



# SCHEHERAZADE

ISSUE 8

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Students and Faculty of  
The Creative Writing Program  
At



# **Scheherazade**

## **Issue 8**

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## Submissions

*Scheherazade* considers submissions of poetry, short fiction, creative nonfiction, novel excerpts, creative nonfiction book excerpts, graphic art, and photography from students of Monterey Peninsula College.

To submit your own original creative work, please follow the instructions for uploading at:

**<http://www.mpc.edu/scheherazade-submission>**

Work submitted should be in 12 Point Times New Roman or Cambria font, with 1-inch margins at top, bottom, and sides of each page. There are no limitations on style or subject matter; bilingual submissions are welcome if the writer can provide equally accomplished work in both languages. Please do not include your name or page numbers in the work.

The magazine is published in the Spring semester annually; submissions are accepted year-round. *Scheherazade* is available in print form at the MPC library, area public libraries, *Bookbuyers* on Lighthouse Avenue in Monterey, and elsewhere.

The magazine is also published online at [www.mpc.edu/scheherazade](http://www.mpc.edu/scheherazade)

# Contents

## Issue 8

Spring 2018

**Cover Art:** Cowboy of the Cosmos, by Lawrence Harris

### Short Fiction

One Way Out, by Sean Fox.....	1
Henge, by Alivia Peters .....	16
The Man in White, by Laura Lark .....	21
The Ice Viper, by Gunnar Cumming.....	33
Black Water, by Alivia Peters .....	40
A Day with My Dad, by Sky Ferris.....	62

### Memoir

Buen Provecho, by Laura Curry.....	64
Finding Jimmie, by Laura Curry .....	66

### Poetry

Fort Ord Dunes, by Elaine La Fleur.....	72
And Not Forget, by Caitlin Bird.....	73

Haiku, by Analyynn Patterson.....	83
At the Speed of Light, by Laura Curry.....	84
The Marriage of Oya and Chango, by Laura Curry.....	87
Haiku, by Alex Harvin.....	89
Elevation, by Ashley Kohaut.....	90
A Hymn for Mal, by Davis Mendez.....	91
Hidden Cottage at Inverness, by Elaine La Fleur.....	93
Twelve Days of Yule, by Sky Ferris.....	94
Always the Story, by Lawrence Harris.....	95
Stray, by Shay Golub.....	96

### **Nonfiction Book Excerpt**

Flying Under the East River Bridges, by Patrick Sullivan.....	97
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### **Novel Excerpts**

Scapegoat, by Zac Buzza.....	113
Introducing Valancy, by Melynda Sylvestre.....	127
Law of Grace, by Jennifer Schmidt.....	134

“The Man in White,” by Laura Lark, is the winner of MPC’s annual Halloween Writing Contest.

## **One Way Out**

Cole tapped a thumb against the steering wheel, glancing down at his Timex -- two minutes to go. He studied the bank, ice-chip eyes fastened tight on the front door. The building stood apart from the others on the street, four white pillars like sentinels out front.

“I got a good one,” Davis said from the passenger seat.

Cole ignored him, too keyed up, veins tingling like live wires.

Billy was inside with the fat bank manager and the young teller he came in early to screw. Cole and Davis had watched Billy pick the lock and slip inside after them, and Cole imagined him walking in on the grunting, moaning pair in the vault. For a moment he wished he was inside, but his job was to stay with the truck; Billy could handle himself. As long as Davis worked his tech magic and kept any unwanted guests away, they'd be fine.

“Alright,” Davis said, turning to face Cole, his brand-new pearl snap shirt barely distinguishable from the upholstery. “Would you rather have a finger for a tongue, or have tongues for fingers?”

“What is it with you and these stupid questions?” Cole looked away from the bank to stare at the other man. They hadn't bothered to alter their appearances—anonymity was a better disguise than cheap sunglasses. The sun hung lazily in the sky, but it was only a few minutes past seven. They'd tracked the

bank manager's habits for two weeks before making their move, and the street was always empty this early in the morning.

Davis shrugged. "Just something to pass the time."

"Why don't you focus on making sure Barney Fife doesn't roll up on us."

"You need to relax, partner." Davis tilted the laptop toward Cole. "I'm tapped into traffic and security cams, and I've got the police scanner in my earbuds. We're good."

Cole grunted, satisfied. Davis was a wizard with anything electronic, even high-level government stuff, but sometimes he wondered how the kid had gotten into this line of work.

The doors of the bank burst open and a guy in jeans and a black T-shirt with a ski mask over his head ran out, sawed-off in one hand and a plain black backpack in the other. Cole threw the truck into drive and slammed on the gas, tires screeching. He jackknifed the wheel to the left and pulled up to the curb, slowing but not stopping as Billy put a hand on the truck and lifted himself into the bed with a grunt.

"Go, go, go!" Billy shouted.

Cole fought the urge to gun the engine, instead easing the truck through empty streets and studying his mirrors for flashing lights. Braking gently, he turned right past a grimy-looking barbershop and an out-of-business drugstore. He pressed harder on the accelerator, pushing the old Ford Ranger up to fifty. Brick buildings and storefronts gave way to one-story houses and bungalows as they reached the outer edges of town.

Davis turned in his seat and opened the little sliding glass



window to check on Billy. Cole saw Billy give a small, fluttering wave as he lay in the bed of the truck, holding tight to the stuffed backpack.

Rolling down his window, a hard breeze pouring over the sheen of sweat on his skin, Cole checked to make sure they were just under the speed limit as they passed the town line. He hadn't seen a single cop, and he couldn't hear any sirens. Clearly Davis hadn't seen anything, either. Still, best to play it safe -- just a couple of guys out for a ride. The wind whipped at his face, whistling through the half-open window. Letting out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, Cole laughed.

"Shit, man, we did it," he said.

"Sure did, partner."

Glancing in the rearview, he noticed Billy's eyes were closed, his head resting against the tailgate. He had no idea how the old man could rack out after pulling a score. Hell, he was so wired he could barely keep still, and he'd done nothing more strenuous than drive. Next to him Davis hummed quietly, feet hanging out the open window.

The two-lane highway stretched on for miles, asphalt old and faded. It was just over a hundred miles to Kansas City. Once they were far enough away from the bank Cole decided to stop so Billy could hop up front. Pulling off the road onto a patch of well-churned dirt next to a cornfield, the stalks rising well over six feet, Cole put the shifter in park and turned off the truck. They hopped out, stretching tight muscles.

“Nothing like some fresh air after a hard day’s work,” Davis said, head tilted back, eyes closed.

“What did you do, exactly?” Cole said.

Davis grinned. “Any cops show up? Or did we get out free and clear?”

“I guess it was our lucky day,” Cole said. “Billy, get out here. You did all the heavy lifting.”

Cole turned and slapped the truck panel a few times, leaning over into the bed.

“Billy?”

Placing both hands on the edge of the truck, Cole leapt into the bed and knelt over Billy. The older man’s eyes were closed and he wasn’t moving. His grey hair fell in a ragged wave over his forehead. Cole rolled Billy onto his side. He ran his hands over Billy’s arms, legs, and torso, feeling for blood. They hadn’t heard anything, and Billy hadn’t said shit about getting shot. Cole’s hands came away clean, though, and he realized there was no blood; Billy had no wounds he could see. Davis stared at him.

“What the hell do we do, Cole?” He clenched his fists repeatedly, hands shaking.

Cole leaned over Billy and placed his ear next to his mouth; he couldn’t hear or feel anything. Billy’s lips felt cold on Cole’s ear. His chest wasn’t moving.

“We gotta call an ambulance,” Davis said.

“What for?” Cole scooted slowly away from Billy to sit on the side of the bed, head down.

“He’s gonna die, Cole!”

“Look at him. He’s already gone.” Cole looked up to stare at Billy. “His heart...” he trailed off, unable to finish. That little wave as they’d passed out of town took on a different meaning. Had Billy been trying to get their attention, tell them something was wrong? He couldn’t bring himself to mention his suspicion to Davis.

Davis’ face fell and he seemed to deflate, sinking against the tailgate. The two men were silent for a long time. Lost in his own thoughts, Cole remembered the day he’d found his father on the floor of their double-wide. He’d been dead a lot longer, though, and smelled a lot worse.

After a while Davis looked up, face haggard. “What do we do now?”

“We can’t take him with us.”

“So we just leave him?”

Cole heard the accusation in Davis’ voice but ignored it. “Would you rather we leave him here, where someone will find him eventually, or take him with us and hope we don’t get pulled over for riding around with a body in back?”

Davis stared at him, face set stubbornly, before letting out an explosive sigh. “I know, I know. Just doesn’t feel right.”

“We can agree on that, at least.”

Standing and hopping to the ground, Cole reached into the cab and pulled a faded grey blanket from beneath the driver’s seat. Unfolding the pillied fleece, he draped the blanket over Billy’s body.

Once they got to KC they would trade what they'd grabbed for clean cash, then split the take. He'd have to take Billy's share to his sister up in Sioux City, then he'd be free. Tomas and the Czechs wouldn't get the last chunk of what he owed, but he'd be long gone before they realized what had happened.

"Help me with him," Cole said.

Looking down the road to make sure no cars were coming, they reached under the blanket and grabbed Billy by the ankles and slid him onto the tailgate, then pulled him off the truck. Sidestepping farther into the grass, their feet sinking into the soft earth, they laid him gently on the ground. Davis crossed Billy's arms on his chest.

Cole stood over the body like a preacher, hands clasped behind his back. He'd known Billy a long time. Memories flashed through his mind—jobs they'd pulled, fights they'd gotten into, nights they could barely piece together. He tried to think of words that could do that justice, something to say goodbye to a friend, but nothing came.

It didn't matter much, he supposed. Billy wasn't going to complain.

"See you on the other side," he said.

\*\*\*

The truck rattled along mile after mile, the sun directly overhead. Billy's backpack, stuffed full of cash, bonds, and jewelry, felt like a magnet under his seat, pushing instead of pulling. Davis hadn't spoken in over an hour, just stared blankly

out the window. Cole wasn't much in the mood for conversation, either.

Twenty minutes later, Davis turned to him. "How'd you guys meet?"

"Huh?"

"You and Billy."

"Oh." Cole looked over at Davis, but the younger man continued to stare out the window, thoughts unreadable. "Few years back I got recruited for a job. Nothing as smooth as what we pulled today, but the money was good. Billy ran point, I drove. After that, we stayed in touch."

"This was another bank job?"

"Armored car." Cole rolled down the window and spit. Sharp rain whipped in, pelting his face. "What's with all the questions?"

Davis shrugged. "Need to pass the time somehow, right?"

Cole grunted, pulling out his cell phone and dialing a number from memory. The Italian answered on the second ring. To the general public, Mauricio Belotti was a respectable businessman. He owned two dry cleaners, a used car lot, three laundromats, and four or five pawn shops. In addition to his legit businesses he also ran a thriving fence operation, moving goods and cash and taking a hefty commission. He wasn't cheap, but he was reliable.

Cole spoke slowly into the phone, reciting what would sound like a grocery list to the uninitiated. The code wasn't especially intricate, but it worked; the Italian got a ballpark on

what he was buying, and they were safe from incriminating themselves if any unwanted ears happened to be listening. After seeing what Davis could do with a computer, he'd probably never feel comfortable around technology again.

He ended the call with a time and an address and pocketed the phone. Cole tapped his thumb on the steering wheel to a soundless beat. A couple more hours and he'd be finished, a pile of cash in his bag and his past a fading memory. He'd head north to drop off Billy's cut to his sister, then he was gone. He could finally see Europe -- meet some beautiful women, walk around old castles, the whole deal. He'd need to get a passport, though, and then he'd show up on passenger logs, flight manifests. Probably better to hop the border and spend some time on a quiet beach in Mexico. A million miles away, forty years of disappointment in the rearview -- he could almost taste it.

"We'll be there in ten," he said. "Make sure your shit is packed and ready to go 'cause once the Italian pays us I'm taking the truck and I'm gone."

"Ten-four, partner," Davis said.

\*\*\*

The rain picked up as they got into Kansas City, and Cole missed the turnoff for the motel twice before he noticed the flickering neon boots of the Cowboy Inn. Water poured off the two-story roof in sheets, soaking everything and flooding the far corner of the parking lot.

Cole pulled the truck in front of the office. "Go get us a room," he said to Davis. "Make sure it's on the first floor."

Pulling the handle and popping open the door, Davis hopped out of the truck and hustled toward the sagging building, arms over his head. Years of filmy, yellow build-up on the windows made them almost opaque, and Cole couldn't see inside. Five minutes later Davis stepped outside, ran back through the rain, and tossed Cole a key on a plastic keychain as he hopped in the truck.

"Room 17," he said. "Down at the far end."

In terms of roadside motels twenty years past their expiration date, it wasn't the worst place Cole had ever seen, but it was close. Brown shag carpet covered every inch of the floor, even in the bathroom. A flickering lamp on the nightstand between the beds bathed the room in hazy yellow light. An old CRT television sat on the dresser, looking like it weighed a hundred pounds and hadn't been turned on in twenty years. Given the damp, earthy smell, maybe no one had set foot in the room in all that time. Luckily, they'd only be here for an hour or two, then he'd be done with Kansas City for good.

Davis carried his bags of gear into the room and set them on the bed closest to the window. "Home sweet home."

"Shut the blinds," Cole said.

He unzipped the backpack and turned it upside down onto the other bed. Banded wads of cash, twisted strands of gold jewelry, some rings and pendants, even a few gemstones—they poured out of the bag like multicolored chunks of hail. Loose cash floated out, too-crisp hundred-dollar bills seeming to hover

in the air -- the paper band must have broken during the robbery.

Finally, the belle of the ball, a quarter-inch-thick stack of bearer bonds tucked away in the bottom of the bag. This was what they'd risked their necks for. He could see the year embossed on the topmost bond; 1977, one of the last years the government had still issued them. Those had to be worth a quarter mil by themselves. Maybe more.

Cole pulled his Glock from his belt, setting it on the nightstand, then sat on the edge of the bed. Look at it all, he thought. They'd gotten away with a fortune, and it had been so easy. They barely broke a sweat. Hell, they didn't even *see* a cop. If it wasn't for Billy, they'd be celebrating like fools right now. Could he really give this up, cash out and move on? One more score like this and he could pay off Tomas with enough left over to set himself up good; he wouldn't need to worry about the Czech's goons, or wonder when his cash would run dry.

Cole sighed.

"You okay, partner?" Davis was seated in a chair by the window, feet up on the desk, studying him. He seemed to have recovered from the shock of Billy's death.

That line of thinking was a trap, Cole knew. Just like poker, best to quit while he was ahead. Besides, even if he gave Tomas the rest of what he owed, he'd never be off the hook. Life wasn't that easy. Better to make a clean break, get out while he could.

"I'm fine."



“You want some help counting that?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Cole said. “Just keep an eye out for the Italian. He should be here soon.”

“Can do, boss man.” Davis hummed quietly to himself, peeking out the window every few minutes.

Cole sorted the haul into piles -- cash, jewelry, and bonds -- then started to count and inventory. He didn’t know shit about jewelry, but the Italian would bring a scale and pay them based on weight. The cash was his biggest concern. The gold could be melted down and sold, but they’d have to swap the cash for clean bills. That meant the Italian could name his price. The bonds were untraceable though, which made them catnip for criminals. Cole planned to make him pay top dollar.

“Anything?” he asked Davis.

“Negative, chief. How’s he going to know what room we’re in?”

“I’ll go get him, once he shows up.” Cole piled five stacks of hundreds on top of each other, a hundred-grand neat as you like. “Until then, we sit tight.”

Satisfied with the count, Cole made the final tally -- just shy of two hundred thousand in cash, two-hundred-sixty thousand in bonds, maybe a pound and a half of jewelry, plus four diamonds and a fat emerald he thought idly about keeping. A king’s ransom.

Running some rough numbers in his head, Cole figured they’d be able to get around three hundred from the Italian. He was a stingy bastard for sure, but he wanted to make a deal just

as badly as they did, especially for the bonds. So, a hundred thousand each. That would set a guy up nicely in Mexico, or somewhere even farther south.

Davis stood up, shoulders tense, and stared out a crack in the blinds. “Guy just pulled up in an old Caddy. Looks like fat Marlon Brando, but with more hair gel.”

“That’s the Italian.” They were in the homestretch now. “Let’s get this over with.” Cole walked to the door and started to throw back the bolt, but Davis reached out and grabbed his arm.

“Wait,” he said. “Take a look at the parking lot.”

Cole stood at the window and peered through the blinds. The rain had tapered off to a weak drizzle. The Italian’s pristine black Cadillac stood out, the only car in the lot not covered in rust. Cole didn’t notice anything else out of place.

Then he saw it. “Shit.”

Across the street from the motel, barely visible in the gloom, a black SUV idled in the parking lot of an out-of-business porno shop. It hadn’t been there when they arrived—Cole would’ve noticed. He didn’t know what instinct had caused Davis to pick out the vehicle, hidden partly in the shadow of a building, but he had no doubt who was inside.

“That fucking prick.” The Italian must’ve sold them out to Tomas. It was the only explanation. Cole’s debt wasn’t exactly a secret, and no one else had known where they’d be. Stupid. He couldn’t have made it any easier for the bastards.

“Those are your Czech friends, I assume?” Davis sounded oddly calm.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Cole thought furiously. The window in the bathroom opened onto a small alley, but a greyhound would barely fit through that thing. If they stepped outside they’d be scooped up by Tomas and his guys immediately, and he knew what would happen next. There was no way they’d be able to sneak away, and the Italian wouldn’t make much of a hostage. He grabbed his Glock from the nightstand and stuck it in his waistband.

“You know what?” Davis rapped his knuckles on the table, drawing Cole’s attention. “I’ve got a good one.”

“Not now, Davis.”

“Just humor me.”

Davis wasn’t likely to shut up until he said his bit, and the situation outside seemed stable -- for the moment. Cole nodded distractedly, staring out the window at the SUV.

Davis’ eyes bored into him. “Would you rather leave here with the Czech and his pals,” Cole heard a scraping sound as Davis slid something across the table toward him, “or with me and mine?”

Cole reached down and picked up the object, turning it face up. The words were a blur as he tried to read them; the small, gold badge felt absurdly heavy in his hand.

“You’re a cop?” Gears turned in Cole’s head, small inconsistencies clicking into place. Something had always felt wrong about Davis, like he was trying too hard. All those damn questions. All the signs had been there all along, Cole thought bitterly. He’d just misread them.

Davis shrugged. "Uncle Sam signs my paychecks, but close enough."

Cole's eyes flicked between Davis and the SUV across the street, packed full of Czech gangsters. He had no idea where the other feds were, but he was sure they were close. His hand drifted back to his waistband, fingering the handle of the Glock. He was out of options.

"I can't promise how things will turn out," Davis said, watching him, "but this has to be better than that." He nodded toward the window.

