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Anthology

**2011 FIU/
Books & Books
Writers
Conference
International
Anthology**

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Fiction



Michael Marmesh

Last K.O.

It was the rare, ugly day in paradise. Grey and dull, like a fifty-year-old virgin bookkeeper still living with his mother. The wind whipped down behind the cold front in a relentless, chilling onslaught. Instead of the typical brief, torrential outbursts, the rain fell as a steady fine mist, driven into exposed skin like icy needles.

Moe Nardino purposely turned his old hampered visage northward toward the blast, full into his face. Memories. It felt like the wet iced towels he used to wrap his mug in at the end of one of his middleweight bouts years ago. Back then it kept down the swelling and the pain. Now, well, it mainly just reminded him of back then.

He'd had a decent career. Started out in the Golden Gloves in Philly and got enough experience and seasoning to turn pro. His technique was only fair, but he had tremendous heart, didn't give up and could take a punch. He'd been good but never great. The highlight of his career was an appearance on the undercard of a Cassius Clay bout, back before he became Ali, at the old Miami Beach Convention Center. He and the future champ had even trained together at old 5th Street Gym. Moe ended his match with a K.O. in the fourth round. It moved him up to third place in the world rankings. Unfortunately, the same right cross that had broken his opponent's jaw had also fractured the first metacarpal in Moe's hand. By the time it had healed well

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enough to start boxing, he'd fallen in the rankings, never to rise again.

In a way it was a blessing. After a couple of failed comeback attempts, he hung up his gloves. Unlike most ex-pugs he'd retired with the majority of his grey matter and bank account intact.

Waiting the last two hours for his target to show up had given Moe time to reflect. He strolled slowly up and down the block, periodically letting the frigid wind slap him in the face to keep him alert. Garbed in an old, worn, dark green and orange U of M sweatshirt, he trod slowly with hood pulled over his white curls, his face in shadow. He realized that even though he had lived in the area for forty years, he hardly recognized anything. And he calculated that with the weather absolutely miserable the few people who were out would walk as quickly as possible with their heads down and wouldn't be likely to recognize him.

Where was the guy? Moe knew he showed up every day to check his property. After all, the newest, poshest, most super lux condo project under construction on South Beach, The Ultimate O, was his baby. What kind of horseshit name is that? Yeah, it was supposed to be the hottest place on Ocean Drive. Still the double entendre ad hook "Have the Ultimate O in Paradise," was pretty cheesy even by the low standards of local real estate promotion.

It was different in the old days. When he quit the ring in the late '60s, Moe decided to move back to the Beach. It beat the hell out of the cold Philly winters. He'd gotten himself a nice apartment on Collins Avenue, just a couple of blocks from the ocean.

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Initially, he lived off his savings and his rep. It was rare that he'd have to pick up a check when he went out to eat. When the Rat Pack was in town, Moe could often be found hanging out with them at the Boom Boom Room in the Fontainebleau. And there were enough good-looking women around during those times that he never lacked companionship.

It didn't take him more than a few months to realize that he could use a more steady source of income. Sure, he'd pick up a few hundred as security muscle when Frank, Dino, Sammy, and some of their Italian associates were in town. But it wasn't steady and he was smart enough to realize he wasn't the only ex-fighter who could do the job.

Not wanting to work too hard, he bought three Good Humor trucks, hired himself some reliable drivers, and did quite well selling ice cream treats to kids and sweltering tourists. Occasionally, as a lark or when he had nothing else to do, he drove one of the trucks himself. He found out he liked meeting people, even if he sometimes cut into his own profits. If a poor kid came up a couple of nickels short or even had no money at all, Moe would often give him an ice cream sandwich or Nutty Buddy on the house.

When Sammy "The Candyman" Davis found out what Moe's new business venture was, he nicknamed him "Ice Cream Moe." It stuck. Though not the most intimidating nom de guerre, it would pay off later.

A short time after this Moe fell in love. He met Lily, a new cocktail waitress at the Fontainebleau bar. She was a beautiful, curvy blond with a sensible head on top of her long, creamy neck. She

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seemed immune to the pick-up lines and schmoozing whether they came from big-named talent or just regular guys. Then, for reasons he would never understand and could never explain, she took an interest in Moe.

He wasn't a bad looking guy back then. True, his nose meandered a bit down his face and was flatter than most. But he'd added a few pounds, and his dark tan along with his curly black hair gave him what would be called rugged good looks. After decades in the sun the tan was now permanent cracked leather and the fluffy white corona made him look like a giant version of those old troll dolls.

Dean Martin, after watching the two of them make small talk for half an hour, couldn't resist asking her what Moe had that he didn't, especially since he'd never gotten anywhere with her.

"He doesn't have your fame or your money, but he does have a sweet sincere smile" was the answer he got. And Moe did have a nice smile, one that put a dimple in his right cheek.

Still, that wasn't much of an advantage when all assets were weighed. It was the only explanation she ever gave.

She was beautiful and believed in him, how could he not fall for her? He stopped chasing skirts and began to date her seriously. From the beginning he treated her like a lady. She wasn't like the other girls he'd dated, silly with no direction. She'd come to Miami Beach from Chicago after a bad break-up with a sweet talker who turned out to be married. She had that midwestern practicality and wanted to take things slow to be sure she wouldn't be hurt again.

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So he courted her. He took her out to dinner. She seemed to be just as happy with a nova omelet at Wolfe's Deli on 21st Street as she was with an expensive stone crab meal from Joe's on 1st Street. One night it was his goombah buddies at the dog track at the tail end of the beach. The next, the cultured hoi polloi at the Bass Art Museum. They walked on the beach and even caught their dinner of the old 5th Street pier. She could do plain or fancy.

The black Range Rover with the heavy tint rolling up Ocean brought him back to the present. The son of a bitch was late. Was this finally him? No. Wrong vanity plates. His man wasn't "DJ ROJO." This damn town had more luxury wheels than any place he'd ever seen, more Mercedes than VWs. There were probably more than a hundred, black Rovers in South Beach alone.

Where was his man? This shitty weather really screwed up traffic. Rain-slicked roads, unlicensed and uninsured third world drivers, sixteen year olds whose parents thought it was a great idea to give them 500 horsepower sports cars to learn to drive, all real traffic hazards. At times the causeways from the mainland to the Beach would be completely shut down until the gore and debris from vehicular mayhem could be cleared.

Maybe that was detaining his guy. No problem. Moe could wait. Somewhere behind the grey blanket that was the sky, the sun would soon sink unseen below the horizon. The approaching darkness would offer him better cover to complete his mission.

He thought back to how he'd gotten the real break that helped him put his life together.

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He'd never been scared stepping into the ring, even if he knew the other guy could out punch him. He knew he could take it.

But when he made his decision about Lily he really sweated it out. What if she said no? It took him two weeks from the time he decided to get his stones together to actually propose.

Moe would never forget her reply.

"Well thank God. The way you've been all nervous and pussyfooting around I began to think you were never going to ask. Of course I'll marry you."

It was then he that he decided to drive one of the ice cream trucks full-time himself. One less salary to pay, more income for him. Lily would keep working, too, so they could put together a nest egg to buy a house. They both wanted kids.

He was sitting in the truck by the park at Third and Ocean. It was a mid-February day about the same date as now. Except the day was sunny and bright, warmer than normal for that time of year. The ice cream moving better than usual for a winter's day.

A guy in jeans, dirty white Keds, and a white T-shirt, with a pack of Marlboros in the rolled up left sleeve, walked up to the window. There were enough dark grease stains on the shirt and black grime under his nails that Moe figured him for some type of mechanic.

"What can I get for ya, Buddy?" Moe asked.

"You the guy they call Ice Cream Moe?" came the question, with a slight New York accent.

"Yeah. What kinda ice cream you want?"

The guy paused and stared at him, then rolled

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his eyes up like he was concentrating, trying hard to remember.

“Hey, youse Moe Nardino. I seen you fight once at the Garden. You was pretty good.”

“You got me. Ice cream?”

Another pause. The guy seemed to be thinking of how he wanted to put his answer.

“Uh no. No ice cream. You know Sinatra, right?”

Obviously this was going to be no sale. Still, Moe’s curiosity was piqued. So he didn’t tell the guy to beat it.

“I’ve worked for him from time to time.”

“Could you get a message to him for me?”

“Like what?” Moe snarled skeptically. It wasn’t the first time somebody had tried to go through him to meet some of the famous people he knew. Moe didn’t like being used.

“There’s a couple of guys planning to rub him tomorrow night,” the guy whispered.

“And how do you know this?” Moe had expected a request for tickets to one of the shows Frank was performing in while he was in town for the week.

The guy told him how he was sitting in a local bar the night before. Two other guys were sitting in a back corner booth drinking their courage and making their plans. The more they drank the louder their planning got. The gist of it was that while Sinatra was out giving a concert, the two mutts would use a pass key they got from a brother-in-law who was hotel security to break into Frank’s pent-house suite at the Eden Roc. It was well known that Sinatra traveled with a nice selection of jewelry and a large amount of cash. He liked to go to the fron-

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ton for Jai-Alai and Hialeah for the ponies. He bet big and liked to look good doing it.

“So why don’t you tell the cops?” Moe was still skeptical. You have to be pretty dumb to rip off a guy as connected as Sinatra. But South Florida had no shortage of stupid crooks.

“Let’s just say that my previous encounters with the police have not gone in my favor. No way I’m talkin’ to them. They wouldn’t believe me if I did.”

Moe knew enough other people with the same experience that he believed him.

“So, what’s in it for you?” Moe asked what, to him, was the obvious question.

“Huh? Nothin’. I got all Mr. Sinatra’s albums. He don’t deserve this. Just get the word to him. Okay?” the guy replied and turned to walk away.

Whadda you know, Moe thought. A true fan.

“Hey pal. What’s your name?” he called after him.

The guy turned back. “Joe. Joe Duffy.”

“Joe. Have an ice cream on me.” Moe said as he tossed him a Heath bar.

Moe drove the truck to the warehouse and called Frank. An assistant answered the phone and put Mr. Sinatra on the line when Moe explained the situation.

“Can you handle this for me?”

“Sure thing,” Moe replied. These guys didn’t sound like dangerous professionals, just a pair of dumb shits with a harebrained idea.

The next night, while Frank was singing to a packed house, Moe and three former sparring partners lay in wait in the penthouse. As soon as the two fools dressed in black let themselves in and closed

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the door, the boxers cold-cocked them. If some of Sinatra's other associates had handled it, maybe the two morons would have ended up in cement flip flops drifting along at the bottom of the Gulf Stream. Instead they and their inside man were quietly led away by the Miami Beach police.

A short time later they became long-term guests in the state penitentiary at Raiford. They were given a special reception by some of the Italian Sinatra fans incarcerated with them.

