that would suit everybody as well, but it has to be done. They made that very clear at the interview. No room for any messing about at all. My husband has never suffered from being very cheerful, but was he was happy to get this. I just made myself laugh when I said that.

The training course explained all the ins and outs. It emphasised how important it was to take the position seriously. And how to deal with the inevitable customer complaints. "You will be more unpopular than a Traffic Warden" they had warned him, but they provided a nice buffet lunch, and that made it a good day out as far as he was concerned.

The hardest thing really has been all the paperwork, he has never been one for complicating things "If it ain't broke" I can hear him say. It's been nothing but 'Risk Assessing' and 'Health and Safety' since he started, "you wouldn't believe how much paperwork using one blade at work can generate" he

ranted after his first day. "Showing me how to hold it properly — like I am some young kid." They even made him trim a few inches off of his work clothes, as they said it might be a 'Trip Hazard'. I couldn't help but laugh at that one.

It's the hours that get to me though, I knew it would be like this but I can't get used to it being so unpredictable. His messenger 'beeps' and off he goes, regularly in the night... never a word of complaint though, bless. Unfortunately he is always busiest in the winter, "Plenty of overtime for our nest egg" he always reminds me. I got him 'Long-johns' for Christmas... "Any colour so long as it's black". He laughed when he saw them.

Oh good... I can hear him coming home now... I had him put some nice gravel on the drive, for when he started coming home in the dark. He used to give me a bit of a scare when I didn't hear him approaching the house...

Cooee!... I'm home.... how has your evening been Mrs Grim Reaper?

Not Waving...

Taking my glasses off, the pouring rain ran down my face. Far in the distance I could see her waving, I waved back, but she kept on... The dog ran ahead barking loudly, I started running — slowed by the thick mud.

Still waving, frantically now... fearing the worst, panic rose in me. Moving faster, adrenalin driving me forward... Getting closer, realising now I should have kept my glasses on...

She wasn't in distress... she was cleaning the windows...

Michael Graeme

The Man Who Could Not Forget

I have a problem with my memory. It isn't that it ever fails me - quite the opposite in fact. Indeed, my recall of events from all but the earliest years of my life is truly photographic, so there was little doubt in my mind the woman before me now was the one who had stolen the book.

I had seen her only minutes earlier in Brady's Antiquarian Book shop, in a corner of its labyrinthine interior. I had looked up briefly from my perusal of a box of eighteenth century prints, to see her in the process of tucking the book down the front of her trousers. Then she had simply walked out with it.

It was Brady himself who raised the alarm because he had seen her too, though not her face, but from the slightly amazed stare she gave me as she passed the both of us, he must have surmised I'd be able to recognise her again. That stare had been quite haunting, causing me to gaze after her in cold astonishment.

She was on the street in a moment and would have got clean away except, incredibly, she blundered into the arms of a passing policeman. Indeed the whole incident might have been amusing except for the fact that Brady, having caught her up, then delved into her clothing in order to recover the book. Now I know she'd stolen it, but even so there was something ungentlemanly about his actions and I found myself siding with the woman.

"It's mine," she protested.

"Nice try," Brady sneered.

"No, really" she said. "I just hid it to avoid confusion."

The policeman listened impassively to this exchange before asking the woman if she could prove the book was hers.

"Well of course I can't," she said. "But can he prove it's his?"

It was a good point. She had taken the book from the second hand section of Brady's shop, where the stock was mostly low grade stuff and bore no proprietorial markings. The constable turned to Brady: "Well, can you?" he asked.

Of course Brady couldn't prove it either, but shop lifters were the bane of his life and I could see he was determined to make an example of the woman. That was when he turned and jabbed a finger at me.

"He'll back me up. He saw her take it as well!"

Now in fact I had not seen her take the book from the shelf. I had only seen her slipping it down her trousers and so, to the letter of his request, I was unable to help. This may seem a little pedantic but I should point out that I did not owe Brady any favours. Many were the times when he had asked me sarcastically if I'd intended buying anything, a reference to the fact I only ever browsed. He was not to know I did not need to buy his prints; the act of simply looking was sufficient for me to possess them. Also, the affair seemed ridiculously overblown. I had noticed the stolen book was a tatty volume of essays by one J. V. Lanchester. The fly cover was missing, the spine broken; why the woman should have risked prosecution for such a worthless thing in the first place, I could not imagine.

So, all eyes were upon me: the policeman's, Brady's, the woman's. She looked pale and nervous, and, apart, from a few wrinkles around her eyes, exactly as I remembered her from our first encounter, ten years ago.

"I really couldn't say," I told them.

Brady coloured at once, an ominous bright red, like he was about to pop. The policeman thought about it for a moment before deciding to give the woman the benefit of the doubt, then rubbed salt in Brady's wounds for good measure, reprimanding him sternly for interfering with the woman's clothing. I turned to Brady and gave a helpless shrug, at which he gruffly announced he would be closing his shop for the rest of the day, then proceeded, rather peevishly, to usher everyone outside.

Walking back to my studio, I thought about the woman. Our first encounter had been in the library at the Polytechnic, where we had been students. It had been a wet afternoon and consequently the place had been busier than normal with very few places remaining to sit. It was thus by chance we'd found ourselves facing one another across a cramped reading table.

I'd found her passably attractive but I was 25 at the time, somewhat older than the norm for a student, and was already jaded by my experience of intimate relations. It was my memory, you see? Everything is recorded, all the things you normal people are the better for forgetting; every slight, every cross word, every bitter misunderstanding. And I suppose it's in our nature that emotional negatives carry more weight than the positives - a thing which in my case provides little nourishment for those first tiny seeds of attraction to blossom into anything more lasting.

It was for this reason I had tried to ignore a growing and somewhat irksome arousal, but with little success. Indeed, such was the strength of her effect upon me, I had begun to imagine her undressed and in all manner of lurid poses. I assure you I was not normally given to moments of such unbridled prurience and at the time had found the experience quite unsettling. In the end I'd only been able to overcome my considerable distraction by gathering up my books and notes and moving to another table.

I did not see her again,... until the day of the incident in the book shop.

Now, that I can remember her from so long ago, and after such a brief and, you might say, insignificant encounter is not so remarkable since I can bring to mind the face of every person I have ever met. What *is* remarkable however, as I had first realised from her expression when she had looked at me in Brady's book shop, was that she remembered me as well, with equal clarity.

As I walked, idly reminiscing over the incident, I suddenly came upon her. She was waiting a

few doors down, having apparently flopped onto the steps of a shop, the tatty memoirs pressed against her bosom. She looked sickly pale and drawn, and she was sweating. When she saw me, she eased herself to her feet and invited by neither word nor gesture, fell into step with me.

"I should thank you," she said.

I gave a careless shrug. "I did not see you take the book."

"I'd like to explain," she began, hesitantly at first. "I don't make a habit of this sort of thing you know." She looked away, perhaps reading my silence as indifference, and then she said what she had meant to say in the first place: "We've met before." She almost whispered the words, as if she couldn't believe it herself. "I wouldn't mention it except that I believe you might also remember me, which would be incredible, wouldn't it? I mean, considering it was so long ago, and our encounter was so brief."

"I believe we *have* met, yes. So,... we're the same, you and I?"

"It would seem that way."

As we walked I noticed her pace slowing, as if she were a clockwork doll gradually winding down. "I had no idea there might be others like me," I said. We had stopped now, the weight of her apparent fatigue having ground us to a halt. I looked at her more closely, wondering about the power of her memory. "Can I buy you a coffee?" I enquired. "Perhaps we should talk."

She smiled. "Coffee would be good. And I do believe I need to sit down."

"Forgive me for mentioning it, but you look a little pale. Is there anything I can do?"

She smiled and shook her head. "It's nothing," she replied.