The moment stretched, the motel room silent. Fucked either way, Cole thought.

Across the street in the parking lot, the doors of the black SUV opened in sync. Three massive guys in dark suits stepped out, not a single neck between them, followed by Tomas and his bald, liver-spotted head. The best tailor in the world couldn't hide the bulges in their jackets.

Davis stood, clipping the gold badge to his jeans. "So, what'll it be, partner?"

Every instinct in Cole's body told him to run, to fling the motel door open and head for the truck, taking his chances before the Czech and his hired guns made it any closer. If it came to it, it wouldn't be the first time he had to shoot his way out of trouble. He stepped forward, reaching for the doorknob, then stopped. Forty years of trusting his instincts had gotten him here -- maybe it was time for something else.

Stepping back, Cole turned to face Davis. He pulled the Glock from his waistband and tossed it casually on the bed.

“Alright,” Cole said. “Let’s try it your way.”

**Henge**

I remember the day you were born.

It was cloudy. I can remember looking up at the sky thinking it was a shame that the sun wasn't shining on such a day. It made me think the Gods were trying to tell me something. I had been wed to your mother for six winters and I had known her for all the winters I can remember. She was the only woman we let come on the hunt; she was a master salter. The men would have wasted half the meat we hunted if it weren't for your mother.

I had known and seen nothing from her in all my years except quiet strength and kindness. I think that's why her labored breathing and wails disturbed me so much. I am sorry that you never knew your mother as well as I have. She was a woman you meet only once in your years. I am lucky to have known her so well.

I can remember the wind skating over the river, finding my bones through my furs. I wore many that day. Your mother would need them once you arrived. You would need them too. I bit at the skin on my hands, I was afraid. I had been afraid of two things in all the moons I had seen: losing your mother, and failing you. Now, I am afraid of nothing.

I remember the rain starting to race towards the earth when I first heard you cry. I stopped my pacing, my hands drooping to my sides with an odd rattling noise. The winter had

been hard, my bones rested close to my skin. The hard winter had made your presence even harder on mother. She carried you with such grace, never stumbling as I had seen women do with their swollen bellies since I was a child.

My ears were ringing with the echo of your tiny voice calling my name. I waited for our clan's healer to tell me I could come see you. I was not allowed to be there when you were coming into the world, the healers say it's bad luck. The rain continued to fall heavy enough now that I could hear the droplets hitting the skin side of the furs covering the hut you were in. I could feel my hands shaking, I had never been that scared of anything in all the hunting summers I had seen.

A fur was pulled back from the doorway of the hut, our eldest healer peered out at me. Her dark hair was braided into a thick plait that was pulled over her left shoulder. It came down to her knees. Her eyes twinkled up at me, shards of arrowheads buried in the tan folds of her face. She was the oldest person I had ever met. She bowed her head and beckoned me inside the hut with a small curl of her fingers.

I remember stumbling over myself in my hurry to get inside.

I saw mother first. She looked so small and frail. I had always seen her so shining and full of life, it hurt my heart to see her so pale and small. I pulled one of my furs from my shoulders and fell to my knees before her, draping the large fur over her little exhausted body. Then I saw you.

And my world stopped.

You stared at me as if you had known me before. You stopped crying to look at me. I had to remind myself to take breaths. How could something so perfect belong to me? How could someone so big and ugly make such a small perfect thing like this? You took more after your mother than you had of me. You had a rosebud for a mouth and a kiss for a nose. There were storms trapped in your eyes.

I can remember being sad whenever you closed your eyes. It made me feel like a little boy that had been too far from his clan for too long. Your mother used to laugh at me when I told this story, her eyes alight with happiness. I spent many hours in that hut with mother and you. It is a place I smile when I think about.

~

You grew up quickly and learned very fast. Winters came and went, mother had decided to call you, Illea. It fit you well. Such a beautiful name for such a beautiful person.

I can remember the other little boys following you around when you left the hut with mother.

The clan had moved much when you were growing. Winters had become harder and harder as you became bigger and bigger, we had to follow the food. I missed much of your growing up, I was always hunting. I wish I had been there.

I remember noticing at the summer feast how much you looked like your mother. Except for your hair. Your hair took after my mother. Long, dark curls wound their way down your



spine and swung back and forth when you walked, I feared the day we would have to shear it to keep it off the ground.

I remember feeling how lucky I really was that night too. I had done so many wrongs in my years, but I had done just enough right to deserve the two of you, and that was all I needed.

~

I remember being in the mountains when the Gods painted the trees.

I remember feeling as though I was too far from you and mother. We had never gone that far to hunt. Meat was harder to come by before winter, we could not follow the bison into these hills.

I remember the way you felt when I hugged you before I left.

I remember the way your mother's lips shaped to fill the crests and dips in my own when she pressed them to mine in farewell.

I remember her whispering to me that the moon had fallen in her again.

I remember thinking about it all the way into the mountains.

I remember the long trip back to the clan and how we all knew that something was wrong. We had known that an enemy clan had been near, but did not believe our clan to be in danger.

I remember smelling the smoke before I saw it.

I remember not being able to run fast enough to save you and mother.

I remember seeing your eyes, that had always been so full of life, so empty.

I remember holding your mother's hand until it grew cold and stiff.

I remember crying.

I had never cried in all the moons I had seen.

I remember how empty I felt after we sent you down the river.

I remember the prayer we all said for you, I can still recite it.

“Mountain save you. Mother hold you. Pass through winter and feel the sun once again. Fear no evil. Feel no pain. Go on and enter eternity.”

Something in us broke after that. We had no women, no children, no love, no hope. We were alone.

Some men found solace in the wood that based the mountains.

Some men found solace in other clans.

Some men found solace in the river.

I never found solace. I have missed you and mother with every breath that I have reminded myself to take since the day you were born. I had done so much wrong, but I had done just enough good to have known you.

And that is how I remember the day that you died.

## **The Man in White**

I've never been as close to death as the night I met the man in white. It began when I ventured onto that exit, where the side roads cut through the green foothills; a welcome break from the endless grey highway.

It was unseasonably hot for October, but the air was clean and smelled like honeysuckle with the windows rolled down. A riverbed, swollen with churning black rainwater, snaked in parallel with the road. Maples along its banks were bright with yellow and scarlet leaves. I passed an old ranch with a leafless persimmon tree out front, heavy with orange, jack-o-lantern fruit. Then came a grove of dormant pecan trees with dark silhouettes against the yellowing sky, the bare branches like twisted fingers creeping out of the ground.

By dark, the isolation of the winding, carless road got to me. I was looking for the fastest way back to the highway when I found myself at the edge of a small town, in front of a narrow building with wood siding. I pulled into the parking lot to get my bearings, but the dim car lights weren't enough to make out the squiggles on the map. That's when I noticed the neon sign lighting the wood siding of the "Lyon Pour House." I decided to ask for directions inside. It seemed reasonable at the time.

I looked around the deserted lot. It was comprised of gravel and dirt and weeds. A rusted barbed wire fence marked its edge. There were no other cars but mine, so I opened the door

and leaned against it, one foot still inside. All I could hear was the muted twang of country music. I shut my door and walked over to get a better look into the bar, but there were only two windows, and they were too high up the front of the building to see through.

The sound swallowed me up when I finally opened that dark, red door. The first thing I noticed was the jukebox in the far corner, with bright colors that blinked and ran with the beat. In the middle of the room, three or four couples danced on the cracked cement floor, with one gleaming stripper pole dead-center. The rest of the room was dedicated to the wood paneled bar, covered in Polaroid photos and taped dollar bills that hung like stalactites from the ceiling. A few of the photos had drawings in red and black marker.

That's when I saw him. He sat furthest from the door in a darkened corner, toying with the curled edge of one photograph taped to the gummy, tar-like countertop. He didn't look like the other blond patrons in their cowboy hats—he was a large-boned black man dressed in white flowing linen, with brown leather sandals that reminded me of Jesus. Even when I looked away, I could feel his presence, squeezed to fit into the steamy room. He seemed soft and imposing at once, with hard black eyes and long feminine lashes. He radiated heat. It drew me in.

I walked over to take one of the ripped red leather seats at the bar. I sat nearest the door, pulling my long brown hair behind my bare shoulders to steal another glance at the man. His shaved head shone, reflecting the bouncing lights as he nodded

in time with the wailing fiddles and stomping leather boots. He was laughing beside a slender blue-eyed fellow with a plaid shirt, shining buckle and jeans.

“What'll it be ma'am?”

I tore my attention from the man to catch the barmaid looking me up and down, a glint of distrust in her gold-flecked green eyes. She smelled like vanilla and cilantro, smooth and a little soapy. I curved the corners of my mouth to shape my answer properly while she pursed her lips impatiently.

“A gin and tonic,” I replied. I was more of a whiskey-neat kind of girl, but gin was a safe choice that seemed classier than the pink martinis the other gals were sloshing around on the dance floor. I licked my lips, betting they liked strawberries and sugar. The barmaid turned on her heel with a frown, her curled black hair flouncing all the way to her waist. It made me lick my lips again.

The man in white beckoned, and the barmaid flitted to his side. I couldn't hear anything he said over the music and laughter behind us. She looked at me, then walked back to the register. Cheering erupted behind me, so I half-turned, still watching the man from the edge of my eye. His companion began hollering and pointing at the middle-aged, sagging woman spinning on the chrome pole. The pole wasn't for professionals; only the inebriated. Her mascara painted streaks of black down her flushed cheeks, her dyed red hair and brown roots catching the light. When she stopped spinning, the rest of her didn't. I

didn't mind that, but the snickers bothered me some, so I started to turn back around, catching the man's eye as I did.

He raised his glass to me then, inclining his head. I swallowed and turned the rest of the way, gluing my eyes to the peeling photos and crackled tape beneath the pooling condensation in a circle around my full glass. Most of the pictures were of flushed twenty-somethings with innocent eyes and straight, bleached teeth. I moved my drink for a better look. The left corner of the photo under my glass was marked with a red symbol, a circle with three lines through it. It showed a brunette with big eyes and fake lashes, lifting a cowboy hat above her head with a red-lipsticked, open-mouthed wink. Behind her, I could make out the outline of what appeared to be the man's arm, covered in white flowing cloth. I recognized something in her dark eyes, but couldn't quite place her. I figured she looked like everyone else from the bar, though she wasn't there that night.

I moved on to the next photo with the same marking. It was another young woman, with brown wavy hair down past her chin and sparkling purple eye shadow, also eerily familiar. They could've been sisters. Hell, they could've been my sisters. I squinted. There it was again, in the corner of the photograph, his leg clad in white, toes peeking out from those brown Jesus sandals. I peered down the bar to my right, scanning for marked photos. There were maybe seven or eight distinct young women close to my age, all with the same shoulder-length brown hair and big eyes. And although not one showed the man in his

entirety, he was in every single marked photo as far as I could tell.

“Open a tab?” The barmaid smiled this time, all trace of coolness gone. My eyes lingered on her chest and her name tag, well after I knew her name.

“Not tonight, Sandra. Just the check.”

“Too bad, honey,” Sandra winked. “The next would’ve been on me.”

My eyes must’ve bugged out of my head a little then, because she grinned even wider before sashaying to the register. I brought the drink to my lips to hide my smile. The cool liquid filled my nose with pine needles, and I sucked down half the glass in a single parched swallow. I almost choked when I felt body heat at my side. I didn’t need to turn to know it was him.

“Hello.”

His hot breath tickled a loose strand of hair against my ear. It could’ve melted the rouge right off my cheeks.

“Hey.” I clinked the glass back down into its pool of water, then faced him. He wasn’t my type, but he was achingly beautiful up close, with bronze eyes and perfectly arching brows that betrayed his vanity. His lips and cheeks were full, slightly rounded from plenty. His throat looked as smooth as his shining head, and a wooden crucifix hung from a wispy twine around his neck. He smelled like earth, like dead leaves and damp soil.

“You’re a pretty little thing, aren’t you?” He smiled with sharp white teeth. I looked down at my ice and shrugged.

He pushed my glass aside, and I watched his hand carefully. Never let a stranger touch your drink, my mother's words echoed in my head. He reached over the counter for a napkin, then slowly wiped the condensation from the girl's face in the photograph. I felt ashamed, like I had disrespected this woman by allowing the water to pool over her face. His reaction made me both shudder and yearn for that kind of tenderness.

"Is she a 'pretty little thing' too?" I asked, regarding him coolly.

"Yes," he replied, unfazed. "And sweet."

He certainly had a type. I swallowed, hoping he couldn't see my throat in the light.

"What brings you out here? I've never seen you before, beautiful."

I swirled the remaining liquid in my glass. "Just passing through."

"Ah."

"You're a popular guy, I see." I smiled, indicating with my glass at the photographs.

"I enjoy spending time with beautiful women."

"Happens to the best of us." I directed my gaze at Sandra. I wasn't sure how else to give him the message that I wasn't interested. Romantically, anyway. It was more like I was compelled by him, which wasn't the kind of thing you confessed to a stranger in a bar.

"I see..." he murmured with a grin. "How lovely, lovely..."



I blanched. My rejection seemed to entice more than it dissuaded him.

“Shall we?”

He held his arm out, and I recoiled from the suggestion.

“That’s rather presumptuous,” I countered, turning my body slightly towards the bar.

He laughed, but his eyes remained fixed on my own.

“I like your spunk. You fit right in around here.”

I flattened my lips to discourage him.

“I don’t intend to stay.”

“They never do,” he said, brushing aside a lock of my hair with his index finger.

I didn't respond. He was crazy. But he wasn't wrong—I'd completely forgotten to ask for directions the minute I saw him.

“Here,” he said, passing a bone-white business card. I barely glanced at it. It had golden, curved lettering, raised slightly on the paper. “When you’re ready for that dance, I’ll be here.”

I took the card, then drained the rest of my glass. He stood, and I nodded without meeting his eyes. I could feel the beam of his smile warming the sweat on my neck as his hand touched my back. It made my skin crawl, but I missed the pressure when it was gone, a misplaced longing that turned my stomach. Then he left out the front, disappearing into the darkness. The room grew cool and quiet. I waited, but didn’t hear a car turn over. Still, he was gone.

“Smile!”

The light flashed and I grimaced. Sandra was back with a Polaroid camera. She took the grey photograph and waved it in the air as it developed.

“Now you’re part of the crew,” she grinned.

“I don’t like photos, sorry.” I mumbled. “Can I get the check?”

I pulled a worn ten dollar bill from my wallet. The bill trembled. She placed her hand over mine, shaking her head.

“Don't worry honey, it's been paid. He takes care of his people.”

His people. I started to feel a little lightheaded then, like I'd gotten myself in some kind of trouble just by entertaining him. I dropped his card and a ten on the counter, then excused myself with a curt nod. I wasn't one of his, whatever that meant. I stumbled outside on the uneven asphalt, the buzzing crickets making my heart pound. I was off kilter, but I wasn't drunk. Just a little buzzed, maybe a little freaked out.

I felt sober enough to drive, so I unlocked my door. I flinched when I flicked on my headlights, half-expecting to see the man standing in front of me, but there was nothing in the lot but yellow weeds. I turned my key and nearly jumped, hearing the soft keystrokes of a piano through the buzzing speakers. I hadn't left the radio on. I was certain of it.

I flipped the knob into silence and shuddered. Then I settled into the torn fabric seat and backed out of the lot. I still didn't know how to get back to the highway.

I made it home by morning. The images of those girls haunted my dreams for weeks. I would see them whirling around in front of glaring sunlight, spinning and spinning until they disappeared into a flurry of white linens. The piano always played in the background, its minor key grainy through my old car stereo.

A year later, I sat alone in my mother's sunny yellow kitchen. I was waiting for the water to boil for my morning tea when the newspaper headline caught my eye. "Central Valley's Missing Women", it said. I dragged it closer across the white tile countertop, spinning it right-side up. I hunched over the article, lifting the paper to study the grayscale photographs. The page started to shake.

There were eight of them. Eight wide smiles that I recognized. They all had the same dark shoulder-length hair, just like my mother. Like me. There was a phone number towards the top. I looked at it for a long time before the tea kettle began to scream.

My mother walked back in. She moved the kettle off the burner, clinked ceramic mugs onto the tile, and I folded the page, quietly, quietly. Water gurgled, mugs steamed, and then it was in my breast pocket. Nothing was wrong, thank you for the tea.

I dialed the number the next day from my own apartment.

"Kern County Sheriff's Department."

The woman that answered had a brightness to her voice that made me falter for a moment.

“Hi, uh, yes, I’m calling with information about the missing women, I think.”

“Hold please.”

I held.

“This is Anthony.”

His voice was deep, but he sounded young. I repeated my purpose and gave him my name.

“Thanks for calling in, Marie. What do you have?”

“I don’t know, really. But I’ve seen the pictures of those girls before.”

“Okay.” I could hear scribbling in the background. “And where did you see their pictures?”

“At a bar. Off the 99. Somewhere between Fresno and Bakersfield. I got off on a side road and got lost, so I went in for directions, and I saw their photos taped to the bar.”

“Alright.” More scribbles. “Do you remember the name of the bar?”

“Yeah, I-” My ear started itching. “I think it was the Pour House? Something Pour House.”

“Do you remember the street it was on?”

I shook my head before I remembered he couldn’t see me. “No, I didn’t see a street name. It was a really small town. The Lyon Pour House, that was it!”

“Can you tell me anything you remember about how you got there?”

I told him about the river, the pecan orchard, the little ranch with the persimmon tree.

“Okay, great. Now can you tell me what the bar looked like?”

I described the wood paneling, the jukebox, the barmaid Sandra with her black curls and green eyes.

“Anything else you remember?”

I hesitated.

“Any specific person or other people that might have more information about these women?”

“There was a man there. I think he was in the photos with the girls.”

“Okay. Tell me more about him. Do you know his name?”

“No, I didn’t get his name. But I can tell you what he looks like.”

I described the white linens, the sandals, his skin, his eyes, a few of the things he said, the way he spoke. I left out the business card and the tingles he left running up and down my spine where he touched me. I left out the song that played on the car radio when I pulled out of the lot. I left out the dreams.

“If you remember anything else, please don’t hesitate to call. I’m going to give you my direct line, okay?”

I mm-hmmed as I wrote it down.

That night, I had another dream. But this time, I was wearing the linens. The man and I were dancing slowly to the eerie piano music. He was smiling, and his pupils were so dilated that his eyes were completely black. He leaned in to kiss my neck, but then I looked down and gasped. We were dancing on top of the water of the dark river.

He vanished. I was sinking. The linens pulled my arms down, down, I couldn't breathe, I reached for the river banks—I jolted awake and clutched at my neck to relieve the pressure. My mattress was soaked in sweat. I had somehow pulled the bed sheet tight across my throat.

I followed up a month later. Anthony said there was no “Lyon Pour House” in the entire state. He even said he had personally driven up and down the side roads I'd described, next to the river, by the pecan grove. I had half a mind to try and find it again myself, but I let it go—that dream was a warning. I just knew it.