Four nights later, much to his surprise, Joe Duffy found himself front row center, resplendent in a finely tailored grey lightweight wool suit and white silk shirt, at Frank's last concert of the engagement. He had a great time with the Rat Pack at the party afterward.

The real payoff for Moe came when he finally married Lily two months later. Neither of them had much family, so it was a small ceremony with just a few friends at St. Rose's where the priest was an old Golden Gloves pal of Moe's. None of the Rat Pack came or for that matter were invited. Dean and Sammy each sent nice checks. The big surprise came from Mr. Sinatra. He took care of people who'd done him favors. Inside a large envelope was a note that simply said, "To start your new life. Frank." Somehow he'd found out that Moe was looking to settle down and make good for himself and Lily. The note was attached to the title for a three-story oceanfront motel between 2nd and 3rd Streets. Frank had made a substantial down payment on the property for them.

They were dumbstruck and very excited. As soon as the reception was over they drove down

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to check out their new property. The Beach View Motel had been built in the late '40s. It was a U-shaped building with a north and south arm, each perpendicular to the sea, connected by a section that fronted Ocean Drive. Concrete waves formed the border of a splashing fountain in the semicircular drive out front. When they walked in the main entry to the lobby they could see through the glass doors at that there was a large Chatahoochee rock patio surrounding a big rectangular pool. It was put back before there were so many damn personal injury lawyers in town. The pool still even had both a high and low diving board. The lobby floor itself was polished terrazzo with a large blue-crested wave inside an emerald circle in the center.

They walked around slowly, almost in a trance, inspecting the whole place. It was in great shape. Sinatra had gotten it for them for less than market value from an associate who wanted to try his hand at casino building in some little godforsaken desert town in Nevada named Las Vegas.

Moe smiled to himself. If he'd only known forty years ago what he knew now he'd have gone to Vegas, too.

Headlights flashed in his face as a big SUV pulled into the driveway at the construction site. Was it that bastard, Manny Diego? Nope. No "BG BLDR" plate.

In fact, when his eye readjusted, he could see it was just an old Suburban disgorging a bunch of people in kitchen whites, probably the staff for Pedro's Beach Club down the block.

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Where was that son of a bitch, Diego? The two of them had accounts to settle. Because of him, Moe was staring at this luxury monstrosity rising where his beautiful little hotel had been. But then that wasn't really the main reason Moe was waiting.

* * *

Life for them at the Beach View had been good right from the start. They forgot about buying a house and converted the third floor of the south wing to living quarters. Essentially they had their house right on the beach. They called it Paradise Found.

Lily put in a little bar with a grill on the north side of the lobby. It was popular with both guests and locals.

They ran the motel as a family place. In the '60s and early '70s, Moe dumped more than a few drug users or sellers out on their asses. To Lily's chagrin he would rent to the practitioners of free love, but at least tossed out the pay-to-play hookers. The diving boards came out in '75 on the advice of their insurance agent.

Lily produced a son in '70 and a daughter in '72. Sea, sun, sand, swimming and surfing, it was a great way for kids to grow up.

By the early to mid '80s things were beginning to change in South Beach. The retirement hotels were being snapped up by speculators and the retirees pushed out. The architecture of the area was preserved when the Art Deco District received an historic preservation designation. On top of that came the glitz and glamour of the Miami Vice influence.

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By the '90s the dog track at the very southern tip of the Beach was long gone, transformed into a handful of high rise condos. Mom and pop motels were disappearing up and down the whole length of the beach to be replaced by ugly 20- to 40-story apartment buildings and hotels.

The Beach View Motel was doing fine. In fact business couldn't have been better. It was one of the steadily decreasing number of places where middle-class families who didn't want anything fancy could still find a place to stay. Moe and Lily were even getting second-generation guests.

Moe had put in a Tiki bar with a thatched roof on the seaside edge of the patio serving both his guests and thirsty customers who straggled up from the beach. As a gimmick he put up a model train track on the inside edge of the bar to deliver the drinks. Being good with his hands, he built a flotilla of small model boats with cup holders in the center to replace the train cars.

Moe enjoyed tending the bar himself. He was a natural born schmoozer with lots of stories to tell. He got a real kick from rolling out his fleet loaded with cold beer and tropical drinks garnished with cherries skewered by tiny umbrellas.

Lily was the brains of the operation. She did the books and bookings, paid the bills, and rode herd on the staff. Moe was good with guest relations and building security. He stayed in good enough shape to muscle out troublemakers. He was also the soft touch. Comping rooms to locals down on their luck and lending out lots of cash that was never repaid. As the business manager it drove Lily

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crazy. As his wife it was one of the things she loved about him.

The kids helped when they were old enough. Later both would get married and move out of state. Eventually they would come back to visit with the grandchildren.

By the late '90s pressure was increasing on Moe and Lily to sell. There weren't many beachfront lots left to develop. Although the Beach View was in the Art Deco District, it wasn't old enough to qualify for preservation.

They had their third floor penthouse in paradise and enough business to keep them comfortable. Including regular guests that had become friends over the years.

Why move?

After the turn of the millennium along came Manuel "Manny" Diego. One of those guys who didn't take no for an answer.

His first approaches were reasonable and business-like. His offers started at twenty percent below market value and went as high as ten percent above. Moe and Lily responded each time that they weren't looking to sell. They were happy as they were. They told him to stop bothering them.

Then the harassment began. Graffiti spray-painted on the front of the building, patio furniture pilfered from around the pool and fire alarms rung in the middle of the night waking and scaring guests, became frequent occurrences. The cops came and took reports while the fire department started charging for false alarms. No one was ever caught.

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Moe would've loved to get his hands on whoever was doing it, but the incidents had an uncanny way of happening when he was away or asleep. It was like someone was watching, waiting for the opportunity.

Someone was.

It was harder on Lily. She wasn't sleeping well and was tense all the time. She started having heart palpitations.

This just made Moe angrier.

Then one night someone set fire to the thatch on the Tiki bar. The fire department didn't respond thinking it was another false alarm. Luckily, Moe with a fire extinguisher and several guests manning hoses were able to bring the blaze under control.

Lily pale and shaken told Moe they needed to talk.

"Moe we're getting too old for this. It's time to take the money and go," she told him.

"I don't like being strong-armed. I won't be forced out by that Diego," he replied angrily.

"You don't know for sure it's him. One of our guests could get hurt next time."

"You think it's just a coincidence he called yesterday to ask if we'd changed our minds?"

"No, Moe, probably not. But I can't take this anymore. It's making me sick," her teary, ashen face stared up at him as she put her cool hands on his temples to calm him.

"Okay. For you," he answered softly, because he would still do anything for her. "I'll call the son of a bitch tomorrow when I get back from the lumberyard. Gotta repair the damn hut. Keep the place in shape for guests 'til we leave."

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“Thanks. I love you,” she kissed him gently.

Next morning, no sooner had Moe’s truck pulled out of the motel drive, than a group of rowdy teenage punks ran into the lobby. They tipped over brochure displays, upset postcard stands and knocked breakfast dishes off the tables of startled guest dining the grill.

Lily came running out from behind the reception desk yelling, “Stop! Stop. Don’t do this. Tell Diego we’ll sell.”

“Who’s Diego?” said the one in the purple paisley do-rag, probably the leader. Still they stopped their mischief, leaving as quickly as they’d come.

Lily hustled toward the grill to check on the patrons. She never made it.

Ice from a shattered water glass lay on the polished terrazzo, an unexpected mine in her path. Her right foot hit the slippery patch and her body flew into the air. The sickening crack, as the back of her skull hit the rock hard floor, reverberated through the lobby. She was dead on impact.

In spite of the malicious mischief preceding it, her death was ruled an accident. The punks were never caught. But Moe had plenty of witnesses to tell him what happened.

He cleared out of the Beach View Motel the day after Lily died. He never returned to the old place. Stepping into the lobby would simply have been too painful.

To the surprise of everyone he sold out to Manny Diego. For a price in the upper seven figures and five percent higher than the last offer. Diego said it was a gesture to help ease his loss. Moe took it as

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blood money, a failed attempt at conscience. But he took it and planned on taking a lot more.

* * *

Moe bided his time. Made his plans and preparations and waited. The super condo, the Ultimate O, was almost finished. Moe was there to make sure Manny Diego would never enjoy it.

Finally the right Range Rover pulled into the condo's drive. It stopped under the covered entryway. The power to the external portions of the building hadn't been connected yet. The driver left the headlights on when he shut off the ignition. A big man stepped out of the driver's door. Alone. Manuel Diego.

As Moe shuffled slowly up the drive, he saw Diego step out into the mist and gaze up at the building. Moe heard, "O baby lookin' so fine."

When he was within twenty feet, Diego sensed Moe's presence. Seeing what looked like a hooded old bum ambling toward him, Diego said, "Forget it buddy. I don't give to panhandlers. Get off my property."

Moe just kept moving.

"Didn't you hear me? Beat it or I'll call the cops."

Moe pulled his hood back just enough to show his face.

"Mr. Nardino, is that you? What're you doing here?" his surprise obvious.

Moe gave a long slow glance up at the glitzy condo. Manny followed his gaze then turned back to look at Moe.

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“Came to check out your motel’s replacement, huh? Incredible isn’t it?” Diego said reaching out to shake hands.

Moe stepped inside the outstretched hand and gave Diego a sharp right jab to the solar plexus. The shock on his face was one of the things Moe had waited so long to see.

The punch had the desired effect. Diego’s diaphragm was temporarily paralyzed. The man couldn’t breathe. As Moe expected Diego opened his mouth in a big O shape trying desperately to suck in air.

Moe took the object he’d been palming in his left hand and rammed it into the open O. Seconds later Diego’s diaphragm stopped its spasms and he inhaled deeply.

Moe took a couple of steps back and watched. Diego’s face was turning red and he was frantically sticking his fingers in his mouth trying to extract the object stuck in his windpipe. Without success.

Red was now becoming purple as the oxygen in his blood was being used up without being replaced. Moe could see the realization in Diego’s eyes that he was going to die. The struggling developer took a couple futile swings at his tormentor, then fell on his back. The last thing he would see as his vision fade to black was his unfinished Ultimate O.

Moe reached into the Rover and turned off the headlights. He waited ten minutes, watching dispassionately as Manuel Diego became a corpse. Irony. Moe figured that the body was lying about where the lobby of the old motel had been. Right about where Lily died.

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He walked over to the body, reached into the mouth, pushed on the object and twisted. Out it came.

He pulled the hood back down over his face, walked back down the drive and looked at his homemade weapon under the street light. At first glance it looked like a regular little drink umbrella. But the handle and support ribs were made of stainless steel. And the ribs were pointed on the ends so that if they were pulled backwards with the umbrella open they would imbed in flesh. The cover was made from latex instead of paper so the air couldn't pass through it. The handle had a smooth finish that when coated with spit would be difficult to grasp.

Still the man just might have been able to save himself. All he'd have had to do was counter-intuitively push the umbrella into his throat so it closed. Then maybe he could have pulled it out.