I was not interested in making an impression on this woman, so I escorted her to the bus station cafe across the street, which was not exactly renowned for its cuisine, nor its ambiance. It was rest and refreshment we sought, nothing more.

"You were reading art," she recalled, as we watched the busses swinging in and out. Her name was Clarissa and indeed her memory was every bit as perversely proficient as my own. "You were writing notes, in green ink, with a tortoiseshell fountain pen."

"An essay on Monet," I remembered. "And you were reading Wordsworth's Prelude. You had on a denim jump suit, a blue scarf around your neck, and a little badge on your lapel, a teddy bear,... yellow enamel."

As we continued to share the recalled minutiae from that brief encounter, I began to tingle with a rare anticipation: this woman was different from all the others I had ever known. We alone could understand one another. Then, almost in the same breath I cursed the futility of it. A relationship with this woman was no more likely to succeed than any other - indeed it seemed twice as likely to fail, neither of us ever able to forget a single word of all the words we might ever share. And in a million kindnesses, it is always the handful of insults we would remember. As a distraction, I asked her why she had taken the book.

"It's rare," she said. "Possibly the last copy in existence. I've searched everywhere for it and would you believe it? I find it on the day I've left my purse at home. It didn't seem such a dreadful crime - and I was going to sneak it back when I had read it. As you know, I need only read it once to possess it."

"But surely Brady would have put it to one side for you?"

"No, I've asked him to do that sort of thing before and he's always refused. He's not exactly the most obliging of characters. I remember finding a book once that he'd marked up for sale at a pound. But as soon as he realised I was interested in it, he wanted ten pounds for it."

"He does have something of a cantankerous reputation," I agreed.

"I know it sounds irrational, but I was afraid it might be gone by the time I came back, or if I asked him to set it aside, he'd pull some trick on me, like before. And you've simply no idea how important this book is to me at the moment."

She took the volume from her pocket and turned to the inside cover where I noted it was a first

edition - 1946. Here also, the price was scribbled in the top corner: Fifty pence. For all his faults, Brady did have an eye for a book's worth and from the looks of it, J. V. Lanchester did not have much of a following.

"There's one copy of the Lindisfarne Gospels," I said. "That's priceless. But this?"

She shook her head. "There are many copies of the Gospels - just the one original, but these essays are probably the last existing vessel of this man's knowledge. Your paintings by Monet, my Wordsworth - those works have been recorded and printed so many times and are in the minds of so many people, they will never be forgotten,... but Lanchester's childhood in a Manchester slum? His experience as an overseer in a cotton mill? His views on social change in the nineteen thirties?"

"But they're just some old geezer's memories,... they're not important, surely? I mean, they don't exactly make the world a richer place."

She smiled. "Who's to say?"

Suddenly, she broke off, as if overcome by a sharp pain in her head.

"You're unwell," I said.

"It'll pass," She looked at me speculatively. "I'm sorry to ask this when you've already been so kind but will you walk me home? Please don't get the wrong idea. It's just that I'm afraid I might pass out on the way."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"There's nothing anyone can do," she said. "It's my mind. I've been filling it with too many books, lately. Now and then it shuts down in protest. I'll be fine, if you could just see me to my door."

I was horrified. "You mean you still make a habit of *reading* books?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

I shrank away from the thought of it. "Not books,... there's too much information. I collect pictures, that's all. "

It was essential to avoid filling one's head with too much sensory information. I would even remember the numbers of the busses manoeuvring past our window and the faces of the passengers gazing back at us until the end of my useful life. And each day added inexorably to this burden of trivia: it was enough to cope with, without actually setting out to deliberately look for more. If I was careful, perhaps I would have another twenty years or so before my mind burned out, after which lay only pathetic confusion in an asylum. Now I understood the nature of Clarissa's sickness: she was nearing that stage already.

We walked slowly while she complained of dizziness and paused frequently, crouching on the pavement like a drunkard, her head between her knees to stave off a fainting fit. Eventually, she led me to a respectable suburb and to the door of a tidy terraced cottage. It was here, while fumbling for her keys she finally collapsed, leaving me to carry her inside.

The house was fastidiously neat, though what struck me most, given her apparently suicidal thirst for text, was that there were no books. The walls were plain white, and the floor was bare, with just a few plain rugs ordered with geometric precision, and some simple chairs. It was much like my own home - nothing to arrest the attention, only blank spaces where one might safely stare and put the ever vigilant receptor circuits on hold.

There was no sofa to place her on, so I took her upstairs to her bedroom. This too was in the minimalist style with a low bed and a plain wardrobe, everything white, and without feature. I laid her on the bed, arranging her as comfortably as I could and then I sank down beside her feeling incredibly sad.

She looked so pretty, and we had so much in common, but it was pointless pursuing a relationship with Clarissa. We could become friends of course, but I already had a string of women with whom I shared a pointless friendship - pointless because all my life I had craved so much more. Had I not been concerned for her health, and had she simply passed out blind drunk, then I would have walked away - but under the circumstances, common decency forced me to stay.

Perhaps it was boredom then that made me carefully slide Lanchester's essays from the pocket of her overcoat - although I admit I was also curious about him and I wondered if there might not be something singularly profound about his insight that had driven Clarissa to possess his words at any price. In the end though, I was sorely disappointed. His prose was convoluted and banal. Speed reading, I ploughed on relentlessly, devouring the text for just one jewel of timeless wisdom, but there were none. These were the memoirs of an ordinary, and poorly educated man, the record of an unremarkable life. Brady and I were of the same mind: Fifty pence was about its worth and I regretted soiling my memory with it.

Shortly after finishing the book, I was roused by a loud rapping on the door and, thinking it might be an anxious relative, I hastened downstairs to open it only to find Brady on the doorstep.

"I should have guessed you'd be in it together," he said.

I was astonished. "You! You must have followed us here?" I was astonished. "For fifty lousy pence! You're crazy."

"It's the principle," he replied. "Now where is it?"

I looked down guiltily at the book in my hands. Brady reached out calmly and took it. "I don't expect to see either of you in my shop again," he said.

Clarissa slept off her malaise and woke after dawn, looking brighter and fresher, though I knew her recovery would be short lived. She gave me a tender look when she saw me waiting at her bedside, but became gloomy when I told her what had happened.

"I don't think he'll come back," I assured her, but Clarissa seemed less concerned about Brady's visit than the loss of the book he had taken from her.

"I'll never find another copy," she groaned.

I tried to make light of it. "Well, from what I read - it's not something you should lose much sleep over."

She froze. "You read it? All of it?"

"Yes. Cover to cover."

"So... you could recite it to me?"

"That might take days!" I protested.

"But you *could* do it? Word for word?"

"Certainly. But it's dross. Why waste your mind on it?"

She looked at me desperately. "Please, I must have that book."

"Why should I help you to commit suicide?"

"Is that what you think?"

"What else am I to suppose, when you seem bent on burning yourself out?"

She looked at me curiously. "I don't keep this knowledge, you know? I pass it on."

I was puzzled. "What do you mean, you pass it on?"

"I mean I *pass it on*, you know, to students mostly... I'm a tutor at the college now. But you don't understand, I pass it on directly... from my memory to theirs - not that they're aware of it of course. They just think I'm a good tutor."

She could see I was struggling with this bizarre concept, so she enlightened me further. "That time we met, at college, I gave you some saucy images of me so you'd want to get to know me better... Polaroids I'd taken of myself. I thought of them and then projected them into your mind. It was cheap, I know, but I was younger then and not so sensitive. Funny, it had always worked on men before..."

I felt myself go pale.

She smiled. "I'm surprised you don't know the technique." Suddenly she grew serious and drew herself closer. "You don't do you? You really don't. You're still carrying it all with you! Your whole life!" She was horrified. "How can you bear it?"

"What choice do I have?"