A few years later, they found the bodies. They were just bones, by then. Bones with symbols burned into them. Circles with three little lines at an angle. The newspapers whispered about satanic undergrounds and religious cults, but I knew better. It was the man in white.

Sometimes I still dream about the girls, but the music is beginning to fade. I still wonder what it would've been like to dance with death.

I suspect someday I'll find out.

## **Gunnar Cumming**

### **The Ice Viper**

I remember the first time I saw the Ice Viper. I was but a lad, barely a hair on my chin. My da took me out to the shoreline, which somehow kept the Ormr-Veðr Sea at bay. The cool breeze passed over me, and my spine took in the chill on the wind. Water traveled in the wind as well, and my face was hit by an invisible wave of moisture. I looked out to the ocean, and my Da pointed out the Carraig Ghéar, outcroppings of jagged stone that the sea battered against. Da told me that in the days of old, the demon-giant Fathach rose from the sea and threatened to devour our ancestors. In response, the wizard Litriú rose the Carraig Ghéar up out of the ocean to drive the giant back. I loved hearing these stories from my da. He had a way of making them seem so real to me.

Da handed me my spear, which was more a sharp stick than anything else. I held the long piece of birch as best I could, but it was hard to balance in my hands, since it was so long. I actually fell over because I couldn't balance myself, or the spear.

"C'mon, boy, stand strong!" Da scolded, picking me up from the damp ground. I held my spear much tighter and balanced myself as best I could.

"Ivar, there are two things that turn a boy to a man: a woman to sleep with and a weapon to hunt with. And today, we hunt," he said, with his proud Cjartic voice bellowing in the wind. He approached the ocean, the water battering against his legs. I

watched in awe; at that point, I had never been in the ocean, and seeing my da walk in defiance of its strength gave me pride. He had told me of the bjargfish that lived in the bay, fish as big as hounds with eyes the size of apples. *You stab 'em in the eye and take 'em home*, he had told me the night before. Da, in his fur armor and wielding his iron spear, truly looked like a hero of the Fødselsalder. In any case, he was a hero to me.

I took a few steps toward the ocean, but was still wary. The Ormr-Veðr was the source of tales and legends that the Shamaness Kvinne told me when I was a babe. Great serpents of ice, and such. While my father respected the Shamaness, he saw the myths as nothing more than stories to capture the awe of children.

I felt the crunch of a something small underneath my fur boot. Lifting my foot, I found a shell, which had shattered under my weight. Underneath the dark grey pieces was a pearl, of brilliant and deep blue color. Curious, I grabbed it and shoved it in the pocket of my coat. Perhaps it would bring me good luck.

The wind stopped abruptly. Da halted his march and set his gaze upon me. His face told all, and even as a lad I could see the expression there. It was fear. The waves stopped hitting his legs, and the ocean became still. The chill that the wind provided had gotten stronger, though, and I began to shake like a newborn ox.

The already grey clouds grew darker, churning with thunder and lightning, casting ice blue arcs across the sky. I could see snow falling toward the ground, but with violent



determination, falling quicker than rain. It hurt as it came down, feeling as hard as a stone as it assaulted me and Da. It formed a layer of frost over everything it hit, from the ground I stood on to the alder trees that coated the land behind us. The frost around my feet turned to ice, and I couldn't get out. I bashed at it with my spear, and the fear that had taken Da took me as well. I was only thirteen, how would you react at that age?

"Ivar! I'm coming, lad!" Da howled, before he let out a cry of pain I have not heard since that day. I turned and saw that ice had taken the whole sea, and he had been trapped worse than I. He began to break the ice with his spear, with strike after strike creating a larger crack in the frozen sea. But his last thrust into the ice failed, as the ice reformed too quickly to be by natural means, and the spear *shattered*. Da screamed as the wood and metal splinters shot in various directions, piercing his hand and slicing it open. The blood spilt over the icy surface, spreading in all directions. He held his shredded hand in agony. His voice had given out, so there was little more than heavy breaths and tears where a scream should have been. I struck at the ice more and more, but nothing seemed to work. I was stuck, my da was stuck, and it was getting colder.

That's when the lightning bolt struck, farther out into the sea, by the Carraig Ghéar. Me and Da looked toward the ragged monoliths of stone and saw the ice splitting. Perhaps the gods were saving us from our unseen foe, I thought. Maybe we would be able to go home.

“Get out of here, Ivar! Run, boy!” Da spat out, his voice barely making it through. I viciously attacked the ice around my feet once again, my wooden spear cracking and bending under the continued pressure. It finally snapped, and I was very close to doing so. Was I going to die? Before I met a woman, and fathered my own lads and lasses? Before I brought down a great mountain boar, and became a true man? Before I did anything in my life? My own tears began to flow down my face. I was going to die before my life truly began.

The cracks in the ice gave way to dark blue spines, each connected by a thin sail of a lighter blue hue. A serpentine body became more apparent as it slithered through the ice, which shattered the moment the creature touched it. Da, who had been struggling to escape before, had suddenly stopped. He stood tall, using his good hand to slowly grab the dagger at his belt.

The creature reared its head from the icy sea, revealing a body akin to a snake but much larger. It must have been as long as a pine tree is tall, with scales as pale as an iceberg. It opened its great eyes, which were a shade of violet that shone like the sun. The purple light of the eyes passed over Da, and the beast opened its pitch-black mouth, its teal teeth dripping with what I could only assume was venom.

*“Hvorfor kommer du inn i havet, dødelig?”* it hissed in an ancient tongue. Though I could not understand it, I knew it did not want us there. My da did not respond with words, but with iron, slashing desperately toward the creature. It reared its pale head in dissatisfaction, and let out a roar that rattled my bones.

Da stood firm, though. Though he was facing what was certain to be his doom, he held his dagger firm and waited to strike. The serpent lunged toward him, and he slashed at the creature. It roared in pain, with viscous blue liquid gushing from the cut across its neck.

*“Du elendig rotte!”* the creature shrieked. It began to take a deep breath, and the jaw of the beast seemed to unhinge as it did so. Da looked to me, and I knew it would be for the last time.

“Die well, son” were his last words before the serpent released an icy stream from its mouth unto him. He was frozen solid, entrapped for eternity within an icy prison. Shock took hold of me, and for a moment I was still, barely grasping the idea that I had watched my da die. That shock subsided into horror, and my screams echoed outward to the sky.

The serpent grinned at the distress it had caused before slithering toward me. Its blood ran down its serpentine body, painting a streak of dark blue against the ice of its scales. I watched, unable to stop screaming, as it came ashore and brought its face right up to my own. Its breath was not hot, but cool, colder than the icy wind of the sea. Its eyes shone over me, and even as I was stuck, I felt petrified. I couldn’t move. And I was looking into the eyes of death.

*“Du er svak, gutt. Du har ikke tjent din død.”* the serpent hissed. I did not understand. I did not understand what it was saying, or why we were chosen by this monster. It opened its mouth once again, and I was certain I was to die. The frozen breath of the serpent would freeze me in place, and me and my

father would be forgotten by the world. I closed my eyes. I was too much a coward to face my fate.

I heard something slip out of the creature's mouth, something dripping with saliva. I opened my eyes out of some misplaced curiosity. It had a long, magenta tongue that forked at the end. It touched my forehead, and my skin felt like it was on fire. As the tongue moved down my face, I could feel my skin melting away. Pain I had never felt before or since shot through my entire body, as if I was shot by hundreds of arrows. My death would take a long time. And I think the beast enjoyed that.

"Ivar? Floki?" an elderly woman called out from the forest. I recognized the voice as the Shamaness Kvinne, and I felt as though I may survive. The serpent turned its gaze toward the forest and hissed in disapproval. It turned toward me, and gave one last message:

*"Never enter my sea again, mortal."*

And with that, the creature slid back into the ocean. The storm clouds dissipated into nothingness and the ice thawed, revealing the ocean once again. My father, still frozen, simply sank into the water. The wind returned, but it did not give me a chill, for the cold the serpent bestowed upon me lingered.

"Ivar! Gods above, what happened?" the Shamaness exclaimed. She ran over to me, her antlered headdress nearly falling from her head. She murmured something in the ancient tongue, and with the wave of her hand, the frost around my feet melted away. My body suddenly felt weak, and I fell to the damp ground. The Shamaness went to her knees to help me, but

stopped. She reached her hand into my coat pocket. When her hand retracted, she was holding the pearl I had found before the nightmare began, but it was glowing with a deep violet color. The same as the eyes of the serpent.

The Shamaness quickly threw it back into the ocean. She cradled me in her thin, leathery arms and began to walk back into the forest, toward the village.

“Feel lucky, child,” she softly said, glancing at me with her emerald green eyes, “for not everyone meets the Ice Viper and lives.”

And to this day, many have fallen to the icy breath of the Ice Viper, Wyrms of the Ormr-Veðr Sea. And though he warned me never to return, on this day I return with steel. I will have his head or join my father in the icy depths of the sea. Either way, I will be at peace.

**Black Water**

Buttery shafts of sunlight streaked into the room through the window as I typed away on my laptop, nodding my head to the folk tunes of *Judah and the Lion*. The English paper I had due the incoming Monday began to take form on the screen as the wind caught the smoke of the incense burning by my window and pulled it into the dusty room; patchouli smoke bathed my face and danced on the desk in front of me. Tonight, this smoke would protect me. I stood, closing the laptop, and headed to my closet. I needed to get dressed; I'm always late and I promised them I wouldn't be tonight. I led the senior class in tardies.

The sun sank quickly as I slipped my boots on and laced up their backs. My hands shook slightly; I was nervous. But I would blame that on the October chill in the air. I pushed the sleeves of the sweater over my elbows with frustration, the smell of freshly polished leather assaulting my nose. It was a favorite sweater of mine. While itchier than any other sweater I owned, it was also the warmest and that was what I needed tonight. It's fine Irish wool might be what kept me from hypothermia. I grabbed my keys out of the little dish on the armoire that sat in the entryway, the sound of the porcelain and metal echoing through the cavernous house, reminding me just how alone I really was.

The Grace Walk was essentially a rite of passage. You couldn't say you were from Kingman unless you did it. All of the

graduating class of Kingman High went down to the Gila River and spent the night getting shitfaced and “bonding.” I hated these kids, but it was tradition. I had to go.

Kingman was an extremely sleepy and small drinking town with a football problem buried in central Arizona. “Football problem” meaning everyone was addicted and our high school athletes walked on water, then turned it to wine. Everyone knew everyone’s dirty little secrets, except for mine of course. I hadn’t been in town long enough and would not stay long enough to let anyone figure them out. They had only figured out one of them. I drove my truck that night, a Ford F250 Highboy with a 454 big block and custom 15” lift kit that I had restored from the ground up. It was my grandfather’s at one point, but it was the only thing the family didn’t fight over. It was originally just a piece of shit; now it’s a very fast and very lifted piece of shit. The song “Little Lies” by Stevie Nicks blasted through my speakers and out through my open windows, then “Bette Davis Eyes” followed suit.

I got to Silver Terrace at 6 o’clock. The sun was barely dipping her hips under the horizon when I hopped out of the truck, my polished boots at odds with the grime and gravel of the unpaved parking lot of the cemetery. A bonfire was burning nearby and I could smell the transformation of the oak trees that surrounded me being turned to ash.

Eugene Thelkirk walked over to my passenger window, a beer in hand and a smirk pulling up one side of his perfect smile, showcasing his too-white teeth. We all called him Boe, because

firstly, it was the traditional nickname for Eugene and two, there were a million and a half other kids at Kingman High named Eugene and he was not anything like them. According to local legend, Boe was quite unremarkable growing up, really shy. He went through the foster system and bounced around the various trailer parks surrounding the one stoplight of downtown Kingman after his mama overdosed and his daddy left, like every other kid here. He had no remarkable talent. One day during his sophomore year he finally got adopted, by the Laynes; they were the mining barons that lived just outside town. After that he was suddenly a superstar on the football field, the No.1 draft prospect for the Atlanta Braves as a junior in high school, and wanted by UCLA to be point guard.

The little old church ladies started the rumor right after I moved to town. Miss Marla, the Sunday school teacher, said she thought Boe had sold his soul to the Devil at a Sunday Potluck a few summers back, and since then everyone had been interested in him.

Boe never said whether the rumors were true. Maybe he did sell his soul. It would definitely explain a lot.

I was adopted by the same family about three years ago this summer. Boe turned 18 a few months back and moved out to live with the rest of the football team at Bobby Delahaney's house. He liked it better where he wasn't monitored or motivated to be a better person. I was the newest addition to the Kingman community of teenage dirt bags. I didn't talk unless I had to, I had no friends, I wore a lot of black clothes, I had black



hair. I had to give them credit for sticking to the cliché. They figured out that I was a witch not too long after Boe sold his soul for all of his athletic power, white teeth, and six pack. I □ looked different from all their grandkids with their inbred features; of course I □ was a witch.

Why the Laynes chose me I will never know. They had to have reason to bring me here from three counties over. People don't usually adopt outside their county. I never asked what about me drew their attention and they never told me. Boe and I didn't ask questions, and our "parents" didn't give us any answers. It was a great way to keep a dysfunctional household from total collapse, dysfunctional meaning lots of money and very little communication.

I had my suspicions about my parents. They were way too perfect. Ma and Pa Layne were quiet people who kept to themselves and made sure everyone knew how much richer they were than everyone else. Mr. Dean Layne was definitely a southern gentleman, who never left the house without a full suit and his Pomade. Always called everyone "ma'am" and "sir." Mrs. Samantha Layne was the typical southern housewife. Made a great strawberry rhubarb pie and taught me how to make the county's best shake and bake fried chicken, with which she's won blue ribbons every year since she first entered it in the fair thirteen years ago. I've attempted to do that whole mother-daughter bonding thing, tried to talk to her about her childhood and how she fell in love with Mr. Layne and all that, but she won't

say anything. She just stays quiet. Which leads to even more suspicion on my behalf.

The only reason they were hated by the whole town is because they could buy the damn thing if they wanted. Other than that everyone would probably like them.

“Princess, you made it,” Boe crooned after I exited the cab, walking back towards my tailgate to grab my duffel bag.

“Yeah. You did invite me,” I said with a fair amount of sarcasm as I tossed its strap over my shoulder and cocked my head to look up at him. “You got taller,” I stated matter-of-factly and ran my tongue over my teeth. Boe had always made me uncomfortable, but he was the only one in this town I’d had more than one good conversation with; I had to keep him as an ally. The fact that he was a local God definitely helped. He said nothing and stared down at me.

“Mama and Pop are still treatin’ ya well, I see,” he muttered with a vague air of annoyance as he took in my knee-high polished leather black boots with the ribbon lacing up the top two inches of material in the back, the black leggings that everyone could tell had cost a fair amount of money and did not come from K-Mart because they weren’t see-through, and the thick cream-colored wool sweater that looked thicker than the jackets all these white trailer trash misfits were wearing. Every witch has to have a sense of style, right? I shrugged up at him and started walking towards the cemetery, the full moon peeking over the eastern stretch of sky to see if we were ready for him. I smiled at his full face. The moon and I were old friends, he would

help keep me safe tonight. I passed Boe's truck, its stereo cranked to ten. "Black Water" by the Doobie Brothers played at a distorted and horrific level. I loved the song, had known it as long as I could remember, but at the volume he had it, I barely recognized it. I sighed and leaned in through the open passenger window, turning it down to a bearable level. The floorboard was littered with already played scratchers and empty Yoo-Hoo bottles. It smelled like old leather and boy. Dirty boy.

"Hey, does Bobby let you use his shower?"

I was shorted a response by the sound of crunching gravel and "Hell's Bells." Grace, Mackenzie, and Amber Walsh also joined us that night. Their little '95 Toyota Corolla blasted the only classic rock station that came in without static, KRTY 96.6. The three busty blondes smiled and waved to Boe. The Walsh girls were identical triplets who managed to get on the nerve of every human being in town. We all played nice because their father was the sheriff. They conned me into doing my makeup for homecoming the first year I was here. I still haven't lived that eye shadow down.

Another truckload of football boys arrived. Bobby Delahaney's mom must be having a good time with the house to herself tonight. Bobby drove, his truck the only thing that could challenge mine in town and its crew cab was filled to the brim with testosterone which spilled out into his truck bed, blasting Queen's "Fat Bottomed Girls" as his Confederate flag snapped in the wind. Levi Tracy's coon dog howled along with the radio.

Bobby was the town's champion hunter. His biggest kills so far had been my cat and my self-esteem. The first day I was in Kingman he tried to hit on me. After I declined his advances he started the rumor that he slept with me and I was terrible in bed. I would have to thank him for that before we all graduated. It kept these corn-fed, inbred men away from me.

Boe's grin split his face ear to ear and made me want to get into my truck and drive back home. I rolled my eyes so far into my head I was surprised they didn't fall out. I needed to stay. I took a deep breath, gritted my teeth, and summoned all the patience that my slight bird-like form could muster and stood up off the truck.

"Who invited Sabrina the teenage witch?" Bobby asked his small cult and their mascot. The boys all laughed uncontrollably at my expense. I said nothing.

Boe laughed and clapped his friend on the back, hugging him. "I did," he said with a venomous smile. These might be Boe's friends, but I was his little sister. He had made that much clear.

The last car rolled up. The Gentry brothers sat in the front seat, Alex driving and Don rolling up his hand crank window. Their mom died in a bad accident about three months ago on that first blind curve on 66. Someone wandered into the other lane driving west, she was driving east. Their dad's been trapped in a bottle ever since. I've tutored them in English since the beginning of the year. They're nice enough. Their girlfriends, Alyssa and Nicole Dawson, were in the backseat fixing their hair and putting on more eyeliner. They were orphans too, grew up in

the orphanage with Boe. But they didn't get adopted. They turned 18 a few weeks ago, and because Mr. Gentry wasn't usually sober enough to tell who was in his house, they had been living there. They sat with me at lunch on my first day. They put nail polish remover in my milk. I threw up for a week.

"That's everyone," Boe said as he walked around to the driver's side of his truck and rolled up his windows.

"We ain't takin' a truck, Boe?" Lyle Henderson asked, looking slightly panicked. He'd barely made the football team after a summer of weed and the munchies and was terrified of any physical movement that didn't win him chicks or glory.

"Nope, we gotta walk like them savages used ta," Boe countered. The Dawson twins moaned as they got out of the car, their heels getting dusty in the gravel.

I looked around. This was too many bodies to walk. We wouldn't get there 'till three am, and I sure as hell was not getting into any of these other cars. "Boe, Lyle's right," I said. "We're gonna have to take a truck. The river is four miles, and with sixteen people we won't make it for seven hours."

As if to back up my statement, the wind screamed and howled for us to hurry to the river. "You know I'm right," I said, putting my hands on my hips. "With this storm coming tomorrow, Boe, we all have to be back home and inside by noon and you know it. Let's just take my truck."