Moe opened the little umbrella and tossed it off the curb. He watched the wind blow it down Ocean Drive. Early the next morning a street sweeper pushed it down a storm drain.

Ice Cream Moe turned north and shuffled up the sidewalk. He'd check out a few more blocks of the old neighborhood before he caught an airport cab at 5th Street.

The stinging mist riding down on the cold front slapped his face again.

Memories.

Jack Roberts

Re: Bright Goddess, at Your Rising

If business is not properly run, the rites and music will not be honored, if the rites and music be not honored, penalties and punishments will not achieve their intended effects, if penalties and punishments do not produce equity and justice, the people won't know where to put their feet . . . or to whom they should stretch out their hands.

—Confucius, *Digest of the Analects*

“...sure you’ll do your utmost to make our visitor feel welcome. Huang has been—” I silenced the voicemail heralding a new arrival from corporate. Two notes like the tinny chirps of a caged cricket sounded behind me. I swiveled around in time to catch the dark youth wearing a black silk jacket in the old Chinese style as he began to speak: “—sent to help branch make a smooth transition to the new calendar.”

Had I choked off the message, chopped it in two, chucked its severed body into the telephonic deep to have its remnant surface from a stranger’s mouth? *A doughty thought boat started making ready for a swift cruise up the Lower Parietal.* Then again, perhaps I’d been too quick to credit what I’d seen and heard. Far better to put the message’s seamless continuation down to the mildly hallucinogenic properties of Folgers Crystals coupled with some less agree-

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able bendings and warpings of sense. The latter was due to morbid sleeplessness, mother of all doorstops and wedge immovable driven between the doors of perception and the world as it appeared when new. *A trim and haughty second thought boat came alongside the first and signaled her to stop making ready.*

The stranger lifted a delicate hand into my cubicle. No, there was nothing delicate about the hand. Let's say a hand floated toward me in a manner suggesting refinement. The shadow of the faintest smile passed across the visitor's lips. "I am Huang."

"Ken LeBrun," I reached for the hand yet gauged my grasp for fear of squeezing too hard. Huang's grip was firm.

"The Bear. Very good. I look forward to working with you, Ken the Bear." He flashed a pleasant enough grin. So why did I get the sense that he was lacing his speech with foreign cadences and stress patterns aimed at creating the impression that English was not his first language? Then there was his Asian get-up, his serene bearing—let alone being, his delicacy of manner and gesture. Each of these fostered my awareness of Huang as someone who wanted to pass himself off as a small Chinese man finely framed. I wasn't buying the Mandarin act.

I may be very big on revising first impressions, but despite my penchant for repeated takes don't think I lack the doggedness to push through a shooting script. What I lack is sleep. Eight year's worth. It's only natural to doubt your readings when your sensors are fried. Much of the time I take stock of nothing, am indifferent as can be to whatever comes or goes. It's all alike to me:

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joy, sadness, what have you. It all appears to me as through smoke. Still I remember days when the world looked new. The world appears as seen from within a case filled with smoke, an illusionist's cabinet of smoked glass, trick partitions, and mirrored panels that slide. Still I long for a world where there is no sliding.

I stepped back to get a better look at Huang. The man who seemed small up close was taller now. Gone was the big difference in our heights. I had two, three inches on him at most. Closer inspection of his face and hair yielded this summary: all black curls and eyes. He looked like Sal Bando, mustachioed captain and third baseman (lifetime batting average .254; 242 HR) of the Oakland A's during their championship years (1972-74). Huang only lacked Bando's major-league facial hair.

He turned to go and then turned to face me again. "Ken the Bear, I do not wish to give offense, but may I abandon the formalities that attend preliminary exchanges such as this?"

"Go for it, Huang."

"You do not sleep, Ken. That speaks to the health of the soul. I have some expertise in the care of the soul. I possess the cure you seek." From his sleeve, Huang produced a circular mirror, silvered on both sides and set in polished stone. *A Captive at the Palace of Vermilion Clouds, the Goddess of Disillusion Made this Mirror for You* read the inscription along the edge of one side.

"Does corporate know about this?"

"It is part of my brief. The smallest part."

"Will you submit a report—"

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“—on the health of your soul? I do not see how that is any of corporate’s affair.”

“So it’s the smallest part of your brief to tend to my soul and no part of theirs to know.”

“Look upon the other side only. In a few days, your soul shall be at rest.” Huang lowered his chin, touched the tips of his index fingers to pursed lips, and, in this attitude of monkish meditation, passed on. Sent here to pass out the new desk calendars, he had passed me some off-menu chicken’s-feet soup for the corporate soul and passed off a ritual object for its cure to boot.

How had Huang got wind of my soul-sickness anyway? How had it come to make up even the smallest part of his brief? I felt a little slighted when Huang all but said that my wilted soul required no more than his slightest attendance.

Does he know I lie awake each night on the Hello Kitty futon in the living room, the only survival from her Japanese kitsch phase apart from the frayed silk Pokémon lampshades in the bedroom? As long as she lived with me, the bedroom was hers. We never made it through a single night together in its bed on account of my wakefulness. As I said, I haven’t slept in years. Soon as I’d hear the little catch in her breath that meant she’d drifted off, I’d slip out from under the sheets and set off for Hello Kitty night-night land so as not to disturb her. She can have all the bedroom furnishings as far as I’m concerned. The futon is mine. I’ve the stronger claim to it, this futon on which I haven’t slept in years the most.

On many a night to bring on sleep I would dip into an old collection of tales about people who en-

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dured great bodily change. Don't think of the high school cheerleader showing up at her tenth reunion the mother of six and a hundred pounds heavier. Think of her showing up as a wildebeest or an emu or a capuchin monkey. Her former classmates would have to admit they were surprised.

In one tale, a king drowns during a storm in which his ship goes down with him and all of its crew aboard. His queen hears nothing about the wreck. She waits a long time for news of her husband, but none arrives. After some nagging from the other gods, the god of sleep finally drags the drowned king's body from the bottom of the sea all the way to the bedroom where the queen is sleeping. Or perhaps Sleep brings a dummy meant to stand for the drowned king's body. The narrator isn't clear on this point. In a dream, Sleep explains to the queen that her husband has drowned even as his dripping corpse sits propped up at the bed's foot. The narrator isn't clear on whether the corpse is propped up at the foot of the queen's actual bed or the one in which she merely dreams she lies.

With or without props, the queen got the message for as soon as she wakes she prays that the other gods reunite her with her husband. Apparently, the god of sleep doesn't have the power to do this himself or the queen would have prayed to him. In any case, the queen doesn't seem to recognize that the god of sleep already answered her prayer in a way. The other gods answer her prayer in another way. They change both royals into splendid waterfowl who from that time on will nest on calm seas and whose nesting will serve as sign of good days to come.

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While the queen never specifically asks the gods to bring her dead husband back to life, for once the gods don't purposely misconstrue the mortal's prayer and grant her only what she literally asks. To tell you the truth, I was surprised. I'd have bet the first thing she saw upon finding herself transformed into a splendid waterfowl riding those soft ocean swells would have been the waterlogged and featherless carcass that was formerly her drowned husband's corpse. A splendid waterfowl's vocal capacities probably don't extend to the blood-curdling screams that would ideally issue from the queen's beak or bill under such circumstances. Still, I can imagine her trying to get off some mirror-cracking shrieks, though even these would probably come out sounding more like a screech owl's screech or a seagull's jagged cries.

I read this tale many times. It had sent me into a deep drowse one night and I'd hoped to repeat its success. No other tale had come as close to nudging me toward sleep. I recall the sound of two birds calling to one another as I drifted off. I couldn't have been under more than a minute or two when I felt myself jolted awake by the sight of her drowning. Trapped and beseeching, she gazed up at me through the padlocked latticed hatch of a submerged vessel swiftly sinking deeper. Not until the sound of the waves closing over her uncoupled from the sound of her pitched breathing in the next room was I able to fend off the truth thus ventured.

For all that, I want to sleep again. If Huang can help me get some *zzzzz*, I'll furnish him with all his

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bedroom needs even though I said the bedroom set was hers.

I pick up the mirror, turn it over and look into its reverse side. A gruesome skeleton gapes at me through hollow orbits. I disobey Huang's instructions and turn the mirror over slowly as Eve must have slowly turned the fruit of that forbidden tree over until she discovered the choicest flesh to eat of first. With Eve's combined thirst and hunger, I stare into the obverse. Phoenix stares back. Looking even lovelier than in life, Phoenix beckons toward me. There. I said her name. Twice.

Why had Huang gone and given me a mirror containing the one image I'd been trying my damndest to put out of mind these last two weeks? I couldn't blame him. I hadn't confined my viewing to the reverse side like he said I should. Surely, the goddess who made the mirror for me foresaw that I wouldn't follow Huang's instructions. Was such foreknowledge a source of her disillusionment?

I flip the mirror over again. Mr. Bones gawks. No help there.

From that Sunday two weeks ago when I decided to have nothing more to do with Phoenix, whose real name is Peggy or Margaret Blanche Schnitzler, her image attended me constantly, tempted me, triggered unrelenting desire. I gave in to bad habits and slept even less. You could say her image haunted me, but that verb does not capture the degree to which it enchanted and vexed me at once.

As alluring as she was, Phoenix-Peggy never ceased to annoy the hell out of me. I had never been able to get past that pretentious self-given name

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and the silly affectations that came with it. All those stagy gestures she thought made her seem exotic: her slow-motion finger rolls calculated to show off slender digitsful of gaudy rings; her Hindu-dancer's way of making her pupils dart about their sockets like waterboatmen across a pond's surface; her Lauren Bacall act: drop chin, shoot smoldering gaze victim's way. I'm not saying these tricks hadn't once worked their magic on me, but over time, they staled and bred an eyeball-rolling distain for the magician. Perhaps a flawed sense of occasion made her sincerest efforts at nonconformity seem forced or silly. Perhaps she just tried too hard at some things.

She didn't have to try too hard at others. More thought-free than free-thinking, more bewildered than wild child, Phoenix-Peggy had somehow come to associate being naked with the most homely of homebound activities. *Are you ready, Mondegreens? One hundred people surveyed. Top five answers on the board. Name a household activity that Phoenix-Peggy enjoys performing while nude: vacuuming the blinds, watering the ficus, folding laundry, sewing buttons onto a chair cushion, beating the rug, addressing Christmas cards, rolling pennies, watching reruns of Family Feud.* How could I possibly resent coming home to find her unclothed and hard at chores?

Did I say unclothed? She was well-clothed in flesh, but nothing gross. Lovely shoulders she had and a straight flat back and a swimmer's body, long of arm and leg. She thought her breasts could be more ample. I thought she lacked for nothing there.

She was lovely in clothes as well. On our first date she showed up wearing a bodice made of Chi-

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nese take-out menus and a brilliant red skirt like a paper umbrella—complete with balsa spokes—with highlighted tresses and painted nails to match. The side of her from whence her daring fashion sense arose almost never failed her.

