

SCHEHERAZADE



**The MPC Literary
Magazine
Issue 4**

Scheherazade

Scheherazade is the queen of fiction. She married a King who murdered the beautiful women of his domain by first marrying them, and ending their lives on the morning after the wedding.

Scheherazade arranged to be married to the King in an attempt to save and preserve the beauty of the kingdom. On the wedding night, after consummation, she woke the King and began to tell him a story about a blue rat and a black cat. She timed her story with the sunrise so that it would not be finished by the time she was to be hung. Captivated by her story, the King granted her a stay of execution until the next day. The story was finished that night, but Scheherazade began a second story that could not be finished by morning, and again the King let her live so that he could hear the end of the story.

This went on for 1001 nights. Scheherazade preserved beauty with her stories. Her stories saved her life. The MPC Literary Magazine is named after her, as the writers and poets within are discovering that they have stories within that they want to tell, and by sharing them here they bring a little more beauty into the world.

Marc Ferris, Managing Editor

Scheherazade

Issue 4

Managing Editor

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Supporting the Magazine

Please consider a contribution to this magazine. Your support will be much appreciated, and will be acknowledged in both the print and online editions.

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“Autumn in the Valley,” by Michelle Morneau and “Children’s Hallow Ballad,” by Justin Huang, were winners of the Creative Writing Club of MPC’s Halloween Writing Contest.

Submissions

Scheherazade is published by the Creative Writing Club of Monterey Peninsula College and considers submissions of original poetry, short fiction, novel excerpts, nonfiction, and photography. All MPC students are welcome to send their work. Submissions are read by members of the club who serve as staff; writers’ names are removed from manuscripts before reading. Please submit up to 5 poems and/or up to 20 pages of prose as an email attachment in .rtf, .doc or .docx format to: CreativeWritingClub@mpc.edu

Photographs submitted must be at least 300psi.

Table Scraps

And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

-- Matthew 15:26-28

Pascal performed like a champion: his bark, pitch perfect; his pant, subtle and unconstrained; his gait, crisp and measured.

"Collie!" shouted his niece.

Pascal lay on his stomach and, looking up at her, placed his palms on the floor on either side of his face. Everyone laughed.

"I think that's a 'no'," said his brother, "But I think you're right that he's some type of sheepdog. It's clear that he's been well trained."

Pascal stood on all fours and gave two sharp barks. Then he stared at his brother with his mouth slightly open.

"Australian shepherd?" guessed an aunt.

Pascal gave his two barks again. Then he rose to his normal posture, standing on two feet, and gave an elegant bow to the laughter and applause of his family. He took his

seat next to his brother. “That means it’s your turn, Aunt Rose,” he said.

Pascal’s brother turned to him. “What’s gotten into you? That was uncanny. Can you train our dog to act like that?”

“I think the first job would be convincing her she’s not a person,” said the niece.

Pascal looked at his wristwatch next morning after breakfast and decided to take himself for a walk. It was a cold winter day but sunny and the sidewalks cleared of snow. He sniffed the air and spotted the church across the street. A few people ambled out the open doors. Others were getting into their cars. He trotted across the street and behind the building where he supposed there might be a door.

There was a door, it was open, and a woman was halfway out of it. She was bent over something on the ground, pouring dark liquid into a snow bank. When Pascal approached, she looked up. At first Pascal did not say anything. He looked at her with a pleasant expression on his face.

“Fine day,” he finally said.

The woman smiled and stood up. “Yes,”

“Service just let out?”

“A while ago.”

“Do you do this every Sunday?” asked Pascal, indicating the slender glass pitcher in her hand.

Her brow knotted faintly. “I take turns with others. Wednesdays too, now it’s Advent.”

“If I come, will you give me what’s left?” As he asked, Pascal took a polite step forward.

The knot appeared fully. “Perhaps you would like to speak with our pastor. He’s here now—if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go get him.” Pascal gave no indication other than a vague smile. The woman went inside.

Pascal walked to where she had stood and without looking around, bent down and carefully dug out the crimson snow. A pruned stub of rose stock scratched his hand. He sucked it briefly before eating the snow and walking back to the street.



“Pastor?” One of the altar guild women appeared at the door. “There was a man at the back door asking for consecrated wine. Or anyway he was asking for wine. I thought you might like to talk to him.”

Immediately the pastor got up and went to the back door. “I’ve been trying to talk to that guy.” He looked around and then followed the footsteps in the snow. When he came around the corner he caught sight of a man on the sidewalk and followed him. The man walked fast. Before the pastor could catch up with him, they reached a park where a group of children were feeding ducks with a bag of moldy bread. The man walked straight toward the children as though he knew them. The pastor stood at a distance to watch.

Only the children’s dog noticed as the man picked up the bag of bread, lifted out a slice, and broke it in half. He continued with the rest until one of the children turned around.

“Hey! Where did all this bread come from?”

A little girl turned. “Oh! Don’t let the dog eat it!”

The pastor looked ahead as the children gathered up the torn bread slices. There was no trace of the man and no snow on the sidewalks. He looked left and right and saw no one.

Taking a guess, he turned right. Six more blocks still didn't offer any clues so he turned back toward the church.



Pascal arrived back at his brother's house and entered through the mudroom. He lingered there sniffing around the dog's bowl. Then he found the package of dog food and examined it, tossing a piece of kibble into his mouth. He chewed slowly with a thoughtful expression.

Janet, Pascal's sister-in-law, brought in an armful of dishtowels and put them on the washing machine.

"Where have you been all this time? Eating my dog's food?"

"I went on a walk. Have you ever been to that church a few blocks away?"

"No. Is that where you went?"

Pascal did not answer. He went on reading the dog food package. His brother entered the room.

Janet said, "You know you can always talk to us if you need to...we are starting to wonder about you a little bit. After Laura left—"

"Things are simpler now."

"You eat dog food for a living. I know that wasn't the big promotion you were expecting but you don't have to act like a monk or something." She watched him chew. "What are you snooping around a church for?"

His brother cleared his throat. "He *tastes* dog food. It's actually a very lucrative account."

Janet rolled her eyes. "He always would put anything in his mouth."

Wednesday after supper, Pascal excused himself from his family and took the same walk as before. He listened outside the church for the proceedings to end.”

“...Jesus Christ...took bread...my body which is given...drink of it...testament in my blood...remembrance of me...”

Absentmindedly, Pascal licked his lips.

A silhouette of the woman he had met before appeared at the back door after the service, black against the light of the doorway, again holding the vessel of dark liquid. Pascal stood up when he saw her. She fixed her eyes on him for about five seconds and then she disappeared.

Almost immediately a man’s silhouette came through the door and out into the moonlight. He wore a black shirt with a stiff white collar.

“Ah,” said Pascal, “Were you also with the body?”

“I neither know nor understand what you mean,” replied the man. “One of our altar guild ladies tells me you’ve been asking for wine. Is that so?”

“Wine? No. I want what she had in that little pitcher.”

The man began to say something and then stopped. Then he asked, “Do you know what this is?”

“Are you going to give it to me?”

“You might consider joining us for worship.”

“Is there any of the flesh left?”



A bird sang. Pastor Peterson’s tensed shoulders sank and he peered at the visitor. His voice took on a conciliatory tone as he spoke again:

“Listen—I don’t even know your name. My name is Pastor Peterson.” Here he extended his hand.

“My name is Pascal,” said the man named Pascal.

“Pascal. Come on in and we’ll get you a cup of coffee and talk a little bit. It’s Christmas Eve, for Pete’s sake. It’s no use standing out here trying to—“

Pascal had turned and was stepping into the same footprints he made when he came.

That night Pastor Peterson lay in his bed and puzzled over the man. He reworked the exchange but even in his imagination he could not compel the man to sit and talk as one in his right mind. Yet *had* he been out of his mind? He did not think Pascal would return after having been denied.



Next morning, Pascal, a niece, two nephews and the family dog spilled out of Pascal’s brother’s house and began a lively snowball fight. In a little while, Pascal said, “Come with me.” They followed him down the sidewalk.

A fresh snow had fallen in the night and turned to freezing rain, but now sunshine sparkled on whitened branches and holly leaves under glass. The party processed down the street, nearly dancing. The smallest of the children attempted to ride the dog; Pascal picked him up and put him on his shoulders, ideally situating the boy for gathering ice and snow from low-bent branches and continuing the siege from atop his fortress. They arrived at the church just as its doors were opening.

A niece and a nephew took shelter under a large evergreen tree in the church’s courtyard, waited for their uncle to put their cousin down, and returned fire upon them.

Children coming out of the church sounded the charge and joined forces against Pascal and his party, now united beneath the evergreen. Pascal stood up to launch a volley and caught three hard snowballs in the face.

Paff

Paff

Paff

The niece gave a cry when she saw blood on his face and joined the nephews in a loud counter-attack. Pascal looked up and immediately he saw the church door opening and Pastor Peterson descending the stairs. And a voice came from an elderly gentleman standing at the opened door:

“What’s going on out there?”

The children froze. Pastor Peterson broke the tableau but as he stepped, the weight of snow and ice broke a mighty branch above where Pascal lay. It fell and buried him. Inside the snow, Pascal felt a warmth breaking on his clothes and then turning to cold. For a moment he thought about tasting it but then he didn’t worry about it anymore.

Have A Nice Day!

I was about to enter when I saw him. I had pre-gamed a bit – a couple of margaritas during the dinner rush - so when a big, broad-shouldered man of about forty grinned broadly at me with perfect teeth and said, "I made this," I didn't think it was all that weird.

"You made this building?"

"No." He waved his hands in an all-encompassing gesture. "*This*." The grin got even bigger.

"You're a contractor?" It made sense. I cooked for a living. I took pride in what I made. If I built bars for a living, I'd take pride in that too.

"No, I mean, all of this."

He was clearly a bit drunk. I assumed he was talking about the street we were on. "An architect, then? No, let me guess - civil engineer."

He shook his head, then stopped mid-shake and knit his eyebrows together. "Civil engineering." He let the phrase roll around a bit. "Yeah, I like that. You could say I'm a civil engineer. Yeah, you could say that."

I reached out a hand. "My name's Thomas. You?"

He laughed. "Thomas. Like the apostle?"

I shrugged. "I suppose. I never was very religious. My grandpa was. Always asked me how Sunday School was going. Don't think he ever really figured out I didn't go."

He looked at me kinda funny. "He knew."

The statement was so confident you couldn't help but believe it. It was a quiet confidence. Looking back, Granddad Brian probably did know. He was always sharper than he let on, always knew what me taking "walks" with my girlfriends meant, always had the best advice for any given situation.

The older man laughed again. "It's never too late to go to church," he said. "The way I see it, faith can hit you in two ways. It can hit you like bird shit hits a statue – in little bits, but over time it just piles up. Or it can hit you like a runaway gravel truck doing ninety down a hill - all at once and then there's nothing left of who you used to be. I wonder which one you'll be."

I shrugged again. "What makes you think I'll be either?"

He laughed some more. The laugh was getting on my nerves. "Would you like a drink? I'm buying."

I've only said no to free drinks twice in my life. The first time, I was fifteen and my cousin offered me vodka in front of my entire family. Under any other circumstances, I would've said yes, but that was just too awkward. The second time I refused a free drink was two years ago. The crazy ex who had stalked me for six months after our split had showed up at the bar I was at. When she came up to me and offered to buy, I left that place faster than I left her. Compared to that, a weird old man who was a civil engineer wasn't all that strange.

We went in. The bar was dim, the drinks were cheap, and the bartender was silent. I'd been there before. You didn't go there to meet singles, you went there to get drunk. We grabbed stools and signaled to the bartender. He stood in front of us and grunted once.

The civil engineer said, "A pint of Guinness."

I said, "Manhattan on the rocks."

The bartender said, "Urm," and turned to fix our drinks.

I looked to the older man. "So what's your name, anyways?"

This time, the laughter wasn't a mild chuckle. It was a full belly laugh, a big booming thing that drowned out the conversations of everybody in the room. "What's my name?" he repeated, and then burst into laughter again.

He calmed down after a little bit. "Many people have called me many things. I suppose you can call me - hmm. Call me Ron."

"So, Ron, what sort of engineering do you do?"

"I told you. Civil."

"Yeah, but what kind of civil engineering?"

No laugh this time, but a broad grin. "All of them."

"How much time did you spend in college?"

"I just sorta picked it up as I went, you know?"

"You just sorta picked up engineering."

The grin came back. "Yep."

"It takes most people four years to learn one single engineering discipline."

The laugh now. "I'm not most people."

We lapsed into silence, sipping our drinks. My Manhattan had too much vermouth. Finally, he said, "What do you do?"

“I cook. I'm the grill man at French's, a bar and grill.”

“No, I mean, what do you *do*, in the bigger sense?”

I didn't really know what to say, so I just shrugged.

“You don't really know, do you? It's a real toughie for some people.”

I just shrugged again, remaining mute.

“Follow me.”

The old guy stood up and walked through the back exit of the bar.

I followed him.

We walked a block or so until he found what he was looking for. It was a standard alley – a few milk crates lounging around doing nothing, bottles rolling around like displaced bowling pins, a shoe, one dirty Dumpster crawling with rats. He grabbed a milk crate, sat on it, gestured for me to do the same.