Boe chewed on his bottom lip, leaning against his truck one foot crossed over the other. He looked like he belonged on one of those pop metal signs of old western movie stars that

people keep on the walls in their garage with funny sayings on them.

“Why your truck?” he asked, narrowing his eyes and crossing his arms like he was going to argue with me.

“My truck is the only one that's lifted. It's the only one here that will clear the storm levees around the river.” He pursed his lips and shrugged.

“Everyone into Farm Truck,” he said. Everyone hesitated just slightly.

“You want us all to drive with the Witch?” Dwayne Pyres asked with a slight stutter as he adjusted his backpack. Dwayne was the town's golden boy. He was the version of Boe that didn't sell his soul to the devil. We all hated him even more than he hated Boe.

“Would you rather drive with someone who sold their soul t'the Devil?” Boe countered, a dark smirk taking over his suntanned face. Boe locked his truck and started walking. Everyone fell in with their groups as they followed. I twirled my keys around my index finger as the football boys sprinted for my truck. I groaned. I should've let someone else drive. But I also did want to survive the journey to the Gila River and go home after everyone had their fun.

By the time I hopped into my truck the bed and cab were filled with people I had never had a full conversation with and a dog I wanted to throw into the river because it wouldn't shut the hell up. Plus Boe, of course, who took shotgun. No one else had the balls. He took aux and continued to play “Black Water,”

starting it over. He knew the path to the river and guided me. The path that was meant for people was not easy to navigate in a twenty-foot four-wheel drive. I know I ran over a lot of shit, but I had a lift kit and big tires. I was fine.

The truck was full of chatter. Homecoming was soon and everyone was talking about dresses and who they wanted to ask and who they wanted to ask them. Every girl in and out of the car was trying her best to catch the attention of a football player, and it was driving me nuts. I turned up the radio as Boe's playlist continued, the next song being "Kashmir" by the greatest band of all time. I grinned as Boe punched my arm. "I've missed you, Princess," he said sadly, like he went to war and got home today. I didn't have the chance to respond. I rounded one of the last corners before the river and stomped on my brakes. There was a man two feet from my front bumper. He was impeccably dressed. Three-piece suit, all black, a perfect white rose in his lapel, a black top hat with a wide satin ribbon askew on his white hair, which barely grazed his shoulders. His skin was sallow. If I had to name the man in front of me, I would name him Death. I could feel how wide my eyes were and hear the surprise from the carload of wasted youth behind me. His answering smile was gruesome. It seemed like his mouth had more teeth than the rest of us, and they were whiter than any teeth I had ever seen. His skin stretched too tight over his skull and he had cold, milky, marbled eyes that pulled your attention. He was blind. My radio clicked off as he leaned forward on a tall black walking stick and took a step. He knew. He smirked and a set of chills played tag on

my spine. Boe and I stared at the dead faceplate of my stereo deck and looked to one another to reassure ourselves that *yes, a man standing outside my truck had just turned off my radio*. It felt like the ground recoiled from his touch when he walked. The forest around us was dead quiet and nothing moved. Even the wind was afraid to blow.

Blake Bodine spoke first, quoting, of all things, the Bible: "Behold the pale horse," he mumbled.

"The man who sat on him was death," Bobby said, slightly louder but with a tremble in his voice.

"And all of hell followed with him," I finished at a normal octave, my hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel.

Despite his clouded vision the white-haired man walked up to my window and stepped up onto my Nerf bar. He did not stumble. He did not falter. The man had no vision, but he could see plenty fine.

"Good evenin' folks," the man drawled as he grabbed one of the supports for my side mirror and leaned away from the truck, seeming to enjoy himself. "Revelations?" he asked. Not a question.

I didn't roll down my window.

Not a soul in or out of the truck breathed.

"I beg your pardon?" I asked, my voice steadier than anything else in my body.

He shouldn't have been able to hear me through the window.



“Behold the pale horse,” he quoted. “That *is* from the Book of Revelations if I remember right,” he said. He smelled like ivory and smoke, and he was cold. The kind of cold that leeches the heat from around you. I let go of the steering wheel and shivered through my sweater, rubbing my arms.

“I reckon so, Sir,” I replied, pressing my lips into a thin hard line.

“Can I ask what you kids plan on doin’ so deep in this here forest this hour?” the man asked, and I had no clue what to say.

Boe stepped in like the hero he was. “Nothing too important, Sir. We’re just gonna head down ‘ta Gila River. Doin’ some campin’.”

“Is that a fact?” the man asked, still hanging like a child from my side mirror.

“Yes, sir,” Boe replied, ever the gentleman.

“Well, it seems like bein’ that y’all have gone through and trampled *my* forest, you should have asked me before you went through all this trouble. Don’t ya think, Boe?”

My heart stopped cold.

Boe had never mentioned his name.

The man laughed a short and mirthless sound and shook his head. “Y’all kids better be careful out at that river, now. There’s worse things ‘round these parts than me.”

The man smiled his horrific grin once again and hopped off my truck, landing sure-footedly on the unstable and potholed ground below. “Y’all drive safe now,” he said before walking

away, walking stick in hand, whistling Allison Krauss' "Down to the River to Pray." I watched him walk out of sight in my rearview. He tossed one look over his shoulder before stepping laterally into the brush on his right and disappearing completely.

My radio clicked back on and Robert Plant continued to wail about the desert of Kashmir and I jumped into my roof liner. "What the fuck?" everyone in the car kind of mumbled as a unit as the wind again began to blow and the crickets resumed their symphony.

I looked at Boe, my hands shaking. "A friend of yours?" I asked, his face an odd shade of white I had never seen him wear.

The kids in the truck quieted again, eager to hear Boe's reply.

"Keep driving," he said as he turned the radio up again, and everyone settled back into their homecoming conversations and postseason baseball rosters. Everyone dismissed the man as a creep with cataracts, but I had a feeling that this wouldn't be the last of him that we saw tonight.

I put my hands on the steering wheel and eased my foot off the brake. I shook my head and rounded the corner, driving the last mile until my tires hit sand.

We were at the river.

And I wasn't happy about it.

Everyone unloaded from my truck and left Boe and I sitting in the front seat.

"What the hell, Gene?" I spat at him, using the name I reserved for when I was at emotional extremes.

“I have no idea,” he replied, shrugging. He was lying through his teeth and I knew it. But I had to let it go. That's how our family worked.

“Whatever you say,” I said, getting out of the truck and pulling my bag from under my seat. I shrugged the strap over my shoulder and walked towards the already dug fire pit that we would end up filling with tongues of flame as the night continued to freeze. I looked around and listened quietly to the conversations going on around me.

The river bank was wide and left the other kids plenty of room to set up tents far away from my truck. The river itself was wide, but not so wide that you couldn't wade across it if you had to. The oak trees lining the banks grew tall and broad, leaving a small sliver of naked sky between their outstretched branches. I could see Cassiopeia smiling at me. The river was loud and the night had dyed the water the color of ichor and left us to play in it. The moon danced on its surface, leaving a ripple of molten silver trickling down its center. I could smell the fresh water and the exhaust that still lingered in the air from my truck. The gravelly sand crunched beneath my feet and I pulled off my boots. I'd rather walk barefoot than scratch the leather on those boots. I pulled them off carefully and left them on my floorboard. Hopping barefoot out of the driver's seat, I looked around, unsurprised.

The girls were all talking about each other.

The boys were talking about the girls.

There's no way that these girls have slept with all the people that the rumors claim, I thought. They wouldn't be walking so normally if that was the case. I broke into my store of snacks and munched away at the carrots I'd brought, still sitting and aimlessly keeping track of their conversation. It would suck to be that shallow, I thought as I yawned.

After sitting on the riverbank drinking beer and smoking joints for four hours everyone was, at the very least, rip roaring drunk. Half of the guys were passed out in the big tent that James Mackey brought and most of the girls had picked a conscious boy to curl up with.

James was the only one in this town besides me who had lived anywhere else. He showed up Boe's freshman year. He came from California, from a place called Santa Cruz. I'd heard him say that he used to camp all the time. But you can't camp in the Mojave Desert. James was the only person in the group of people who came tonight that had ever shown me the slightest bit of kindness, and even that had been merely polite. He held open the door of our Chemistry class when I was trailing him. Just once. It's small but I remember. If you only remember the bad, your life is pretty miserable no matter how many great things happen to you. If you only focus on the good, your life is great no matter how many bad things happen to you. Being happy is all about tricking your brain. That's all.

Boe was standing in the river, his jeans rolled up to his knees, his boots discarded a few yards away. I stood and meandered over to the river myself. The black water split around

Boe's tanned calves just to rejoin on the other side, like he had never been there in the first place. I smirked slightly and stayed on the dry shore and asked him over the rushing of the river, "You wanna know my favorite part about rivers?"

He turned and smiled a ghost of a grin at me, his face still pale, the blind man's image still ghosting through his irises.

"Tell me."

I laughed inaudibly, the only indication the steady bouncing of my shoulders. "You can't step in the same river twice. The water's always changing, always flowing," I said in a singsong voice, quoting my favorite childhood movie, *Pocahontas*. He actually smiled this time and shook his head.

He remembered.

Boe looked down into the inky darkness of the river and his smile softened just slightly.

"If it's any consolation for actually showing emotion, I missed you too," I said just loud enough for him to hear.

The night blooming jasmine floated through the air around us along with the dying embers of the bonfire behind us. I glanced at my watch. It was one o'clock in the morning, closer to two. I groaned and stretched my arms over my head, my body revolting against my extended consciousness. Moonlight beat down on the backs of wolves as the full moon smiled down at us. The riverbank was illuminated as though there were Christmas lights strung through the oaks that lined the banks. The ground-down boulders that my feet were buried in were freezing and numbed my toes.

“You know if you bury your feet too far you’ll find where the Gila Monsters are born,” Boe teased as he sat down next to me, the sand sticking to his wet feet.

“Gila Monsters are reptiles who are hatched in the river bed,” I stated matter-of-factly as I continued to burrow my feet into the sand.

Boe laughed and shook his head. “They ain’t half as scary as the people sleeping over there,” he said, dusting his feet off. “They wouldn’t think twice about killing ya for a chance outta this town.”

I snorted. “Who are you tellin’, deal maker?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

He shrugged. “It’s easier to read people when they’s scared uh ya.”

I smirked. “Don’t I know it.”

I jolted awake against my seat, jolting Boe out of sleep as well.

There was screaming. I looked at Boe, eyes wide. His sleepy eyes were made of solid stone as he stared back at me, his finger over his lips. I narrowed my eyes. I didn’t like these people, not by a long shot, but something was happening out there. I couldn’t just sit here.

As though his thoughts mirrored my own, Boe’s immense hand grabbed my wrist, holding firm.

“Ya’ wanna live, Princess?” he asked as he watched through the window.

He took his other hand and pointed very slowly out the windshield to where everyone was laid out on the beach.

I saw one man.

A silhouette outlined by the moonlight, a perfect, white rose in his breast pocket.

He tipped his top hat in our direction, the head of his walking stick drinking in the moonlight only to spit it back into our eyes.

Pools of tar marred the soft white sand of the river bank, the moonlight glinting off of its liquid surface. There was blood covering the bank.

I saw compound fractures, I saw entrails, I saw gnarled bodies, and I saw more blood.

My stomach swooned and I took a handful of deep breaths in through my nose, out through my mouth, setting my forehead on the steering wheel.

I whimpered, my hands shaking in Boe's grip.

I let out a small sob and blinked my eyes, hoping that if I blinked enough, if I cried enough, the tears would wash the image from my eyes and I wouldn't see it again.

"Bobo, I'm scared," I muttered as I peered over the dash.

I will confess, I knew something would happen that night, the winds told me as much.

But I didn't know it was going to be like this.

"Well, don't y'all seem cozy," a familiar voice drawled from outside my window. My blood stopped in its veins and my body went cold. I knew the face that I would find outside my

window. I knew the sinister smile, the perfect teeth, the skin that was the color of the moon, the milky eyes. The face burned into my mind. It was then, looking over at Boe, the only family I had left, that it occurred to me. I sat up slowly, the realization seeping through my skin, as I looked to my right at the ghost outside my window.

To the face with the same smile as Boe's.

"You never made a deal with the Devil," I whispered as I looked between the two.

They had the same shape eyes, the same nose. The only difference was Boe's lips.

They shared the same nonchalance, the same broad and sturdy build.

Now, it all made sense.

"The Devil never made a deal with you," I whispered, my voice trembling.

"The Devil made you." My voice cracked altogether.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, darlin," the man said with the same face-splitting smile I had seen on Boe so many times.

"Lylla, I want you to meet my father," Boe said softly, letting go of my wrist.

My mind was blank.

My adopted brother was the son of Satan.

I fucking *knew* it.

"My name is Ezekiel Rayne," the man said, his southern drawl thick.



I cocked my head. "I thought Ezekiel was one of the apostles."

He nodded. "It goes over better to have a Christian name with a good story, 'round these parts."

I chewed on my lip and narrowed my eyes, pulling another laugh from Ezekiel. "You were right, she is funny," he said to Boe. "Speaking of which, how is my brother?"

"Daddy's doin' fine," Boe replied quickly, trying to avoid lingering on the topic of our adopted father being the brother of the Devil. I pondered on the thought and that would make him either Gabriel, Michael, or Raphael.

I shook my head and returned my vision to the carnage in front of me. The bodies of almost the entire senior class of Kingman High School were lying in pieces on the bank of the Gila River.

"So is there a reason you murdered fourteen innocent teenagers?" I asked Mr. Rayne.

"Innocent?" he asked. "Do you really think those kids were *innocent*?"

"I mean, they weren't great people," I said, "but they didn't des-"

"Let me tell you something, darlin'. See those bodies out there lying on that beach?"

I didn't take my eyes from his and nodded.

"No, Lylla. I need you to look."

I gritted my teeth and glanced over at the pile of my classmates. My hands were shaking again.

“Every single one of those kids was guilty of ruining someone’s life. And I don’t mean mommies that had to drop out Of high school or daddies that couldn’t go play professional baseball. These kids ruined the lives of people they had known almost as long as their parents. They made each other cry themselves to sleep, made them tear their own skin like newspaper. They were killing each other. What makes you think they were innocent, little miss Lylla?”

I stuttered, my eyes locked on his face, at the passion that burned behind his marbled eyes. My mouth went dry. I had nothing to say. I looked down at my hands balled up in my lap.

“That’s what I thought.” Ezekiel spat as he backed away from the truck. “Don’t be so ungrateful, little girl. You don’t know how big a favor I did for you.” He walked towards the river.

I looked at Boe, my voice lodged somewhere in my appendix. Mr. Rayne walked towards the river, stopping at the bank and throwing one last glance back at us.

Even in the darkness I could see him wink. He waved at us and walked straight into the river.

His suit sucking into his form.

A graceful wave of his hand had that monstrous pile of bodies sliding into the water. He was shoulder deep now and near the center of the river. I was looking at the people I had spent so many hours with and I could not recall one happy memory with a single person who had just lost their life. In that moment, cool resolve slithered through my bloodstream.

I felt nothing for these people who had made my life hell.

The only thought that came to mind was, “Good Riddance.”

“You know what *Gila* means in Hopi, right?” Boe asked, his voice as scratchy as the sweater I wore. I shook my head, voice still buried in my throat.

“Means, ‘belonging to what is below’.”

I snorted a laugh and shook my head. My mind was blank and my body oh so very tired.

The metallic, salty tang of blood crawled through the air and down my lungs.

I could hear Ezekiel Rayne whistling the Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy for the Devil” as the black water parted around him and came back together again on the other side like he was never there.

The moment he dipped his head under that black moonlit water, my stereo came back on. The Doobie Brothers were still singing about that Black Water, as the Devil slithered beneath the bloody water of the Gila River.

And in that moment, I couldn’t have had more sympathy for the Devil.

## **A Day with My Dad**

"Just stay put and start handing me those jugs, one at a time. Careful! They're heavy."

That's what we do for about ten minutes. My dad stands on the steps leading down to his little bunker while I hand him five-gallon jugs of water from the car. I only stop when he pauses to take a handkerchief out of his pocket.

There is no escaping the sun's heat, even in the garage. This might be the hottest day yet. For a moment I think about the beach and about how I wish I was there instead, but guilt sets in when I look at my dad wiping the sweat off his face. He worked hard all his life and now his madness is making him work even harder in retirement.

"He's gonna rip apart the basement either way," I remember my mom saying, a glass of cherry-red wine in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "But if you're there to help him, he might not break his back yet."

"Are you ready to go back in, Dad?" I ask him. "We got all the water. I'll help you move the food rations next weekend."

The shelter is almost finished. Three months of exhausting work. Months spent listening to tales of government conspiracies and post-apocalyptic heroism.

"Maybe," my dad says as he peers into the dark basement. "We should probably stockpile today. You never know. They aren't telling us everything, you know."

Here we go again.

"Dad, come on. It's been a long day. We should go talk to mom. I'll help you tomorrow. I'll even skip class. It's not like I have any tests coming up soon."

"Alright." He reluctantly walks up the steps into the garage. "I just want to be prepared, Pumpkin. You know that I will always take care of you and your mom."

"I know, Dad." My own eyes start to feel wet, and I wonder whether it is sweat or tears. "You do a good job of it," I say. "Let's go back to the house."

As I reach for the lever that opens the door, my dad stands still.

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

He sighs.

"Do you think it's worth it? What we built? Do you think it'll keep us safe?"

He's never asked me that question before. It chills me, and then it evaporates, like an ice cube in a toaster oven.

I know the answer, of course. Everyone knows the answer. In six weeks and three days from today, the sun is going to explode. No amount of prepping can save us. Even the news doesn't sugarcoat it anymore. But that's not what I tell him. I can't.

"Well," I say, instead. "You never know, right? It's not like they tell us everything, you know." My dad smiles at this answer, and I think to myself that it was worth it. A righteous lie. I open the garage door and we step into the blistering day.

## Buen Provecho

In a mountain town only slightly less dusty than our ride there in the back of a logging truck, a town where pigs reclined on front porches like pet dogs and rooted through scrub oaks for grubs and acorns, night was falling. Dust-covered children appeared in the twilight: "Do you need a place to sleep? Come home with us." And we followed them to a dimly lit wooden house, where their mother bade us sit at an oil cloth-covered table. She asked about our travels, over grainy black coffee boiled in a pot of blue and white speckled enamel (apparently the only cookware design in all of Mexico at the time).

"¿Ya comieron?" And since no, we had not already eaten, I greedily waited for the inevitable offer to share their meal. Soft corn tortillas, thick pureed orange chile sauce, and...*chicharrones*. It would have been rude to refuse them, especially after proclaiming my hunger, and with an obvious lack of other dinner plans. Hunks of pig fat, fresh from a sizzling liquid rendered from the same animal, plucked from a kettle closely related to the coffeepot, accompanied by tortillas right off the flat, iron *comal*: a hot, home-cooked meal.