"Surely, you know that in passing it on you are relieved of the knowledge yourself? That's why

people like us live the way we do,... so we can put other stuff in there as well - like,... like,... those bus numbers from last night and any other trivia that keeps accumulating."

I shook my head in disbelief. "You dump the garbage into other people's heads? But don't they know?"

"You can jumble it up," she said. "It's just background noise to them - and quite harmless,... but to us,... to us, such a relief!"

"But,... how is it done? How do choose your subjects?"

"It's easy," she said. "You can do it to anyone - even a passer by."

It was a revelation, and I realised at once such a technique would extend my useful life to the norm. If only it were true! "Can you teach me, Clarissa?"

She looked at me cautiously. "Of course. Just as soon as you've given me Lanchester's essays."

"But if you teach me now, I could give you the essays directly," I said. "And rid myself of them in the process."

"It might take months to teach you," she said, "And I'm not sure my client can wait that long."

We began after breakfast - me typing out the essays word for word, comma for comma on her computer. It was not a difficult task, only tedious, like copying out the pages of a dictionary. Every hour or so, I would produce a handful of printouts, which she would then settle down to read. The task took two long days to complete, the last full stop being punched in around midnight, after which I slept on a comfortable futon Clarissa had prepared for me in her spare bedroom.

I woke up the following morning to find her sitting cross legged on the floor regarding me strangely, as if something was troubling her - as if perhaps she'd changed her mind, and was thinking of going back on her word.

"You *will* teach me?" I reminded her. "You promised."

She sighed. "Have you thought that the price will be your memories? Which ones and how many, only you can decide. Once gone, they are gone for ever and I'm worried you'll be reckless, destroying half your life in an attempt to preserve it."

"Surely I'm the best judge of that," I said. But I knew she had a point, for already I had begun secretly sifting my memories in an attempt to label them for execution, and it had been harder than I'd thought. Was it only the good memories that sustained us? The successes? The times of deep satisfaction? Could I safely dispose of the failures, the cringing embarrassments, the heartaches, the insults - or were they just as important in defining us? Was there a danger I would destroy my soul in an attempt to preserve its mortal vessel?

She reached out and squeezed my hand. "But of course I'll teach you," she said tenderly. "Besides you still have pictures of me I'd like returning."

"Ah no, Clarissa," I replied, teasing her. "Some things I will never be persuaded to part with."

By now she was almost too weak to leave the house, as if Lanchester's infernal essays had proved too much for her and in the end, I had to drive her across town to her appointment with her client. I was curious about him - even more so when she directed me through the gates of a geriatric home.

We were greeted at the door by a cheery faced nurse and shown along a corridor heavy with a soporific heat, and finally into a lounge whose walls were lined by the vacant expressions of thirty ancient souls. Clarissa picked out a frail old man in a wheelchair and knelt beside him.

"My client," she said.

He was in a bad way - his skin almost transparent and drawn tightly over his bones. I offered him my hand, a gesture he returned by some long embedded reflex. He felt deathly cold.

The nurse hovered at my elbow. "Poor old chap," she said. "He's stone deaf,... and he can't even remember his own name."

"Perhaps he doesn't need to," I replied, for I knew it of course: This was none other than J V. Lanchester. And now I understood the value of memory, not just his, but also my own because what to

me had been worthless was of course, to him, a spotlight cutting clean through the fog of his decrepitude to the finest of his days - days that had leaked away from him, to be gathered by chance into the strongholds of two temporarily stronger minds.

I tightened my grip on his hand and Clarissa closed her eyes, as if to concentrate. Then she sighed and I swear as I looked into his eyes, I saw a glimmer of light - not much - but enough I thought...

...to sustain him...

Judy B.

Clang, Clang, Clang

ONE

She was riding the California Street line. The driver recalled the svelte, pale-skinned woman wearing cat-eye shades, in her twenties or so, with shiny black hair caught at the nape of her neck in a thick braid that reached half way down her back. She had crossed California from the south side and hopped on to a running board at Sansome, a couple of blocks before California begins to slope up Nob Hill. Just after the car crossed Kearney St., she appeared to lose her balance, according to a woman from Baltimore who had watched the young woman rummage through her shoulder bag with her free hand. Perhaps she was searching for a Kleenex, the bewildered, pink-faced, gray-haired lady surmised aloud to no one in particular as she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief, the arm of a passerby slung across her ample, rounded shoulders.

The car lurched, the woman gave a little squeak, tipped back, and let go of her purse, the strap of which slipped from her shoulder to her forearm. The bag must have been heavy: the weight of it appeared to loosen her handhold. The woman from Baltimore said she would never forget the look on the falling woman's face: she appeared to be puzzled, more than frightened, when she tottered back, her left hand sliding as if the pole were greased. She flapped and flailed both arms, grappled for the pole, a hand, a bit of someone's coat, but by the time observers realized what was happening and reached out to her, she had already landed on the hood of a green Honda Accord that was speeding in the opposite direction to make the light at Kearney.

The driver slammed on the brakes when he saw the body flomp onto his car, heard the dull thud, felt the shock resonate through the vehicle into the seat of his pants, and the woman was thrown into the intersection, into the path of an SUV that rolled over her right leg without stopping. Witnesses said the driver was talking on a mobile phone and would have plowed over the woman's torso, had he not swerved to pass a red Beetle that was waiting to make a left turn onto California. No one noted the license number, though all agreed the driver was young, good-looking, and sported a goatee. As the Beetle driver passed behind the cable car the catastrophe unfolded in her peripheral vision: she saw the woman's flimsy frame fall from the cable car onto the Honda and in the rearview mirror followed her trajectory into the path of the SUV. Several other cable car passengers corroborated the two motorists' accounts, even some who were sitting on the north side of the vehicle, their backs to the scene.

The woman's purse strap had stayed hooked in the crook of her arm throughout the flight, and the bag's contents spilled onto the street when she hit the pavement, catching the attention of a tall, burly man who was buying flowers at the edge of the Bank of America plaza on the southeast corner of

Kearny and California. His left hand, cragged with dirt, fisted a bouquet of pink Gerbera daisies, and a glistening track lined his dusty right cheek from his eye to his bushy red beard as he recounted for reporters how he had heard screeching tires and screaming voices in the intersection behind him, how he had turned toward the commotion only to see a bullet-shaped tube of lipstick and a crumpled white tissue roll and tumble past him, ushered along by cold, gray swaths of fog.

TWO

Jennie Jennings does not need to glance in a mirror to know that her hair, her lipstick, her powder is perfect. She has already checked it seven times and the young woman who is her production assistant knows she will lose her job if she lets Jennie go on air with so much as a fleck of lint on the back of her jacket. The last PA got booted on a breath charge: at a city hall spot she didn't have any gum or mints, and the mayor correctly named—during a live interview—what Jennie had eaten for lunch. The girl was gone before the crew returned to the station.

The other passengers are long gone, and the weeping burly man has been done to death. If they could find out the girl's name, they'd have a scoop. But nobody knows anything; these people are no help. Inside herself Jennie slumps her shoulders, lets her arms hang lifeless at her sides, drops the microphone to the ground, then ravages her wavy, shoulder-length blond hair (accented with chestnut low-lights) with her fists, and screams, "Why can't I get any decent fucking help?" But she is wearing linen and can't afford any extra movements that might wrinkle her look. She stares at the rod in her hand, touches the big ball of foam on the tip and twists the microphone to read each side of the box: the station's call letters, alternating with its winking icon. KWNK. Wink. KWNK. Wink. K-Wink. Kwink. Field reporter.

Two months into this, and she is still reporting from the scene of accidents and street fairs. Her father is an executive at the station, and she was promised an anchor job—on condition that she go through the motions of paying her dues. They said as soon as old white hair retired, they'd put her behind the desk. Raymond Carlisle had supposedly been on the verge of leaving since the day she was offered the job. Now the would-be retiree is eking out a little more time until the market recovers and his funds are secure, so Jennie is stuck standing around while some inept intern screws up another story for her.