I sat.

“Do you believe in God?”

“I don't have the time to do the whole church thing.” It was the truth. I had about enough time to get hammered after work.

“Why not?”

“I just don't, I guess.”

“Never examined your beliefs?”

“Too tired.” Again, it was the truth and nothing more.

“Would you like to see something?”

I had zero interest in seeing something.

“Yeah, sure.”

And just like that, a flower emerged from the impermeable asphalt.

It was an ordinary flower – bright blue petals, dark brown stamen, a green stalk. I leaned down and plucked it from its new home. A new one shot right up to replace it.

I turned it over in my hands. It was definitely a flower. I smelled it, crushed the stalk and felt the sticky fluid that came out. Definitely a flower. I looked at the old man.

“So what's the trick?”

“No trick. Just some, what was it? Civil engineering.” He turned around, reached down, and offered me a bottle of Guinness that he had apparently procured from the ground. There had definitely not been a cold Guinness where he was sitting. “Wanna see another one?”

He went over to the Dumpster. The rats froze, staring at him. He picked one up, held it in his hands. Then he brought it over to me. The rat sniffed a little. It was very clearly a living, breathing, healthy Dumpster rat.

Then, almost sadly, he crushed the rat's skull between his thumb and forefinger.

It stopped twitching after a few seconds. He put its dead body on the ground and wiped brain off his fingers.

He put his hand on the rat's body.

The tail moved. What had once been a smashed pulp for a head was now a whole rat's head. The undead rat sat up, sniffed the air, and sprinted for the Dumpster.

“Look around you, lad. Can you guess who I am?”

“A necromancer?”

He snorted. “No, dumbass. Try again.”

There was only one other answer that I could think of.

“... God?”

He nodded.

I drank some Guinness to dull the shock. After a while, I said, “Can I ask a question?”

“You just did.”

“Why are you here?”

The old man motioned towards the bottle in my hands. “The beer, mostly. The beer gets better the lower you go.”

“So why not go to Germany, or Belgium, or, hell, Ireland?”

“America has some good microbrews. Besides, your women are easier.”

I broke into laughter. It was crazy, hysterical laughter, the sort of laugh that you associate with people who should be in small padded rooms, the ones the doctors write papers about. I just couldn't stop. The very idea that the supreme maker, creator of the heavens and the earth, he who saw it and said it was good – the thought that he cared about how easily you could get a girl's pants off was beyond me. So I laughed, because if I didn't I'd crack.

He sat and watched me for a while, then asked, “Are you done?” in a kindly tone.

I sobered immediately. “Yeah. I'm done.”

“Good. Let's discuss your future.”

“What's there to discuss? I work. If I work hard enough, maybe I get to run a restaurant or three.”

He smiled. It reminded me of Granddad Brian. “No, not that future. Your eternal future. The biggest of big pictures.”

“What about it?”

“Well, you haven't exactly been the most pious person.”

I couldn't deny it. I couldn't even deny it to my best friend, much less somebody who was omniscient.

“Your point being?”

“Well, you've been slacking. If you slack on the line too often, what happens?”

“I lose my job.”

“You lose your job. Precisely. Now, I realize you're a busy busy man. So am I. I have lots of things to look over, prayers to answer, angels to dispatch. Do you honestly think you met me by chance?”

I wasn't sure what to think. He continued.

“No, of course not. Really, nothing happens by chance. It's not all my doing -I have an entire department working on the small details of the future - but, by and large, the Big Plan is mapped out. So, here's the deal. Do something for me. One small thing. One small thing, and your future is guaranteed. No church needed. No repenting.”

“And why can't you do it yourself?”

He leaned forward conspiratorially.

“We're both busy men. I could get an angel to do it, but they're busy too. After all, it's a big universe, and I only have

so many agents to spare. And you have a soul to save, after all. It's a win-win. I can engage my agents in more useful activities, and you get Paradise at a reduced rate. It's not an uncommon bargain. I make offers like this all the time. But it's a one-time offer. This is not a car sale, not a weekly special. You say yes or no to me, in this alley, tonight."

"So what is it?"

"A very small thing. Sometimes the smallest things have the biggest consequences."

"So *what is it?*"

"Hold a sign at a crosswalk. A sign that simply says, "Have a nice day!" A hundred people will see it and a hundred people will have their days brightened. Then they'll brighten the days of all the people around them, and those people will brighten the days of yet more people. Do you remember what I said about faith slowly building up?"

"Yeah. Like bird shit."

"Precisely. A good day is a fleck of bird shit. It's not enough to convert somebody on its own, but over a long enough span of time, over enough good days, that's thousands of converts, thousands of people with renewed faith, all of them seeing the universe in all its beauty and glory."

"So you want me to hold a nice sign, and make a lot of people a little bit happy, and then it's Paradise guaranteed, no backsies?"

"Paradise guaranteed. No backsies."

I thought about it. Even if he was just making shit up, even if the things with the rat and the flower and the Guinness that just appeared from nowhere were just tricks, it wasn't like holding a sign for a few hours was gonna hurt all

that much. It wasn't even an in-your-face religious sign, it was just kind and nice, a good deed on my karmic résumé.

“What intersection, and what time on what day?”

“Main and Townsend, three pm, tomorrow. Hold the sign for an hour, at least. Two hours would be nice.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

We shook on it, me and God, sitting on milk crates in an alley.

I'm not sure how I got home. I woke up in my apartment the next morning, no hangover, no memories of getting a taxi or walking back. I was in bed, fully dressed. My phone, keys, and wallet were on the kitchen counter. I wasn't altogether too concerned by the fact that I had no memory of getting home. It wasn't the strangest thing that had happened last night.

I munched some Frosted Flakes while I thought about how I should accomplish today's task. Sundays were brunch shifts, the shifts you threw the third string at. I was a better cook than to be assigned brunch, so today was my day off. My roommate wasn't home. Maybe he'd found a girl. Maybe he was dead. That would be a pisser. He owed me rent money.

After breakfast, I looked around for a Sharpie. I couldn't find one in the whole apartment, even though I found a copy of *A Night At The Opera* that I thought I'd lost a year ago. I walked down to the local grocery store to buy a pack of permanent markers.

I came back and put on *The Usual Suspects*. I found an old cardboard box that had once held a case of bananas. My roommate and I had bought a whole case of bananas, determined to discover the secret behind banana coulis. Ultimately, the experiment had failed. Bananas just did not become coulis, no matter how we wrangled them. However,

the cardboard box that we had been too lazy to throw out became a great sign. I scrawled "**HAVE A NICE DAY!**" on it, per my instructions. By the time that was done, and *The Usual Suspects* had ended, it was about time to leave.

I got to the intersection, checked the time. I was two minutes early. I got out my sign.

Fifty minutes passed. A few people honked or waved. Some people simply smiled. Almost everybody took a quick look at the sign. That's all the affirmation I needed, really. I just needed to know that people were looking, that people were having better days.

And then, as if in slow-motion, I saw a girl who couldn't have been a day over seventeen look over. Her mom was in the car, yelling at her to pay attention to the road. Her light changed, went red.

Her speed didn't change. She wasn't watching where she was going. She was watching my sign.

A driver on her left, seeing the green but not her, gunned it. He was in a sports car, the kind that goes from zero to light speed in the blink of an eye.

He was probably doing sixty when they collided.

I dropped my sign. My jaw dropped with it. I couldn't process what was happening. Had somebody just been hurt because of me? Had two people? Had one of them, God forbid, *died* because of my sign?

Somebody tapped my shoulder. I spun around. It was the old man from the bar.

"How does it feel?" he asked with a giant grin. "Being a murderer, I mean."

"A - a murderer?"

His grin got even wider.

“Oh, yes. The little girl, practicing for her driver's test, is dead. Or will be, anyways. She's still alive now, but she'll die in the ICU. The sports car driver is dead as well. He'll be pulled out of his car in a body bag. The mother will survive, but that little girl was her whole world. Her husband's as well. The mother will hang herself, and the husband will never remarry. He'll end up self-medicating with alcohol until the drink consumes him, he'll lose his job, be foreclosed upon. He'll die of pneumonia two years from now, homeless and utterly alone in the world. And you know what? He'll welcome death with open arms. None of that would have happened without you. I really must thank you. You did such a good job.”

I just stared at him, white with fury.

“This was my good deed? My ticket to Heaven? All it would cost me was an hour of my time and the lives of four people?”

The grin got even wider. It was now distinctly nonhuman,

“My dear boy, whatever makes you think a murderer with the blood of four innocents on his hands will get into Heaven? No, you're destined for much warmer climates.”

“You promised me that I'd get into Heaven!”

“Not quite. I promised Paradise. And, once you get used to it, my chunk of land can be a paradise of its own.”

“Your chunk of...”

My eyes flew open.

“You're -”

“Now you get it. Eve had much the same look as you when she connected the dots.”

And then I took a swing at that big, shit-eating grin. So help me God, I swung on Satan.

He deflected it very calmly and sunk his fist into my stomach. I bent double. He slammed me across the jaw, knocked me to the ground, kicked me in the ribs once, twice. Then he squatted in front of me and patted my cheek.

“There, there,” he said. “It will be alright. You won't be arrested. That's what matters to you mortals, right?”

He stood up, brushed some invisible dust off his tweed.

“Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to. I'm a busy man.”

He started to walk away, then turned to face me.

“Enjoy your next sixty years, he said. “The eternity after that isn't going to be quite as fun.”

And like that, he was gone.

Something for the Inspector (The Thing in the Shed)

Article 12, section 14 stipulates that my lawn must be edged a full quarter inch away from my cobblestone pathway leading the 20 feet from my driveway, to the bricked steps ranch-style porch. Does your home owner's association measure for that quarter inch? Mine does. Here at Whispering Sands the codes are strictly enforced by the park assistant manager, and lead inspector, Dean Geasel, and his butt-sniffing sycophant, Arnold. I don't know his last name. They live to ding people with a \$50 fine here, a \$90 infraction there. If the Third Reich was still around they would send S.S. officers here to train under Geasel. My grass was edged perfectly, and the clippings and dirt neatly swept. My tools were placed in the garage out of sight from the street (another no-no), I closed the automatic door, and began the final walk around the house, looking for something I'd missed. Everything was perfect. Checking the back yard took me close to the tool shed.

I didn't use the shed anymore. Four months ago my hours at work were cut back making Geasel's fines hurt more, and putting the landscaping company who once maintained my yard financially out of reach. I didn't mind doing the work, it took my mind off the world for a while. Two months ago I went to the shed to get the lawnmower. I started to open the padlock, something stirred inside, there was a powerful thud on the door, and a growl. Jumping back I saw the lock was secure. The growling continued. Walking around the shed I looked for an opening, but the shed was solid. The thing inside launched its body against whichever wall I was

standing next to. Backing off the growling ceased. I drove to Home Depot to buy a new lawnmower, and assorted tools.

Yes, I maintained the backyard just as well as I did the front. I named the thing in the shed “Coop” after D.B. Cooper, the guy who parachuted out of a hijacked 727 with a hundred grand in cash never to be seen again. Coop hated it when I took the weed-eater to the grass around the shed, I could hear the impact on the plywood walls over the motor. Eventually I dug out the grass, and put a gravel five-foot wide lane around the shed. Coop seemed okay with this not bothering to attack the walls when I worked in the yard from that point on. He would still growl just to let me know he was still in there. Backyards were only inspected quarterly. Geasel had not seen the gravel lane around the shed, nor had I asked permission to put it in. I hoped there was latitude for changes made in the backyards as long as they were out of view, and the neighbors didn’t complain.

When I returned to the front yard Geasel and Arnold were across the street at the Chapman’s place. Arnold made notes on his clipboard while Geasel took pictures with his digital camera. The smirk on his face when he saw me made me want to dive-tackle him to the ground, and punch his face until it was a gelatinous mass. He crossed the street with Arnold following three paces behind – the prick actually counted them before he moved – and came up my driveway, he was wearing that stupid Nike tennis visor (the only way he’d consider getting near a tennis court is if the yellow balls were edible).

“Good day, Mr...” He looked at the street number above the garage door then checked a sheet on Arnold’s clipboard. “...Price, we’re here to give your grounds a looksee.” A grown man who says “Looksee” ain’t right in the head. Walking to the curb he surveyed the front. Arnold waited to scribble on his paper, but Geasel was silent. Strolling over to the cobblestone path he took out his tape measure (*I told you so*)

to check the edging. I passed. Arnold was looking bummed out.

“The front seems to be in order, let’s check the back, shall we?” Arnold waited for those three steps and followed him around the side of the house to the gate. Geasel saw the gravel immediately.

“What do we have here?”

“Drainage,” I said.

“I don’t remember this being approved.” He nodded to Arnold, who was jotting things down with a shit-eating grin.

“It wasn’t, it is out of view from the street, and the neighbors haven’t said anything.”

“That is not how we do things here at Whispering Sands. You can’t just take up a section of lawn to install gravel, it has to be approved, and permits must be issued.” He moved toward the shed with Arnold in tow. His feet crunched on the gravel. Coop smacked the inside of the shed hard growling, Geasel froze. “What in the hell is that?” He pointed at the shed. This was going to be a record fine.

“It’s a shed.” I couldn’t help myself.