Sometimes, when a food is not right for me-- so obviously the wrong flavor, the wrong nutritional composition, portending the wrong type of digestive experience -- I perversely imagine that the next helping will somehow negate the previous one. Rather than stopping at one of these greasy tacos washed down

with an acidic cup of coffee, I had quite a few of both. My friend cast me unbelieving sidelong glances as he kept up the conversation about the trains and buses and semis we had ridden in, the beaches and riverbanks we had slept on, the places we intended to visit.

Mercifully, the offer to lead us to our sleeping quarters finally came, putting an end to my bedeviled consumption. We stumbled through the dark to the spare storeroom that doubled as a guest bedroom, and lay down on rope webbing covered with lumpy quilts. As our eyes adjusted to the dark, we could make out trunks and packing cases and burlap bags piled around the room, as well as various items suspended from the rafters. To our horror, we realized that one of these items was the skull and spine of a pig, skin peeled away, but with plenty of bits of meat still clinging to its bones.

Each time I rose in the night to deal with the rumblings in my intestines, my head grazed that curing pork carcass, and I was haunted by the grinning teeth and hollow eye sockets of the animal whose fat was responsible for my current misery. As we waited by the road next morning for a ride in a vehicle heading south, I wrote a letter describing our evening to my parents in Indiana: "It may be hard for you to understand why I have come thousands of miles to sleep under a dead pig, and right now I am not sure I understand it either. But I'm fairly certain that one day I will."

## **Finding Jimmie**

The innkeeper at the base of Benbulbin, an immense rumpled ridge of fluorescent green, had told me her Dad was sure to know Jimmie. While I ate a dinner of mussels at the Yeats Tavern, she went for a visit, and learned, as she put it, “Some not so good news. He’s died, quite recently it seems. It must be the same man.”

This same man was a mystery man, who bore our family’s original last name -- Currid. He had lived right across the lane from the two-room stone house my grandfather grew up in, and, according to those who knew, was the image of our Uncle Artie. Yet he claimed to be no relation. Nonetheless, he escorted all who visited County Sligo to the cemetery where the family graves are, the church where they were baptized and married, and to meet Cousin Hugh, the one true relative of the Currid clan still in Ireland. Still, we all had our theories and speculations that Jimmie was surely one of us.

Over the nine years since I’d met Jimmie, we’d shared an occasional correspondence: holiday cards, photos of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration and my daughters’ graduations, his detailed accounts of facts he could remember about Grandfather Bryan’s seven siblings and their offspring. On a living room shelf, I keep a photo of him with his donkey, leaning against a fence in tweed jacket and cap, in the frame that holds my certificate of Irish citizenship.



Then there came a time I hadn't heard from Jimmie in a while, and wasn't even certain he was still living. As I was planning a trip to Portugal, it seemed the perfect time to tack on a visit to Ireland, and hopefully see Jimmie once again. Then his Christmas card arrived, with a curious mention: "I had a man here to see me last summer. You may come home next summer." So I did.

The two friends I met up with in Dublin, this being their first trip to Ireland, had better things to do than accompany me on a goose chase for an imaginary relation. I had taken the train west alone, to stay at an inn near the Currids' hometown, a tiny cluster in the road called Grange. In spite of my host's unfortunate news that first night, I asked her to drop me off in front of the parish church there the next morning. The person who would know everything, as any Irishman or woman can tell you, is The Priest.

The church was empty, there was a closed-up look about the rectory, and there didn't seem to be anyone priestly about. Not being able to follow up on what had happened to Jimmie (and who was he really, anyway?) felt almost as great a disappointment as not seeing him. I was perusing a church bulletin in the entryway when a youngish man with a dog and bicycle appeared. He explained that the residence was being repaired, so The Priest was in temporary quarters up the road a bit.

Hesitating, unsure if the walk uphill would prove worthwhile, I came to the point: "I'm actually looking for Jimmie

Currid.”

“Oh, we just buried him two days ago now. I sang at his funeral. It was a full church, a lovely service.”

After several beats of silence, he said, “You know the person you should talk to is Anne Gillen. She was very close to him. I’m walking that way, if you want to see her.”

A few turns in the lane and we were at Anne’s house, where my companion knocked and said, “I’ve brought you a visitor. She’d been hoping to see Jimmie.”

As I began my apologetic explanation, a stranger interrupting this woman’s morning, I heard over my shoulder, “I’ll leave you now,” and the man and his dog and bike were gone.

“You’ll have to come in then,” said Anne. “I’m sorry, I’m still not myself, it’s still not real to me. We weren’t expecting to lose him yet. He’d just been for his regular check-up, gotten a good report from the doctor. He was looking forward to celebrating his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday at the end of this month. Only three years ago my husband died, and now Jimmie.”

I could sense the two deaths had left equal holes in her life. Jimmie and Anne’s husband had been best friends, and I realized he was the man next to Jimmie in the birthday photo he’d sent.

“You know Jimmie never married; we were his family.” She served tea, and produced the evidence. In Anne’s photos, of two generations of baptisms, weddings, and festive gatherings of any kind, there was Jimmie. The irony was that I had come

seeking some sort of confirmation of the Currys' suspicions that Jimmie was part of *our* family.

"Jimmie used to come by every morning for a talk. There's his chair at the side of the house, and that umbrella, for when the sun was hot. You know that's his house just up there."

Of course. I'd been there with my Dad and sister, and remembered Jimmie's two ducks he kept for eggs, the gray donkey, Bess, tethered outside, and a photo of her inside on the mantle, above the small peat fire for warming the damp gray June day.

"And that was my Grandfather Bryan's, my dad's Dad's house."

I pointed across to the lot with the house's stone remains, in a much more tumbledown and overgrown state than when we'd visited nine years ago. After so many years, I'd thought it would have been torn down and something built in its place or, less likely, that someone would've restored it to livability. Wondering aloud to whom the Currid property belonged now, Anne told me one of her sons had bought it, and would probably build a house for one of his children on it.

"But tear it down? No, you wouldn't do that, out of respect. You wait for it to come down on its own."

I suggested we might go over to Jimmie's so I could have a last look, but Anne hesitated.

"Jimmie's nephew is the one with the key, and I don't know how he'd feel about meeting you. He's rather...primitive. I mean, he's just not comfortable talking. We can drive out to the

cemetery instead -- no, it's no trouble -- I have a candle I want to put on Jimmie's grave anyway, so we can go together."

On the way, Anne told me how Sunday of that week, when Jimmie hadn't been at Mass as usual, they knew someone should go over to look in.

"All by himself, I thought he might have fallen. I was afraid he'd be marked, you know. But there he was, curled up on his side, peaceful in his own bed. Exactly the way he always said he would go."

Anne set her battery-powered vigil light among the still-fresh flowers heaped high over Jimmie's grave. She pointed out a new tombstone Jimmie and his nephew had paid to have engraved and erected, for a relation who had long gone unmemorialized.

A quiet drive home, but Anne was cheered by the sight of her son coming along the lane on his tractor. Telling him I'd hoped to see Jimmie's house, the son responded that the nephew was in fact there now, and he'd just stop and have a word. I was welcomed.

All the rooms but one had been cleared of furniture for the two-day wake. A hundred people or more, some from England, had come to pay their respects. I recalled that nine years ago, even the owner of the bed and breakfast in Sligo town, 20 kilometers away, knew Jimmy. She assured us, as we set out to meet him, "You're in for a real treat." I regretted that my second visit to his house had not been quite soon enough.

Out back in the shed was a pile of peat, recently delivered, now no longer needed. Both Anne and Jimmie's nephew urged me to take some. A strange memento, I thought, but put a piece in my pocket.

Anne insisted on driving me back to the inn at Benbulbin; the fact she couldn't place the innkeeper's name seemed a matter she needed to clear up. At the door, sure enough, she remembered that the innkeeper and her own daughter had been schoolmates. Over tea, the younger woman remembered Anne as the school nurse.

Who Jimmie Currid was, who my Grandfather's family were, who the people of County Sligo are, was revealed to me by five strangers, whose kindness led me to place a chunk of peat in front of a picture on my living room shelf.

## **Elaine La Fleur**

### **Ford Ord Dunes**

They are dumped into the sea  
To land on Omaha Beach  
Surf, sound of booming cannons  
                  crashing into the waves.

Ghosts dressed in fog haunt  
                  forsaken barracks  
Sounds of airplanes  
Landing, taking off again  
Hoping to use the mist for cover.

Scraps of paper clinging to brambles  
Ghostwritten pages  
                  in the shadows, left behind  
Smell, taste the foggy air  
Signaling home base but never  
                  going home.

## **Caitlin Bird**

### **And Not Forget**

this week, my grandfather turns 78,  
and, here we add-  
another ring on the tree, creaking  
it's only been these past few years  
that I could hear the wind  
I forget that time continued, even  
as I felt suspended in the grey  
of young adulthood, these milestones  
unpredictable and intangible  
the drinking age, a legal vote  
I forget that time grows heavier  
on the lungs and spines  
of all my forebears  
he is still as quiet as I remember him  
like my grandmother is still as busy  
blue in the corner and orange in the kitchen  
I can gravitate towards  
what kind of smile I want today  
he still likes the kind of jokes-  
longform, drawn out, the kind  
you work for, work towards, the kind  
that takes a special patience  
to entertain  
a patience I have never had

and he still likes to describe a meal  
if it arrested his mind, sitting there  
in his brown leather chair  
with one knee up  
and a glass of wine  
my grandfather is a full watercolor palette  
of subtleties that I  
(overzealous and loud,  
brash and anxious,  
might never catch, but  
I watch him gently touch the edge  
of my paintings, and turn them  
towards his friends, towards the light  
and I know, at least, the most important  
of his thoughts

-

in May, my grandmother will turn 78  
coming up on her husband, and  
I can see the way her hands ache  
her hair has been a mute gingersnap auburn  
my whole life- I don't  
recall how old I was, but  
I went to her salon, once, and watched them  
bring it back to a sunshine penny  
she likes the way plants curve towards the sky  
in her garden  
telling me all the ways a bud may bloom



and  
she likes to know that those she loves  
are happy  
like a music box ticking, always thinking  
of ways to give us all a calmer breath  
she cooks like I cook, like the way she taught me  
to measure once and throw things in on good faith  
that your hands will guide you  
and your experience will find you  
something new, and bright, and  
all your own  
she loves seashells on ceramics,  
the oak leaves crunching on the path while she walks  
and there's no way to slow her down  
(though her younger sister walks faster  
for every inch taller my grandmother grew)  
and I still have the note she wrote me  
taped to a rock on my bedroom shelf  
in looping, ink-stained handwriting  
telling me  
*please trust in yourself*

-

my other grandfather celebrates in June  
when the morning sun dries my hair too quick  
and the hills are turning gold on the drive  
to his house  
when I was eleven, he tried his best

to mold red clay into a bowl  
I was unmade on the excitement of creation  
and his hands were as fragile as the ropes of earth  
when my bowl grew too hot, broke apart  
he offered his, and I filled it with a coin  
for every time I watch his eyebrows rise in laughter  
I know the way they build the bridges  
and the way they harness the sea  
I know the way the roads lead to Rome, and  
the way those roads all lead back to me, because  
with a blue striped button up and a worn out belt  
I sat on the bus with him  
and he spoke with the voice of every steel beam  
and I remember being seventeen, with my  
hair tied back, two days past a shower  
stuck at home, phone in my hand  
listening to him talk from the ICU in a voice like fallen wheat  
left behind by the careless thresher  
he told me three secrets to the periodic table, and  
he told me three ways to fail geology class, and  
he told me three times he thought he'd discovered fire,  
before he told me he loved me as he hung up the phone  
—  
his wife, my Linda, is an August birthday  
and this year she will know seventy decades  
on an earth it seems she is most  
determined to know

I love art museums two times out of one-  
when I see them through my eyes, and then  
through hers  
my grandfather sits on the bench in the gift shop,  
while we walk arm in arm, and she tells me  
*the flowers in that painting are just bright enough*  
*and the woman who painted this could see the future, it seems,*  
and  
*this modern art installment escapes my good taste*  
she has an opinion on almost everything  
I recall  
being young, being buoyed on the fact  
that she still wanted to hear mine too  
and when I was half her size, she taught me  
the way your legs swing back and forth on the playground  
can take you high enough  
to touch the clouds  
I know the way her hands shelve books carefully, and  
the way she raises her hands in triumphant fists  
cheering her grandchildren on, on a rickety lawn chair  
just this side of the chalk sports field line  
I know the way she arranges berries in a bowl of yogurt, the way  
we made stir fry together, the way  
she read me fairy tales about the girl with the blue bull,  
the girl with the nettle ointment,  
the girl with ashen bones who fought the world  
and won

I still know the taste of the ginger peach tea  
sitting on her back porch as she told me  
*one day*  
*that girl*  
*will be you*

–  
my youngest grandmother is a September baby  
born in Autumn when the California earth is still hot  
and the leaves start to turn  
I remember my Oma like a string of music notes, I-  
remember her hands over mine  
stretching just far enough to tap the ivory keys  
where I couldn't quite reach  
sitting in the front row of my recital  
she likes the salt air on the deck of Phil's  
and she likes it when women stand strong  
she liked to show me the ways science could take me  
to the stars  
and the smile on her face the day we met Sally Ride  
is burned onto the back of my brain  
I remember sitting in the back yard  
watching her laugh  
as my brother and I turned the crank  
of the old wooden ice cream machine  
like I know the click of her camera shutter, like  
I know the tap of her foot to a beat, like  
I know the way she still hugged me the same

even when I grew taller than her eyes  
I know her frustrated huff prying my hackysack  
out of the jaws of a golden retriever  
like I know how much she loves the WNBA  
like I know that she fought  
(fought, fights, and and will still-)  
for the woman she loves  
like I know that, blood or not,  
her roots are still tangled with mine, and  
I remember never knowing why  
anyone might say she was less my grandmother  
than any of the three other  
like I know how hard she tried  
to make sure I might never have to understand  
that washed out rhetoric  
that I might only be myself

-

and then my Nana, in December  
with pink coconut cake and sweet marzipan  
purple teeshirts and  
she is always trying, the same way  
her son is always trying  
to hold all those around her up  
I spent every Wednesday for a decade  
in the backseat of her car  
with a juice and a running river mouth  
listening to her classical music station

she's always taller than I remember  
running her finger around the rim of a wine glass  
and laughing, startled, when it shrieks  
she printed out five paintings I put online,  
and five more poems of mine  
and I remember drinking lemonade on her linoleum  
the way her dog scabbled on the carpet  
I remember the first time she put a paintbrush in my hand  
she loves sweet flavors and special occasions  
(excuses to make other people smile)  
the way an iris blooms in spring  
pink lemonade in a tall glass, and  
I think  
I learned what the face of true appreciation  
for beauty was,  
from watching her  
when she could find something lovely in  
a five nickel school play  
or a Broadway musical making millions on the stage  
back when I could eat walnuts, she gave me  
turkish delight, getting powder  
on the back seat of her car  
she laughed the same laugh then that she did  
when she tasted pineapple on Maui  
stepping foot on the islands for the first time  
that summer bright  
and no matter how solid she seems,

she can be moved by  
the smallest of triumphs on the big screen,  
and I recall- we walked among the sculptures in the MOMA,  
and she said  
one of these days  
I'll watch them hang  
your painting on this wall

-

I don't know what I will say-  
when there comes a day, there always  
comes a day, when the forest  
finds itself missing its tallest tree  
and I did not think, until I watched  
the sea take another man  
that as much as we can be silent, in this family  
as much as we can be slow-  
to speak like bared branches in the winter,  
perhaps they did not know  
well, I know my spine grew crooked  
and I know my growing pains came late  
I know my face looks like my father's  
and my heart doesn't look like much at all  
but I do not think that life without them  
would have seen me be this tall  
and  
I forget  
I forget how fast time flies

I forget the way gravity arrests us, the way  
our cells might age  
I forget that they can't hear  
all of the things that  
I forget to say  
but I think this is my promise  
I won't forget  
the things they gave



## **Analynn Patterson**

### **Haiku**

Remote alpine lake--  
Granite-cradled sparkles dance,  
Your ghost beside me.

**Laura Curry**

**At the Speed of Light**

The first star, the first four,  
a parallelogram comes out.  
To the left some more,  
and a moving, flashing plane.  
Darker and darker the sky,  
more numerous the points of piercing light.

My neighbor's yard is a painting:  
Garage light reflected on the white of the house,  
his shadow flickering before an orange charcoal glow.  
Through the limbs of the walnut tree  
pink sunlight reflects off clouds,  
and above the tree, moon reflects a borrowed light.

My own yard illuminates:  
Bright turquoise sky glitters  
in the water filling the lettuce beds,  
and the garden hose is a long snake of twilight  
reflected off plastic.

The raised garage door

reveals a cage of chicks  
lit yellow around their black fluff by an unseen bulb.  
They have already grown uglier:  
Longer necks, curvier beaks, stiffer feathers.  
In two days' watch they will again transform,  
always in some new stage of awkwardness  
until they return to full-grown beauty.

The stars keep coming out.  
Every time I take count there are more than before.  
Scanning the dark blue is like  
Scanning the brown and green jumble of the potato bed,  
a new set of thick, wrinkled leaves  
emerging to sight with every survey.

Life moves constantly,  
too fast not to notice.  
I am suspended  
in the middle of my yard  
in the middle of a moment,  
long enough  
to see the swiftness passing.

Curtains radiate lamplight all around me.

A rabbit's white body stands out in the moonlight  
between his black spots.

The second day's crescent hangs  
like the rim of a gleaming white bowl,  
but the rest of the circle shows too.  
Nothing is hidden.

**Laura Curry**

**The Marriage of Oya and Chango**

The cow stepped into the clearing  
white flanks shimmering,  
golden bamboo horns  
nudging aside the stalks,  
probing the screen of her transformation.

And then he saw her,  
and wanted her  
to bear him nine children  
through a partnered life of lust,  
so she made him promise:

She would be free to roam the graveyards  
in blood-red velvet,  
and stand on the marshy banks  
tearing black cloth from her loom,  
causing the long clear river to rise in the rocks  
and curve across the continent.  
There would be no end to the storms  
that must be brewed and calmed,  
the lightning ignited and deflected,

the clouds bursting and drifting and dispersing,  
at the wielding of her sword  
and the swirling of her horsetail whip.

Oya would win all battles as Warrior of Words,  
and make safe the final wordless passage.  
He could never reveal her true nature,  
and never forget what she had whispered  
as she shed her bovine skin:

*What I destroy, you no longer need.*

**Alex Harvin**

**Haiku**

In the field of weeds

A lone poppy blossoms

So effortlessly

## Ashley Kohaut

### Elevation

I catch myself drifting  
into states of claustrophobia,  
When I look at the space  
for dreamers in this world.

A space where air  
becomes competition.

Yet we all keep breathing at the same time,  
like typewriting lungs

In a quiet library .