The San Francisco State student pumps her arms to propel her up the incline to the Bank of America Plaza, where Jennie stands, so poised that the young woman panics, thinks she's on air. The cocktail formed when the adrenaline shooting from her brain meets the espresso's caffeine in her blood propels the young woman to run the last half block in just three seconds. She slows herself so her footsteps cannot be caught on the sound track and strides noiselessly around to behind the camera operator.

"What are you hiding for? Did you get me an interview or not? I'm not going to stand around here all day." Jennie manages to deliver the rebuke without moving her body or even but scarcely her face. The one thing over which she maintains absolute control is her voice. It does exactly what she wants it to do.

The intern is unruffled. She has already outlasted two others, and she is determined to go the distance. She needs the credit and the line on her resume. "I got you the barista at the coffee shop where she had a cappuccino before she stepped onto the cable car."

One would not have thought it possible for Jennie's posture to be any straighter, but she straightens. "Well it's about time. Let's go." The intern starts back down the hill. "In the van, missie. I'm not walking in these shoes."

"But you're wearing linen."

Jennie considers the remark. "How far is it?"

"Just at Sansome. And it's all downhill."

Jennie heaves the sigh of someone reluctantly granting a favor, shoves the microphone at the assistant, follows.

"I think this is going to be a good one." The assistant is determined to make this work. "It's a chance to show her before the accident, give people a glimpse into the real person, not dwell on her as a victim."

"Yes." Jennie says the word slowly, almost adds, "Good work," but holds back. No need to give the girl too much too soon. Keep her hungry. She'll need to stay in touch with that feeling. It's part of the business. "So, who was she, before the accident?"

The girl takes a deep breath, not just for the extra seconds it affords her to clear her head and organize her thoughts, but also because her body is trembling from nerves, adrenaline, and caffeine, and she needs to calm down.

"She's a double decaf low-fat, low-foam mocha; no whipped cream, dash of cinnamon."

Jennie slows her pace. The PA thinks she's going to stop walking to yell at her, so she quickly adds, "The table where she sat hasn't even been bussed yet. We've got the cup. And—" she pauses for effect, then spills her revelation. "I think the barista kind of dug her. Sounds like she kind of flirted with him. Very human."

What gave Jennie pause was the coffee order. She is herself a double decaf low-fat, low-foam mocha, although on occasion she will take a spot of whipped cream on top, and she prefers nutmeg to cinnamon. In spite of herself, she does see this young woman as a real person, sees herself on that streetcar, grappling for a firm purchase, watching the ground she had trusted to stay beneath her slip away. "All right," she says, as much to herself as to the crew. She nods slowly as she stares straight ahead. This is it. She feels it. This is the story that will put her behind the desk. She has paid her dues, and now it's time for the payoff. "All right, then. Let's talk to the barista." Yes.

The barista is standing outside the café, draped over a mailbox, smoking. His brittle, dull-black hair falls into his face, frames his dark eyes, which don't blink when he sees the blond stick walk toward him. Jennie tends to be attracted to her likes, but her empathic episode continues and she finds herself drawn to this slouchy, misshaven young man. After she introduces herself and offers the young man a cordial handshake, the PA ushers the pair inside to a table on which a crumpled napkin sits beside a tall glass mug with dried bubbles around its rim. "I thought we could do the spot here," she says.

Jennie does not take her eyes off the barista. She cocks her head over her right shoulder. "OK, let's set it up." The crew flurries around them, moving tables, adjusting lights and verifying sound levels. Jennie looks past the straggly locks of hair into the young man's eyes, rests a hand on a forearm that is crossed before his chest, and says, "I know this all seems terribly banal, but we do need to give people the details. Especially in a situation like this one, which could have happened to any of us, people want to know exactly what happened, retrace the person's steps, you know, to understand. We want to show them the real person who suffered this unusual ordeal." He indicates his agreement with a nod.

When the stage is set and the PA has brushed her shoulders, smoothed her lapels, and primped her hair, Jennie Jennings, field reporter, slowly seeps back into her skin beside her compassionate counterpart. Together they guide the barista through recounting the last drink the woman had before her fall: her decisive order (she knew exactly what she wanted), her friendly manner (she wasn't chatty but had a kind smile), and her generosity (she left a hefty tip). In her earpiece Jennie hears the director tell her to wrap it up; the studio needs to cut to a crash on the Bay Bridge, where a vanload of teenagers nearly plunged to their deaths.

Jennie Jennings holds the microphone in her left hand, the empty coffee cup in her right. She stares into the spent drink, the remains of what could have been her beverage, her destiny. She swirls

the cold, murky fluid, smells the cinnamon, feels the grit of the last gulp on her tongue. She tilts her head up, looks directly into the camera lens, where she can see but not quite make out her own inverted, mottled reflection.

"If only she had taken this last sip," Jennie touches the napkin on the table. "She would be here with us right now."

Jennie does not realize the inanity of this remark. First off, the woman is not dead, as Jennie's dramatics imply. Second, if she hadn't fallen off the cable car, the woman most certainly would not have been in the cafe, she'd be on the other side of Nob Hill. Her producer, a documentary filmmaker by night who works in news for the money and because she believes she can lift it from the morass of sensationalism it's slipped into in the last 30 years, will ream her. And although the production assistant will do her best to cajole her, may even keep her job, Jennie Jennings is done with paying dues. Finished.

THREE

Jason is hungry. Not for a scone or a croissant or a madeleine. He wants lunch: a big sandwich at least, if not something hot, with a salad on the side. Paychecks won't come in until 3 p.m. at the earliest—more likely it will be 5—and his shift mates know better than to float him lunch money in the meantime. Someone looted the tip jar during the morning rush—not him, this once—so he'll have to wait, who knows how long, until there's enough to buy him a sandwich and then until he can pocket it without being caught.

In the last twenty-four hours he has opened his refrigerator thirty times. Last night, after having a fried egg on toast with a jar of pickles on the side, he sneaked his roommate's leftover mac and cheese one forkful at a time until so little was left he had to finish it off and wash the casserole so Jimi would forget it had been in there. Jason continued to gravitate to the fridge, hopeful each time he opened the door that he would find some forgotten morsel he had missed. But after he made a ketchup sandwich with the last heel of bread, there was nothing but a jar of tomato sauce overtaken by a mold culture, a jar of horseradish, a loaf of tofu, two unexposed rolls of film, and Penelope's macrobiotic wheat germ concoction, which made him gag even when it was just sprinkled on beans tossed in olive oil. His six-three frame is starving.

As Jason wonders if he might be able to scrounge up some protein powder, make some kind of smoothie with the wheat germ and tofu and some honey, a woman a head shorter than himself walks in. Her shiny black hair is caught in a loose braid that hangs a little below the middle of her back. She seems to be a little nervous, or perhaps just energetic. Her hands rest on a fat brown wallet. Her thin, pale fingers taper to pointy oval nails painted a glossy beige. Her fingers look incredibly soft, are wrinkled only at the knuckles. She can't keep them still. They drum the counter, flip and spin the wallet around. She doesn't remove her sunglasses. The wallet bulges with more receipts and business cards and bills and credit cards than there are slots and compartments allotted for. Jason nods a hello, juts his chin in her direction to invite her to place her order.

"Hi. I'd like a double decaf low-fat, low-foam mocha, please. No whipped cream, but a dash of cinnamon on that, if you would." Jason bobs his head twice, slowly, to let her know he's registered all that. Her phone rings.