“I meant what is inside the shed?” Coop banged the inside of the door making the deadbolt jump in its carriage. I shrugged, I really didn’t know. It could be a Badger, maybe a Wolverine, or some other medium sized mammal that would attack my genitals, and tear my face off. Whatever Coop was we had a truce.

Geasel pulled his massive keychain from his pocket unclipping it from his belt. He had keys to every tool and storage shed in the subdivision. Fine with me, I didn’t want to be any closer to the door than I was. Arnold shook his head

slowly while his master went to the shed door. The lock snapped open. When he opened the door nothing happened. Geasel peered inside, and beckoned for Arnold to join him. I stayed put.

Geasel said, "I don't see anything, it sounded so big. We don't allow large dogs or exotic pets here." He turned around and tapped on Arnold's clipboard. "Make a note to have the exterminators come out here at Mr. Price's expense, and then we'll – *Gah!*" A long, black scaly arm grabbed his neck from behind. He didn't scream, more like quacking in panic. The arm lifted him off the ground taking him into the shed like a guy taking a gallon of milk out of a refrigerator. Arnold dropped his clipboard. Weasel's quacking stopped. Arnold looked at me with pleading eyes, I pretended to hold a clipboard, and made a series of checks with dramatic flair. Something shot out of the shed wrapping around his waist, it took me a second to realize it was a long tongue. Coop was going to eat Arnold bullfrog-style. Arnold vanished in a cloud of lawn clippings.

I went to the shed, and pushed the doors closed. Coop wasn't growling this time. Picking up the padlock I slid the loop in place, and locked it. Papers on Arnold's clipboard fluttered in the sudden afternoon breeze. I picked it up, this would have to be carefully disposed of somewhere far from my house. I wasn't as shocked as I should have been, and I confess I was relieved. I drove across town putting random inspection forms into different recycle bins, and I hung the clipboard on an empty hook near the manager's office at the supermarket next to three others. I bought a gallon of peppermint & chocolate chip ice-cream on my way out. On the drive home I decided two things: Coop was family, and a monster in the shed is nowhere as bad as a monster with a clipboard. There would be a new inspector soon. Coop would feast again.

Single/Married/Divorced/Widow

“Name.”

“Dorothy Hillard.”

“Date of birth.”

“10-7-73.”

“Employment Status.”

“Well, I help out over at my cousin’s sometimes—“

“Are you currently employed? Or Unemployed?”

“Unemployed, I guess.”

“How long?”

“Well, like I was sayin’—“

“Can you give me the Date of Last Job Worked?”

“I worked a day shift a couple weeks back, but then before that I—“

“So. Two weeks.” (Fills in response, glances up briefly.)
“Children?”

“I got three.”

“And they all live with you?”

“My oldest’s sleeping at his daddy’s, my middle’s with my mother most the time, but my youngest one’s right here with me -- ain’t you, baby girl?”

“So -- One child.”

“Now hold on! I just told you, I have *three!*”

“But only one living under your roof at present. Is that correct?”

“That’s just for now, but—“

“Single/Married/Divorced/Widow.”

“We’s separated.”

“Fine, but you need to choose one of the options I gave you, ma’am.”

Dorothy just stares at her.

“Single. Married. Divorced. Widow.”

After a long pause, Dorothy says, “I’m Single.”

“Reason for Visit.”

Silence.

“Ma’am, why are you here?”

Dorothy’s mind hangs on the question. Why was she here? Only the Good Lord hisself could know why she was here, or how she had got here, little Kayla clutched in her tired arms and this fat white woman breathin’ her superior breath all over them.

“Ma’am?”

“I’m here because I got bills to pay and no way of payin’ em.”

“So, you—“

“And I got three babies living all spread apart from each other.”

“Well, there’s really nothing I—“

“I seen today I got some kind of mushrooms springin’ up around my bathtub and a landlord ain’t fit to take out my trash let alone fix up the place. I got one roll of toilet paper and a quarter tank of gas – you gettin’ this down? – and I got a mean old man makin’ me and my babies’ life harder, and now you sitting there, writin’ all kinds of crazy answers on your sheet, that’s what I got. And it looks like I got to beg for my supper, too.”

“You done?”

“Yeah, we done here.” Dorothy rises quickly, grasping her baby and purse tightly. The metal chair clatters back; a few people waiting in line watch with interest.

“Ma’am, if you want to walk out of here, fine. Suit yourself. But you’ll probably be back next week, and you already waited in the line today.”

The baby squirms in Dorothy’s arms. Dorothy hovers above the desk.

“Let’s try this again. What did you come here for?”

“For a job. And food stamps.”

“Okay, let’s start with the food stamps. I’m sure you’ll be qualified for those.” Gathering papers from metal shelves near her desk, she continues, “You’ll have to fill these out,” then holds out a stack of multi-colored forms.

Dorothy takes them, sits slowly back down, sets her purse on the floor.

“As for a job, what kind of work are you looking to do?”

“What do you got?”

“That depends. Do you type? Have you got computer skills? Food service experience? Manual labor? Retail? Specialized skills of any kind?”

“I graduated high school, and I’m a mother. Ain’t that skills enough?”

There is a long pause as the two women size each other up. Kayla gurgles and kicks off a tiny pink bootie that drops onto Helen’s paper blotter.

Helen picks it up quickly, then notices the miniature bows. “That’s cute.”

“I made it.”

“You sew?”

Dorothy nods. “Sewed this dress for her. Blanket, too.”

Helen rises slightly, cranes her neck over the desk to take a closer look. “Hm.” Sitting forward on her chair, she drops her voice. “This is not official, okay? Not through the office, you understand? But my sister works in a dress shop. A nice one, up near Bedford on 91st. They just lost their alterations

lady – she moved for family reasons. Anyway, I could have you meet her. My sister, I mean. See the store, maybe talk a little.”

“And you think they’d hire me?”

“I honestly don’t know. They might.”

“Yeah, I’ll meet her. When?”

“5:30 tomorrow?” She grabs a yellow post-it note and scribbles on it: 1057 91st Street. “La Belle Femme.”

“Le Bell what?!” Dorothy takes the note, stares at it.

“Belle Femme. Means Pretty Woman, in French.”

The baby starts to whimper. Her tiny arms reach out from the bundle and begin to flail.

“She looks like she’s ready to eat,” says Helen.

“This child’s always ready to eat! Like to drain me dry some days.” Dorothy stands and unwraps Kayla’s blanket, then hoists her over her shoulder. “I got to visit the restroom before we go. Can you hold on to her a minute?”

“...Okay.” Helen stands up, nervously smooths her camel-colored skirt.

Dorothy hands Kayla unceremoniously into Helen’s arms, then turns and walks off towards the restroom.

Helen stands there stiffly. “Hello, little one.” She begins to walk in circles around her tiny cubicle. The baby wriggles in her arms and bumps against her, searching for a nipple. “You’re okay, little girl. You’re okay now. It’s alright. Your mommy’s coming right back...”

Helen's desk bell rings.

"Excuse me? Do you work here?" asks a cross-looking Asian man.

"I'm ... on break. Wait for the next window, please."

"There's no one at the next window! I've been here since 9:00!"

"Just give me a minute."

The man stalks off. Helen hums, bounces in circles, doesn't know what she's singing anymore.

Then Dorothy laughs, a loud bray that makes both Kayla and Helen startle. "Ooh, I never wear them kind of earrings! She can pull it right out your lobe."

"Good to know," says Helen, head bent sideways, extracting her pearl earring from Kayla's strong fist. "So, I can tell my sister you'll be at La Belle Femme tomorrow, then?"

"Yeah, I'll be at The Pretty Woman," Dorothy says, lifting Kayla from Helen's arms, whose pressed shirt is rumpled now, her graying hair mussed. "Pretty or not, here I come. Come on, baby girl."

Helen watches Dorothy walk away, the infant snug against her shoulder, past a long line of applicants snaking out the door. She sits back down, squares up the blotter with the edge of her desk, then checks the clock. 11:38.

"Next."

Michelle Morneau

Autumn in the Valley

When he was seventeen, Tom worked on a cattle ranch on the outskirts of Gilroy with a few hired hands. The summer of 1904 had come late and lasted well into October so that there was no change of seasons to sweep across the valley and transform the countryside. The tawny hills baked slowly in the dull, dry heat, which lingered in the long, silent nights. Tom never once saw a single leaf blaze into fiery color, and no corn grew tall in the fields. Every day he wished for a fresh, cool breeze that would play along his cheeks as he rode between the long shadows in the golden afternoons.

One late October evening, Tom miscounted the culled herd he had helped drive to the pen, and he found that a perpetually unruly steer had gone missing. Tom decided to go back into the hills and retrieve it, and in the gathering twilight he galloped through the open back gates. The other hands watched him grow smaller and disappear in the darkening folds of the hills. He became a swift shadow under the twisting boughs of the black oaks, and he was gone.

The low moon was full and bright, and it lit the path ahead of Tom with a soft blue glow. He found that he had turned away from the path at one point, and he had come upon a thick cluster of oaks with branches that intertwined to create a natural awning. The moonlight filtered between the leaves and dappled the ground below, scattering shadows and light. A flash of movement caught Tom's eye, and as he turned he found the obstinate steer grazing between the roots of a tree. A small, dark figure crouched beside the steer and stroked its

side in apparent concentration. Slowly, the figure raised its head to meet Tom's gaze, and it froze with its palm flat against the steer's twitching flank.

"Hello?" Tom called, and he narrowed his eyes to get a better look at the figure. It shuddered and made a whimpering sound as though it were about to cry.

"Are you all right?" asked Tom, and he tried to approach it. His horse stopped short, stamped its hoof into the dirt, and snorted with flaring nostrils. The figure backed away a little, and as it did so it stumbled and fell momentarily into a patch of light. It was a girl not much older than Tom with tangled hair and skin so white that it looked luminous. She wore a simple cotton gown that was torn at the shoulder, and her eyes met Tom's with a pained, pleading look.

"Help," she whispered with trembling lips. "Please help." She came nearer to Tom, reaching out to him. The horse tensed, and Tom tried to check it in place before it could pivot and bolt. While horse and boy struggled with each other, the girl hesitated and cowered. The tear at her shoulder exposed a poultice made with damp brown leaves.

"What's that?" Tom asked, eyeing the leaves. "Are you hurt? I can take you to get help--" His words were cut short as the horse spun and pitched forward, then aimed a sharp kick at the girl. The girl screamed, and before Tom could act, the horse threw him and galloped down the hill in a cloud of dust. Tom gripped his elbow in pain, and he turned around to see that the weeping girl had run back to the steer's side.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Tom called, and he scrambled to his feet. "Come back!" Fear, frustration, and guilt rose within him as he passed under the awning and found her lying between

the steer and the roots. Tom smacked the steer aside to reach the girl. It shifted its weight with a grunt, and Tom froze at what he saw next.

The poultice had peeled apart, and underneath it was a gaping wound with a mass of bright red leaves packed under the skin. The girl's movement had caused the leaves to bristle out of the wound in a snarl of stems, and they fell out of her as she reached up to hug Tom by the neck. Tom gasped at the unbelievable clamminess of her skin, and for a moment he imagined that this was what it felt like to be embraced by a corpse. She put her icy lips to his and kissed him hard, and although he tried to pull away she held him fast. A crumpled leaf passed from her mouth to his, and he swallowed it in reflex. He started to gag, and he twisted aside with sputtering coughs and gasps. She held his shoulder as he retched, and when she met Tom's gaze she grinned. "Thank you," she said, and when she opened her mouth, Tom found more leaves lodged deep in the back of her throat.

"What are you?" Tom asked between coughs.

"I'm free," said the girl. "You've set me free." She got to her feet, dusted off her skirt, and wiped the tears from her cheeks. Her eyes had a wicked new brightness, and her skin had grown ruddy since she had kissed him. With one last glance at Tom over her torn shoulder, she ran into the trees and vanished. The steer raised its heavy head at the sound of her footfall and plodded after her into the shadows. Tom watched it disappear, dumbfounded. He held his sore elbow again to discover that packed leaves now crunched softly under his skin.

A chill breeze came from the west, and it swept gently over the hills while the trees around the ranch burst into brilliant shades of red and orange. The corn grew again in the fields, and for the first time in a long while the wind cleared away the dull, still heat. In the days and weeks that followed, the hands continued their search for the steer and for Tom while they prepared for the seasons ahead. Tom's horse returned to them one evening, trembling and shaken. For the rest of its life, it never allowed anyone to ride it back to the hills.

Three Wishes

I grazed casually in the shade of a small eucalyptus copse, watching them set up their camp for the night. They pulled a couple flimsy fold away chairs out of the camper and erected a small table between them. Then they settled down with bottles of water and a pile of fried dim sum, bought at the last gas station they'd passed.

It was easy to see that they were father and son. They both had curly hair, heavy-lidded sleepy eyes, broad shoulders and handsome faces. The teenager had sandy brown hair, bright blue eyes and towered over his father. The older man had dark curls sprinkled with white – rather at odds with his otherwise youthful appearance – hazel eyes, and a strong athletic build; Byron, he was the one I was responsible for this time around.