Sad to say, she had an artsy-craftsy side that almost always did. Phoenix-Peggy hobbled as a candle maker, only sometimes she forgot to add the wicks. Come Christmas, I'd mail these blue cylinders and magenta pyramids to distant relatives, since, even without wicks, structural flaws disqualified them for classroom use by teachers of solid geometry. Even when she remembered to add a wick, she might fail to secure it firmly to the mold. On cooling, it would be found worming its way free from a tiny hole near the base or coiling about the middle boa-like. I'd dub these useless assemblies with names such as "Wax and String Study #7" and make gifts of them to couples with whom we no longer wished to socialize.

Not a bit discouraged by her steep descent through gates of wax to candle hell, Phoenix-Peggy took up macramé. She turned out countless wall hangings mercifully free of those attractively repetitive patterns whose presence might otherwise have suggested the weaver's less than total commitment to undermining the conventions of her yarny art. Breaking new ground in the craft of folk weaving was not without its risks. Now and then one of her loose-knotted designs would yield up what little structural integrity it possessed to a passing kitten with inquiring claws. Within seconds, nothing would be left of the original formlessness but a chaotic tangle of brightly colored twine.

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Not long before we split, Phoenix-Peggy revealed her intention to enroll in a jewelry making class at Waskaswaska Junior College. Visions of molten metal and scorched palms, of sharp little knives and severed digits, danced in my head. I suggested she take Japanese floral arrangement instead. “I know!” she said as if I’d made an observation. “I mean, how do they get those flowers so tiny and I heard somewhere that they can even do it with cows, but how can they, I mean, really?” She snorted and left me scrambling for some shred of meaning: “What? Flowers? Tiny? Cows? Oh no. . . .” Too late. Like Elvis, all sense and coherence had left the building, sucked out as if someone had switched on a gigantic Hoover. Unable to frame a reply, I assumed a kneeling posture on the living room carpet. I mouthed a ritual cry as I passed an imaginary blade through my vitals. I leaned slightly to the right and toppled over into deep shag.

I probably could have put up with her not quite candles and form-defying feats of yarn, with her irremediable misspeak and unintelligible questions, with her silly posturing and bizarre mannerisms. I probably could have put up with all of this for a while had she not late that Sunday evening confessed to spending Saturday night in the arms of a junior vice-president for marketing.

I took the mirror from my desk again and tried to stare down the skeleton. He didn’t blink. What would I do if he beckoned to me as Phoenix-Peggy had? There wasn’t much point in wondering. Mr. Bones was nothing if not impassive. Who could guess what he was thinking? At least I’d followed

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Huang's instructions this time. As I slipped the mirror back into my desk drawer, I overheard Judy say: "Kimono's Japanese."

"Who made you foreign fashion expert?" Marge from accounts said.

"I'm telling you. It's Chinese wear that jacket."

"And how do you know?"

"I watch the Jackie Chan."

"Go change your filters, Judy."

"Least I know kimono from a jacket in the Jackie Chan. Hey, Mr. Warner, what's with the little Chinese guy?"

"You mean Huang? From where I stood, he looked to be of average height," Comptroller Dave Warner said.

"Average height!" Marge and Judy said together.

"Should we be having this sort of discussion in the workspace?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Warner, but the man is tiny!" Judy said.

"She's right, Dave," Marge said. "The man is tiny whether we say it here or in the garage where you park that abortion on wheels you're so proud of driving."

Flustered, Dave Warner drew the line: "Ladies, I think we'd better discontinue this exchange before any of us says something all of us will regret."

Phoenix-Peggy owned up to everything not fifteen minutes after returning from Baby Pro's North Central Midwest regional sales conference, an event made even more memorable for her by the launch of Baby Pro's Simulated Pregnancy product line. Perhaps "owned up" is not the right phrase

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since I never accused her of cheating on me. If anything, I tried to stop her from coming clean as soon as I figured out what she was trying to tell me. I repeated the catch-mantra, “Hey, what happens in Kenosha stays in Kenosha,” adding a hand gesture to signify: “Now, just you go ahead and back up that rig of yours on account of we’re not taking any more deliveries today.”

She insisted on seeing her confession through. By the time she finished, I was hurt and angry. I asked if she’d managed to get herself pregnant or just “Baby Pro” pregnant. Hurt and confused, she called me mean. I said she could go immolate herself and rise from her own ashes in the junior vice-president for marketing’s bed. She gathered her things and left.

The crack about her getting “Baby Pro” pregnant was mean given her feelings about my feelings about the company. I had doubts about Baby Pro and not simply because of its penchant for filling their junior executive corps with malefactors and degenerates. Some months back, her boss had encouraged the younger gals in the office to take the prototype of Baby Pro’s new product line home with them. Of course, they would have to sign a waiver affirming that they hadn’t any history of pulmonary trouble or monstrous births, but everybody knew how nettled those fussy budgets down in legal could get.

Within six months, the new line would become a colossal success with women who loved the idea of being pregnant but who did not want to or could not bring a child into the world. The simulated pregnancy kits came in nine-, eighteen-, and

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twenty-seven-month versions as well as a trial size that included enough “fertility agent” to carry the would-be expectant mother through the first month of morning-sickness-free simulated pregnancy. Top-of-the-line kits came with the *Baby’s Kickin’* and the *Oops, My Water Broke* simulators as well as authentic ultrasound and prenatal test results from actual pregnancies.

Yet at the time I couldn’t see why offering herself as a guinea pig in exchange for the health risks associated with a product under development appealed to Phoenix-Peggy. She’d always insisted that she wanted to focus on her career, that she wanted to wait until we were married before she took the plunge into motherhood. She’d always insisted that she was only twenty-nine, that she had plenty of fertile years left. She said, “I want to see if this will make my boobs bigger, Ken. Baby Pro is thinking about marketing it as a breast enlargement regime also.”

She withdrew a small white bag from a small white box and opened the seal. Inside were seven foil packets each bearing the Baby Pro *Nursin’ Mommy* logo and containing two capsules: one red, one blue. Before I could tell her how much I liked her the way she was, she said, “I know, Ken. I’ll try it for a week.” She sat down at the dining room table to read the dosage schedule.

After three days, I didn’t notice any change though Phoenix-Peggy told me that her breasts felt tender. I told her to stop taking the capsules and see a doctor. A few nights later, before I turned off the lamp next to the bed, she pulled up her nightgown and leaned back on her pillow.

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Baby Pro chemistry hadn't simply augmented her breasts. They looked full to bursting. Her nipples were swollen and her areolas had grown from silver dollars into Nilla wafers. Their light pink hue had given way to those darker shades observed during the early stages of a black eye. About them hung the scent of non-dairy creamer.

On a new mother, these breasts would have been beautiful in that way that only the breasts of a new mother are beautiful. But Phoenix-Peggy wasn't a new mother and her breasts weren't beautiful in that way. A chill ran down my spine, herald of inexpressible loss. Gone was my lover's sense of her body. When we made love, I felt as if I were cheating on Phoenix-Peggy with someone else. A few weeks later she'd gone and cheated on me. Guess I had that coming.

Huang moved to the front of the room. From beneath the podium, he lifted a large red box with yellow characters and set it down on a table beside a water pitcher and some plastic cups. He raised the lid of the box and looked at us the way a magician looks at his audience before he pulls a rabbit from his hat. He lowered both hands into the box and raised them again until over the edge of the lid there began to appear little moving stars, comets, planets, crescent and full moons, a miniature cosmos of tiny celestial bodies rising as over the horizon. Each little moon, planet, comet, and star crowned a long strip of translucent red plastic. Each strip rose from the wide red band that Huang secured over his dark curls. The little cellophane universe danced like a rice paddy in light wind.

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Huang took a small drum from his briefcase. He chanted as he walked to each corner of the conference room, accompanying himself on a drum. When he reached a new corner, he would cease chanting and drumming and stand for a moment in silence. Then the chanting and drumming would begin again as he moved on to the next corner. He returned to his briefcase and took out a finger gong that he brushed to alert us that the meeting was about to begin.

“I thank you for coming today. I am Huang. In case you are wondering, it is customary to purify the chamber of illumination through an ancient rite. You will all be good students now, I think.” Huang laughed and the little universe shook with approval.

“Corporate has sent me to help you implement the changes required by its adoption of the new calendar. Everyone is expected to adapt to these changes at a reasonable rate, though resistance is also to be expected. Resistance is at times useful. The byword at corporate these days is Patience. In the I Ching, the characters corresponding to this byword are Compassion Spring.” Huang touched the keyboard on his laptop and power-pointed the characters onto the screen behind him. “There is a second byword at corporate whose characters may be translated as ‘After Patience Come Kick in Ass.’” On the screen: a little man in a suit, bent over, hands on knees, eyes shut tight, bracing himself against the imminent application of a gigantic well-worn boot to his posterior. Obligatory laughter filled the room. “I now invite questions,” Huang said.

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“Could you spell out some of the changes you mentioned?” Juana Durante from Creative asked.

“All will be revealed at the proper time.”

“What should we do till then?” Vin Carbon from Sales asked.

“Breathe deeply. Strive to achieve openness.” Huang paused. “Neither activity costs corporate any money, incidentally.” Several employees chuckled weakly.

“Each new day will bring change, but not I hope too much. Your managers and I have decided upon a pace that we think will be neither too slow nor too fast.”

“How long do we have to get it all done?” Zillah Willikers from Human Resources asked.

“We have until the twenty-second of September, the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, being the anniversary of the bright goddess’s birth. On that evening, we will celebrate the Festival of the Eighth Moon.” I wanted to ask why that luminary hadn’t been born on the first day of her own month, but kept my mouth shut.

“Eleven weeks isn’t much time,” Harv Stain from Graphic Design piped in.

“I assure you, it is neither too much nor too little time,” Huang said.

Harv Stain again: “In that case I have a request.”

“I hope it is within my power to grant.”

“Can I try on your hat?”

Bryan Redding from Graphic Design covered his mouth as if to cough and bellowed, “Haaaaarv.”

Huang smiled and waved Harv forward.

Shouts of “You go, Harv!” went up.

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Steve Wondrus from PR said into the wall phone: "Send up Roger and Cho with camcorders." Then, to the rest of us, "Nobody move until Roger and Cho get here."

Nobody moved until Roger and Cho got there and made the sign for action. Huang lowered the headdress onto Harv's enormous head. Harv rolled his eyes upward as if trying to see the stars shimmering above him. Huang clapped his hands and let out a disconcertingly loud laugh. This turned out to be a prearranged signal for half the office's temps to enter carrying trays of big white cakes shaped like the phases of the moon while the other half followed with trays of tea. All wore dresses of painted silk. All wore the obliging but aloof air mastered long ago by hostesses at your better Chinese eateries. The moon cakes sold like hotcakes, so to speak. Here and there, the odd red bean or crumb of lotus-seed paste clung to a moist lip.