It never stops,  
until it does.

If I held my breath

Would anyone notice?

Or would they write essays  
on top of my silence?



## **Oscar Davis Mendez**

### **A Hymn for Mal**

“Inspiration made flesh  
my callipygian Muse  
after Helen: men clash  
in order to pay their dues  
to my callipygian Muse.

A strip of radiant land  
separates prominent mountains.  
Mal’s glorious glow commands  
beasts, men, winds, and linden  
like sunlight, moonlight, whitelight  
light my callipygian Muse

Poets and kings, gladiators and knights  
contend to death as though possessed  
by adoration, until the flight  
of angels, Nephilim, make jest  
the innocence of mortal might.  
Even the sun stilled to witness,  
as tours of the day came, and tried  
glory of my callipygian Muse.

Auburn tresses kiss her endless breasts  
like waves teasing with a beach white.

Jealous, the sun skulks behind the west  
yet war furthers into the night.  
No rest, none, for Mal's suitors, no rest.  
Alas her bored yawn contrites them  
like shameful Catholic children pray lest  
my callipygian Muse condemn.

Mal rose as the mountains rose,  
Left, Mal graced them with it.  
Petrified and wondrous  
Nephilim and men remained  
adoring monuments"

*-sings the last living  
survivor of the  
failed campaign on  
Mal, my divine Muse*

**Elaine La Fleur**

**Hidden Cottage at Inverness**

Weathered wooden doors lean together, slightly ajar  
Seventeen wooden steps that end at a door  
Midway down our eyes are caught  
By a vivid stained glass window  
Golden tulip, blue pears, green heart –  
Displayed by the sunlight.

Unlock this door:

A wall of windows frame the glassy blue-green bay  
Flowing under, beyond an old wharf leading nowhere.  
Dense forests hug the opposite shore  
An egret perches on a strand of saltwater cordgrass  
That hides underwater each time the tide comes in  
A bevy of pink naked ladies nod approvingly just offstage.

## **Sky Ferris**

### **Twelve Days of Yule**

Give me long winter nights  
At the endless story table.  
Give me home-grown fire in a hearth,  
And take the foreign sun away.  
Give me love and ale for supper,  
And take away my pain.  
Wrap me in a scarf of memories,  
And let me there remain.

## **Lawrence Harris**

### **Always the Story**

I am head and eyes and things inside.

Driven.

I am chest and arms that happen.

Action.

Layered upon the mind,

A row of Eucalyptus trees,

An arc of pungent serenity,

In the California piety.

Manifest hope budding open,

The traveler roams.

The soldier in a cauldron,

In light when mourning comes.

Stories remembered,

Half stories formed, half known, half spoken.

Old stories revisited.

Old news, the neighbor.

Old trouble, always the story.

## **Shay Golub**

### **Stray**

You've left a bit of yourself under my skin;

From that time we last met,

You called me something nasty –

I heard only sharp static –

And spat shrapnel through my eardrums.

Well, it's trapped in my shoulder now:

A little shard of you.

It still itches when people ask me how we've been,

Where you are now, why I left;

I grind my teeth into a smile

So I'm not tempted to claw my own arm off.

Everyone tells me not to scratch at your memory,

Now the splinter you left is scabbed over,

All crimson red and crystalline,

Gorgeous to the naked eye,

Cruel in its persistence.

It reminds me a lot of you.

## **Flying Under the East River Bridges**

Elinor Smith was a young pilot who flew out of Roosevelt Field, Long Island, New York and was extraordinarily famous for a time. This account, adapted by her son from her own memoirs, begins in October of 1928 when she is just 17 years old (having received her pilot's license at 16, thereby becoming the youngest licensed pilot in the country). Despite extensive flying experience, and her license, she found herself viewed by other pilots at the field as a flash-in-the-pan, not likely to survive the rigors of becoming a true professional.

In the years immediately following this story, Elinor set the women's flight endurance record, the women's altitude record, the women's refueling in air record, and at the age of 19 was named Aviation's Best Female Pilot for 1929.

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What was to become a defining moment in my hoped-for female flying career began innocuously, as many auspicious things do. In late September 1928, an itinerant barnstormer from the mid-west was flying to Curtis Field, Long Island<sup>1</sup>, hoping to earn himself some publicity. He attempted to fly his bi-winged Jenny under the Hellgate Bridge that connected northern

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<sup>1</sup> Curtiss Field was an adjunct to Roosevelt Field, having been bought from Roosevelt Field and renamed. The two airfield names are often used synonymously.

Manhattan and Queens. Tricky wind currents surrounding this bridge caused him to hook his wing on a stanchion and splash himself and his Jenny into the swift currents of Hell Gate Gut. Nevertheless, when he was fished out and eventually reached Curtis Field (presumably by car) he bragged to all and sundry about his exploit; claiming if “that ol’ OX-5 engine hadn’t started “spittin’ and sputtin’ just as I went under that bridge . . .”

Although many took pity on the hapless and airplane-less pilot, and tried to scare up some employment for him, he nonetheless proved to be inept at everything he was asked to do; and soon became unemployable. He remained, however, a braggadocio-filled hangar pilot who routinely haunted the Curtiss Field hang-outs.

One day, when the usual gang of pilots and newsmen had collected in one of the hangars for a bull session, this pilot began grumbling for the thousandth time about how much better he was at the controls than any of us. Herb McCory, one of my newspapermen friends, could take it no more. Turning on the fellow with a roar, he bellowed, “You idiot! Someone’s already flown successfully under that damn bridge, for Christ-sake. When are you gonna knock it off? Why even seventeen-year-old Ellie here could do it, couldn’t you, Sis?”

“Sure”, I responded in knee-jerk fashion. “Anytime.” And that seemed to deflate the situation when he couldn’t come up with a good rejoinder. It ended the conversation, and the unhappy barnstormer left in a grumbling huff. I thought the matter closed, until some days later I was to learn that a betting



pool had been started. It seemed that the pilot in question had gone straight from the bull session over to a group of hangar pilots on the other side of the field, where he told everyone that I had agreed to duplicate his flight but had then turned yellow and was trying to back out of it.

A couple of days later, when things had heated up to the “I’ll betcha she won’t -- She will too!” stage, my Irish got up and I realized my honor had been challenged, something a feisty Irish girl could not let stand unchallenged. Well, there was only one way to handle that and also to put this clown in his place once and for all. I would fly under not one, but all four bridges across the East River. When later checking the books for flights under those bridges I learned that no one had *ever* flown under all four in a land plane<sup>2</sup>, so mine would be an unusual first<sup>3</sup>.

What I didn’t know was that McCory, fearing that if I did complete the stunt, the pilot might claim that I hired someone more experienced to make the flight and claim that it was me. Mac was to organize a group of photographers and newsreel men on the bridges to shoot pictures down into the open cockpit to show it was really me at the controls. I knew nothing of this until I was actually in the air.

In preparation for the flight I talked with a number of experienced fliers on Curtiss field. I practiced low-level figure

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<sup>2</sup> At the time, there were two “official’ categories of airplane: land and sea.

<sup>3</sup> No one else has ever flown under the East River bridges in a land plane before or since.

eights, mostly around ship's masts in Manhasset Bay. I even contacted my Uncle Harry who was a Navy chief petty officer assigned to a torpedo plane squadron and received good advice about flying low and slow in hazardous conditions. His advice was easy to remember: "Fly as close to the water as you safely can, and stay far away from any and all bridge structures, as the wind around them generates strong and inconsistent eddies that can dangerously surprise you!"

The day of the flight my alarm jangled much too early. I got out of bed, showered, and going through the usual morning bathroom routine, I pulled on my grubby flying outfit: a pair of my brother's old knickers, some of his even older knee socks, an equally seasoned shirt cadged from his wardrobe, and my lucky scarf. Fully prepared clothing-wise, I went downstairs to grab a bite before driving to Curtiss field where my airplane was hangared.

On my way down the stairs I could smell waffles and bacon wafting up from the stove, and by the time I reached the kitchen I could see that my mother, Agnes, had risen earlier to prepare me a hearty breakfast. I guess she must have known that today would be challenging one for me.

My father was probably still sleeping, having performed on stage the previous night in New York. Besides, knowing him and his confidence in my piloting it was unlikely that he would lose any sleep over my flight today. Breakfast done, I grabbed my helmet and goggles, and, with a kiss for mom, headed straight for

the back driveway and the sporty Ford coupe Mom and Pop had given me for my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. For the 45-minute trip to Curtiss Field I tried to focus on driving, but my mind kept wandering to the plan Pop and I had worked out for the flight.

I kept replaying my concerns about the East River and the four bridges I had promised to fly under. It gnawed on me for the remainder of the 45-minute drive to the airfield.

As it was a Sunday morning, the drive was fortunately uneventful and, as any pilot automatically does, I scanned the treetops to check the direction and force of the wind. By now the sun was up, and it teased the maple treetops, whose leaves looked like burnished gold. I tried to think of something besides my upcoming flight and tried to focus on the lovely countryside, but to no avail.

Reaching the Field, I parked near the hangar housing Pop's Waco and made my way to the plane, which, to my surprise, was already out on the flight line. Apparently Pop had asked our mechanic to pull the plane out and to warm it up; the engine was idling as I approached. It was at that moment that it dawned on me what a dangerous thing I was about to do.

With that thought bouncing round and round in my head, I started to pre-flight the airplane. This amounted to slowly circling the craft, checking all of the support wires between the wings for tautness, the tail skid for recent damage, the sturdy wheels for air pressure, the cloth wings and fuselage for any rips

or recent tears, and looking intently through the engine area for loose wires or anything that might be visibly amiss.

When I'd checked every bit of the airplane's exterior, I climbed into the cockpit and began the internal part of the pre-flight ritual. The first thing was to ensure that the airplane's control surfaces weren't somehow jammed so that they wouldn't respond to movements of the control stick. I wagged it and simultaneously looked out to make sure that the ailerons and elevators went up and down when I moved the stick forward and back: and that they moved as ordered when I moved the stick from left to right and back again. The next thing I checked was the engine. The oil pressure gauge, the only instrument on the plane's panel, showed that the engine had sufficient oil pressure. As all seemed OK so far, I advanced the throttle of the already idling engine and was pleased to hear it increase its throaty sound to a roar then return to a purr when I pulled the throttle lever back.

Okay, everything checks out, I said to myself. Satisfied that the airplane was ready, I realized that maybe I wasn't! As I sat there I briefly considered backing away from the dare, but then came to my senses and knew that if I did, I would never retrieve any of the respect I may have already garnered from the whole Curtiss Field crowd. While I was thinking about all of that, the mechanic appeared suddenly and removed the chocks that held the wheels to keep the airplane from unintended movement. He looked up at me, and then flashed a smile and a thumb's up for luck.

With that, I said, All right! No sense in putting this off any longer. Might as well do this now! I pushed the throttle forward, increased the power, and maneuvered the airplane away from the hangar. Checking the nearby windsock I noted the direction of the wind, and determined what position on the runway-less grassy meadow I should maneuver to in order to be in a good takeoff position. Taxiing slowly, I steered the plane using the rudder and engine blasts along the field so that I could end up on the downwind side of the meadow with lots of room in front of me for takeoff into the light wind.

OK, I thought, no more stalling. This is it. I'm really going to do this! And with that pushed the throttle forward and the plane gained speed across the meadow, lifting itself toward the sky.

Once aloft the first thing I noticed was the chill of an October morning on the breeze that caressed my cheeks. I could see the town of Garden City spreading out under the lower wing as the bi-plane gained altitude. The weather was glorious with the sun by now enveloping the small town. The trees gently rustled as a breeze passed through their leaves. I hoped the winds would continue light and variable by the time I got to the River, as gusty winds made flying close to rigid structures something any pilot wanted to avoid.

Giving the airplane its head, I allowed it to climb to a comfortable 1,500 feet; the view revealing more and more of the peacefulness of small towns awakening to a lovely Sunday

October day. When I reached altitude, I was happy to note that the engine was running smoothly and didn't throw out smoke or any oil mist to splatter my goggles on this fine morning. I turned southwest and flew over a portion of western Nassau County and across Brooklyn heading for Manhattan's Battery Park, the southernmost tip of the City.

My original plan was to fly northward, or upriver, under the bridges that spanned the East River<sup>4</sup> between Manhattan Island and its neighbor: Long Island.

As I flew across Brooklyn toward lower Manhattan I reviewed the two major elements of my plan. First, I had decided to do this on a Sunday, reasoning there would probably be less river traffic on a Sunday. Secondly, although I wanted to fly a test run several days before the final event, I had learned that the flight was strictly forbidden by almost every possible government administrative and regulatory authority: the City of New York, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Federal Civil Air Board, and probably the Marines, the Knights of Columbus, the American Legion and the Vatican. "Since a 'test run' is out," I reminded myself, "I think this morning I'll fly the river from south to north, keeping myself to the Brooklyn/Queens side to take a good look at my final route." Putting the plane into a slow right turn I noticed something that had not been obvious on the

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<sup>4</sup> The East River is, of course, not actually a river at all. It is a body of tidal water that separates Manhattan from Long Island. At its southern end it joins with New York Harbor, and at its northern end it passes through Hellgate to join with Long Island Sound.

map: “as the crow flies,” the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges were much closer together than I had realized. On the other hand, there was a fair amount of distance between the Queensboro and Williamsburg bridges, making them more attractive as the first bridges to try for. I made a snap decision to change the plan and to fly under the two northernmost bridges first and then proceed consecutively downriver south through the remaining two.

Still at an altitude of about 1,500 feet I guided the small Waco northward across Brooklyn and then Queens. Just north of Welfare Island (later to become re-named as Roosevelt Island) flying over Queens, I arrived at a point where the Queensboro Bridge was perpendicular to my left wingtip. I banked steeply to the left toward the River and dropped altitude rapidly. I could see the three spans of the bridge ahead of me. Furthest away, the western span was the longest, crossing the broad span of water from Manhattan to Welfare Island. Then there was the smaller middle span, the portion of the bridge that took cars over Welfare Island itself. Finally, there was the even smaller eastern span that was closest to me and traversed the water from Welfare Island over to Queens on the Long Island side. I had chosen the eastern span because it was least likely to have any ship traffic. I positioned the aircraft for a run through an air corridor comprising a 900 feet horizontal distance available between the Welfare Island support and the terminus in Queens. With a 130-foot vertical clearance underneath the intended

route<sup>5</sup>, my craft had scarcely settled onto its intended course and altitude when I saw a tall-masted yacht cruising toward me through the gap directly toward the air corridor I had staked out for myself! I remembered Uncle Harry's instructions: "Stay just above stalling speed, you can't correct accurately for turbulence or obstructions. Remember, to steer clear of the bridge structures. Also, the airplane is best flown low and slow for this kind of thing."

But this wasn't a *low and slow, stay just above stalling speed* situation. Acting on instinct alone I yanked the stick back, scrambling for altitude. I kicked the rudder hard right to find the best alternative way under the bridge. I quickly shot for the widest and most open bridge span, the western one, as it had the most open airspace available. By now, my stomach was beginning to react to the situation by tightening up and threatening to become a major competitor for my attention if things didn't calm down. But calming down was not in the cards.

As I veered away from the eastern-most air corridor and congratulated myself on avoiding possible disaster with the yacht and its unexpected appearance, the 1,000-foot western span leapt into view in my windscreen and rapidly loomed closer. Immediately ahead of the nose of my ship was a gaggle of cables with large wooden blocks attached that hung from the

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<sup>5</sup> Although 130-foot vertical clearance may seem generous, in a very small and very light biplane the winds swirling around a bridge span are quite dangerous. A cautious pilot will fly as far away from any bridge structure as possible.



bridge and dipped low to the water, hanging downward and blocking my path through the span. Holding my breath, I dove the airplane to within a perilous 10 feet above the water's surface, all the while dancing the rudder from left to right to maneuver myself between the hanging cables underneath the bridge.

When clear, I throttled back and allowed myself a few moments for my heart to slow down and stomach to relax, but the Williamsburg bridge materialized immediately ahead. This bridge crossed the East River in one giant leap. Its span was an impressive 1,600 feet with a vertical clearance of yet another 130 feet. As the airship sped toward it, I looked up and saw a phalanx of news movie cameras lining the bridge's walls, shooting downward into my cockpit. I increased my altitude as much as I dared while still avoiding the dreaded air eddies around the span, and waggled the wings in recognition but continued to focus on my flight path as I cruised under the bridge. McCory's photographer friends were shooting film down into my cockpit, making sure that the blond curls peeking out from my helmet were photographic evidence of who was actually flying this plane.

The Manhattan Bridge came next. I quickly glanced up and saw another newsreel truck. Once more I waggled the Waco's wings, this time adding a raised arm in salute. This bridge offered me no problems and I flew thankfully under its span with sufficient clearance for safety.

One more bridge to go . . . practically home free; I found myself breathing a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived. My worst fear quickly materialized as I arrived at the Brooklyn Bridge quicker than anticipated. There was a large tanker plodding downriver in the deep-water channel off to my right. It took up an acceptable portion of the almost 1,600 feet of the bridge's span across the river, reducing the available airspace on my right, no problem! But what *was* an immediate threat was a U.S. Navy destroyer that unexpectedly appeared, heading upriver through the bridge opening, taking up most of the expected air corridor on my left. The warship hadn't counted on an airplane coming at it, so it had chosen a course that closed off most of my intended flight path. It happened so suddenly that it was too late for me to maneuver around the destroyer. I saw no room for two ships and one airplane in the tight air corridor ahead and I was too close to the bridge to safely shoot up and over it. So, with no room to squeeze through, and nowhere else to go, I stood the biplane on its side, generating enough lift off of the fuselage to keep myself in the air and rode the rudder and stick with all of my strength to keep my ship aloft, completing the passage sideways between the tanker and the destroyer, sailing over the heads of the open-mouthed sailors on the navy ship's fantail.

Once through I rolled the plane back into an upright position, while finding myself overcome with sudden relief. I'd made it! Wow! What a great feeling! It was over and I had done what I boasted I'd do. For the moment I didn't care if there were any consequences; I'd done what no man had ever done before!

I jammed the throttle to the firewall, giving the plane all the power it could handle. As for me, I felt like a Yankee ballplayer rounding third after hitting the winning home run. I let out a series of triumphant whoops. Speeding out of the East River and into New York's lower Bay I did a victory lap around the Statue of Liberty. I was so relieved and happy that I kept shouting victory whoops and then did a second lap around the famous Statue for good measure! Flying past its nose I pulled the ship up into a steep climbing victory turn and, looking back, I could see jets of steam rising from the whistles of ships in the harbor as they blew a nautical salute to me . . . the audacious pilot.

After a few more gleeful shouts, it was time to return home. Having gained a few thousand feet in my exuberance, I dove back down, circled the Statue of Liberty once more, and then headed for the barn.