Leaving the shelter of the gum trees, I moved towards the van. I hopped forward gracefully, and my motion caught the man's attention. I swallowed my mouthful of grass, and straightened up. I guessed it was time. We locked gazes, and I willed him to say what I needed to hear.

“Hey Sam, check out the kangaroo! I'd swear it's the same one that was following us around the campsite yesterday. He's staring at us again. I didn't know kangaroos could be so weird.”

He?! What is *wrong* with humans? Anyone could see that I am a paragon of marsupial femininity. And who is he calling weird, anyways? I'm not the one who drove my RV into the restaurant overhang last week. He really should be more respectful towards his Fairy God-Roo! Hmph. If I weren't

obligated to grant him three wishes I'd turn him into a platypus.

"Don't be ridiculous, Dad. We've driven over 300 miles from that campsite. It can't be the same kangaroo. They all look the same, that's all."

Well. The man might be clueless about gender but at least he could tell me apart from the common herd. The kid obviously lacked his father's discerning eye. He might look like his father, but he must take after his mother.

"Maybe it's hungry." The boy tossed a hunk of dim sum in my direction. I looked at it with disdain. Even if I weren't an herbivore there was no way I would touch that grease-soaked lump of dough and meat. I'd seen dingoes get indigestion from those things.

The man laughed. "That kangaroo has better sense than we do, he'll stick to grass and leaves."

He broke eye contact to have a drink of water and poke at one of those silly phones all humans carried around with them nowadays. I took the opportunity to resume my grazing and subtly circle out of their direct line of sight, slowly edging closer to listen, as I had been doing for the past week and more.

The two humans ignored me and ate their disgusting supper in silence. As usual. In all my years as a Fairy God-Roo, it had never taken me so long to get my person to say the 'W'-word before. I find that most people wish for things all the time, without even being aware of it. They'll wish for better weather; they'll wish for their football team to win; they'll wish for a gas station with a clean toilet. They throw the word around like it means nothing. All I have to do is call up a little rain, knock a ball between some posts, put a sanitary loo in their way, and then I'm free to go.

But not this one. This annoying American tourist is making me work for it. He's just not wishful at all, and I'm getting seriously tired of following him around the outback.

Still staring at his little screen, the object of my frustration began to laugh. Byron held up the phone to his son, obviously showing him a picture.

“Why?”

“It reminded your mom of the time we were talking about what wild thing we would do for a day if we had a wish...I said I would wish to be a rock star for just one night. I don't know who she got to Photoshop that picture, but it is perfect.”

BINGO! A rock star for a night – YES!!

Here we go...

An hour later, a low sporty car rattled into the pull-off where the guys had set up camp. It shook and bumped as it rolled over a wheel so flat it was nothing more than loose rubber splayed on the ground. Pulling up next to the camper, it stopped and disgorged a small, frantic middle-aged man from the driver's seat. He slammed the door and stood staring helplessly at the tyre as he waved his arms in the air and yelled into the headset he was wearing.

“Of course I don't know how to change a tyre! Yeah, I called. Be too late for the show. What do you mean, he hasn't shown up? He's where?! Oh bloody hell. We can't cancel. Shit. Shit. Shit. Let me think. I'll call you back.”

He turned from the car and noticed that Sam and Byron had come around the side of the camper and were looking at his tyre too. As the setting sun shone on the trio of men, the

stranger froze in spot with his jaw dropped and arms still in mid-wave.

“I can help you with that, if you have a spare. Won’t take very long.” Byron offered.

“Oh. My. God.” The strange little man breathed the words reverently. “That’s amazing!”

Father and son exchanged looks, clearly thinking that the guy was a nutcase, and it might be better to move away slowly and carefully.

Suddenly the man broke free of his paralysis and began to dance in place with unconcealed excitement. He caught Byron’s hand and began to shake it manically.

“I’m Hector P Valenti, agent to the stars! And YOU are a dead ringer for Georgie Waterford! It’s uncanny; you really look exactly like him!”

Hector’s handshake slowed down as he registered the blank stare that greeted his momentous announcement.

“Um, Georgie Waterford? Frontman for Georgie Porgie? Three top 10 hits in ’91? The heartthrob of millions of Australian housewives? No?”

Hector stopped pumping Byron’s hand entirely and just stood there holding it like a lonely schoolgirl, despite Byron’s best attempts to extradite it from his grip.

Feeling sorry for the deflated agent, Byron – still struggling to regain his hand – tried to show that he was at least listening.

“So, I look like some Australian singer from the ‘90’s?”

With a last, manful tug, he pulled his hand free.

“No, no, Georgie is American, not Australian. You even sound like him. A little. And he’s still performing. Well,” he amended “he’s supposed to be performing. Tonight. But there’s been a little problem.”

With a visible effort, Hector P. Valenti pulled himself together, re-inflated his ego and pumped up his energy level. With a grand, but failed, attempt at suavility, he smiled smarmily at Byron and spread his arms as he asked the all-important question:

“How would *you* like to be a rock star?!”

Another hour later, and Byron was standing in the wings of an enormous stage set up beneath the biggest tent he’d ever seen. When they’d pulled into the festival, which had appeared stranded in the middle of the outback, surrounded by a sea of cars, the banner over the entrance proclaimed “Nostalgia Down Under – the music you loved when you still had hair”. Hector P. Valenti must have been busy on his cell phone during the drive, because they were greeted by a swarm of assistants who assisted Byron out of his clothes, into an overly glitzy costume, covered him in make-up, and instructed him on how to use the stage equipment that would prompt him with the words to lip-synch as he bounced around and smiled at the women. A busty young red-head collared Sam and immediately inducted him into the crew of roadies who were hard at work setting up, breaking down, and passing round a joint. In mere minutes, with the words “no worries, mate” ringing in his ears, Byron was balanced on the edge of his first performance.

I watched the entire procedure with interest, my head stuck under the bottom of the tent in strategic locations as Byron was shifted from wardrobe to make-up to back-stage. He didn’t look like he was enjoying himself very much, but I

have noticed that humans rarely find their wishes as much fun as they expected. Me, I was enjoying myself enormously!

As the MC worked the crowd and made Byron's introduction, I scanned the edges of the audience for the most inebriated group I could find. My choices were plenty, and I choose one that was close to the stage. I slipped all the way into the big top, and lurked in the shadows near my new friends. They were clearly practiced drunks, and didn't think it was strange to see a kangaroo in the middle of a music festival. I suspected that they may have been seeing stranger things as well, so I may have looked pretty normal to them. This is Australia, after all.

With a roar of approval, Byron was shoved onto the stage in all his glory. He looked like a wallaby caught in the headlights as the spots focused him and the music started with a crash. I was proud of how quickly he rallied, and before the second verse was over he was mouthing the words almost in time with the lyrics that were singing out over the giant speakers. By the third song he had caught the rhythm and was singing along perfectly, as well as dancing around the stage energetically to the joy of the 40-ish females lining the front apron of the stage.

By the end of the set he was hamming it up, blowing kisses to lucky ladies and swiveling his hips in a way that drove them into a frenzy. When his final song began, a rocking sexy love song that had been Georgie's biggest hit, the screaming women began to throw their underwear onto stage. He was pelted with granny panties, size 16 thongs, bullet-proof bras and the odd pair of support hose.

Byron was obviously terrified to think what might happen to him when he left the protection of the stage. After a grand finale that ended with him on his knees and the audience clapping and stomping for more, he darted behind the curtain and stood panting backstage as he looked around for his son.

Sam slipped out of the wings, sporting a painful looking hickey, holding his freshly bandaged arm and sending furtive glances into the shadowy recesses of the tent.

“Dad, we’ve gotta get out of here,” Sam waved a swollen limb at his father. “There are attack spiders in the kybo.”

Byron nodded emphatically. “There are snakes in the dressing room.”

“The beer tastes like horse piss.” Sam looked a little green around the gills.

The calls for an encore rose into the sound of feminine mania. Byron shuddered. “And the women are crazy.”

“Hallelujah!” Sam responded, once again looking warily towards the back of the tent where roadies were already preparing to change sets for the next performer.

Byron shook his head. This kind of craziness just wasn’t his scene.

“I wish we were back at our nice campsite, watching the stars and listening to all the nothing!”

From the other side of the tent wall, I punched my furry fist into the air. YES!

I lifted up the heavy canvas and peered under it at the guys. Both of them were covered in sweat and their eyes were wide with stress. I thumped my tail against the ground a few times, to get their attention. When they saw me they didn’t waste time making stupid comments or questioning why a kangaroo was helping them escape. They darted towards me, slipped under the tent and into the night.

I led the way towards the parking area, keeping us magically cloaked from view as we wended through throngs

of drunken Aussies. Cars had shifted and moved so that the camper was miraculously unblocked and free to pull straight out through the unwatched entrance.

As they climbed into the cab of the van, Byron hesitated and looked from me to his son. “Do you think we should try to put the kangaroo in the camper? I hate to leave *anything* here, in this madhouse.”

Sam eyed me doubtfully. Clearly neither of them wanted to risk grabbing me and shoving a pissed off marsupial into the closed confines of their vehicle. I shuffled backwards, putting more space between myself and the men.

“I’m not sure it needs the help,” Sam replied. “It seems to know what it is doing.” He laughed. “I can’t believe I just said that!”

Byron nodded. “I told you it was a weird kangaroo. I’m sure now that it’s the same one, for all this time and all those miles. I’m grateful for it helping us out, but I still don’t trust it. I wish it would just leave us alone.”

Well! That’s gratitude for you! Still, a wish is a wish, and now I could get back to more important things. Like eating leaves and playing with my joeys.

So I turned my back on the two humans and hopped a few yards into the night. I heard the doors of the van slam shut, and the engine rev up. I stopped and turned around to watch them, one last time. As they slowly eased their camper out of its parking space and through the darkened archway, I could see their faces peering out the windows towards me. I raised my fist in a farewell salute. They waved their furless hands at me.

Then we both faded into the outback.

Black Jack

Trevor's medication had run out the night before. He called his doctor first thing the next morning for a refill, but wouldn't be ready to leave the apartment until 10:00 PM. It just took him that long. Washing his hands ten times before using the toilet, and another twenty times after, and doing so again prior to his three showers added up to an hour and a half. The refrigerator door was opened and closed four times when taking something out. The contents of his breakfast: one egg, and toast with real butter were removed in their specific order. Washing his plate was fast, but he had to wash his hands ten more times when done. Picking his suit from the closet was easy enough as he only had the one, but it was laid out on his bed carefully, and re-hung back in the closet nine times before he allowed himself to put on clean sox and underwear.

Each shoe was tied and untied fifteen times. Finally it was time for lunch. Two hours later he had prepared and consumed his regular meal of a sardines and dill pickle sandwich, a slice of tomato, and guava juice. Washing his dish and glass took another forty-five minutes. Before he could leave his apartment he searched all four rooms five times each for any signs of fire. Sometimes this took longer if he thought he smelled smoke. It was dinner time when he finished his search. Dinner took three hours to prepare, cook, eat, and clean. Searching his apartment again five more times he finally went to his front door. The doorknob had never

been a concern, but the dead-bolt required opening and closing twenty times.

“Jack and Jill went up the hill,” he said, turning the latch to the rhythm of the nursery rhyme, once he said, “And Jill came tumbling after” the lock session reached twenty-one meaning he could open the door. He had figured this trick out when he was nine, the same summer he was diagnosed with severe O.C.D. Opening the door he stepped into the hall pulling the door closed behind him, he stuck his key into the dead-bolt.

“Jack and Jill went up the hill...” Going to the stairs he descended the four flights to the lobby of his building and was gratified to see that the door had been left open. Had it been closed he would have waited until someone came through the door due to his fear of publicly used door handles. The Tuesday-Night street greeted him Tuesday-Night indifference which was fine with him as the Friday-Night street was too noisy for him to handle with people bouncing in and out of the four bars he needed to pass to get to the all-night pharmacy.

Traffic was light so he knew he could cross the street easily when the time came. A black and white Tabby cat met his gaze from across the street. The feline sat on a dumpster near the corner of an alley, and judging by its girth it was a successful mouser. At the first corner he searched his coat pocket for a napkin to use to press the pedestrian crossing sign button. Only having only the one he didn't throw it away, three more lights were ahead of him. Trying to push the knowledge of millions of strange germs a paper's length away from the skin of his hand he almost walked into the street before the light had turned. Walking fast he came to the next

corner and pressed that button doubling the number of germs on the napkin. In his mind he pictured them forming medieval army formations while microscopic generals drew up plans to cross the napkin's edges, and infect him with the worst diseases in their ranks. The next light was already green so he scooted over to the next block.

At the final light the pharmacy's lights were a beacon of safety. A man came up beside him. The man took his finger from deep inside his nostril and pressed the button to cross the street. Trevor almost screamed. He wanted to run back to his apartment and try again tomorrow, but he forced his feet to freeze. The light changed, and he ran into the pharmacy. Mr. Lo was working the pharmacy counter.

"Dr. Willis should have called in my prescription this morning," Trevor said. Lo found the bottle on the order shelf. Trevor grabbed a box of Kleenex for the return trip, and paid for his medication.