This woman is perhaps the only person in the world capable of speaking on a mobile phone so discreetly that her words are unintelligible. Jason can't even tell whether the call is business or personal. She could be ordering a hit on him, or describing him to a girlfriend, he thinks, staring at her face while he steams the low-fat milk, then he realizes she could also be watching him watch her, for all he knows, as her eyes are obscured behind her shades. She abruptly turns away from him, leaving

her wallet on the counter beside her. She continues to spin it with her free hand. Business is slow enough that Jason can take his time concocting her drink. So he does, all the while watching the wallet and willing the bulging mass to spring open, for that stack of credit cards to spill onto the counter, so he can slip one under the register as he helps the distracted woman reassemble her affairs. Then he realizes this won't work if she has an Asian last name. His gothness couldn't pass for being her husband without showing ID. The best he can hope for is a big tip.

Just as Jason is running out of ways to draw out the drink-making process, she taps her phone off and turns to him. He slides the coffee across the counter to her, along with a plate on which he has placed a biscotti, and points her to the condiment station, where she can garnish her beverage. She retrieves a five-dollar bill without compromising the rest of her stash and hands it to him, then sees the biscotti.

"Is that mine? I didn't order it."

"It's on me. Special today." He places a napkin on top of the plate with a casual wink. She just smiles at him and dumps whatever change he returns to her into the tip jar—as he knew she would. Her phone rings again, so she grabs the plate and the coffee and hurries over to a table to take the call.

A buck-fifty-seven in the jar—not a bad start. Two more of those, and he can get an egg salad from the sandwich truck; three more, and he can add a cup of soup. As long as he makes the dough in the next forty-five minutes, before Angelina comes in. Anyone else he can scam, but not her. The first thing she does is count the jar. She may not need the money like Jason does, but she wants it just as badly. She's a stickler for dividing it fairly.

The next two customers are an elderly white couple: the woman, short, round, and rosy; the man, tall, drawn, and peaked. She does all the talking, orders them both hot chocolates, one croissant to share. When he pushes their drinks to them, Jason makes sure to accidentally jostle the tip jar. The woman doesn't appear to notice, but does drop her coinage into it—all of thirty-five cents. The next two customers have exact change for their orders. Rarely do people bother to fish in their pockets to tip. Jason sees he has fifteen minutes on the clock. His stomach barks a plea.

A man wearing what appear to be brand-new athletic shoes and a woman carrying a large Gumps bag and a Lonely Planet guide enter, arguing in a foreign language. Two types of people who never tip are arguing couples and foreigners. What Jason does not realize is that they are not arguing, merely animated, and they had read in the book that it is considered rude not to leave a tip in an American restaurant. They leave him a dollar for each drink and all their coinage, eighty-seven cents. As they turn to go, the woman shoves something toward him and says, "Someone forget." Jason looks down at the bulging wallet, slides it behind the register, and nods a solemn thanks.

He feels just one crisp note in the billfold. On second thought, it's two twenties stuck together, born together from the ATM. He removes them and folds them in one deft flick, pushes the wallet deep under the espresso machine with one hand as he slides the other to his pocket, seemingly to remove his lip balm, which he nonchalantly applies just as Angelina comes in the door. She doesn't pause to ask her question or even look at him as she saunters behind the counter.

"You skim your tips yet?"

"Oh, that's right." Jason leans around the register, plunges his hand into the jar and retrieves four singles and four quarters, leaves one single and a mound of pennies, nickels, and dimes. "I almost forgot," he says to the cloud of perfume Angelina has left behind her. "It's been pretty slow."

FOUR

He waited longer than was necessary. Then he waited longer than would be expected and stayed past what would be considered reasonable. He was waiting when the ambulance passed and the wailing

crescendo and diminuendo of the siren did not distract him from his waiting, although he was staring into the street when the flashing red and white blur sliced through his field of view. He waited until his second coffee—which he forced himself to sip slowly at first but then lost interest in halfway through—grew cold. He waited until he was sure.

He had begun the waiting resolute: after three months of occasional coffees and movies he was going to ask her to dinner. Ask her out on a date. But during the waiting his certainty slipped into hopeful excitement, which transitioned into nervousness, which shifted into anxiety, which in the dampness of errant thought warped into cold fear, which mutated into an anger that smoldered and grew hotter the more his coffee cooled.

When his last hopes finally desiccate and ignite, the anger morphs back into anxious anticipation, which fizzles into a dull resignation, which now rises from the ash as the following thoughts:

She is not coming.

It's just as well.

He is hobbled by his lack of a cellphone. She could have called to let him know she was running late. After waiting 30 minutes he did call her from a payphone outside but she didn't pick up. Then he checked his messages at home; there were none. He waited 15 minutes and called both numbers again. Nothing still. She simply isn't coming. She decided not to come. Perhaps she had heard the twitch in his voice when he asked her to meet him, noted a different tone from his other calls, a hesitance, and she sensed what was coming and was avoiding it. Why else would she not call? The plan was to grab a coffee and walk to the bay. He will continue, as planned. He will walk. On his way out he passes a large, loud man walking in but does not hear the man ask the room:

"Hey, you hear someone fell off a cable car?"

He follows California Street up and over Nob Hill. The climb does him good. When his lungs heave his attention is forced out of the past and his thoughts are pulled back from the future he had imagined there. Exertion eclipses embarrassment. He doesn't pause to catch his breath when he reaches Huntington Square Park at the top of the hill. He keeps walking. He goes faster going down. When he reaches Kearny he does not notice the skid marks and remnants of a flare on the pavement. He does not glance across the street at the Bank of America building and so finds nothing remarkable in the lethargic movements of the flower seller and the crowd still gathered around the kiosk at the corner of the plaza. He misses the TV news vans. As he approaches Montgomery two cable cars crisscross so even if he were looking across the street he would not see the café on the other side, the one with the same name as the one where he'd just spent over an hour. Because he doesn't see it he doesn't go in and doesn't hear the woman behind the counter telling a customer that she was supposed to have been on the a.m. shift but had to trade because her daughter had an orthodontist appointment or otherwise she would have been the one on TV.

He is glad to have walked. He is seeing more clearly now: He sees how it is all in his head. It was nothing, really, she is just a friend. He almost ruined it. Overreacting. He is infatuated with a woman who enjoys his company, nothing more. Why does he have to make it more? What was he thinking? He was waiting a long time. He shouldn't have waited such a long time. Even if she did feel the same way, waiting that long can't be attractive. Or wise. But she doesn't. Feel the same way. He won't call again. He will walk until he doesn't want to call.

A Russian widower whose English is shaky and whose phone number is one digit off from his is hearing this message: "Hello, this is Saint Francis Medical Center. Could you please give us a call? We have a patient here who arrived with no identification except her agenda book. Your name and this phone number are written in for today and circled twice so we're hoping you know her. She could use a friend..."

Tom Lichtenberg

Magic

Around the time I turned twelve, my best friend and my worst enemy were one and the same. He was my best friend because he was my only friend, even though I didn't even like him. I had a lot of enemies, but he was the worst, or at least tied for the title. His name was Alan Belew. Mine is Jimmy Kruzel. The other important person in this story is a girl named Dana Sanderson. She wasn't a friend or an enemy. I don't even know what she was. We were temporary partners in a plot to get, and get rid of, Alan Belew. She wanted to get him. I wanted to get rid of him. We thought maybe we could help each other out. It was a dumb idea, but far from the dumbest we came up with that fall.

I had just come back from a year somewhere else. Let me tell you, going away for a year as a kid, and then coming back, is a great way to lose all your friends. They all moved on and left me out. I could hardly believe it. These were kids I had known pretty much all my life, kids I had played with, gone to school with, had sleepovers with, gone camping with, hung out with, kicked the can with, you name it. But now we were all turning twelve, and I'd missed out on one crucial ceremony - the spinning the bottle with. How did my childhood buddies all pair up into romantic couples in the space of a prepubescent year? Yet they did. All of them, it seemed, except the girl with the cooties, the Nazi boy, and the two brand new kids: Alan Belew, and Dana Sanderson.