Some employees balked at the tea. The temps urged the steaming cups on them anyway. You might conclude from this that none of us were free not to take a cup, though how you get there from temps' exotic get-ups and Huang's ungainly ovation would be hard to explain. I just figured that all freedoms turned on the right of tea refusal.

Huang smiled and nodded at everyone. He lifted the headdress from Harv's enormous head and put it on again. Harv pumped a fist in the air as he walked back to his seat. Everyone laughed and applauded. Huang laughed and applauded, though this time with his customary reserve. I noticed he was wearing red silk slippers trimmed with gold thread.

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Before I left, he asked me if I'd tried out the mirror. I answered that I had.

"Very good," he said. "Today and then two more days and Ken the Bear will experience peace for the first time in a long time."

"As long as it gets so I can sleep through the night."

"You will sleep through the night, Ken the Bear. On all succeeding nights you will sleep through the night too."

Back at my cubicle, a voicemail from Phoenix-Peggy was waiting. While cleaning out her night table, she'd found a snapshot of us taken at the water park the previous summer. She said we looked happy and the sight of how happy we'd looked made her miss me. Do you know what I remember about our day together at the water park? The drowned kitten plucked from a filter reservoir. Still, I had a strong urge to call her. I took the mirror from its drawer. I followed Huang's instructions to the letter. Mr. Bones shook his head no.

A week later, I was reaping the benefit of Huang's mirror cure. Mr. Bones continued to glare at me whenever I looked his way. Each time I peeked into the other side of the mirror, the image of Phoenix-Peggy appeared to grow fainter like the fading likeness of Dorothy's Auntie Em in frog-green Margaret Hamilton's crystal ball. Auntie Em had been calling Dorothy's name and holding her hand to her chest out of worry, fear, and heartache. Phoenix-Peggy said nothing. She'd stopped beckoning to me. Her translucent flesh was the color of ash and her eyes emitted only the palest light.

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I started to reach for my chest then reached for the phone instead. Voicemail chirped that Phoenix-Peggy was away from her desk, but I got hold of Amy Knoblach who worked in the same division. She said Phoenix-Peggy had been resting at her mother's since undergoing a series of tests earlier in the week: "I'll let her tell you the rest herself."

She sounded weak when she picked up but insisted we talk. She'd felt sick to her stomach for weeks but had tried to wait it out. Only when her breasts hardened and her nipples cracked had she grown frightened enough to seek medical attention. She said that the doctors weren't sure but they thought that the prototype Baby Pro *Nursin' Mommy* Kit's pills had triggered a delayed allergic reaction. The cortisone injections hadn't done any good but at least the doctors had put her on painkillers so she could sleep.

Trying to sound cheerful, Phoenix-Peggy told me how the first doctor joked that she shouldn't plan on dancing topless anytime soon. She told me how she'd cried in his office and on the drive home. She began to cry again while repeating his remark. The tactless physician had scored a direct hit on the lightly ballasted vessel of her self-esteem, one buoyed by her sense of herself as a free spirit, and sent it shattered and whirling to the bottom of a gulf of hurt. Uncovered, her breasts had stood for the healthy abandon and guiltless sexuality that she'd tried to carry off without—or so I once had thought—much success. To be fair, she'd succeeded far more often than not. I wanted to tell her how well she'd carried it off and how I would have told

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her so while we were together had I been any sort of boyfriend. I just told her how sorry I was.

In the two weeks Huang had been with us, the office had grown quieter each day. He replaced the central cooling units with ceiling fans powered by lead weights and gravity. After a daylong audibility workshop, conversations around the office rarely rose above the level of a stage whisper. Phones in the office no longer bleated: three chimes whose sequence rendered the concept “Moon” in Chinese musical notation signaled incoming calls.

The following Monday, Huang presented every employee with a pair of custom-made silk slippers. He'd gotten everyone's shoe size from Human Resources. While the silk jackets and trousers sported by Huang had not caught on with the men, more and more women in the office opted for stylish silk and satin dresses. A lunchtime fashion show presented by New Moon Fashions' Ada Fong had done the trick. These same women had begun to wear their hair up with lacquered chopsticks before Black Jade Studios' Mrs. Chao conducted a make-over seminar; afterwards they began to use more face powder. Many women even began to adopt a small-stepped gait verging on a shuffle. Though these insisted the new footwear was comfortable, I caught Gina Fornato weeping in her cubicle. Still in slippers, she was tugging on what looked like a silk bandage wrapped tightly about her foot.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. But if you ask me, Gina won't be making any journeys on foot anytime soon. From the look of things, she'd have a rough time making it from her

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desk to her file cabinet. And before any of you start thinking about making a thousand-mile journey, you'll want to get sized properly for a good pair of walking shoes with plenty of room in the toe. Funny how a wise saying can be made to yield practical advice so long as you don't let yourself be impressed by the sound of wisdom talking to itself. To encourage you in your efforts to remain unimpressed, I'll share this: after awhile, the sound of wisdom talking to itself begins to sound exactly like the sound of one hand clapping.

I've said more than I wanted to because most of you have heard this saying so many times that you won't even bother to nod your head anymore, and I feel bad that I've not given you real value. I also feel bad for those of you who still nod your head when you hear it, because it's a saying that can lead you by the hand if you let it. You could call it the Huang of ancient Chinese sayings. It only sounds deep when you take its elements symptomatically being careful not to think too much about the symptoms themselves. Should you take its elements literally and then go off to think hard about them, you'll come back feeling like you've traveled a long way for nothing.

All talk of miles aside, the journey of a thousand steps begins with a single step; the journey of a hundred steps also begins with a single step; and so do the journeys of ten steps, five steps, and two steps. We don't really get ourselves into trouble until the journey is one step long and we are forced to say: *The journey of one step begins with a single step.* But here's where things get interesting, so even trouble turns out to be the good kind of trouble. You

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might say that the saying grows more Zen as the distance of the journey approaches one step. But this only shows how “Huang” the original saying is. For what’s to keep me from banishing trouble by saying: *The journey of a single step ends with a single step.* Nothing Zen about that. What I’m trying to say is that unless you’re Gina Fornato you shouldn’t find it hard to get where you want to go.

The other day, I went down to the fifth floor to see if Don Plastero in Coding wanted to join me for a quick one after work. Though I’d visited him hundreds of times before, the fifth floor was a maze to most, including me, and Don’s room had never been easy to find. He and his fellow encoders seemed to like it that way. Don and the dozen other programmers on his shift wrote code in a big windowless room crammed with super PCs. To keep the hardware from overheating, they kept the workspace tens of degrees cooler than any other room in the building. You only knew you were close when a draught of cold air slapped you in the face like the blast from an ice-cream truck’s freezer.

This visit I was lost before I stepped off the elevator. Nothing looked familiar. Even the large number five painted on the facing wall had been replaced with lines drawn to suggest a running horse. Care had been taken over the flowing mane and flying fore-hooves. Since no arctic chill was forthcoming, I began trying doors at random. In the third hallway, the second one on the left opened on a hundred scribes in black silk pajamas hard at work. Each sat cross-legged at a knee-high table. Each brandished a fine-pointed brush. Not one looked

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up from his copying as I entered. Other than the sounds of brushstrokes on rice paper and water falling dropwise into a tiny pool fringed with delicate bamboo, the room was silent. I left the chamber of echoes and climbed the stairs back to my floor as quietly as I could.

On Tuesday, Huang replaced the coffee stations with tea breaks twice a day. Judy grumbled at first about being put in charge of the tea service—it had been easier changing filters a few times a day—but she quieted down after a few words from Huang. Actually, I wondered that there weren't more complaints about the switch from java to tea. A story told me by Stanton Kilter from Copywriting went some way toward explaining why. It seems that as soon as Gary Sordquist, another copywriter, showed up for work with two *muy grandes*, word came from upstairs that the big boss wanted to see him. Gary took a big gulp from one of the containers before setting off. Later that morning, Bev Fotheringay called all the copywriters into the conference room to announce that Gary was off to corporate to work on a new campaign and that he might be gone for some time. When they returned to their workspace, all signs of Gary, including the Starbucks, had vanished. Stanton tried calling Gary at home that evening. His wife answered sounding frightened and distraught. She managed to get out that Gary couldn't come to the phone, breathing in sharply the way people do after they've been crying a lot.

Even after Gary was disappeared, I kept a few jars of Folgers freeze-dried stashed among toner cartridges and ledgers, shifting them from one

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inconspicuous supply cabinet to another between morning and post-lunch fixes. I wasn't being defiant or overconfident about not getting caught.

During the dismal two weeks that began with Phoenix-Peggy moving out and ended with Huang arriving from corporate, I survived on a diet of Folgers and jerky. By the end of the first week, I decided that I was all about purity. Not a day after I stopped taking milk and sweetener with my instant coffee, Leroy the cat revealed the spiritual hypocrisy of rehydration by upsetting a full mug with its steaming contents all over *The Watchtower*. Half an hour before, I'd dug out of my jeans the dollar forty seven it took to make two Witnesses go away. Had they but known that *Jehovah's Kingdom* would soon be inundated by a dark tide redolent with the rich aroma of mountain-grown beans. Would they plead that He could still bring an end to all wickedness with this sodden monthly? Would all wickedness stop snickering long enough to admit His smittings?

I cannot say whether the jagged little granules of Folgers were the best part of waking up on all those grim mornings after Phoenix-Peggy left. But until the first crystals dissolved on my tongue, turning it to ashes and filling my mouth with thorns, I couldn't think of any reason to wake up at all. I didn't need to steel myself so against a bitterness whose sole parents and inhuman originals were the impersonal laws of organic chemistry and the mindless interactions among alkaloids. There was nothing in it to compare to envy or rage or deepest resentment. To take pain at the hands of one who intends that you should suffer; to countenance a barefaced

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second betrayal rather than face head-on your dazed grief at stumbling upon a shamefaced first; to endure being forgiven by one who should be begging your forgiveness: these are the terms on which living becomes unbearable.

Five weeks after his arrival, Huang announced that corporate wished to reward us all for our hard work. For two hours every afternoon until the lunar festival we would be free to devote ourselves to supervised contemplation and exercise. At great expense, corporate had flown in Huang's own teacher to guide us. Master Lin had agreed to conduct a three-hour introductory session that afternoon. Huang failed to mention that Master Lin's burly assistants carried staves of the hardest oak, which they did not scruple to apply to the back of the legs of employees who tried to mask their disobedience with signs of mental distraction and physical fatigue. When the older and out-of-shape protested, Huang called an end to the session with slightly more than an hour to go. He pleaded with us not to blame Master Lin for his overzealous disciples. He would personally explain to the assistants how things worked in corporate America.