"Would you like a cup of water so you could take a pill here before you go?" Lo said. Trevor said no. Lord only knew what was lurking in the water, or the cup, or both. He went out the door, and waited at the corner stop-light tearing open the box and pulling six tissues out. Pressing the button he tapped the theme to the Lone Ranger on the Kleenex box with the fingers of his other hand. With the green light he was on his way. The next two lights were green, and a faint smile crossed his face. Pulling fresh tissues from the box he pressed the button on the final light four times. (*Why four times? Why not five?*) He silently argued with himself over introducing a new thing to obsess over.

Something black shot across the street ahead of him into the alley on the other side.

The light turned green and his feet dragged as his pushed his body to the other side. (*Why did that chicken cross the road anyway?*) He heard the cat scream and hiss. The dumpster clanged sounding like something shoved it into the brick wall of the pool hall opposite his apartment building. His feet kept moving, he needed his medication. Looking over into the alley he saw a black...thing holding the Tabby by its hind legs. The head was leaned back, its massive jaw wide open. The thing turned slightly to look at Trevor with its even blacker eyes. Trevor thought he saw an eyebrow rise. Dropping the cat it turned and faced him.

It grinned.

Trevor ran into his building. He reached the second floor landing when he heard the thing come into the lobby below. Looking over the ornate wooden rail he saw the thing looking up at him. In its smile he estimated there were sixty sharp teeth, red at the base their tips gleamed black reflecting the cheap lobby lights. Bolting up the final flights two stairs at a time he charged down the hallway to his door. All he had to do was unlock it, go inside, relock it, and he would be safe. He stuck the key into the knob first – always the knob first – it unlocked. Next he inserted the key into the deadbolt. (*No, not now!*)

“Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water.” He froze. The thing was humming as it casually climbed the stairs. (*Where was I?*)

“Jack fell down and broke his crown, and Jill came tumbling after.” Pushing the door it didn’t move. The deadbolt was still locked.

“Jack and Jill went up the hill...” The door opened with the thing’s shadow darkening the fourth floor landing. The humming was louder, he closed the door. (*Lock the knob first this time!*) The deadbolt had to be locked first. The humming stopped outside of his door. He finally recognized it as “Gary Owen”, and old Cavalry song. He didn’t know how he knew that. His shaking hand reached for the latch.

“Jack and Jill went up the hill.” The thing laughed leaning against the door.

“Jack fell down and broke his crown, and Jill came tumbling after.” He locked the doorknob and backed away. The thing continued to hum. Trevor’s hands sweated so much that his fingers had bored into his Kleenex box. He shook his paper bag, the pills rattled in their plastic bottle. (*Take a pill and then call for help.*) Yes, that was what he would do. Turning for the kitchen he took a step.

“I counted nineteen,” the thing said from the hallway. Its voice was an alto and relaxed.

(*It was 21, it’s trying to trick you.*) It had to be twenty-one. His feet were moving back to the door. (*No, what are you doing?*) He unlocked the doorknob and reached for the latch.

“Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water; Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill-” The door shoved open knocking him off his feet. The thing squeezed into the apartment. Trevor lay on the floor clutching his bag and

hyperventilating. The thing closed the door, took a step toward him, and stopped. Raising a finger it smirked, reached back, and locked the dead bolt.

FREE JR.

I'm not sure who or what Tibet is, but I always see that "Free Tibet" bumper sticker, especially when me and my friends go to the beach in Carmel. I wonder if people are doing it? Freeing Tibet? I wonder if the bumper stickers make a difference. Does Tibet know about them? Can the people who read the bumper stickers free Tibet? Can the people who put them on? Maybe people just feel so helpless to free Tibet, all they can do is put up a sticker to show what they wish would happen.

Pardon the expression, but my mom says you can wish in one hand and shit in the other and see which one fills up first. Which I think is another way of saying that a bumper sticker slogan isn't worth turds to Tibet. Or it is worth it. Seems like the things worth less than and the things worth exactly shit are still worth about the same.

I don't know why my mom says that about wishing, either. Maybe it's so we don't get our hopes up on things that can't happen. She wishes too though; she just doesn't say it out loud. She stays up half the night wishing my brother could come home but of course she calls it praying. She has about a dozen different statues; I don't know who they are, but they take up enough space in the living room to start asking rent. There's incense and candles. She does it quietly at night, pretending everything's normal in the morning, even though the smell of breakfast doesn't cover up the incense. This morning I was fed up with no one saying anything.

"Mom," I said, "it smells like the sausage has something in it."

"What do you mean?" she said. She didn't turn from the stove to show her heavy eyelids.

"I dunno, something holy and sweet."

Now she did turn. She just stared at me.

"Mom, are you awake? You look like you've been up all night."

"Eat your breakfast and mind your business," she said, turning back.

"Fine, mom, but every night you pray is followed by a day without him. Nothing is happening. They're not even letting him write. And he's not an American citizen, so how is America supposed to care about him?"

She was quiet for a while. Then she said, all softly, "They did a story about him on the radio. People know about it. If people know, they can do something. That is enough of an answer for now. It's something."

"But people don't care, Mom!"

She didn't answer. I tried again: "The radio doesn't have anything to do with all the saints in the living room!"

Still quiet. But I had one more: "You can wish in one hand-"

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" She started swearing in her mother's language and banging the spoon on the pan. My grandmother got up and started yelling back. I took my breakfast, left everybody in the kitchen, said goodbye to the dozen saints and walked to school. It was a Friday.

After school, when I got to work, people were quiet but giggly. I put my stuff in the locker and asked the blond girl

what was up.

"Eric put something on the dune," she whispered.
"Dwayne is mad."

Dwayne is the manager. He's okay, but he gets too excited about little things. When he's mad at someone, he gets all perfectionistic with everyone.

"What did Eric put?"

"Go look."

I looked around for Dwayne. He was talking to Josh at the register about putting the bills in straight. I grabbed a broom to look official.

There's a huge sand dune between the beach and the highway, and people write stuff on it by shaping dead ice plant into letters. It's like a big billboard, because all the people on the highway can see it when they drive by, and all the people driving up Beaumont Boulevard. It's so big you could see it from an airplane. You can see it right from the drive-through window, too. Today the dune said "McDwaynolds."

I stepped away from the window, shared a hushed giggle with the blond girl, and kept quiet until my shift was over. After work I went with my friends and got home late.

Mom wasn't there and she hadn't been there all day, apparently. Grandmother, however, had been keeping some kind of vigil and now she was doing it next to me, sort of hovering and talking softly.

"Are there at least any leftovers?" I asked her.

"The sun goes over the whole earth every day...."

"The sun is fixed and the earth moves around it, Grandmother," I answered, closing the fridge. "Everybody knows that. Go to bed." I knew I was being mean to everyone, especially because my brother was gone. Hey, I miss him too, but it was stupid of him to go there, even if he did it on his own money. I sat down at the table with a glass of milk.

"Yes, the earth moves around the sun," she continued patiently. I felt meaner with every word she spoke. "...but the earth spins, too. And so the sun sees every part of the earth every day."

I could only stare at her. Why was she so patient? What did she want?

"The sun sees Junior every day," she said. After she said it, we were quiet there at the kitchen table for a long time. It was dark all around except the light hanging over us.

I fell asleep there and Grandmother gave me a shake in the morning and I remembered I had to work. I almost knocked Mom over hurrying out the door. She was just coming home. Her hair was wild and she was bundled. She took my shoulders in her hands and squared me up:

"God cares. As long as he will listen, I will tell him. And people can care too. But if you never say anything, how can they care?"

I got on my way to work. How did she know God cared? Or people? People just do what they want, exactly like my brother who thought he would be would be heroic or funny by going to Iraq. He's not a soldier or anything; he and his friends just went to make a point, or for fun. I think it was stupid, because Iraqi soldiers captured them while they were hiking and now they have no way to get back home.

Home, where their poor mothers all stay up praying to

deaf stone saints asking God to listen. Mom always reminds me that he sees everything, but she usually only says that about bad stuff we do. So maybe Junior got what he deserved and now not even Mom's prayers to a God as hard as stone and as far as the sun can change anything.

I got to work and clocked in. I was a minute late. I hurried to get to the window and Dwayne walked by. He didn't say anything to me; just gave me a little nod. I got situated but there weren't any cars, so I glanced up at the dune. Someone had rearranged the ice-plant letters. They said, "FREE JR."

**Final Blessings:
A Tale of the Twin Thrones Empire**

The pulsing rhythm of the music filled the dimly lit club. Patches of multi-colored light strobed across the dance floor. On it, bodies writhed to the beat. Jeff was not a good dancer, which was fine tonight. They were just out for drinks and the *Odyssey* was their favorite dive. Besides, it was still early enough that Jeff could score a hookup later if he really wanted. He didn't think he would.

The whole gang was here around the table: Gam, Frank, and Carole, and himself the humans of the group. Trecil, a Zephyryn, Geer and Vur, a couple of guys from the Federation of Derolio. And of course the two who had made everyone come out tonight: the Atharian couple Felir and Berrat. They'd all been through a lot these last eight years and the group had provided great support. But now they were losing Felir and Berrat. They were leaving tomorrow.

"Damn, you're leaving?" He repeated when they broke the news. They were his best and oldest friends. "I thought you guys loved Binar-3. Why would you move?"

"We're not leaving the planet," Felir explained. She was the talkative one but both were pretty quiet for Atharians. "We are going to undergo the rite of *Regeneration*."

The rest of the table got quiet but Jeff was confused. "What's that?"

"It's the process by which we Atharians create a *Genis*."

"Oh, cool. Can we come watch?"

Felir got an uncomfortable look on her face. “The *Regeneration* can be uncomfortable for non-Atharians to watch.”

“Why?” Jeff asked. “I was there when you made Dinis.” Dinis was Felir and Berrat's son. “That was fun... In a weird way. This can't be any worse.”

Carole got up, she looked mad. She punched him hard on the arm. “What was that for?” Jeff yelled at her. The tables around them ignored the action. The music drowned out the conversation for anyone trying to listen in anyway.

“Don't you know anything about Atharians?” She shouted back. “If they perform the *Regeneration* they are going to die.”

“WHAT?” Jeff was shocked. He'd had no idea “That can't be true.” He looked to Felir and Berrat who nodded. “You can't be serious. You're going to die? We can't let you do that.”

“Jeff...” Trecil tried to calm him down.

“No!” Jeff raged, “How can you guy sit there like that. This is the dumbest thing I've ever heard.”

Then Berrat stood. If Carole had looked mad, there was no describing the look on his face.

“Jeff,” he said. His voice was calm. The kind of cold calm a person gets when they are deadly earnest. “Shut up. You think we actually wanted this? Of course we don't want to die. It took us months to come to this decision. Months of unbelievable stress and pain. And now you want us to change our minds. How could we live with ourselves?”

A reprimand from the normally terse Berrat was enough to cool Jeff's temper. “But I still don't understand.”

“Our *Genis* are long lived but they are not immortal. They can and will die after a few thousand years. Our weald's *Genis* is very old. It was transplanted here from Hymmselia.” Berrat paused to see if Jeff followed. “It's dying and we need a new one if we want to continue living here.”

“Okay,” Jeff said. “I get you would need a new one but why does it have to be you two and why now?”

Having exhausted his supply of words for the day Berrat let Felir continue, “This must be done now so that will be little or no time between the death of the old *Genis* and when the new one is mature. The *Genis* has some time but a new one takes a long time to grow. And should it fail to reach maturity we need time to produce another replacement. As for why it needs to be us, well... it does not necessarily need to be us.”

“Huh?” Jeff thought he was following the lecture fairly well, but that confused him again.

“Really, any willing couple could create a new *Genis*. The problem is that we are the only ones suitable right now.”

“There have to be others. Shouldn't an older couple be doing this, since they have less time anyway?” Jeff asked.

“How old do you think we are?” Berrat asked. Jeff thought about it. He realized he had no idea Atharians' actual ages. Berrat answered for him, “I am sixty-eight. Felir is fifty-nine.”

Jeff was momentarily stunned. They looked like they couldn't be any more than in their mid-twenties. But that was normal for Atharians. They didn't age like humans. They only start showing physical signs of aging in the last year of their lives. But still, Jeff would have never been able to guess.

Felir took over the explanation again, “We have done pretty much everything a person can do in a lifetime. We've made many friends and had just as many good times. We've

even raised a son together. And we are the oldest couple in our weald. There are a few other couples but we feel they are not as stable and that the *Genis* they create won't survive to adulthood. Some of the older ones he offered but none of them are a strong enough pairing and the *Genis* has rejected them. So you see we have no choice."

Seeing the sad faces around the table Felir tried to console her friends, "It is not so bad. We will be remembered and honored for as long as the weald survives. And all of you will keep us in your hearts."

"It's not the same," Geer said.

"No," she said, smiling sadly, her voice gentle. "But it will have to do. This is our duty. Please don't be sad. It was our choice to make and we have chosen the most sacred of passings for our people."

"Well, if that is it, we had better make your last night with us one to remember." Jeff said, raising his glass in a toast. "To friends, the ones who are here with us and those who live in our hearts." The others responded raising their glasses as well, refracting Club's flashing across the table in a vibrant dance.