Up ahead Curtis Field eventually came into view. I approached and side-slipped over the telephone wires for a short landing, then quickly taxied toward the hangar. The minute the prop stopped spinning Pop came racing toward the plane and lifted me out of the cockpit amid frantic hugs, kisses, and backslaps. I was momentarily overcome with emotion. I reveled in the warmth of his embrace and his dad-scent that brought warm childhood memories blocking out everything else in that moment. But, out of the corner of my eye I saw the news gang running towards us and, having no wish to be

photographed with tears in my eyes and in my tacky flying outfit, asked them for a reprieve from photographs, but to no avail.

At home that night the phone never stopped ringing. The newsreels were already in New York movie theaters. On Monday the newspapers were pretty hysterical, too. As for publicity, I don't know what else I might have done to inspire this level of interest in my flying. On Wednesday, however, the axe fell. A telegram summoned me to a hearing in the office of the Mayor of New York City, the Honorable James J. ("Gentleman Jim") Walker. For the rest of the week I stayed away from the Field and took out my frustrations on our baby grand piano, playing every piece of classical music I had ever learned. My parents graciously covered their ears and never said a word.

On Tuesday morning Pop and I arrived at City Hall as ordered. We were ushered into a well-appointed waiting room to await His Honor. Soon a dapper slender little man came into the room. The charm of James J. Walker was legendary, but at seventeen, I was totally unprepared for it. His very presence lit up that room like a torch in a darkened tunnel.

He took one look at Pop and said, "Hello, Tom Smith, isn't it? Saw you at the Palace last week. Great show. Enjoyed you immensely. I'm an old songwriter myself, you know. Whenever you need some new material . . . . . say, why are you here? Can I help you in any way?"

Pop said, "Well, I'm here with my daughter, Elinor. You sent for her."

“I sent for her, why?”

“Well, Mr. Mayor, she flew under all the East River bridges last week.”

I pulled myself up to my full five feet three inches in an attempt to give some dignity to my introduction.

Turning to Pop, Walker said, “You can’t mean that this child is the careless daredevil I am supposed to chastise publicly? You know, Tom, I have been directed by the Civil Aeronautics Board to do something. They don’t want people willy-nilly flying under bridges any day of the week.”

With a curtly bow in my direction, he ushered Pop and me into his office. The soul of concern, he asked many penetrating questions. I was happy to learn he was familiar with the details of the barnstormer’s Hell Gate fiasco. He also knew several of the aviation newsmen who were also my buddies on Curtiss Field. Under his sympathetic prodding I told him how I’d begged Pop to let me go through with the flight and how he’d agreed against his better judgment.

The mayor looked pensive. “You know, of course, that I do have to take some action here. Still, I have to commend your father for giving you the freedom to learn to fly and to make your own decisions, even if this wasn’t a particularly wise one. For the time being, I think I will issue a statement that you have been grounded by the City of New York for a ten-day period. Agreed?”

I nodded my head. My vocal cords wouldn't work. I was paralyzed by thoughts of the danger in which I had unthinkingly put others, the grief I would have caused if I had crashed, and my willingness to sacrifice so much just to satisfy my teen-aged honor. While I stood there with all of these thoughts racing through my mind, the mayor continued:

“As to the Department of Commerce and the Civil Aeronautics Board, you leave Washington to me. I think you can safely count on an off-the-cuff unofficial reprimand and – oh, yes – those ten days will be retroactive from today.”

Still speechless, my melancholy faded immediately. I wanted to dance around the room. Retroactive! I could be back in the air by Thursday, the day after tomorrow!

Then the Mayor and Pop spent the next half hour chatting and laughing, telling stories while the Mayor's next appointment fumed helplessly in the outer office.

True to the Mayor's word, the Department of Commerce sent me a letter of reprimand the following week, with a little personal note inserted by the Secretary's secretary, asking for my autograph by return mail.

**Scapegoat**

**CHAPTER 1**

Well, crap.

I can't believe they actually think I did this. One damn coincidence and suddenly they're all calling for my head. Why me? What do they hate me for? Being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Saying the wrong thing? The dude was dating my ex? *I don't even care!* Hell, they barely even *know* me! I stare at the package that showed up this morning, the gift that slaps me in the face with its fearsome cardboard exoskeleton every time I look at it. Whoever my ominous, anonymous benefactor is clearly doesn't have my well-being on his mind. Why the delivery guy didn't have any questions about a heavy black box is beyond me. Thank God I was smart enough to call Chance to take it for X-rays at the crime lab. Now all I have to do is wait for him to show up. Gonna be a hell of a half-hour, that's for sure.

I hear something hit a window in the kitchen. My left hand immediately snaps itself onto the handle of the shiny new Ruger that's been hiding in my waistband since the ten-day waiting period blew over. It's only been a few weeks, and this kind of ballistic weapon's grown obsolete, but the cold, unforgiving American steel has become one of my best friends since the day its grip met the palm of my hand. Fight me, you psycho-ass mafia goons: I'm packing. I scan the backyard that lay outside my kitchen. Nothing but a few twitches in the leaves a

tree gives off a sign of life from the daunting outdoors. I relax, but only a little. Chance already relentlessly drilled his whole “never drop your guard” speech into my head.

I pull the gun from my waistband and sit down on the couch. The fully loaded magazine falls to the safety of my right hand as my thumb catches the release. Screw Cali gun laws, my *life's* at stake here. I put the clip on the coffee table in front of me, and I pull the slide back, letting the loaded round jump up from its barrel and spin around in the air, finally landing in between the folds of the couch.

There's no alternative: I need that round. My hand plunges into the soft cushions, its digits scrambling like the limbs of a spider as it searches for the cylindrical shape that I know will save my ass sometime in the future. A coin, a paper clip, a stray bit of plastic. Wait. That's it! I close my finger and thumb around the sleek metal projectile, bringing it out of the depths of the soft fabric, and grab its storage unit. The bullet snaps back into the magazine with a satisfying clicking sound. It enters the chamber once again as I bump the mag into the gun and yank the slide back again, ready for a fight.

My eye gets caught on an old photo. Somehow, Dad's smile convinces me to pick up the ghost of his fiftieth birthday. There we are, a newly-born pentagenarian and his teenage son, fresh out of high school. I was...what, nineteen that day? Damn, and now he's sixty-seven. That fiftieth birthday bash was the first time I drank. A snort of laughter jets out of my nose. Dad was so proud of me when he saw that half-empty can in my hand.



I turn the picture over so the back of the frame now faces towards me. Using the tiny little latch device that keeps the back from falling off, the photo is freed from its felt fetters. I lift the back up to reveal the little description Mom wrote on the reverse side of the photo.

*Robert celebrating his 50th with Adam. Looking great, guys!*

Something vibrates in my pocket, shaking me out of my nostalgia. Just as well, too. Gotta be on my guard. My free hand dives into my pants and pulls out my phone. The little digisphere thing shakes. Its holographic display reads "Chance." And to think that touch screens were state-of-the-art five years ago...

"Yeah, go ahead," I prompt it.

It beeps in reply as a hologram of Chance, with his hands on the wheel and a seatbelt across his chest, arches his eyebrows over his cop glasses. Typical.

*"Adam," he says urgently. "Got some bad news for you. Just got a call from HQ. Someone intercepted a call from a couple mafia hitmen. They're headed to your house right now. Drop your cocks and grab your Glocks, gentlemen. You'll have to hold out until I get there."*

"Are you out of your *mind*, man?!" I find myself yelling. "You don't have *any* units in this damn town?"

*"You're in Janice Valley, Adam. Crime's a one-in-a-million shot over there!"*

"Serve and protect, man!" I shoot a nervous glance over at the porch window. Nothing's out of the ordinary, thank God:

the grass is undisturbed, the security camera hidden in my wall hasn't been moved, and my new hover-speedster's still sparkling clean. "You guys slacked off 'cause there was only an *iota* of a chance that someone might die?! I'm an *actor*, not a cop! You're used to this kinda crap!"

*"You know, Adam, all your whining isn't gonna get me there faster."* His hands jerk the steering wheel as an angry horn does a Doppler in the background. Chance flips his hair out of his face. *"Plus, now with the whole Eovin-human alliance, everyone wants to be a space cop. Terrestrial crime is boring nowadays. Why work with people when you can enforce the law alongside walking space wolves, right?"*

I sigh. He's right, as much as I hate to admit it. "Are they humans, at the very least? I'm not struttin' a beam weapon."

Chance does some kind of weird frown movement with his lips. *"We don't know. All we got from the call is that it's a barbershop quartet."*

"Okay. Four hostiles. Dropping four of them shouldn't be that hard."

*"No, I mean, they're literally dressed as a barbershop quartet."*

I can't help but laugh. Chance never could tell a joke. "Well, let's see if I can throw in a few more red stripes on their suits." I rub my eyes to clear my head. "Why are these people after me, man? Coincidence?" *"Well, you were supposed to have the lead role. Then you back out, and a bomb goes off on opening night? Mighty damn suspicious, if you ask me."*

“Yeah, but that bomb only killed two people.”

*“And one of those people just so happened to be your ex, who, by the way, you had a few skirmishes with recently.”*

“Well, he started them.”

*“Doesn’t matter. He’s dead, you’re not. I mean, I can see where they’re coming from.”*

“Yeah, but I didn’t do it!”

*“We’re doing everything we can to clear your name, Adam, all right? Now sit tight, fight ‘em off if you have to, and I’ll get you out of the fray as soon as I get over there.”*

“Fine,” I huff, picking up my phone and clicking it before returning it to my pocket. Adam disappears from sight. The wall that had sat so patiently in the background of our conversation now comes into focus. A deep drag of oxygen forces its way into my nose as I start thinking about how to defend myself. Humans are easy. Trigger plus finger equals dead guy. It was the Myrmkirdi that would be a threat. I have to get a knife, or a chainsaw or something.

The gun weighs my hand down as I run to the kitchen. My wooden block of knives sits next to the sink, its polish worn and faded from years of use. I take one of the small blades out of its sheath, cradling it in my palm. The sharp end seems a bit dull, but it should work against a Myrmkirdi. They’re built and trained for ranged combat, and my hand-to-hand stage training is rivaled by few. I flip the knife as I toss it, grabbing the handle in a smooth motion as it comes back down.

An engine. Voices. They’re here.

I run to the window, taking care to flatten myself against the wall and peer out of the glass with all the swiftness of a snail. The speeder's green with purple flames on it, and the guy behind the wheel's got a wispy, white-haired 'do that makes his pale ass seem tan. His glasses would rival Woody Allen's, and I can hear some kind of 80s tune pumping out of the sound system. "She Blinded Me With Science," it sounds like. Dude, it's 2037. Pop's out. Silverscore's in. Get with the times.

Ladies and gentlemen, meet renowned astrophysicist Professor Yuri Klad. Weird-looking for a Russian national, I'll give him that much. He could pass for American. False alarm. No assassins in sight.

The cinematic crack of splintering wood that I've heard on set a million times before triggers the acting instincts in me, and I throw my head over my shoulder in a dramatic backwards glance. "Shit." I put my left hand straight in the air, pointing my gun as far out as it can go. My right hand jumps underneath the gun and burrows beneath my left wrist. Now I've got two weapons ready at a moment's notice, both facing the enemy. Fantastic. Too bad movie and stage props are so much lighter than the real stuff. Otherwise, I'd have no problem wasting these fools.

Someone's talking in some weird language. Great. Myrmkirdi. I can't hear where they are exactly, but I have a good idea. No time to form a strategy. My feet lunge for the stairs, taking them two at a time as the Myrmkirdi get ever closer. As I hit the top, I hear automatic weapons fire, and streaks of blue

and purple light hiss past me, splattering blast marks on my walls.

So much for my home makeover project.

My instincts bid me dive-roll into my bedroom, where I have the biggest home court advantage. The door provides perfect cover as I hide behind it, taking care to leave it open only the slightest bit. Footsteps get closer as my heart starts its fear-induced drum solo on my rib cage.

The door swings open, and a human walks in with purpose, forgetting to check his corners. Lucky me. He doesn't even get a look at me before I pull the trigger. The gun snaps back at me as its victim's head jerks forward. A spray of blood hangs in the air for the briefest of moment before falling with him onto my bed.

Well, I'm not sleeping on *those* sheets for a while

I kick the door, sending it smashing into someone else. A guttural grunt comes from the other side. A Myrmkirdi. Without thinking, I grab the door and rip it open, hurling my knife at the unfortunate hitman, who catches the blade square in his scaly neck. My actor's nature takes over once again as I swipe his weapon off of him and take aim. The gun's stock slams into my shoulder as a dash of purple and blue punches through his face, leaving a gaping, smoking hole in his head. He gives one last nasty-ass choking noise before he falls forward, forcing the blade all the way through his throat so that it pokes through the back of his spine. I can feel myself grimacing. Uggggh...this is so much more different than the stage stuff. Oh, hell, that *stench!*

The rifle bumps against my back as I sling it over my shoulder, doing the best I can not to breathe in the delectable aroma of fried space-alien brains. Half the circus is out of commission. Where are the other two? I rush to the window that hangs above my bed and open it. The coast is clear. Where could they be?

I hear the front door being breached. That would be the reinforcements. I can't keep myself from breathing, and I can't make it to the window in time— oh, what the hell! Reeks like sunbaked *asshole!* *Damn*, man...I gotta clean this crap out of my *carpet?! Screw that, I'm buying a new house...*

Wait. The window! I can get out that way!

The tiny little portal to the outside world provides a small means of escape as I try to wriggle my way through it. I can feel the pressure of the supports pushing on my chest, and the cold body of the rifle on my spine. There's no way I can get out like this. So what if I get rid of the rifle first? I pull my body into the bedroom once more and take the gun off my back before slinging it out the window. It drops fast, and I hear the thud of metal on the grassy ground. Now less encumbered, I grab the outside of the wall and pull myself through, wriggling the entire way. I suck in my gut as much as I can, pushing against the building with all the strength I can muster. The grass calls to me, offering salvation. Then, weightlessness. My legs flip themselves over my head. My nose points skyward. I tuck myself into a tight ball. The ground charges me and I rotate in the air. I silently pray that I can right myself in time.

The grass crunches underneath my feet as I land with a grunt, knees bending from the impact. I put my hand on the ground to keep the soft blades a respectable distance from my face. The gun lies right next to me. It fuses into my hand, my finger on the trigger and the butt in my shoulder. Kneeling like a commando, I check the area for anyone that might have stumbled across my little escape. Nothing moves. Only the leaves of the trees, rustling a little in the wind, make a sound. I rise to my feet and progress towards the front of my house, ready to, at any moment, shoot the intruders. I flatten my back to the wall again and peek around.

My door's open and swinging freely, and a new hover car is parked in the grass. Well, whose could that be? I cautiously draw nearer to my hunters' transport, wondering what might lie inside. The passenger's seat is what catches my eye first. Oooh, what have we here? Three military-grade grenades present themselves right out in the open, evidence that even a rookie cop couldn't miss...or ammunition that an actor, in the process of saving his own life, wouldn't hesitate to use. Don't mind if I do. I grab one before I turn around and throw open the door to my own vehicle, putting my stolen gun in the backseat.

The leather trims and the heated steering wheel go unappreciated as I punch the ignition button. I feel the small thrill that comes with the activation of the gravity repulsors as I'm lifted higher in the air. That ought to get their attention. Voices emanate from the door, both human. Exit stage right, Adam, old buddy.

I throw the car into reverse, but keep my foot on the brake to allow for a better throw. The grenade fumbles out of my clumsy hand and into the ready position. Pulling the pin, I aim carefully. I've had to pull off shots like this before in movies, but this is different. There's two professional killers coming for me, I have no backup, and if we start a high-speed pursuit, I'll get pushed off the road.

It happens in a flash: my hand makes up my mind for me, hurling the mini-bomb at the other car. My weapon seems to land right in the passenger's seat. Perfect. I jerk my foot off the brake and slam it on the gas pedal, cranking the steering wheel as fast as I possibly can. The car fishhooks out of the driveway. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch my pursuers barreling out of my house, and they don't seem happy to see me.

"Come here, mother—" one of them yells.

A concussive wave of bass throws itself into my chest. Brilliant oranges and yellows climb for the sky. Shrapnel flies everywhere, and I feel little specks of metal hit my *ohshitdoor*—

I duck as the passenger's door of the deceased vehicle plants itself in my windshield, lying on the hood of my car like a souvenir of destruction. Damn! I'm in straight-up badass mode right now! How are the assassins do—oh, *hell*, that's nasty! Yeah, if I had the hood of a car dig itself a footlong hole into my chest, I'd be dead too. Sorry, bro. Should have stopped sooner, huh? And your buddy, too. But he ducked, which would have been fine if he had ducked low enough to keep his head on. No dice, though. Ouch. Bye-bye, cranium.



I turn around to look at something besides death and destruction for a change. First the road, then Yuri's speeder, then the ajar front door to Yuri's house, then Yuri himself. He's giving me this wide-eyed, mouth-agape stare that makes him look like a kid who's seen a super-strong dude lift up one of those old 4-wheeler sedans all by himself. I wave.

"And *that's* why you never leave high explosives in the glove compartment, boys and girls." My hand shifts the chariot into drive, the perfect exit for a sassy one-liner. I smell the burning nitrous as my speeder racks up the inertia. Before long, I realize I'm hyperventilating. The steering wheel becomes my stress relief ball as I try to focus on deep breathing, doing the best I can to see past the broken mass of steel that used to be a hitman's car door.

I scramble for my phone and put it on the dash, gouging the call button so hard my arms starts to tremble. "Call Chance!" I don't remember consciously telling my mouth to say it, but I heard it, so it must have happened.

The phone beeps and throws up the little holographic old-timey telephone I've seen so many times. Beneath it, "Calling Chance..." is printed in an autonomic font. I hate that font. The kerning is just so wrong. I have to figure out how to —

Damn!

I jerk the steering wheel to get back over to my side of the road. Two tenths of a second later, and my car would have lost a game of chicken against that cargo truck. Exhilarating day, that's for sure.

*"...calling me if you don't talk to me, Adam?"*

Wait. Chance is here. I look up on my dash, each of us staring at the other. I don't know about him, but I'm wondering what I look like on his side. Technically, we're breaking the law, but so were those hitmen. So I think I'm good.

"Sorry, I just narrowly missed a head-on with a 4-tonner."

*"Well, if you've got something to say, say it. I highly doubt this was an ass-dial."*

"Yeah, you know how you said fight them off if they came?"

*"Yeah."*

"I might or might not have ended up killing four cronies." Ooh. My head itches. Let me just...there we go. Much better.

*"What?!"*

I know it's just a hologram, but now I'm frightened of the possibility that Chance is gonna throttle me through the call.

"Well, what was I *supposed* to do, Five-O? They had hair-trigger automatics!"

*"How did you drop four pro assassins, Adam?"*

How should I know? "Luck, I guess." I give him a one-armed shrug, taking care to make sure I was still on the right side of the road.