Huang did not attend class the following day, but his word with the Master's assistants must have done some good. While the beatings continued, they didn't last nearly as long. On the other hand, their shorter duration did nothing to lessen their brutality. In another week, we were down to less than half the original complement. Assistants disappeared as Master Lin grew pleased with the progress of the remaining students. He rarely called us dogs

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anymore. We learned not to inquire after those who stopped attending. Almost the last to have his name scratched off the roster turned up late one night at St. Bodo's hospital with brain injuries. The doctors watched him slip into a coma and placed him in the care of a head-trauma nurse whose wife's cousin worked at our branch. That cousin had a cousin who thought she recognized Huang from high school. She couldn't say for sure though because the person she was thinking of wasn't Chinese.

Midway through his tenure at branch, Huang gathered everyone into the large conference room. His manner was grave. "I have sad news for everyone. One of your colleagues has seen fit to act against the good of the whole." The doors opened and an accountant named Gig Mallard staggered into the room pushed from behind by one of Master Lin's assistants. He knelt before us while the assistant loomed over him. Gig Mallard spoke: "I confess to stealing from petty cash." A sharp blow to the back of his head stunned him. "From the common stock, I mean. I have made restitution. I ask your forgiveness."

Huang's voice was cold: "The criminal repents for his crime and craves your forgiveness. He understands that your forgiveness will not save him from punishment."

"You said all I had to do was confess, return the cash, and say I was sorry," Gig said.

"I said that in return for your willingness to comply with these measures, you would receive swift punishment." On Huang's signal, Master Lin's last remaining assistant and Doug Watkins from Community Outreach dragged Gig from the room.

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Her mother called to tell me that the seizures had stopped and that Phoenix-Peggy had been transferred from St. Bodo's to Glade Manor, a nursing home generally reserved for the destitute. Citing unauthorized private use of a product under development, Baby Pro had refused to pay for Peggy's care and treatment. At first, Mrs. Schnitzler had made up for the shortfall, but private hospital costs being what they were she was running out of money fast. A kindly hospital administrator arranged for her to place Peggy under Glade Manor's care at public expense. Residual toxins left Peggy confused and weak. I asked Mrs. Schnitzler if she thought Peggy would like a visit from me. She said I shouldn't expect anything, that Peggy was changed from the Peggy I knew. She said how proud Peggy had always been of her figure.

I pocketed the mirror and set off for Huang's offices nine floors up. If the mirror had contributed to Phoenix-Peggy's condition, if the damage might be reversed, I wanted to know. I made my way past a flower-covered gate and down a narrow hallway with a marble screen at its halfway point. Carved beams ran the length of the passage's ceiling from which hung cages of finches, thrushes, and wrens. On the other side of the screen, I glimpsed a large court lined with painted columns. An old man wrapped in blue silk opened a hidden door and led me onto a terrace. Huang was studying an astronomical chart tracing the moon's course through the heavens. Beside him stood an ancient astrologer who was calculating lunar trajectories with an abacus. Huang nodded at me and sent the stargazer

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away. “I can see, Ken the Bear, that your soul has been restored to the path to health.”

“I wanted to ask to you about that. I’ve been looking into the reverse side of the mirror as you told me to—though sometimes I look into the other side too.”

Huang frowned and shook his head as if pretending to scold me then smiled. “Of course what you have done will not always yield the most desirable result, but you feel better nevertheless.”

“I do—“

“—but you are concerned about the one whose image appears in the wrong side of the mirror. You believe the mirror to be responsible for her difficulties. I ask you, Ken the Bear: did she show concern for you when she invited another man into her bed?”

“Is she going to die?”

“It is not for me to say. The mirror’s power is strong, but if she dies it will not be the fault of the mirror. I am sorry. I may concern *myself* only with the health of friends and of those who depend on me.”

“If you could see how much she has suffered....”

“I can do nothing for her.”

“Won’t you at least take the mirror back?”

“I cannot take back what was never mine.”

“Please take it.”

“I cannot take from you what is yours.”

“I don’t want her to die.”

“It is not up to you. I am sorry, Ken the Bear, but it is time for you to go.”

Actually, it was time for Huang to go. He had to catch a flight to corporate in time for the launch of the *Sea Dragon* the following day, when a pretty

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Chinese maiden girl would break a bottle of rice wine on the junk's bow in a ceremony accompanied by gongs and firecrackers meant to ward off demons specializing in wrecks and storms at sea. After cruising up the Eastern seaboard and down the St. Lawrence, the *Sea Dragon*, gods and demons willing, would arrive at branch in time for the Festival of the Eighth Moon.

A nautical affairs writer for the *Newport Shipping News* observed that while the junk sailed slowly and sat rather deep in the water, "her hull is a brilliant red edged in white and gold. A terrifying red-and-yellow painted dragon coils and uncoils along both sides of the poop. The junk's mainsail is yellow, her mizzen sail vermilion. A phoenix adorns her carved stern."

Huang himself had hired the crew: captain, engineer, radar man, seven crewmen, cook, and cabin boy. He'd even put aboard a mascot pair of white kittens, since just one would have made the total going to sea thirteen. Shortly after launch, a crewman tripped over one of the kittens on deck, fell down an unbattened hatch and broke his ankle. Huang's return flight had been in the air for less than half an hour when the *Sea Dragon* headed back to port.

Two weeks later, she hit rough weather on Lake Michigan. All that day, the junk made good time cutting through the swells and she was halfway across by nightfall. At a minute before midnight, her bow scuds over the remotest coordinates on the lake and, for a moment, she's as far from shore in every direction as it's possible for a vessel to be. At a minute after midnight, record atmospheric electricity

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overloads the receiving circuits of the *Sea Dragon's* radio rendering it useless in an emergency.

The heralds of such an emergency appear at once as white crests and the east wind coming on strong, strong enough to drown the captain's orders to his scrambling crew. The crew makes to deny canvas-room to the rowdy wind anyway, while the captain sets the pumps on high. But the storm is on them and the winds drive from every direction, angering the lashing waves. The *Sea Dragon's* sides and boards strain under the weight of the swells whose spray licks the lowering clouds as the waves themselves collide over the deck with the booming of thunder. The pumps fail as the generator ebbs with dying surge.

Lightning saws through the storm's black wall. By its serrated light, crew and captain make out the great black arcs of water crashing down upon the junk, driving her down deep into a trough. The water sweeps the deck clear, driving the drowned crew down to the lake bottom.

The captain holds on for another moment. There's only enough time before the main mast shatters and the rudder snaps off in a heaping swell to say his wife's name and plead that the waves might carry his body to where she sleeps awaiting his return. Given the heaving of splintering deck, the moaning of the cracking ribs below, it's only reasonable that his prayer, like his mind, would run off-course. Whom the gods would drown, they first make rave. The junk rolls hard to starboard and loses herself in the trough, loses her captain in a bursting wave whose rough edge cleaves his heart and buries his drowning head. The *Sea Dragon* breaks up.

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With the lunar celebrations a week away, Huang made a big announcement. Buses waiting downstairs would take us to our new offices across town on the top floor of the seventy-three-story Lunar Arts Tower. A glass skylight in place of the ceiling would provide a clear view of the night sky for those not inclined to make their way up to the Moon Terrace.

Huang followed the big announcement with others less winning. Traditional dress would now be mandatory for all employees. We would receive a supply of good brushes and ink. Prohibited: the use of PCs, ballpoint pens, and pencils. All would be required to attend a class called *Classical Chinese Calligraphy for Dummies* in the great hall. On Sunday evening, the new hours of operation would take effect: work would start each evening at nine and end at five A.M.

After the big news, Mrs. Schnitzler called to say that if I meant to visit Peggy I should probably get to Glade Manor sooner rather than later. She said we should pray for a miracle.

“Do you think she’ll recognize me?”

“It’s hard to say if you’ll recognize her, Kenny. She’s so changed.”

That morning the mirror had gone missing. I searched for it again under a pile of memos and checked the desk drawer once more without success. Co-workers began rehearsing the lunar incantations in small groups. I ducked into the freight elevator and caught the 2:10 bus to Glade Manor. Phoenix-Peggy had been sent back to St. Bodo’s for an emergency tracheotomy. I was back at my desk

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within the hour. An inter-office envelope waited for me. The little box for “sender” was blank. I withdrew the mirror from a cardboard sleeve and locked it away in my desk without looking at it.

Another envelope postmarked Syracuse, New York, waited for me as well. *Oakleaves of 1993*, the Fayetteville-Manlius High School Yearbook, slipped from my hand and fell open as it hit the floor. On page 131, a sheepish Huang stared out from between Rhonda Delfini and Roy “Mack” DeMint, from behind tinted aviators and a #2 pencil mustache, but there was absolutely no mistaking him. His name was Anthony DeMarzio. His memberships included the Arbor Day Committee, the Ceramics Club, and Model UN. His senior quote read: *“I don’t matter. You don’t matter. What matters is your uniform.”* —*Pete Townshend*. During my lunch hour, I made some long-distance calls from the phone booth over on Decatur across from the Chinese laundry.

At lunch the next day, Josh Dembowski from Compliance told me about Huang’s binoculars. It had gotten round that each lens transmitted a different live image. Through the right lens, the viewer saw the most distant object in the universe, the quasar GRB 090423, as seen through the most powerful orbiting telescope. Through the left lens, the viewer saw the closest object, the viewer’s own retina as seen by an ophthalmologist. One day last week, a flower maiden looked through the binoculars while Huang stepped out of his office. When she tried to return them to their stand on Huang’s desk, she missed both stand and desk by a mile. Moments

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later, Huang returned to find the binoculars lying, undamaged somehow, under a low stone bench near the wall. A few feet away, the flower maiden seemed to be rehearsing a bizarre dance in which her feet despaired of ever finding the floor again. Huang ordered her out of the office, but her steps were so tentative that she still hadn't reached the door half an hour later. Word was that one look through Huang's binoculars had robbed her of all sense of distance. She no longer possessed any idea of how close or far she stood from anyone or anything else.

Where the telescope ends, there begins the microscope. I'll give you a buck if you can tell me which nineteenth-century French novelist wrote that. Time's up. Victor Hugo. You guessed Jules Verne, didn't you? He would have been my first guess too. The quotation isn't meant to comment on the anecdote, especially since the latter turns on the profound changes to perception wrought by profound changes of scale, whereas Hugo imagines a seamless transition between zooming in and zooming out untroubled by neither profundity nor mutability. Of the remark, Hugo's harshest critic Michel-Ange Naine rightly declared: *this merely ingenious assertion does not begin to account for the terrifying leap of faith one must take to trust that any of this is real.* Still, the statement implies a question—which instrument commands the better view?—and a choice, as if one could at will or on whim lose the forest for the trees or vice versa—clearly our flower maiden had lost both—or, if you like, confuse the highest redshift glare for the reflected pinpoint beam of an eye doctor's ophthalmoscope.