I found out all about it on the first day of sixth grade. Brandon was with Sarah. Tucker was with Jenny. Carl with Candy. Gregory with Terry. Erica and Charlie. Even Annie, whose family had just changed their last name from Barkowicki to Barnes, was hooked up with Scooter McDaniel. The twins, Marcie and Margie, had boyfriends in Ricky and Rajel. That left Ariel (Cootie Girl) and Duncan (Nazi Boy), and Dana and Alan, and yours truly, myself, on the outside of the glorious circle of light. You'd think that soon there would be only one - the extra boy would be totally alone, and I was certain that that would be me. It seemed inevitable that the other two pairs would form as I have just named them.

It was all new to me and I wasn't ready. I wanted my friends back, and I didn't like girls, not for holding hands, kissing and going steady at least. Or maybe I did but didn't want to admit it. The thing was, I was small, I was weak, I was shy and I was convinced I was ugly as well. It was not going to be a good year. That first day at school, I stood there at recess with nobody talking to me, nobody bothering with me, too nervous and scared to do anything myself, just watching my former friends gather together and command secret audiences with coded messages, gestures and expressions. I was like a rabbit exposed in a field, and it didn't take long for Alan Belew, raptor that he was, to swoop down.

I don't think we'd ever spoken to each other before that moment, when he came up beside me and slugged me right in the shoulder. It hurt so bad I cried out and tears came before I could stop them.

"Look at those jackholes!" he scoffed, not even noticing my pain. "Do you even like any of these kids?"

"I guess so", I muttered, even though I wasn't sure about that anymore. Charlie Evans had been my best friend from kindergarten until then. I lived next door to Rajel Patel and two doors down from Ricky Ventura. I had known them all my life. I'd been in love with Annie Barkowicki when I was only seven. Yeah, I liked those kids. Too bad they didn't like me anymore. I could hardly believe the way they'd shut me out, like they'd forgotten my entire existence. The first thing I did when we moved back there was to go knock on Charlie's door, and he just shrugged on the porch and told me he was busy. Went right back inside, and I had been missing him so much. I had even written him a letter from Virginia where we'd been. It was just like that with all the others. Too busy. Sorry. Can't. Maybe some other time or maybe not. We'd come home in the middle of the summer and I don't think I played with

any of my former friends even once till school began, and now that school had begun it was more of the same. Just this moron towering over me and leaning his bad breath into my face.

"Bunch of losers if I ever saw one", he said, and spat on the dirt. He really did. He spat. I was totally grossed out. This Alan kid was big, and mean. He was taller than any of the other kids and maybe even a year older. He'd probably been held back 'cause he was stupid too. Couldn't even tell you ten times ten, which I knew because Miss Hacksaw'd asked him that very question just before break. He hadn't even bothered to answer, just kind of snorted and folded his arms across his chest. Light brown hair, cut short in bangs. Tortoise shell glasses. Freckles. Light brown eyes as well. Wore these horizontal striped shirts with collars always, short sleeves and wore short pants all the time as well. Knobby knees and beat up old white sneakers. I think it was the same two or three shirts, now that I think about it. His family didn't have any money.

They'd just moved in to the little apartment building around the corner from my house - four small apartments sharing a weird little concrete patio that wrapped around the rear of the place and came abruptly to a halt along either side like a really bad haircut. He was the only kid in that place I'm pretty sure, the only kid then, and before, and since. I swear I never saw another one. Later on he told me that his dad was in the military, which is why they moved around so much. He knew about Virginia too. Newport News. Arlington. Lorton and Langley. He figured that our dads probably knew each other, but my dad was some kind of bureaucrat, and his was some kind of sergeant so I doubted it, and I was right.

"Come on", he pushed me that first minute. "I'll race you to the hole in the fence and back".

"I don't want to race", I started to say, but it was no use. He shoved me forward, then pushed me again, then kept pushing and shoving until I gave up and finally started to run. I was no match for the guy. He was at least a foot taller and weighed maybe fifty pounds more than me, which was no feat. I think I still weighed around sixty when I was twelve years old. I was basically a runt. Still am. So Alan Belew kept jogging right beside me while I got madder and madder and ran faster and faster, as fast as I could because I wanted to beat him, wanted to do something I could be happy about at least, but he was barely even breathing as he kept right up with me. We got to the hole in the fence at about the same time, but then, turning around, he shouted out something and took off like a cheetah. He was back where we started before I was even halfway there.

Some of the other kids had turned to watch and he knew it, and he turned toward them as he finished, and took a deep bow. Every single one of those kids looked away without a word and he was left to kick a rock, which naturally hit me in the shin as I approached and knocked me right down, ripping my pants at the knee as I fell. Recess was over right then, so there I was, dirty and sweaty and torn pants and all, I had to go right back to class, no time to clean up. Then when he got there, Alan somehow sat next to me - I was certain he hadn't been sitting there earlier - and whenever Miss Hacksaw wasn't looking, he reached over and poked me in the side with a pencil.

I guess he was in love with me or something. I couldn't get away from him. As soon as school ended I made a dash for the door, but there he was catching up to me, insisting on walking back home with me. After all, we went the same way and lived only houses apart. He told me some stories concerning himself. He didn't like animals. He made paper airplanes. He liked football and wrestling and guns. He knew a big secret he couldn't tell anyone. His father would kill him if he did. Did I want to come over and see his collection of arrows? He made them himself. He wouldn't take no for an answer. There was ice cream and his mother was working. She'd never know and what did he care if she did? He hated his mother. His dad was all right.

Their apartment was shabbier than I had imagined. They had a worn out green couch and a battered old table, and that was pretty much all there was in the main room, aside from the beat up old rug and a TV which sat unplugged on the floor. Alan told me it was broken. His room consisted of a piece of foam rubber which lay on the ground, some pretty impressive paper airplanes and a small pile of clothes, all equally dirty or equally clean, depending on how you decided to judge it. There was also

a collection of sticks on the windowsill, which he'd turned into arrows just like he'd said. I'd say there were maybe twenty of them, all the same length more or less, with very sharp points and at the other end, feathers, gray and purple. He told me he'd plucked them from pigeons himself. He'd sneak up on the birds, grab them, pull out a feather or two and then let them go. I didn't believe him, but somehow those actually were pigeon feathers.

His parents' bedroom door was closed, and in all the times I visited there it remained so, forever. I never caught a glimpse of that place. The kitchen, well, you can imagine. A few pots and pans, but everything else was of plastic or paper - the plates, utensils - except for an assortment of sharp looking knives. Alan pointed them out with some pride. He used them for whittling and carving. He picked up one of the larger ones and casually mentioned it had killed a man at one time. I didn't press him for details and he put it away with some ceremony.

The walls were barren. I remember how strange it seemed to me then. I was raised in a house where the walls were practically covered with stuff - paintings by my sister, drawings by me, posters and prints from all over. My mother even taped postcards she especially liked to the walls. Alan Belew's place was empty. Well, I reminded myself, he did say that they moved around a lot. Different place every year. Probably got tired of packing up stuff so that's why they didn't have any. He offered me some ice cream but I said no thanks, because I felt guilty to take anything. The boy had so little to begin with.

"Suit yourself", he replied, helping himself to a half-box of chocolate, then wolfing it down, scooping it out with his hands. He had ice cream all over his face and his arms and just wiped it all off on his shirt when he finished.

"Come on", he declared, "let's go back outside. There's something I want to show you".

I just wanted to go. I had to get home. My mother would worry, I told him, and maybe he had had enough of my whining by then, because he said "Suit yourself" one more time, and then went to his room, slamming the door shut behind him. I let myself out and tried to get ready for the yelling my mother would give me as soon as she saw my new pants.