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The next morning Jeff woke up with a massive hangover. The ride over to the Conolore Weald was painful, especially since he had to use a ground cab since he didn't trust himself to drive and lev-crafts gave him motion sickness. The walk to the center of the Weald would have sucked if he hadn't run into one of the resident mages. A quick spell to quicken his body's natural systems and a trip to the restroom had him feeling right as rain. Except that he was essentially attending his friends' funeral.

The Atharians of the Weald were a tight knit group. Everyone knew everyone else and, by extension, everyone's non-Atharian friends. So when Jeff walked through the community many of the Atharians recognized and greeted him. They knew why he was here and they shared his somber mood. Normally Atharians loved to talk, but today the walk to the center of the Weald, where the ancient *Genis* towered over the surrounding lawns, was unusually quiet.

The Weald was always a beautiful place to visit. It was an emerald patch in the middle of a modern high-rise city. Binar-3 was a distant little vacation planet in the Sol-Earth Federation. Most of the surface was undeveloped. It only had a few large metropolises. Neo-Samara, the planetary capital was the largest.

The Conolore Weald was the only Sun Atharian community in Neo-Samara. The Weald was surrounded by a stone wall so random people could not just wander in. Considering that the Sun Atharian communities in cities often looked like large, grassy parks, this was a real possibility. In the center was a huge leafy tree, The Weald's *Genis*. People outside the wall could see the *Genis'* crown, but when viewed from directly above a glamour made the Weald look like an empty field to give the residents some privacy. In reality, there were many houses which provided homes for the Atharians who chose to live within the Weald itself.

When Jeff reached the *Genis* everyone except Trecil was already there. He was about to comment on her absence when she came gliding down. Zephyryn wings were useful, but in any city with lev-crafts they gave the traffic controllers nightmares. They exchanged greetings but none were very spirited today.

More Atharians began to arrive and soon it looked like the entire Sun Atharian population of Neo-Samara had come to bear witness to the ceremony. There was even a large

contingent of Star and Earth Atharians. No doubt the Earth Atharians were Berrat's relations. The white skinned Earth Atharians stayed under pavilions which had been set up to protect them from the sun. Apparently a *Regeneration* was a big deal. For the non-Atharians it was less about the birth of a new *Genis* than it was about losing dear friends.

Felir and Berrat's closest relations each began bidding them farewell. There were a lot of tears, both from Felir and Berrat and their friends and family. When the Atharians were done Jeff couldn't help himself and went over to say goodbye. Strictly speaking non-Atharians were not supposed to participate in the Right but the Atharians did not object. Too soon they were all done and it was time for Felir and Berrat to commune with the *Genis*.

Jeff and the other non-Atharians moved back to let the Atharians take their proper place. The couple was about to move toward the tree-like being when a commotion at the back of the crowd drew their attention. Jeff had seen what started it but did not understand why it would be much of anything. A small human girl had come up behind the Atharians and said, "Excuse me. May I pass? I would like to speak with the couple."

She looked almost exactly like a Chinese girl Jeff had known back in high school. The only difference he could see was that this girl had much longer hair which went all the way to her knees. So he was surprised when the Atharians to whom she was speaking made an inarticulate noise and bowed, moving out of her way. That made other Atharians turn around to see what was going on. Their reaction was much the same. When she got to the front of the crowd the last Atharians had regained some composure and Jeff heard one of them say, "Your majesty," as he bowed.

Your majesty? What the... he thought. Almost as if she was responding to his inner dialogue the girl turned and looked

directly at Jeff. That was when he saw her eyes. Where humans had black pupils hers were liquid silver framed by dark green irises. Jeff realized he had seen eyes like that before.

Everyone in the Twin Throne Empire knew of the Emperors and had seen them at least once in a broadcast. Jeff remembered Empress Aria had the same green and silver eyes. But in the broadcast she had been much taller and had been, quite frankly, a slamming hottie. She could have made any human supermodel apoplectic with envy. This girl looked like she had escaped puberty and would be forever cursed with a permanent position on the itty-bitty-titty-committee.

Then Jeff remembered a rumor he had once heard about the Emperors. They were clearly not human and people said they were shape-shifters. If that were true then...

The girl, who might be his supreme ruler, broke their impromptu staring competition and walked to Felir and Berrat. They both bowed deeply, amazement clearly shown on their face. When the girl spoke it was with a weight no teenager should ever be able to muster, "I came to this planet to visit a dying friend. I did not think I would be so fortunate as to witness the birth of a new generation." Her voice sounded quiet, yet it somehow carried through the entire Weald. Jeff saw her expression as she spoke her next words. It was one of terrible sadness. "I am sorry that you must give your lives to do this. But it is the way of the universe to demand payment in exchange for things of value. And there is nothing of greater value than the birth of a new generation. Tell me your names so that I may share in your memories."

"Felir. Berrat," they both stammered at once.

"Felir and Berrat." She smiled as she repeated their names with great love, like a mother speaking her children's names for the first time. "I cannot possibly express my gratitude for

your sacrifice. You already understand how thankful your Elder is," she nodded toward the *Genis*. "Please, allow me to give you one final blessing to accompany you into the next world." They could only nod. The girl smiled radiantly. She turned her face upward and raised her arms as if embracing the sky. Then she began to sing.

It was a beautiful and surreal sound. From her small body flowed a beautiful song unlike anything Jeff had ever heard. Her voice was somehow multi-toned and harmonizing with itself. A few bars passed before Jeff recognized the song and then he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It was a song that had been popular in night clubs over a decade ago. It was about one of the dirtiest songs a person could legally play in public. The Empress, he had absolutely no doubts about her identity now, had changed it, made it something wholly different. The lyrics were the same as were the notes but she had done something to it, made it a beautiful celebration of life. But that was not what made it so special. Jeff recognized the song as the one that had been playing when Felir and Berrat had first met.

Twelve years ago he had been a grad student in Binar-3's polytechnic university. He had met Felir in one of his classes and they had become good friends. At that time he had almost no knowledge about the Atharians aside from the fact that they existed. So he had been extremely surprised when, a few weeks later, Felir had shown up at his apartment unannounced, told his roommate to get out, and given him one of the most memorable nights of his life. Even after she met Berrat a couple months later they had continued to have a number of intimate encounters over the years. Unlike a human male, Berrat had never grown jealous and had even once suggested himself as a partner for Jeff. Jeff had been politely declined. He had learned that sex was one way an Atharian expressed a deep friendship and had been flattered by Berrat's offer. But he just didn't swing that way.

The night Felir and Berrat met he had been there. In fact Felir had been acting as his “wing-(wo)man” that night. Ironically he did not get a date that night but Felir had gone home with Berrat. Back then this song had been at the top of the charts, at least in the Federation of Sol-Earth, and could be heard every night in the clubs. Felir and Berrat's first dance had been to this song.

Jeff noticed some of the Atharians were now singing too. That was weird since the Empress was clearly making it up as she went. A feeling popped into his head. He tested the thought and realized he knew exactly how the song was supposed to be sung. Jeff shrugged and joined in. No doubt the Empress was projecting the song into the minds of everyone around her. Apparently she could do that kind of crazy thing. Soon everyone had joined in the song. Empress Aria led them all into another repeat.

Jeff noticed the light in the Weald had gone a little funny. When he looked around he realized what it was. The mark on the heads of all the Atharians was glowing. There were many families present and each had a unique mark and glowed a different color. The relatively simple mark of Felir's family was a deep violet while that of Berrat's people was pale yellow. The immense *Genis* also bore a shining mark which mirrored the one on Felir's forehead.

It was a glorious experience to be sure, but eventually it had to end. By the last repeat Felir and Berrat were crying again, but this time the tears were less bitter. When it was done they were ready. As the approached the *Genis* a path formed in the base of the mammoth tree leading to its very heart. They entered and the narrow opening sealed itself behind them.

The Atharians had warned Jeff what was about to happen, but when the he heard the first scream he immediately felt sick. He was about to turn and leave but he felt a hand on his

elbow. He looked down to see the Empress' eyes boring into his soul. "Stay. You were their closest friend. It is your duty to bear witness to their sacrifice," she said to him.

The command made Jeff straighten his back and resolved to stay until the end. Seeing this, the other non-Atharians followed his example. For the next half hour they remained still. Stalwart guardians of Felir and Berrat's memories. When the screams finally subsided Jeff felt drained. The others looked just as tired. He glanced sidelong at the Empress. Her face was emotionless, but two thin lines had etched wet trails down from her eyes.

High above, in the *Genis'* branches, he thought he could make out the beginnings of a new pod. But that was probably his imagination. The pod would take weeks to develop.

The crowd was dispersing now and Jeff went to speak with his friends. They found they couldn't think of anything to say, having already said everything the night before. For a time they just huddled together in a quiet group. Occasionally someone would make an innocuous comment but nothing more. They were too tired. Too sad. Trecil was the first to leave, taking flight out of the Weald. Geer and Vur went next, then Frank, Gam, and Carole. Jeff found himself alone before the *Genis*; even most of the Atharians had gone.

It was getting dark and he had to get home, but Jeff felt there was still something left undone. Unable to think of anything else, he gave the tree-thing and his fallen friends a salute. Someone chuckled behind him. He turned and saw the Empress was still there. He tried to stammer out an explanation but she just smiled and held out a hand to stop him from making himself look like an even bigger idiot. "I admit your gesture was a bit odd, but it held a certain... rightness under the circumstances. After all, what was this but a battle between the old and the new?"

She began walking toward one of the Weald's gates, her body language clearly telling Jeff she expected him to follow. As she walked she turned her head to size him up. "You may not believe it but I grieve for their loss just as you do," she said. "Though regrettable, this is how things must be."

"Sure," he replied sagaciously. Nodding his head and completely lost. They exchanged no more words until they reached the gate. The Empress suddenly stopped a few yards short of the entrance. Jeff had to swerve to avoid running her over. He swore he felt something in his back go out. "Stand there a moment. There is one last thing I must do." As Jeff watched the Empress knelt down on the ground, her dress becoming damp from the moisture in the grass. She proceeded to dig a small hole with her bare hands. He felt he should help, but something in the tone of her command made him stay put.

When she had finished digging the Empress took something from her pocket. She cupped it in her hands, brought it before her face, and began whispering to it quick, urgent words. Jeff didn't understand the language though it was clearly meant something. There was a look of intense concentration on her young face. This went on for a good twenty minutes. Jeff knew. He timed it. The sun had almost set by the time she had finished.

The Empress opened her hands and lovingly kissed the object. She then gently lowered it into the ground, depositing the item at the bottom of the hole. She covered the hole again and stood up. Jeff desperately wanted to ask her what she had just done but had no idea how one was supposed to address a sovereign of an Empire. Empress Aria bent backward, hands on the small of her back, to stretch out the muscles. The sight of a couple muddy handprints on the backside of such an important person struck Jeff as oddly hysterical.

Again, she did that freaky mind reading thing and answered his unasked question, "It is my final gift to Felir and Berrat. Their memories will remain as long as I am alive." Jeff realized she was saying that they would always be remembered since the Emperors were supposed to be immortal. Jeff looked at the ground curiously, "In time..." she continued in a distracted, distant voice, looking into the distance to see something so very far away. Jeff felt compelled to look too, but there was nothing his eyes could see. "In time it will grow into a great tree. It will produce blossoms of yellow and purple. The nectar of these blooms will bring pleasant dreams and disperse sadness in those the Atharians deem worthy of such a gift." He looked around when she finished and had to jog a little to catch up to the Empress since she had started walking again. Before leaving he turned back to look one last time. A tiny green shoot was already breaking the surface of the turned earth.

Outside the gate the Empress made another sudden stop. Jeff was ready this time and was able to avoid using any ridiculous maneuvers. She just stood there unmoving; Jeff wasn't sure what to do. So he tried to move around her and leave with a simple "Goodbye". He didn't think it was a crime to part with the Empress so informally. At least, he hoped it wasn't.

"At times like this," Jeff stopped hearing her address him. "I find physical comfort to be the most effective. Would you mind keeping me company tonight?"

Jeff stared at her dumbfounded. He wasn't sure if his mouth was open or not. Not until a piece of paper flew into the gaping cavern in his face. It sounded a hell of a lot like the Empress had just propositioned him. "Well?" she asked, one eyebrow devilishly cocked.

Jeff knew better than to turn down an invitation from someone important, much more so if that person was one of

the two most powerful people in the known universe. But it was a bit awkward. She looked like a freshman in high school and that creeped him out a bit. The Empress seemed to read his thoughts. Again. "Don't worry. I'll change into something more comfortable for you." He was pretty sure she wasn't talking about her clothes. Well, in that case...