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One consequence of years of watchfulness is my inability to focus on anything for very long. Since I'm neither partial to any single thing I see nor to any single perspective from which to see it, I cannot imagine being tempted to look into Huang's binoculars, and Josh's anecdote holds little interest for me. See what you can make of it.

Red silk banners welcoming the Eighth Moon have appeared throughout our offices and on the Moon Terrace. I've stopped looking into the mirror. The other morning, I dreamed that I'd dropped it off a bridge only to find it on my desk the following morning. I've thought about leaving it on the bus that takes me to Phoenix-Peggy's nursing home—her mother had been right to wonder if I would recognize her—but I'm convinced that it would find its way back.

Preparations for the lunar festival were nearly complete by the time I showed up for work yesterday evening. I arrived half an hour late and received a typically severe warning from Master Lin's assistant: a deafening box to the ears. What good would it have done to plead that I'd been visiting Phoenix-Peggy? Victim of terrible change, she seemed more unresponsive and further beyond help each day. As I held her frozen hand, I thought about telling her I forgave her, that I still loved her. That even sounds like a lie. Actually, I thought about asking if she forgave me, if she still loved me, but said nothing. What business had I asking anything of her?

I've never seen an evening sky like the one I dreamed of this morning. I'd read about one like it once. In my dream, evening is spread out across the

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sky like a patient etherized upon a table. She's laid out on her gurney, colorless and gaunt, suspended as in an anesthetic mist. Then her skin tone gradually returns. A little color comes back to her face. Soon she is rising from the table, still under the influence of the ether, but supporting herself with a hand on the gurney. Her hospital gown falls away. She smiles a little goofily, biting down lightly on her lower lip. Her eyes are half-closed but she wears an expression of quiet exaltation.

"Hey, Ken. It's me. Peggy. I've become the evening sky somehow. I'm a goddess and I'm naked and it feels very cool. Look." She picks up a lively little cloud in the shape of a kitten. "There are two of them. The other one's shy."

Peggy puts down the cloud-kitten and envelops me in her soft pink, rose, and orange light. I feel lifted up and joyous and all I want to do is curl up and fall sleep in her warm vaporous arms. She holds me until dawn when she kisses me awake and tells me to meet her where the sun sets over the vast reserves at the western edge of town expressly established for this sort of rendezvous.

Huang assembled everyone for the last time two hours before the start of the Festival of the Eighth Moon. He said how proud he was of us. He said we should give ourselves a round of applause. Our applause soon turned into the rhythmic clapping you would expect to hear at the Beijing Opera. Huang ran through the last-minute details once again, but I'd already stopped listening.

Perhaps that box to the ears impaired my judgment, because I followed my own worst advice and

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returned to my cubicle to gaze into the mirror. The skeleton yawned. With something like last hope, I flipped the mirror over and searched the glass for Phoenix's image. The empty mirror told me everything I needed to know, but I caught the next bus for Glade Manor anyway. I got there in time to watch a nurse strip the bedding from what had been her mattress, making it ready for the next terminal case.

Why is it only now I'm tempted to abandon my simple past for a less easygoing tense, one more vigilant and less accepting, to reveal all that happened from the moment Huang appeared outside my cubicle to the moment I lost her to his mirror? What is wanted is a more wary telling, less forgiving of the shadows he let fall over our branch, of that darkest midnight shadow he let fall over her. As if that would bring her back.

Out on the Moon Terrace, strange music played. From a rampart, I gazed down at the mobbed streets below. Even from that height, I could make out dancers steering a long yellow dragon with poles to mimic the river spirit's sinuous windings. There followed a procession of eunuchs hoisting banners with gold and silver fish, twirling parasols adorned with painted butterflies and blossoms, and waving great fans of peacock feathers and pheasant plumes. The eunuchs had accompanied the Presidential Concubine on her journey from the Capital. The great personage herself came into view borne aloft in a gold sedan chair by eight massive bearers who maintained a dignified pace all the way to the entrance of the Lunar Arts Tower. A step less stately was out of the question: well-wishers with flowers and gifts ran into the path

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of her amply cushioned carriage and even right up to the traveling chair itself.

In the Courtesan-in-Chief's wake, pallid color-guardsmen shouldered furled ensigns and pressed on dully against night's advance. With each stride, they covered less ground and soon their steps slowed to a funeral march. Behind them, a dozen flame-robed men moved forward in loose array, waving pennants emblazoned with the likeness of a phoenix encircled in a wreath of flame. They sang strange words set to stranger music:

The Phoenix play on their terrace.
The Phoenix are gone.
On and alone the river flows.
The Moon haunts their terrace.
The Phoenix are gone.

In my bewilderment, I must have leapt at the first available means of writing off so unequivocal a sign, though the first appearance of the painted flock was no less ghastly for my having blamed it on ghastly coincidence.

Of course, I was only dimly aware of the Phoenix winging their way toward me through hoops of fire as the banners came fully into view. By then, mental shock waves had abridged the contents of my brain even as they adjusted its focus defaults to high blur. Yet not even these self-protective measures could keep me from stumbling upon evidence for the mind's unlimited capacity for fucking with itself just in time to arrive at this horrible recognition: at its most vacant and confused, the mind remains the mightiest of receivers and the subtlest

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of tuners for picking up those lowest of low-end frequencies assigned to grief.

That's right, chicos and chicas. You're tuned to W-O-E. We're talking way past rock bottom on your radio dial. [Sound effect: someone saying "OOOPS!" followed by the sound of a cherished and irreplaceable object being dropped into the abyss, followed by the sound of said object falling endlessly through empty space.] This just in: Memo to Ken the Bear from the Goddess of Disillusion and Mr. Bones. Re: Resurrection. Phoenix is dead. Other reports greatly exaggerated. [Sound effect: sound of a foghorn like the deep cry of a great lonesome beast, more lament than call, followed by the sound of an empty sea where no ships come.] Ouch! That's gotta hurt. Still, everyone loves the Goddess. And, oh, that Mr. Bones. We all know how he gets sometimes. Hey, Ken the Bear. Bet you don't remember the phrase that pays. Now, listen up, cuz I'm only gonna say it once more. W-O-E is me! Hope you got it that time. [Sound effect: sound of an irate Grizzly bellowing, in hot pursuit of prey followed by sound of an old lady, fleeing, out of breath, saying, "Oh my!" followed by sound of man saying, "You kids seen Grandma?"] OK, but this is absolutely the last time: W-O-E is me! It's the praise that sways. It's the gaze that preys. And speaking of the phase that flays, let's turn it over to Huang with tonight's lunar report. Come in, Huang. Ground Control to Major Huang. Houston, we have an issue: Huang has left the capsule. And he's floating in a most unusual way . . .

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“How different the stars look today, Ken the Bear,” Huang said. “I am happy that you have joined us on the Moon Terrace.” He searched my eyes for any clue in the ruby light that drifted down to us from a sea surface of paper lanterns. I shifted my face into neutral. He drew his lips together, lowering and lifting his chin in a way that fell short of a nod. He then turned abruptly and started moving in the direction of the reviewing stand.

“Was it worth it, Huang?” I called after him. If he heard me he kept walking as if he hadn’t. “Hey, DeMarzio, I’m asking you a question.”

He stopped, turned around, and waited for me to speak again.

“That’s right, Anthony. I figured this would be as good a time as any to ask you why you felt the need to present yourself as a repairer of souls. I don’t know how you did the trick with the mirror, but the most compelling part of the act was your patter. You told me the mirror couldn’t be faulted for Phoenix’s dying, but you were intent on leaving me with the impression that you were not without influence in matters concerning my life and her death.”

“Ken the Bear, I understand. You are in mourning—”

“Why was it so important to you that I blame her? Is there another reason why you linked her image to the cause of my sleeplessness? I had trouble sleeping before we started dating.”

“You must try to understand that my effectiveness as a consultant lies in my capacity to create loyalty and faithfulness and solidarity among those with whom I work. I had to focus everyone’s at-

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tention on instances of disloyalty and faithlessness and nonconformity both at the office and in one's personal life."

"So if you could purge Don Plastero, Gary Sorquist, and Gig Mallard, if you could make Phoenix fade from my life as you made her image fade from the mirror, everything else would fall into place?"

"It just worked out that way."

"You worked it out that way."

"Truly I am saddened by the news of her death, but as you say, I had—the mirror had nothing to do with that. Would you expose me and endanger all that we have achieved together?" He cast a sad gaze about the Moon Terrace as if taking in the extravagant flotsam of his wrecked dream.

I handed him a paper sleeve which read: *Frank Ruffle, a middle-aged man slightly disenchanted with his work as a Greyhound ticketing agent, prepared this one-way travel voucher to Syracuse for you.* "Looks like you've got a bus to catch, Anthony."

I walked him only as far as the express elevator to the lobby. He kept his finger on the button bearing the character meaning *Open*.

"What about the Goddess?" he asked.

"Everything is ready for her big entrance. You just won't be here to see it." I brushed his finger out of the way to push the button bearing the character meaning *Close* and waited as the doors seamlessly shut him inside.

Fireworks capped off the last of the lunar incantations. The smoke cleared and the bright goddess began her cool progress across the sky. From the streets below rose the chorus of the "Hymn to the

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Eighth Moon.” The voices around me on the rooftop joined the voices from below. All over the city, bells rang and sirens wailed.

As the Eighth Moon was shining her mythic light upon all her children above and below, I recalled hearing that morning that a dead white kitten had washed ashore on Mackinac Island. I thought of the lost crew of the *Sea Dragon*. I thought of drowned Peggy. I’d had enough lunar joy for one night.

I made my way downstairs to the great window at the end of the office for one more look at the mobbed streets below. The silence of the throng rose even to this height. The whole sky brightened immeasurably and against my brow I felt a strange pressure, the hand of an evangelist dripping with grace like honey. I turned my back to the glass in time to watch the far wall dissolve in blinding light. When sight returned, I saw my shadow, the sole prisoner of all that radiance, frozen in arctic whiteness. To spring him, I simply had to walk across the office to where the Moon would not be able invoke her ancestral right to gaze on whomever she pleased.

I met the lunar incarcerate at the edge of dark and light and gave him his liberty. I crossed the border myself and waited to see if the moon would press her ancient prerogative. Except for the glow that filled the office on the bright side of the line—a warning, no doubt—she offered no further shows of force. Wasn’t there a custom of freeing one prisoner on royal anniversaries?

I open my desk drawer and stare down into the mirror. I see nothing—not even my own image—in its dark glass. Mr. Bones has left out. Even the

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inscription from the captive Goddess of Disillusionment has vanished. I flip the dull circle over. Both sides of the mirror have lost their powers of reflection. The Phoenix are gone.

Waiting at reception for the ink to dry on my resignation, I reach for a still-warm fax marked urgent: a consultant would be dropping by to answer questions about the new health plan. I hear the hum of the ascending elevator car and the chime signaling its arrival. The doors slide open and the new visitor from corporate slips out. He sports a navy pinstripe suit and a grotesque ebony mask. In one hand, he carries the bloody carcass of a headless cock; in the other, he clutches a churning sack of vipers.