Every school day after that, Alan Belew was waiting for me outside on the sidewalk by my home. He never once knocked on the door, or called, or even asked if I wanted to walk the five blocks with him. He just made sure to arrive there early enough, and waited. It was no use trying to avoid him. He would wait as long as it took. Sooner or later I would run out of excuses and my mother would push me out the front door and there I was, stuck. I soon discovered that getting sluggered was now part of my daily routine. It was the way he had of saying hello. He'd punch me in the arm or the shoulder and without a word we'd head down the street towards school.

Along the way we crossed a bridge over some railroad tracks, followed by a detour through some weeds across a vacant lot, then down another side street to the elementary school. In those days, sixth grade was the top of the line. All your life you waited until you could be the top dog, because right after that you were shipped off to junior high, you had to take the bus and be the small fry once again. But I was always the small fry, and sixth grade turned out to be the same old story for me, only now I had a crazy sort of bodyguard, the kind that does the opposite of protect you. Hardly a day went by without Alan Belew daring me to do something incredibly dangerous and stupid, like jump off the bridge onto a train rushing by underneath, or throwing an egg at the garbage man riding the back of his truck, or sticking my hand through the fence where the mean German Shepherd was drooling to bite it. I almost did all of these things, out of the fear that if I didn't do them on my own he would push me, or throw me, or make me somehow do them. I didn't really think about the consequences. At the time, it seemed to me that any of those options would probably lead to somehow escaping the presence of Alan Belew, if only briefly. At the very last moment he'd let me off the hook with a snort and a caustic insult.

"What an idiot", he'd say. "You sure take the cake", and then pull me away from the scene of the dare.

I hated that boy. I hated his breath, the sound of his voice, the smell of his putrid old shirts. I

was a virtual prisoner from the moment I left home in the morning, all day long at the school, until I got home, if he let me go home, in the evening. It turned out we both stayed for day care. Me and him and a bunch of littler kids in a room with a nasty old man who always made us play cards, Mr. Snittle. He had children as young as six playing poker and gambling with pretzel sticks. Alan was always in trouble. More often than not, he was punished with detention for things that he did in the classroom. Mr. Snittle also ran that, and he knew just how to make a kid suffer. Once he discovered that Alan had some natural mechanical talents, he started bringing in all sorts of interesting magazines of that sort, and refused to let Alan read them. He brought in Alan's favorite snacks - marshmallow rice krispie treats - and wouldn't let Alan eat them. He made him watch while the other kids got to do things he enjoyed. On our way home after a typical Snittleday, I was sure to get the brunt of his rage, mixed in with the usual assortment of improbable tales, such as the time that a rattlesnake jumped up and bit him on the elbow, or how his father felled two elk with one shot from a crossbow.

I lied to my parents about it, about the torn clothing, the bruises, the bleeding. I had become very accident prone all at once. I couldn't tell anyone. Nobody knew, and it went on like this for weeks. I didn't realize it at the time, but everything changed when a girl in my class took me aside at recess one day, and started to quiz me about him. I didn't really know Dana Sanderson. She lived in the gigantic apartment complex about a mile from my house - I didn't even know which floor she lived on - and we had never talked to each other before. She was almost as tall as Alan, which meant that she towered over me. She had long straight brown hair, a lot of freckles, and a couple of bumps which would turn into breasts, but for the moment seemed hardly to be there at all. There was nothing special about her. She never spoke up in class. She didn't seem to have many friends or any particular interests.

"He's your friend, right?" she asked me.

"Who is?" I asked.

"Alan", she gestured impatiently at him. He was walking alone by the fence, kicking rocks.

"I guess", I replied.

"I want him", she told me directly. "Will you help me to get him?" she asked. I had no idea what she meant, but I think I had a glimmer of hope that maybe she would take him from me. It would be a clean transfer. I'd just hand him over and that would be that. I'd be free.

"Sure", I replied. "If I can."

"Good", Dana told me, and started walking away, and I stood there, wondering what that was all about.

I didn't hear another word from Dana Sanderson for several days, and began to wonder if maybe I'd just imagined that whole conversation. School days had been bad enough, but now, even on the weekends, I would wake up, peek out my second floor window, and see Alan Belew hanging around on the sidewalk across the street, waiting for me to come outside. It was just my good luck, my only luck at the time, that he was for some reason afraid to come and knock at the door. On the other hand, it meant I was trapped in my own home. I would have to wait for my parents to insist on taking me somewhere, or else sneak out the back and play as quietly as possible, making sure I didn't venture anywhere that was visible from the street. One Saturday he remained out front for nearly three hours.

When Dana did call, it was on a Sunday morning and Alan was nowhere in sight. I had never received a phone call from a girl before in my life, and I remember feeling a little flattered. I shouldn't have.

"Jimmy?" she asked, after I had come to the phone and said "hi".

"Yeah?"

I tried to sound cool.

"Do you have your shovel ready?" she wanted to know.

"My shovel?"

I was confused.

"Like we talked about", Dana replied.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You were going to come over today, and you said you'd bring your shovel", she told me. This was entirely news to me. I think she had played back a conversation with me in her head so many times she was convinced it had actually happened. It turned out this was very typical of her. She must have had a lot of imaginary friends when she was small, because she had a whole quiet world going on in that big brown head of hers. She didn't talk much, but when she did, she often began in the middle of some long involved story that nobody around her knew anything about. The funny part was, she didn't even notice. I don't think she had much time for other people and their little realities.

As it was, I didn't mind having an excuse to get out of the house and do something, anything, with anyone other than Alan. I told her I'd bring my shovel right over. She told me to meet her in the parking lot outside the apartment building, "on the south side", she said, as if I'd have any idea what that meant. I could never tell what the "northeast" corner or any directions were all about. Still can't. I figured I'd fake it, and find her somehow, which it turned out was easy to do, because a twelve year old girl with a shovel was easy to spot in a big old empty lot with nobody around.

Dana Sanderson meant business, and I soon discovered what business she meant. There was a small patch of woods not far from the apartment building, concealed by a huge mound of dirt that lined the lot. It was almost as if they had excavated a ten story hole, and piled all the dirt right next to the ten story building they put in there. We climbed with our shovels over that hill, and entered the woods. I followed Dana, who knew exactly where she was going; a spot behind a big weeping willow and in front of a stand of blue spruce trees.

"Help me dig", she commanded, which were the first words she spoke after a cursory greeting upon my arrival. She started in digging herself, and pointed at an area next to where she was working. I proceeded to match her output, shovel for shovel, as we dug out the soft red dirt and piled it next to the trees. I had to admit I was beginning to wonder. What were we digging for, and what did it have to do with Alan Belew? I thought if I asked her, though, it might make her mad, and then she wouldn't want to hang out with me anymore. That's how pathetic I was by that point. I was happy to be this girl's slave labor, if only because it made me feel needed. I knew the whole thing seemed crazy, but I think I was actually happy. I've always liked doing mindless work, which maybe explains how I ended up doing pretty much that with most of my grown-up years.

We dug for what seemed like an hour, in silence, and made a lot of progress, for what it was worth. We had dug out a coffin-sized rectangle, about six feet long, maybe three feet deep. Dana leaned back on her shovel, wiping the sweat from her face on her sleeve.

"It's going to be harder than I thought", she declared.

"I wish I'd brought water", she added.

"Maybe we could go up to your place for a drink", I suggested, but she shook her head.

"My dad is in town", she informed me, as if that explained something.

"What are we actually doing?" I finally asked her. She stared at me as if I was a complete imbecile for entirely forgetting the long involved talk that we'd had in her mind.

"Like I told you?" she shook her head impatiently. "I want to have a make-out chamber so when you bring Alan over, him and me can make out".

Him and me? Making out? I did not understand at all what she said. I was going to bring Alan over? It was all beginning to make sense, in a weird sort of way. Of course I still didn't know what a "make-out chamber" was, but I was suddenly interested. Dana described her design in more detail.