*"Thanks for the extra paperwork, Tweedle-Dum! Now I've gotta bail your ass, check that allegedly dangerous black ballerina music box for you, and explain why there are four corpses in your house?!"*

Should I tell him? “There might...also be...” Yeah, I should tell him. “Their car exploded. Quite nicely, too.”

I can’t see his eyes through the cop glasses that he never takes off, but he looks pretty pissed. *“You...owe me...big time, Adam. You hear me?! I was already scheduled for overtime tonight!”*

“Yeah, listen, I’ll do whatever you want, all right? This is my life we’re talking about here. I like it. It’s nice. Maybe a little broken, maybe a little dangerous, but I feel like I couldn’t live without it.”

*“Okay, hit the safe house, don’t come out until at least twenty-four hours have passed, and then come meet me at the station. You know how to catch a tail, right?”*

“No, Chance, you’ve never shown me how to do that. It’s not like you follow me to the gay bar every Saturday night to test me.”

*“Okay, good, because I have no backup safe house. Just sit tight and send me a holo-message when you get there, yeah? And Adam...”* He lowers his glasses halfway down the bridge of his nose so that the rims hide half his eyes.

Well, here comes the one-liner.

*“Try not the screw this whole thing over as hard as you did your last love interest, okay?”*

“Whatever.”

His hand reaches for me, and the call cuts out. Cool. Now I can focus on the road ahead of me. Wow. Not a lot of traffic for ten o’clock on a Tuesday morning. Well, that makes catching a

tail easier, at least. I fall back into the time-honored ritual of breath control. In, one, two, out. In, one, two, out.

Sorry I hung you out to dry on this one, Chance, and I wish I could help you with the mystery box, but it just felt like a Disneyland kind of day.

## **Melynda Sylvestre**

### **Introducing Valancy**

Mom calls me her Border Collie – only not when Dad’s around because he gets really mad when she does that. He thinks saying your daughter is like a kind of dog is degrading, but I really don’t see it. I’ve met a few Border Collies and I think they have the right idea; they have a job to do and they do it, however they can. They’re smart and fast and pretty, too. So what if they aren’t human? It’s not like humans are all that great. Hell, there are plenty of people I would be more upset about being compared to. I’ll take the dog.

Mom says that when I was little I wasn’t interested in my toys, or in playing kids’ games. I wanted to be with her all the time, doing whatever she was doing, and whenever I was left out of things I would just stare at her intently until she was done. She said it was unnerving and was making her twitch. So when I was about a year old she started to tell me that my brothers needed me to watch over them, that they needed a lot more help than she did. She says she was just trying to get a little space, trying to make supper for all six of us without my eyes boring into the back of her neck. I really don’t remember any of this, of course, but she was right – my brothers obviously were in serious need of someone to take care of them. They still are.

I’ve got three older brothers. Some kids I know think that must be horrible, but it isn’t. They are great, and they really like me. I’m five years younger than Elyas, seven younger than

Tristian, and nine younger than Jack. Dad says I was a surprise, but Elyas insists that the proper term is “mistake.” All three of them call me Opps sometimes; but they have always been good to me and never try to ditch me like my friends’ older brothers and sisters do to them. But no matter how nice they are, and how much older than me, the fact remains that they are boys and boys just don’t have a clue. You wouldn’t believe the trouble they would get themselves into if it weren’t for me!

Dad likes to tell people about the day they realized that I was herding my brothers. We’d gone over to Grandma’s for a big family picnic when I was about four years old. Jack, Tristian and Elyas were always off running in the pack with the cousins. I really couldn’t keep up, since I was so small, but I just wouldn’t hang out with the aunties and play with the littler cousins. When the boys started to go different directions, I would wander around until I found each one and got him to come back to the house one way or another. After the third or fourth time that I fetched all three of them, Mom noticed and told Aunt Heather that I was rounding them up. She didn’t believe Mom, so Mom told Jack to go behind the house the next time I wasn’t looking. Of course, I immediately realized he was gone, and set off after him. When I got him back, Tristian was missing. Then Elyas. Then Jack and Tristian together. They had me going for hours, until I lured all three boys into the house and got them into the basement playing video games – only one door to the rec room, and I fell asleep on the threshold. Of course, I’ve gotten much better in the last seven years. The boys rarely realize that I’m keeping them all

in range. When they do, they complain to Dad that *Valancy is herding again* – but they know better than to try to lose me. I’m damned good at what I do.

My name is Valancy. Mom named me after one of her favorite books from when she was a kid. I read it last year. It was pretty good, but I am nothing like the main character. She sat around and let people treat her like shit for her whole life. No one ever really noticed her until she thought she was going to die, then she let herself be real. It was cute, and romantic I guess. But I thought the real point of the story was that the inevitability of death is often the drive for life. Mom agreed, but Grandma and Grandpa looked at me really strange when we were talking about it over dinner one night. Dad shook his head and told Mom this was all her fault. Grown-ups can be so weird.

For the past few years my biggest mission has been checking out all the girls that hang around my brothers and getting rid of the really terrible ones. This is a really important job, one that will affect their entire lives if I don’t do it right. For a while, it was a full-time occupation!

You see, boys really do not know anything about what girls are like. They seem to think that just because a girl is pretty, and is nice when she’s around them, then the girl must be okay. Hoh-boy! Usually it is easy to chase off the bad ones. Like last winter, when Jack brought home that snotty sorority-type. The guys were having a big Christmas party and I saw her rubbing up against almost every guy in the room when Jack wasn’t around (she didn’t notice me – not just because I am pretty small, but

because she's one of those females who don't register anything that isn't male). When our folks got home, Jack brought Barbie over to introduce her. Dad and Mom were polite, but I could tell they weren't impressed. When she leaned down to squeal and gush at me (*very* unconvincing; I caught Mom's wince and Dad looked like he was going to crack up, but I could see Jack was buying the "Oh I just love little kids" crap – puh-lease!) I got the proof I needed.

I just asked her if she wasn't a bit young for breast implants. Really, if she was going to do that kind of thing, you wouldn't think she would be so sensitive. And honestly, if she had just stuck to calling me nasty names, Jack might have felt sorry for her and she would've been able to keep her claws in him. But she did take a swing at me (okay, so I *have* practiced that really annoying smile in front of a mirror – but still...) and my big brothers do so like to think they are the ones protecting me. Hasta la vista, bimbo.

More recently, Dad started mentioning to me how the boys are growing up and are likely to be leaving home soon. Jack is almost done his second year at community college and getting ready to transfer to another school; Tristian is already at the college part time, and Elyas won't be far behind. Mom is more straightforward – she sat me down last night and told me that I am going to need a new mission in life. She also said she is afraid I will blow a fuse trying to keep track of brothers who will be living in different states, or possibly even different countries, over the next years. And that she did see my search history, and I



am not allowed to chip the guys or plant GPS devices in their cars and bags.

Sometimes I forget that even though she is old, Mom isn't really all that stupid. Damn. At least she didn't know I'd planned on using her credit card to pay for the supplies, or I wouldn't be allowed back on the computer until I was 20.

But she does have a point. I've done a good job with my brothers – there has been a lot of training going on over the years that they haven't even been aware of – and I have to accept that at some point my work will need to stand on its own. I think they are even almost ready to choose their own girlfriends (well, with just a little checkup from me now and then, to make sure they haven't been taken in by a particularly crafty one). And they are each getting so focused on their careers-to-be that they spend a lot of time working or studying. It really keeps them out of trouble.

It's not that they don't need me at all anymore, but they aren't the challenge they used to be. I am a very rational person (despite what my brothers may say), so I am giving my mother's words serious consideration. If taking care of my brothers isn't enough to keep me busy, what new job should I be doing?

Dad, ever optimistic, and with the usual male cluelessness, brought home a bunch of books about choosing careers today. He seems to think deciding I want to be a doctor or a lawyer will give me "direction" and I can fill my time with academics. I can't blame him for trying, I did much the same thing a couple years ago for Tristian and it worked wonderfully.

But boys really can't focus on many things at once, so they don't require anything too complex to keep them happy. But if I start working towards a PhD at 11, I'll have nothing left to do during my teens.

I've been looking online for some more challenging ideas than the rather sanitized options in Dad's books. Hostage Negotiator looked pretty cool, but I am not sure I could pretend to empathize with some scumbag when I am really hoping a sniper will just put a bullet in his head and make the world a better place. Politics might be more up my alley, 'though having to get people to see reason and do as I want them to can be tedious and annoying. Business. Yes, that would be better. I could certainly run a company or two.

Mom just stuck her head over my shoulder to see what I was looking up. She agrees that I'd make a perfect CEO, since there are no small countries in need of a dictator at the moment. Mom may be smarter than she looks, but she's not nearly as funny as she thinks she is.

Mom will probably be talking to Dad about my idea – what is it with parents, always talking about their kids? – so, by tomorrow he'll be plopping down a pile of books about accounting and managerial strategies and long-term investments. He always gets the wrong end of the stick, plus he forgets that I have a Kindle and can just download anything I want faster than he can run to a bookstore. Which, I must say, is amazingly fast. I'm a bit worried that Mr. Allison's bookstore won't be able to stay afloat once all of us kids are out of the

house and Dad doesn't have anyone to buy resource material for anymore.

Okay, so running a business may be interesting. But just making money seems like a lame goal. You need it to keep the business going, and when I'm grown up I suppose it will be a good thing to be able to buy my own groceries. But one dollar or ten dollars or a million dollars - it's all just variations on a theme. Boring. I want something more challenging. Something at least as interesting as raising brothers.

Luckily my research skills are pretty awesome. Elyas is a bit of a computer geek, and I've kept up to date on things like data analysis and all the newest platforms so I can understand what he's doing, and help him when necessary. Let me see...registering business names...incorporating vs sole proprietorship...private detective license, state requirements...CIA interrogation techniques...office space for rent...advertising costs...

**Law of Grace**

**CHAPTER 1**

Parker awoke early, enjoying the sun warming him as he strutted down the hallway towards the rear of the house. He stopped short of the milky glass door to the bedroom; it was ajar. He peered at his reflection with the sun shining in. If he'd had an opinion he'd likely think he was handsome. He pushed through and hopped onto the bed. His light footfalls didn't wake Anne. Parker stepped on to Anne's chest, looking straight down upon her face; a light purr rolled into a meow. His front paws alternated pressing down, contracting and relaxing his rounded black nails. His eyes narrowed to relaxed slits, then blinked, his sign of affection and trust that he'd shown to Anne every morning since she'd had him. As far as cats went, Parker was a dignified, although needy, gentleman.

A cool light breeze blew in through the open French doors of the bedroom. The early morning sea air combined with Parker's greeting woke Anne. She sat up and Parker put his feet up close to her shoulders, driving the top of his head into her cheek, rubbing it back and forth. She said, "Good morning to you, too." Anne thought that the sunrise, the briny breeze and Parker's morning ritual made her morning perfect.

Anne, dressed in a white silk sleeping gown, made her way from the bedroom to the living area. Parker trotted alongside. He purred and sauntered around her ankles in a figure

eight, pressing his head into her legs and rubbing his cheeks against them. She paused, caressing his silky grey fur, stroking him from his ears to the base of his tail. "Let's get you some breakfast, shall we?" Anne filled and placed Parker's silver dish down on the honey colored bamboo flooring. She thought the colors were a gorgeous contrast against the dark grey fur of the cat, and smiled at the simple beauty. She retreated to her room for a few minutes, emerging again in simple pocketless khaki pants and a white t-shirt.

She headed out the side door towards the shared garden between the houses. Mrs. Kusta, the widow, as usual was at her dining room window that looked on this space. She was like clockwork, every morning sitting there alone with her old fashioned white ceramic mug, taking in the view. Anne liked the consistency that her neighbor had provided, as she herself was consistent, running on routine. Anne picked a handful of lavender, pulled a few weeds and watered the garden. Mrs. Kusta came outside.

"Anne," she said with a smile, "I can't thank you enough for taking care of the little garden. I know you're a busy woman, but I can't tell you how much I have appreciated all your help over the past few months since my Arland died."

"It's my pleasure," Anne replied. "And it really hasn't been a bother at all. If it weren't for this little garden that you started we wouldn't have our lavender, now would we?"

"Dearie, if it weren't for you this garden wouldn't have survived, to say nothing of the odd jobs you've done for me.

Especially fixing the latch on my dining room window! I don't know what I'd have done without you, and I just want to tell you how much I appreciate it."

Anne smiled and stepped through the garden to give Mrs. Kusta a hug. The old woman smelled of a sweet perfume, something like jasmine. Anne said, "Don't forget to close that window this evening, it's likely to be chilly." She leaned down and clipped a bit more lavender, handed it to Mrs. Kusta and bid her farewell with a warm smile. Mrs. Kusta shuffled back to her kitchen table, calling out, "Anne, dear, you take such good care of me." Anne smiled and retreated inside her home. Mrs. Kusta lived a simple life. She was a quiet little old woman who minded her own business.

Inside, Anne tapped the control to the blinds that faced Mrs. Kusta's home, then checked her holo-pad to ensure that all the blinds were closed except those facing the water from her small dining table. She used the pad to unlock the front door as well, then sat and looked out over the water. She sat motionless, absorbing the view and the sounds of the gulls being carried on the breeze. The blue of the water, the small white gulls that flew above and the soft light of the morning helped to keep her relaxed, carefree, and certain. After some time, noticing the clock, she stood and called for Parker. He came trotting to her, the bell on his collar jingling. It reminded her of the old-fashioned tricycle from her youth, whimsical, musical and pleasant. It made her smile. Alise, Anne's dearest friend, gave her the little red collar with the bell. While Alise said she hated cats Parker would

always sit on her lap when she visited. Alise never shooed him away. Anne took Parker in her right arm, grabbed a few of his favorite cat treats and the catnip plant from the counter. Parker began swatting at them with his paw. She carefully placed the plant in the spare room on the bedside table, the treats on the bed and Parker next to them. She checked the attached bath, ensuring the litter box was clean and that the small water dispenser was flowing for him. On her way out of the room she stroked Parker and scratched under his chin; he purred loudly. She took the collar off, holding it in her hand, left the room and shut the door. Anne walked around her small but comfortable home, ensuring everything was as it should be. The rooms were neat and tidy, the few hand-written notebooks she'd set out upon her long marble kitchen counter were open to specific pages, and documents that needed to be passed along were set out for the messenger, Molly, to scan and reproduce for work. She wanted to leave nothing unfinished. Her life's work was here, or at least the copies she wanted to ensure were found today. The rest, well, it would be available soon enough.

As Anne walked back towards the kitchen and her view, she checked the plants to ensure they had enough water, straightened the mat in front of the glass doors to the rear deck, then went into the sitting room. She reached into a small antique wooden box, the name "Montecristo" burned into its lid. This antique was one of her most treasured, the feel of the old wood and the aroma of lemon oil used to ensure its continued beauty, the old-fashioned metal hinges that creaked slightly when she

lifted the lid. The lid's logo, a triangle of six swords surrounding a fleur-de-lis, was worn but recognizable. These little details made her feel alive, so different from the sterile and cold offices of the R&D lab where she spent her days with holo-screens and grey uniforms. She grabbed some handmade paper and an ink pen from under the lid, as well as a small, but moderately weighted canvas bag. This, after all, was no job for the holo-terminal voice dictation program. This was an occasion for the old fashioned written word. This was personal and timing was important.

She sat at the small bistro style dining table and glanced over at the marble countertop covered with her work. She took a moment to look over the items, contemplating their textures and the way the light was reflected or absorbed by each. She let the sun shine on her face, feeling its warmth, inhaling deeply to etch the odor of the salty ocean and decaying seaweed inside her lungs, then exhaled and felt at peace. With two taps on the holo-pad the patio doors and blinds closed. Another tap and a single dim light shone over the table, an almost romantic light that cast a warm glow. Anne carefully uncapped the pen; its weight felt nice in her hand, not like the weightless instruments used on the holo-screens at work. The sensation of the paper with its ridges and imperfections of color delighted her fingers and eyes.

Anne wrote: "My name is not important, but what I have done is. When you proceed with the retinal scan you will find I am a registered citizen in good standing. What I do now, I can only hope will have a wide and deep impact upon my fellow citizens. In the time it takes you to enter my home, scan my



retinas and begin the investigation, the damage to the Amerist Government and the hand that leads it will have begun. I ask only one thing, when Ms. Pearce arrives, please apologize to her for any inconvenience she suffers due to the time you detain her for questioning.”

Once finished, Anne opened the canvas bag and pulled out the matching neuro-stim bolts. These were antiques, heavy in the hand and smooth except for the small ridges at the center of the rounded ends. The military had stopped using these years ago, since the desired effect was much less destructive than these bolts were designed for. The bolts, once activated, would destroy the circuits in the brain where thought was processed. While the body could be kept alive, if necessary, there was never a chance of recovering any information from the brain. Even with the algorithms that Anne had created to read, decode and translate electrical activity, once the neural pathways were destroyed there was nothing that could be read or retrieved. Nothing, at least, that the government knew about. Anne would take her knowledge and work with her.

Anne pressed the cold, smooth bolts to her temples. The adhering compound worked; it was the one thing she'd worried about, as the compound was very old. She folded the canvas bag neatly in half, placed the newly inked paper on top, then the pen as the weight to keep it all together. She heard a small thud in the backroom, like a small weight hitting the bamboo floor, and she waited to hear Parker's bell jingling. Looking down in her lap, she realized she wouldn't hear that, not ever again. She took the

collar and placed it on the bistro table. She imagined Parker had found and gotten a hold of the catnip, and it made her smile. She gently touched the emergency alarm on the holo-pad.

“What assistance do you require?” the pleasant automated feminine voice chimed.

“This is Dr. Anne Augustine. Please send a SOaC team to my home.”

Her hands were steady as she pressed the disconnect button, cutting off the human voice that was just breaking into the automated recording. She then pulled up the messages that she had not yet sent, each to a different contact but containing the same documents and research. She said slowly, in a strong, quiet voice, “Send all,” then lightly set the holo-pad on the table.

She closed her eyes, exhaled, and pushed in on the bolts attached to her temples. Her eyes turned crimson and her nose began to bleed, her jaw locked and a throaty deep momentary grunt arose. Her arms grew rigid as the electrical impulses batted around inside her head, from one side of her skull to the other. When the impulses stopped, her head fell forward, striking and cracking the glass top of the bistro table. The blood from her nose flowed slowly through the cracks in the glass, creating red channels that reflected the light above. The little streams of blood touched the edge of the cat’s collar, which slowly began to absorb it. Anne’s arms fell to her sides, lifeless, dangling.

What remained were the faintest signals from her brain stem, short with long pauses between, causing the false appearance of breathing; they would call it “*agonal breathing*” on

the death report. Her body had only to wait a short time before the Social Operations and Control Officers arrived to begin the retinal scans. She greeted them with a deep chestnut lifeless gaze and the faint smell of burned flesh from her temples.

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