Ruvic

Devices

I live in hotels
I walk by corners
I do street magic
It keeps me full
It's better than staying with you
I'm happier leaving you to your devices

Keeps your thoughts off me (maybe)
But I keep moving on, and doing what else

I'm at the plaza
I stand there doing tricks
I like happy smiles
The anonymous clapping soothes me
It reminds me someone enjoys me
They don't ignore me for other devices

Keeps your thoughts off me (maybe)
But I keep moving on, and doing what else

I dine in a cafe
I enjoy a window seat
It's late but I see it clearly
That one - you
Sitting over there with device stuck in hand,
Back, head, to waist as it's connected you whole

Keeps your thoughts off me (maybe)
But I keep moving on, and doing what else

Genesis Hernandez

The Hollow Forest

Hollow and silent...that is one way to describe this forest

Walking along this narrow path

Its silence is eerie

Dark shadows tower over me

Leaves crumble under my feet

Darkness all around

The feeling of being watched

Trees swaying numbly

Winds still and silent

Quickening my pace

Unsure of where to go

Walking further...deeper within the forest

Everything looks the same

Thoughts of being swallowed by darkness cross my mind

Faint footsteps rip me away from my thoughts

Fear consumes me

My blood runs cold

My heartbeat quickens...banging against my chest

Trying to stay calm

I quicken my pace

Afraid of what may be behind me

Completely off the path

Unsure of where to go

Completely lost

The faint footsteps grow closer

Slowing my pace...a chill runs down my spine

Turning around slowly

My breath hitches softly

Darkness surrounds me

Consuming me until I am no more

Justin Huang

Children's Hallow Ballad

All throughout the street we run
Dressed as goblins, ghosts, and hags
We do this in the name of fun
And to fill our little bags
There goes Johnny with his gun
And here is Jenny dressed in rags
Johnny gets a stick of gum
While Jenny gets sweet sticks to wag
All throughout the street we run
Dressed as goblins, ghosts, and hags
We do this in the name of fun
And to fill our little bags
Stacy's here with features elfin
Jason's costume's starting to sag
We have filled our bags a ton
And our spirits have yet to flag
All throughout the street we run
Dressed as goblins, ghosts, and hags
We do this in the name of fun
And to fill our little bags
Then, we come to Hawthorne Manor
With darkened yard and bare-branched trees
A place where only wind will stir
To knock upon the door of leaves
Creaks the door with lamplight umber
Answers it a figure ghastly
And, with voice of quiet thunder,
Asked us, would you like some candy?

We nod with faces somber
We all think this game is funny
Here the door is then flung wider
To reveal a festive party
All throughout the street we run
Dressed as goblins, ghosts, and hags
We do this in the name of fun
And to fill our little bags
On this day of great good, fun
Where all can come to strut and preen
Where sugar flows in endless tons
Rejoice this day. It's Halloween.

Making Quiche

For the crust
clouds of flour,
fruit of the field,
and butter,
churned gift of the cows.

Then the greens,
leaves grown by the sun,
steamed, pressed and chopped.

The pudding is next,
sweet milk and the golden
globulous inners of ovoids.

Put it together,
plus a grating of nutmeg
and bake.

The hardest part – the waiting
while the kitchen fills
with the smells of earth and of life.

At last! We all sit
down and eat.

Patricia Merrifield

Birches

Waning light, gravity, wind
brought the leaves down
in the fall.

Snow hides the white
bark in whiteness.

Only the prophets among us
can hear the bass largo of life,
waiting for spring.

Courtney L. Correll

Heart of a Rose

I am like a weed

My roots are dead and longing to be free
Chopped down by the hate of life
Thrown away and not thought about twice
Looked upon as ugly and useless
Predicted as just creating a mess
Destroying things in my path

I am not like a rose

So beautiful with blinding radiance
Always smiled on and given a second chance
Protected, loved, and care for
Given everything needed and more
Known and cherished by all

I am like a lost planet

Gravity forcing me in other directions
Swirling and spinning with no connections
Cold and heartless to the core
Yet, inside wanting to be much more
Dark and misguided on the path of life

I am not like a shooting star

Wished upon and waited for eagerly
Gasps and murmurs once they see clearly
Bringing joy and hope to those who speak
Some want to put it in a pocket to keep
Others to store in a box for their own sake

I am my own nightmare
But what I desire to be will forever haunt
I chase after for what I care
For death then I shall be a beautiful Rose.

Ruvic

Casinoside

Breathing the smoke roaming in air;
wandering into the land of the damned
Seeing the machine roll up then flare

Blackjack is out to trick people in his lair -
A deviant out to exact his grand-scam plan
Breathing the smoke roaming in air

A man praying for the machine to spare
Clutching the lever for that hopeful grand;
seeing the machine roll up then flare

Hit it! Hit it! People chant in their chairs
Constantly praying lady luck saves their hand,
breathing the smoke roaming in air

Walking all over, here and there
I always wonder at the attraction of the land;
seeing the machine roll up then flare

Should I play and join this gambling affair?
Blackjack hitting my mind like the horn of a ram
Breathing the smoke roaming in air,
seeing the machine roll up then flare...

Ruvic

Summertime

When I remember summertime... you were always in my mind
I remember the first time... when I saw you dancing then...
Coppertone femme dancing through the bonfire
Sire my breath, and checking if I just died
You looked like an angel come by high tide,
Made me high from the look of you...

You were looking at me, maybe checking me
Got me thinking that you and me could dance
And get into a summer jam
Not a seasonal plan, but a long term chance?

Think of summertime...
You come back into my mind
Even if it's wintertime
You make me come alive
Always thinking of then...

Remembering the night it all came down -
like the twin towers in a trance
It didn't seem to feel real,
when you went away
Seeing you slowly walk away...
I always dread that time stamp
It's still stuck in my mind...
Slowly seeing you walk away
Far, far, away

Wish it could have been
Thinking back in slow-mo
I could have done more...
Still can't believe I lost that
and stuck alone, seeing seasons move on...
It's hard to go on

Think of summertime...
You come back into my mind
Even if it's wintertime
You make me come alive
Always thinking of then...

Justin Huang

Just to Piss You Off

Ever get annoyed...
When things don't
line Up exactly

right?

Doesn't it piss
you off
When things
don't conform
to Your expectations?

You'd
THink I would
Have some deep

point to

this...
i really don't.

But maybe it
is your own
problem when
you can't stand
differences. So
it could just be
that we need to
get over
ourselves.

Brandon Stettenbenz

Green Light Across East Egg

A compass I built by hand

I look for the green light across East Egg

I have to ignite it

I carved the ship's helm

The ocean fog blinds the North Star

Navigation and age are parallels

Achieving counseling with meditation

Enlighten the clairvoyance

Observe, discover, educate, practice

Love will lead me and blind me

Opaque smoke gives me clarity

Callouses on my hands, sweat on my brow

Empowerment for paving my own roads

This world will rotate full circle but I must not

A helmsmen yes, a disciple no

The green light across East Egg will illuminate

Then I will know where to go

The Kindness of Strangers, Nebraska – part 3

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“Mom!” The girl grabbed at her mother’s elbow as the woman held the keys out of her reach, drawing back an arm and pitching them over the fence, across the tall grass thick with Queen Anne’s Lace and Black-eyed Susans.

Shading her eyes in the bright sunlight, the girl tracked their trajectory, bouncing on bare feet. The keys sailed over wide patches of blackberry bushes, stacks of fieldstone, and pooling water. She heard them jingle as they fell through the twigs with a scatter of leaves and a clank. She ran. A foot on the bottom rung, an arm braced on the top, she vaulted the fence. Leaping, she cleared the first puddle, falling short on the second, splattering dirty water on her legs, toe prints left across the muddy bottom, her eyes never leaving the keys.

“Ten seconds!” her mother shouted.

Her hands in fists, the girl pumped her arms, heels drumming her rump as she sprinted, then dove and rolled under the thicket between her and the oak, muffling an “ouch” when a thorn scratched her knee, giving a tug to yank her skirt loose from the briars. The metal pieces dangled out of reach in a tree fork, the trunk too big to shake. She swatted aside the wildflowers, searching for a rock. With the right pitch, she could jar the keys loose. The wrong pitch would jam them into the crevice, forcing her to climb, costing precious seconds.

Settling and balancing herself, she cradled the chunk of stone she’d found, aimed and swept her arm in an arc, the rock

sailing, wavering and bouncing off the tip of the tangled key. Bull's eye! The rock tumbled into the debris at the base of the tree, the keys skidding across the scar left from a branch cut. She hustled forward, an infielder's fly ball snag, thrusting the jangling ring over her head. "Got 'em." The girl spun to her mother who leaned on the fence a hundred feet away, hands draped over the top rail.

"Twenty-three!" her mother yelled, her stopwatch swinging from the lanyard around her neck. "Good. Really good." This was their game; a ploy, a tool, an energetic competition devised to use and teach skills. Her mother had a terrific arm, playing outfield on the softball team, an expert at horseshoes.

The girl's arm swung back and around, snapping off a high underhand shot. Then she was off, chasing her pitch, watching her mother's arm snap out, hearing the clank of the catch. "That stings!" her mother called, tossing the keys to the other hand, blowing on her palm and rubbing it on her plaid housedress.

Clearing the sticker bushes and both puddles, the girl focused on her mother, more importantly, her mother's hands, tossing the keys back and forth, up in the air, behind her back and over her shoulder, juggling the ringed dozen, weighty and jagged. The mother backed away from the fence as the girl came between the rails, head tucked, hands into the dirt, forward roll onto a shoulder, catapulting towards her. The clump of keys soared up, up, and, bang, hit the shale shingles, gliding down, spilling into the gutter two stories above.

"Aw, Mom!" The girl panted, fisted hands planted on jutting hipbones, sweat trickling between her shoulder blades. A gray squirrel, chittering, skittering, leaped from tree branch to roof, darting across the tile to the top and disappearing over the center ridge. Moisture gathered on the girl's upper lip, the grass prickly under her feet. If she climbed the porch railing and grabbed the rose trellis, she could swing herself onto the

peaked roof of the porch and use the attic windowsill to lever herself to the roof, adding a few scrapes to knees and elbows. She could creep down. Though the slate probably was hot in the sun. Reaching through her legs for the back hem of the skirt, she pulled it to the front, up and over, shoving it down the waistband, the volume corralled into makeshift shorts.

Her mother crossed the driveway, heading for the backdoor. Of course! The swing set. Racing past her mother, the girl could see the course in her mind – the side bar, the high cross bar, the tree branch to the roof, and like the squirrel, drop the short distance to the dormer window before crawling down to the gutter. Then the girl's foot was on the swing seat, the other on the center of the A-frame, a leg kicked over the top and she was hanging from it, moving hand over hand, suspended in the air, legs crossed over each other, scooting along after her hands. She swung to the top, onto her belly, both toes pressed into the rusting metal, her arms pushing her to a squat eight feet off the ground. A simple leapfrog to a limb of the sprawling oak and she was scrabbling up the tree.

Swaying over the house, the girl extended her foot, inching down, feeling for the crack along the dormer where rough tarpaper was exposed. She eased her weight to a sit and crabbed her way down, hands and toes clinging to the edges and tops of the tiles. The slate was very warm, heated-bricks-wrapped-in-a-towel temperature for a cold night in a car that once needed the heater repaired. Her foot slid out from under her and her elbow banged onto the slate. Stop daydreaming, she told herself; pay attention.

The girl saw the keys resting in the leaf litter, the ring flat, the keys splayed like hours on a clock face. She lay back, knees bent and feet braced, her body curled away from the roof's edge, her head resting on her arm, its palm flat on the roof, fingers flexed. The other hand groped the gutter's edge, became gentle in the leaves, searching. Drifting across the leaf mold, fingers tickled with tuned ears, listening for metallic

sound waves. Her forefinger stroked steel, her middle finger curled into the ring, pushing the keys into her palm. Holding her breath, she drew her hand out of the gutter and over her body, shaking off the leaves, transferring the gritty ring to her teeth, her lips pressed against the warm metal.

“Two minutes, 25 seconds,” came from below. Her mother was keeping time!

The girl rolled her shoulder and pulled her arm out from under her head, pushed her feet into the roof as she angled her knees away from the edge. Straightening one leg to slide under the other’s knee, her head turned, keys clanking on the tile, arms creeping over the roof, fingers and toes working, knees wide. She spidered to the peak, belly pressed flat to the slate, skidding once and bumping her scratched knee. Grabbing the edge, she crouched, and swung her legs, toes reaching for the sill, then the porch roof, keys gouging her chin. The house needed repainting; tiny bits of bright green showed through the dirty yellow, the chips sticking to her feet as she backed down, draping her legs over the porch roof, hunting for a toehold on the trellis.

“Three minutes, 43 seconds.” Her mother’s arms wrapped around her legs, holding the girl steady as she scraped herself loose from the roof. Stick straight in the air, clenched to her mother’s breast, the girl jawed the keys loose into one hand, the other arm finding the woman’s shoulder. “There’s a spare key under the back door mat,” her mother said.

The girl stayed like that, fingers clutching the keys to her heart, her mother’s head pressed against her hip, her hands steady around the girl’s thighs, the two of them a strong pair.

“You weigh a ton.” Her mother grunted, adjusting her grip around the girl.

“Not hardly.” The girl slid down, adjusting her skirt, scrubbing her toe across an itch on the back of her calf.

“Over my limit.” Her mother held out her hand. The girl responded, extending her hand reflexively then snatching it back. She crossed the two steps to the front door, jingling the keys.

It was unlocked.

“Well done.” Her mother spoke quietly. They walked through the wide foyer, the cool of the hallway a relief.

The girl stepped down the hall, careful to stay on the pine boards, avoiding the carpet runner, twisting her hip to slink along the wall, galloping one dirty foot up to the other. She heard her mother close the front door, the latch bolt clicking into place. She slipped into the bathroom, pulled a bath towel from the rack and draped it across the end of the cast iron tub. A twist of the wrist and water drooled from the faucet. The water would get warm. Eventually. She leaned on the edge of the pedestal sink and swiveled the cold water tap, sticking her wrists under the cool water. She sank inside herself, expanding her lungs and slowing her heartbeat, staring at the water disappearing down the drain, wondering how to trade the speed of the sink faucet water with the tubs.