"It's got to have a roof", she'd decided. "So it's got to be high enough for that, but then we don't have to stand up in it really. It's just got to have some floor kind of thing. I was thinking maybe a rug. I could get one. So maybe four feet? What do you think? And the steps to go down, over there".

She scrambled around in the pit, gesturing at the various locations. Two steps would lead in from the front and go to the bottom, to the rug, which would be under a canopy of sorts. The pit would be half-roofed, half-open. I suggested it should be maybe six feet so you could stand up inside if you

wanted, and she thought maybe so. But we weren't even half done the pit part, and she was already exhausted. I was tired too but didn't want to admit it.

"It's probably lunch time", she told me. "I ought to get home so he doesn't get mad", and without another word, not even a 'thanks', she got up and left me there in the woods. I stood around for a while, trying to admire our progress. It was really just a hole in the ground, but it gave me something to think about. Maybe I could have a make-out chamber too. If I did, then who would I ever make out with? I thought I was lucky that Dana didn't ask me that question, but I didn't need to worry. Dana wasn't the least bit interested in me, in who I was, or what I liked, or anything. I was only two things to her, a body with a shovel, and the sole living friend of Alan Belew.

It took two another two Sundays to finish it. I was proud of the steps I made, which turned out pretty nice, and we did get to five feet and change in the back. For the roof she found some old corrugated plastic from what must have been somebody's greenhouse somewhere. I didn't ask questions and she didn't give answers. Dana Sanderson hardly ever talked the whole time, at least not aloud. Her sole ambition, it seemed, was to get him and kiss him. Sometimes she blurted that out. She must have been thinking about it a lot. She found an old battered sheepskin that went perfectly with our decor; pine cones, needles and duff. I wanted to add some nice touches, a hand painted sign maybe, but she ruled it all out. It wasn't just a make-out chamber, it was a secret make-out chamber. Nobody should know what it was or who made it.

I got used to the digging and sweating and waiting for orders. I figured she'd tell me what I was expected to do when the time came, so I wasn't surprised when she informed me that the following Saturday at precisely eleven a.m., I was to bring Alan Belew to the spot, and then go away and leave "him and her" all alone.

My next problem was how to do it. Alan never took orders from me. He never even took my suggestions. It was always whatever HE wanted to do, and I'd go along or else I'd get slugger. That was how I ended up stealing baseball cards from Mr. Henley at the drugstore. It was how I put a board with nails sticking up on old lady Magnusson's driveway. It was how I found myself dashing across the tracks just before the train came. I was pretty sure that Alan Belew was sent by the Devil to kill me, and the way things were going, I was hoping he would.

Well, not really. Dana Sanderson was going to be my salvation. All the other kids in the class were suddenly into making out whenever and wherever they could. You'd catch them at recess in places they knew they were not allowed to be. The boys would be "copping a feel" and the girls would be "letting" them. There were a whole lot of baseball metaphors flying about, but Alan and I hadn't gotten there yet. I figured he'd be closer than me, seeing as he was so much bigger and all. In my mind, size mattered, meaning height. The taller guys had the prettier girls, and yet Alan was tallest of all and had none. I wanted to bring up the subject but didn't know how, and at the same time I didn't want to jinx my only chance to get rid of him. I figured that the moment Dana "got him and kissed him", I'd be totally free.

On that Saturday he was waiting as usual and this time I jumped out of bed and ran out there to join him.

"What do you want to do?" I cheerfully asked. He looked at me carefully. This was certainly not my usual behavior.

"I don't know", he replied, and I saw my chance.

"I could show you something you wouldn't believe", I teased him.

"Oh yeah, like what?" he retorted.

"Come on, down the hill, and I'll show you", I said. I was doing my best to seem confident and brave. Maybe if I led, he would follow, I reasoned, and it turned out for once I was right. I started walking and he decided to join me. We walked down the street, around the corner past his house, and then down the steep hill to the Lakeview apartments. I was just hoping we weren't too early. Dana was very specific.

"So what is this thing", he kept asking me every ten paces, but I was keeping my secret.

"You'll see", I promised. "It's not far away."

"Where is it?" he prompted.

"Not far", I replied. I was practically skipping by then. The very idea - freedom! - was ringing in my head like a bell. All it would take was a kiss, and the toad that I was would still be a toad, but he at least would be a happier frog.

We entered the long road to the apartment building parking lot, and Alan began to hang back.

"Are we going in there?" he asked.

"Nope", I assured him, "not inside. Over there", and I pointed at the dirt mounds. He was still leery until I veered away from the building. He really had a phobia about people's front doors, it turned out. It wasn't just mine.

When we got the mounds I leaped up and scrambled along the top of their ridge. I knew he would like that. Dirt, speed and height were a great combination for him. He ran up the side and blew by me in giant strides. I hopped off toward the chamber and called out.

"Over here!" I shouted, and he came running back and jumped down in a leap. As we entered the woods I put my finger up to my lips and shushed him.

"We have to be quiet", I whispered. "It's a secret."

I think that I had him intrigued. We tiptoed very gently around the lean trees, and tried not to make any sounds. When we brushed past the willow I slowed the pace down even more. Come on, I was wishing as hard as I could. Be here, Dana. You'd better be here! We came to the clearing, and then there she was.

Dana Sanderson was dressed up as never before. She was wearing cut off jean shorts, a yellow tank top, high heels and lipstick. She stood in what must have been her idea of a seductive pose, with one hand on a hip, and the other hand bent away from her body, backhand sort of, and twitching. I was impressed. She looked pretty good, and she even had almost a smile on her face.

Alan Belew burst out laughing.

"Looks like somebody found out your secret!" he shouted, and punched me in the shoulder, knocking me down to the ground.

"You look pretty dumb!" he told Dana. "What are you doing out here in those shoes?"

"Come here and I'll show you", she challenged him.

He wasn't used to being told what to do. I could tell he was very resistant. I expected him then to say no and run off. I was surprised when instead he said,

"Sure, if you want", and took a few steps closer to her.

"Come here", she repeated, using her bent hand to wave him over.

He took two more steps.

"You can show me from here", he advised her. He was still, oh maybe six feet away. I was behind him, just getting up, and wondering if I should beat it already. Dana would probably have given me a look to just that effect if she wasn't so totally smitten. She had completely forgotten I ever existed.

"Uh-uh", she told him and there was that smile coming out of her face for maybe the first time in years.

"Oh all right", he muttered, and walked up beside her. As soon as he did, she grabbed both his hands with her own and she kissed him, full on the lips with her eyes shut tight and gripping his fingers so tightly he had no chance to escape.

That's when I ran. I was just following orders and I didn't look back. I didn't even want to know, not then, not later, not ever, and as it turned out, I never did. The trick worked. She was right. She got him and kissed him and that was all that it took. I was free.

After that there was only Nazi Boy, Cootie Girl and me left unpaired. Turned out Cootie Girl liked me, but I couldn't do it, so I just let Nazi Boy win. I didn't care. None of those people would ever be my friends, never again. They say that when one door is closed, another door opens. I don't know

what they are talking about. All those doors closed, and when that last one slammed shut I was glad.

The End

About the Authors

Lisa Thatcher is a writer and culture reviewer par excellence who maintains [a most fascinating blog](#)

Paul Samael also reviews free e-books and has introduced me to many great indie authors through [his website](#)

Carla R. Herrera has written several gripping SF books, all worth reading, and you can find her at [her website](#)

Giando Sigurani is the author of the dazzling novel "Mister Mercury" whose home can be found [here](#)

Willie Wit is the prolific author of [tantalizing flash fictions](#)

Michael Graeme has written many books across many genres and maintains [The Rivendale Review](#)

Judy B's wide variety of works can be found online at [Onze Productions](#)

Tom Lichtenberg writes "curiously engaging novellas" and resides online at [Pigeon Weather Productions](#)



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