Looking up, her reflection showed overheated red skin, summer-darkened freckles and sweat-soaked bangs that stuck to her forehead. She bent her head to brush her face across her sleeve, momentarily drier and hotter. She wanted a fan. The wall phone rang in the kitchen, vibrating the mirror of the medicine cabinet, castaneting its contents. Something thunked the door. She looked up, her mother’s hand holding the black telephone receiver, the cord curling down and looping around the corner. Her mother never talked over running water, a waste of articulate speech.

~

She clunked her head on the wall behind her, a phone ringing far away, smacking her hand on her chin, biting the tip of her tongue as she slapped her mouth closed. “Mmmm,” she sputtered, surprised to be awake when she didn’t know she had been sleeping. Oxygen deprivation, she had enough clarity to consider. Paper money scattered across the floor, tokens knocked askew with the sweep of her leg. She sucked her tongue, palming her cheeks and chin, eyelids drooping. Her back ached between the shoulder blades, her wrists cold. What had she been doing? Waiting for a tub to fill and overheated from running, daydreaming pieces of her past, vivid and close, another meandering from the daily exhaustion that accompanied this road trek. She was sweating inside her jacket as she looked at the socks on her feet, certain she had been barefoot.

Her mother had called it “getting to school on time.” Her high school track coach, trained by the French military, had called it obstacle running. She was a natural, good at it, eager to map a safely maneuvered and direct path between here and there with the least amount of effort. Her mother would have done it, too, if she had had a parental partner; however, she wouldn’t risk getting injured. Theirs was a unique relationship, competitive, yes, but unlike others’ motherly tests and trials. She, a girl without a dad in the house, had been taught to be competitive with herself, reaping benefits from the interior prod.

She had spent many hours after school in bank interiors, waiting for a mother who rarely looked up from her pencil and comptometer. Intent, closeted with numbers and columns, her mother, older than other mothers of girls her age, pressed the buttons and pulled the handle, the whirring sound of the crank a constant noise that attached itself to algebra, Dickens, essay writing done on her lap, sitting in the odd corner of the building. Their first few years on the road she hadn’t been enrolled in school, on her own with a retired

spinster schoolmarm, or, if given her preference, making friends with the town's librarian.

She shrugged off her jacket and folded her arms against her stomach, hands pressed to forearms. She swept her tongue across her front teeth. It was okay, better than biting the inside of her cheek. It had left an iron taste in her mouth and when she put a finger to her tongue, it came away with a bit of blood on it. She rubbed it around, less than a drop, the smearing movement of thumb across skin bringing a memory of waiting next to starting blocks, a bloody pinprick on a finger. She daily incurred scabbed knees, bruises she had no idea how she'd gotten. Once a single straight edged bruise across the back of her thigh when she missed a hurdle training for the decathlon, an Olympics hopeful until a torn ligament nixed her chances. She stared at the floor, suddenly choked with gratitude for four years in the same place, an Illinois town, running and swerving through her days in the most efficient path, scaling college prep courses, leaping onto honor rolls, awarded a scholarship for speed and agility.

She stretched out her arms and tucked her legs under her, kneeling as she thumbed cash and identification back into her wallet, returning it to her jacket pocket. She should be moving faster and here she was, parked on the floor, pushing tokens around a circle of tiles while she waited out the storm. And keys, what had been in that daydream about keys? Pins and needles in her feet, she stood, grabbing the safe deposit key and miniature music box off the floor. She wobbled to the shelf, released the elastic around the portfolio and put the key back with the lawyer's letter. The music box, a tiny spinet piano, was a gift from her mother. It played "Für Elise," the Beethoven she'd played in a spring recital. She wound the tiny key on the back and put the box on the shelf, the tune plinking in the room. Her hands moved to the brushed steel counter, lightly fingering the melody. After eight measures, the tune repeated itself, reminding her of a summer ice cream truck that played "Turkey in the Straw" as it rolled down the

streets, just the first bars of the song, never the bridge to the end, an endless melodic torture. She looked up as the key unwound and the music slowed.

It had stopped snowing. The sun lightened the altostratus clouds, a dim round disk glowing behind. She smiled. She knew the names of clouds and what they did and why. Some things she had learned from her mother were permanent, daily recordings, things of note. Always watch the weather, she could still hear her mother say. It was midday, she guessed, the thin sunlight filtering onto the snow piled outside. She pressed her hand to the window. And still cold. The flag hung limp from the pole. No wind. She was tempted to go out, shuffle a path, uncover the white pumpkin outside that was her van. The clouds indicated more snow soon so she chose to pull the door open a crack, leaving most of the snow piled against it outside, freshening but chilling the lobby.

Her brain cleared and she let the door close, remembering a phone call, the daydream a reminder. She picked up her jacket, looking for her wallet, and spied the phone card lying on top of the wastebasket. The instructions for its use were in tiny print on the back and again she knew bifocals were in her future. Moving to the payphone, she held the card at arm's length, turned her head slightly to the left until the letters came into focus. She needed a hard edge. A silver coating covered the access code. She fished the van keys out of her pocket – keys, she thought, her mother's keys. Left to hold them or retrieve them or hunt for them so many times, the shape and shade of each key clung to her. She had made up a poem or list or something with her mother, a way to remember what each was for. She held the card against her thigh and scraped at the stripe, mining for numbers, silver tailings falling to the floor, a rhyme or a riddle poking her at her memory.

She unhooked the receiver and laid it across her shoulder, the dial tone audible across the inches. Holding the card she punched in the long distance number and waited for another dial tone.

“We’re sorry. The number you have dialed is temporarily out-of-order or no longer....”

She pressed down the hook, moved the card, searching for more light to read by and tried again. A recording came on, welcoming her, thanking her, asking her for the access code; she punched it in.

“Your card has twenty dollars of phone minutes. Please dial your party’s number.”

She did, ten digits as familiar as her birth date and her childhood address, nearly two decades of friendship. She waited, pocketing the phone card, pushing the receiver to her ear.

It was busy. She sighed. Too cheap for call waiting or call forwarding, it was busy because someone was talking or someone was leaving a message. The phone line was engaged. And she pictured the phone call kneeling in front of the phone line, a ring box extended on its palm, asking for its hand in marriage, the humiliating “no” blatting across the wires some fifteen hundred miles away. Drat. She hung up, glad there were no coins involved, a worrisome retrieval when no connection was made. The phone cards were an improvement there.

The phone rang. She jumped and squeaked, aware no one heard her but nevertheless, not liking to be surprised, which she had been. She had never heard a payphone ring. The story she’d heard was the phone company removed the printed numbers from the dial because drug dealers used payphones to make their drops. She swallowed. It rang

again. What to do? Maybe this payphone number had somehow gotten through to California. That was absurd, mostly impossible. The phone rang a third time. The only way someone else could get here right now was by helicopter and that was so beyond ridiculous, she would have to be in a movie for it to happen. She lifted her arm and put it down. A fourth ring and the desperation of someone else stuck in the storm, hoping for help, screamed with the sound. She had to know. She lifted the receiver and slowly moved it towards her ear, her heart beat revving up as she strained to hear.

There were loud thudding sounds and the noise of a running engine coming across the line. Someone was calling from inside a mineshaft. Or at least that was what it sounded like.

“Yes?” she ventured. The thudding stopped and started again.

“Hello?” She said it louder this time. The engine sputtered off. The thuds stopped. Someone swore in the distance.

“Hey!” She doubted this person needed her help but why call here? She was annoyed for no reason she could fathom. “You’re the one who called me!”

“You’re there?” The voice came across the line. “Oh, man, you’re there.” It was a statement cloaked in relief.

“Where else would I be?” This was weird. “I’ve never answered a payphone.” She’d hang up except she wanted to know who was yawning so loudly at the other end of the line.

“I’ve been up all night, plowing snow and getting generators to work and that’s all you can say?” The voice returned her annoyance in kind.

“What time is it? I don’t have a watch.”

“One forty-five. I think. Thereabouts.” The voice laughed. “That’s what you want to know? The time?”

Then she knew who it was. A laugh rooted in smug something. She laughed back. She dug in her pocket for the card the snowplow driver left with her yesterday. Andersen. Ms. Anderson. “Yes. And the weather forecast.” More snow, she expected. “It’s dangerous to drive without sleep.”

“The caffeine is wearing off. I napped in the truck for an hour.”

“That must have been cold.”

“I left the engine running and the heater on.”

“That’s a big no-no in a blizzard. Tail pipes blocked and what all. Even I know that.” That was a reference to a California license plate dig the driver had thrown at her the day before.

“I know where to park.”

“Idiot.”

“Wimp. Bet you slept inside.”

“You told me to.” She blurted that in defense. She had thought about sleeping outside.

“You listened. I’m glad. We’ve had twenty-two inches with more on the way. I-80 is closed to the Iowa state line.”

She let out a long breath. It could be worse. It could have been so much worse.

“Is the power on?” The voice sounded doubtful.

“No. It went off sometime overnight.” She turned, surveying the lobby and its energy users, lights and vents and vending machines.

“Damn. There’s a generator but I have the only key to that storeroom.” An engine started and roared across the connection. “There is a spare key for the sandwich vendor in a magnetic key case stuck to the bottom near the right corner. Go check.”

She let the receiver drop, the metal coil swaying. The bottom of the vending machine, she repeated, walking across the lobby, at the right corner, her fingers prowling the edge. There it was, just like the one her mom had used under the tire well once they owned a car. She pried it loose and slid it open. A large silver key gleamed inside, thick and solid, #42 engraved on the front. She fit the key into the lock and turned it, a sharp snap followed by the door swinging loose against her hand, a cold draft dropping onto her feet. Tuna with tomato and lettuce between slices of whole wheat sat in the slot. She pulled it out and another sandwich slid forward. Closing the door, she turned the key, leaving it in the slot.

“Better fare than I brought in from the van,” she said into the phone.

“It’ll keep 24 hours in there.” The noise across the line had settled into a steady rumble. “Any longer, move them into the snow just outside the door.” The voice was matter-of-fact. “All of them. Eat three or four a day. Help keep your body temperature up.”

“You sound like I could be here days.” She looked out the window, the clouds gray through the softening sunlight.

“That’s why I called. I tried a little while ago but there was no answer.” Footsteps creaked across snow and a door slammed shut. “Were you tobogganing? Skating on the

Platte?" The voice was carefully light, a fake mocking tone. "Building a snow man?"

She shuffled her feet, pressing the receiver between ear and shoulder as she tried to peel open the cellophane wrapping. The driver had used a knife last night. She dug in her pocket for her keys. "Playing with myself." She opened the tiny folding knife on the ring from Red's Texaco, Viola, Illinois and slit open the plastic.

There was silence from the other end of the line as she wrestled half of the sandwich into her hand and up to her mouth.

"Huh." A radio turned on and changed stations. "There's a rare thing, a woman admitting that to someone after one night." A laugh rumbled into her ear.

She chewed and swallowed, not listening, another bite filling her mouth, sweet pickle relish crunching in too much mayonnaise. Fattening. Delicious. She'd have a turkey with cranberry sauce later. And the ham and cheese for dinner. Maybe there was egg salad or chicken salad. Or hard boiled eggs. Food that would spoil if it weren't consumed. Heaven.

"I played my mother, me playing myself. Moved some pieces around the floor. Bought some cheap property. Like a board game. I got bored. Nodded off and got a visit from my past, something about keys and running." She bit into the second half, juggling the sandwich and the receiver. Like Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Past. She considered the tuna. Had it been indigestion? A daydream? She'd take any clues she could get about safe deposit keys. "There are a lot of sandwiches." She looked over her shoulder, chocolate bars and yogurt cups among the selections.

"Good. It won't go to waste." The plow roared to life, the radio disappearing in the noise. "I misunderstood you." The

driver was shifting gears, a loud grating accompanying the roar. “The playing-with-myself statement.” The voice teased, sort of a big-brother gotcha.

She chewed and swallowed, crumbling the wrapper, useless in its present form. She had said that. She heard it again the way she had blurted it out, perhaps the way the driver had heard it, not the way she had meant it, a picture of the cards and money and tokens spread out on the tile at her feet. Oh. Well.

“Your secret is safe with me.” The words came across in a quieter moment between shifting gears. “I’ve always found that looking for an answer is worth pondering its question.” She heard the parking brake clatter off across the miles. “Time to go. Eat up. Stay warm. Wait there.” The connection clicked off.

She replaced the receiver, her other call forgotten, a hot flash awash, her face too warm, her chest flaming. She crossed to the door and yanked it open, the cold blast welcome, allowing her to breathe, chilling the perspiration at the roots of her hair. This kindness thing was breaking her, her skin too tight, her skull shrinking around her mind. A light dusting of snow landed on her socks. Her feet would get wet. And with the thought of this small inconvenience, she closed her eyes, covering her mouth with a hand, silent sobs bobbing her chin, licking her salty tears back into herself as they reached her lips.

Thank you for reading *Scheherazade*.

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