Patricia Nicholson

The Keys

The sky was dark, a silvery slice of moon the only light. A strong southerly wind had come up and was gusting through the trees, throwing grotesque shadows onto the road. In sharp contrast, Jennifer's happiness was nearly tangible and she smiled to herself as she pulled sharply into her driveway.

She had just dropped Daisy off at the kennel and had picked up some supplies for the work the painters would be doing in her absence. She was behind schedule and didn't want to miss Jon's phone call.

Quickly, getting out of the car, she glanced up at the filmy bank of clouds now obscuring the small arc of moon. Without Daisy's presence she was suddenly uneasy. As she opened the back of the car to take out the paint, she glimpsed Joey slouching by, his white hair reflecting in the glow of the street light. He was an odd man, but an accomplished gardener whose specialty was roses, a talent that was valued highly by two of her neighbors. She waved a half-hearted greeting to which he uttered his usual grunt in reply. *Strange fellow*, she thought. She often sensed that he was watching her, and his furtive smile made her uncomfortable. She would have been more wary of him if he wasn't such a familiar figure in the neighborhood. No one had ever mentioned having a problem with him and she hesitated to start conjecture that was probably unwarranted.

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She hit the remote lock button on the keys and turned toward the house. Her arms full, she almost tripped on an uneven paving stone in the walkway. She managed to open the door to the screened porch and, balancing her cumbersome load on her hip, put the key into the lock on the front door. She didn't notice Joey as he slipped into the shadows of the thick hedge at the end of her drive. He had pulled his dark hoodie over his head.

She was preoccupied with the turn her life had taken and, to compound her distraction, she had definitely overburdened herself with her purchases. In her haste not to miss Jon's call, she didn't want to make two trips—*a lazy man's load*—she could hear her grandfather's voice. Her parcels were so ungainly that rather than put them down and pick them up again she left the keys in the lock as she staggered to the kitchen.

The phone was ringing and she scrambled from under her load to answer.

"Hi, babe," the familiar voice sounded in her ear. She loved being called babe. No one had ever called her babe before.

"Hi, you, it's so good to hear your voice."

"You sound a bit frazzled, everything okay?"

"Everything's good. I just got in from dropping Daisy at the kennel and finishing a few errands. I'm in for the night and all that's left is to pack and I'll be ready for the flight in the morning."

"Okay, I'll let you settle in and get sorted. I just wanted to let you know I arrived safely. Sweet dreams and I'll meet your plane tomorrow. Love you."

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“Love you more.” She hung up slowly and stood quietly savoring the moment.

The phone rang again.

“Just wanted to say ‘I love you’ one more time.”

“I’m counting the hours. See you soon.”

She, the scoffer of class reunions and all things that looked backward instead of forward had, several months ago, been reunited with her first love. She and Jon had dated for three years when they were in university but neither had been ready to settle down. They had parted when Jon went on to graduate school, and she left to travel, and ended up living in Paris.

She had written to Jon once during her time abroad. The only address she had was his mother’s. Some months later she had received a reply. She remembered verbatim how it began.

Dear Jenny,

It was great to hear from you. Sorry for the delay in replying but my mother waited for me to visit as she wasn’t quite sure whether it was kosher to forward a letter from an old girlfriend to a married man.

She had a pang of regret when she read the letter, but was not surprised. Moving on had been a mutual decision. She had toyed with the idea of sending her best wishes; instead she had kept the letter for a while but never replied.

She had eventually returned from Europe, met Gavin and was married after a short courtship. Their life had been happy and fulfilled until he succumbed to pancreatic cancer and died shortly after Jennifer’s

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fortieth birthday. That was eighteen years ago. In the ensuing years there had been a couple of dalliances, but nothing that was worth pursuing until six months ago. That's when she and Jon, divorced for several years, had run into each other at the Toronto International Arts Festival. They had both pursued their interest in the arts. Jon was the curator of a major gallery in Vancouver. Jennifer lived just outside Boston and was the poetry editor for a university press.

She was on her way back to the kitchen to put away her purchases and lock up the house when the phone rang again.

Laughing she picked it up, "If you keep phoning, I'll never be ready to leave in the morning."

"Jen, it's me." She recognized her friend Carol's voice. "I just called to wish you safe travels and a great trip. I want details when you get back."

"Can you believe this is happening? Whoever would have thought at my age?"

"You deserve it, Jen."

"Thanks, Carol. I still have a couple of things to take care of, then a long hot shower and to bed. This is one flight I am not going to miss. I'll call you when I get back."

Jennifer went back to the kitchen. She missed the familiar presence of Daisy. She placed the paint on the counter in easy view for the workmen, turned the deadbolt on the front door and went down the hall to her bedroom. The suitcase was on the bed and she tossed in the last couple of things. Quickly undressing, she made her way into the shower. Turning the water on full strength, she felt the stress

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of the day slough off. Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough. She was meeting Jon in Miami and from there they were taking a leisurely cruise of the eastern Caribbean Islands.

As she turned off the shower, she suddenly remembered. *Rats! I left the keys in the door. Dumb thing to do!*

She dried her feet so as not to slip on the tiled floor and, quickly pulling on her housecoat and tying it loosely around her waist, padded down the darkened hallway.

She opened the door to retrieve the keys, but they were not to be found. She turned on the light and, tightening her housecoat around her, carefully examined the floor of the porch. She looked on the floor on the inside of the door. She went back into the kitchen and looked on the counters where she had first put her purchases.

No keys.

She closed and locked the door and went back to the bedroom. She dumped her handbag on the bed and searched through the pockets of the suit jacket she had been wearing.

No keys.

She slipped on a pair of shoes and went out to the driveway. They couldn't be there; she had them to open the door and she hadn't gone back out since. She repeated the search again. This time she took everything that was still in bags out, she emptied her purse again and went to look beside the telephone.

No keys.

She was both exasperated and nervous. Where could they be? She decided that the only thing she

The Keys

could do was have the locks changed while she was away. She made a mental note to ask Carol to check with the workmen to make sure they got new keys. Maybe she should call Carol and spend the night there. She was over reacting. They were somewhere on the porch. They must have fallen behind one of the plants or under a chaise. She would leave herself time to look in the morning. She got into bed. Before she turned off the light she reached over and picked up the phone.

“Carol, sorry you weren’t asleep, but I’ve a small problem.

“What’s up?”

“I don’t know what I’ve done with my house and car keys. I thought I’d left them in the door when I came in but, when I remembered to look, they weren’t there. I’ve searched high and low but no luck. If I don’t find them in the morning, do you think you can drop me at the airport? I hate to leave the car without knowing where they are. Sam from the office has a spare set and the plan is for him to pick it up at the airport and use it while I am away. I’ll just email him to get it at the house instead.”

“No problem. I’ll pick you up at nine-thirty. That should give you plenty of time. Let me know if you find them.”

“You’re the best. I’m sure they’ll turn up when I’ve more light in the porch but, if you don’t hear from me, I’ll be ready at nine-thirty.”

Hanging up, she turned out the light and willed herself into an uneasy sleep. A squall blew in during the night and she tossed and turned as the rain beat against her windows and long flashes of lightning

The Keys

illuminated the room. She awoke an hour before her alarm. The keys were her first thought.

What could I have done with them?

The sun was just coming up as she went down the hall and pulled open the front door to have another look on the porch. The keys were in the lock where she had left them.

I'm not nuts! They weren't there when I looked last night.

She yanked them out of the door and closed in swiftly, engaging the deadbolt at the same time.

She quickly dialed Carol's number. "Found them."

"Where?" Carol's sleep-filled voice answered.

"It's the strangest thing. They were in the lock where I left them. But I swear they weren't there last night."

"It really must be love," Carol laughed.

"Guess so, but I looked more than once."

"Do you still want a ride to the airport?"

"No, it's okay. I didn't email Sam last night so the plan for him to pick up the car is still on."

"Okay, have a fabulous time and call me when you get back."

Jennifer hung up the phone slowly and quickly made her bed. She finished dressing and putting on her make up. She was still puzzled. *I know those keys weren't there last night. I know, know, know it!*

She wheeled her suit case down the hall, picked up her tickets and passport and stuffed them in the side pocket of her carry on. She carefully locked the door and went down the walkway to her car.

She stowed the suitcase in the back and opened the driver's side. As she climbed behind the wheel

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she glanced over at the passenger seat.

On the seat beside her, with the drops of last night's rain still on them, were two perfect white roses.

Elke Feuer

For the Love of Jazz

Prologue

CHICAGO 1959

Please meet me at the Park. It's important! Lola Johnson pulls her knee-length coat closer to her petite frame and suppresses the tickle of fear at the base of her spine. If it had been anyone else, she'd have refused to meet this late at night, but she couldn't ignore her friend's urgent request.

Cool night air crackling and wind rustling through the leaves are the only noises. Visitors are gone, leaving dark empty walkways and overflowing garbage bins. Crunching leaves and strange noises in the black distance start her heart racing. *This is a bad idea.*

In the distance, she sees her rendezvous and smiles in welcome and relief. When the distance between them closes, there is no smile in return. Normally cool, but inviting eyes curve with menace. Her eyes widen in surprise when a gun is pointed at her. Before she can scream, the sting and burn of flesh seize her, as bullets from the outstretched gun enter her shoulder once, twice. She falls to her knees and leaves crunch beneath her hands.

"Why?" she looks up at her friend in disbelief.

Silent hate glares back at her from narrowed eyes and another bullet from the gun to her leg.

"Help!" she screams, her gaze shifting frantically around the park, down lonely sidewalks. No one

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is coming to rescue her, no matter how much she wishes and hopes they will.

Another shot fires and hits her other leg and Lola knows she is meant to suffer before she dies. She raises her hand in a frail attempt to stop the bullets, but it doesn't make a difference. The gun fires again and blood pools around her and the icy ground.

Hot tears spill as she thinks of William. If she'd listened to her intuition, she could be lying in the crook of his arm, spooned against him instead of dying in a dirty area of the park like a stray animal abandoned by its owner.

She doesn't want to die and leave him or the happiness she'd found! She screams until her lungs burn with the sensation they will burst from the strain of each deep breath she takes to make them.

She looks up and anger boils the blood still running through her veins. She longs to reach out and take the gun, and shoot. Have them feel the pain in every muscle of her body. To feel the agony of regret: words left unspoken, unshared kisses, and things left undone. To know the fear of the unknown that lies in the blanket of darkness swirling in the distance, and the anguish of the unanswered question: Why?

She remembers pleasant conversations, smiles and the laughter they shared, the friendship that was offered. It was all a lie!

Heartache crushes her, dulling the pain of her physical wounds. "This isn't over," she vows adamantly, even as life begins to drain from her weak frame.

"You're over," was spat back at her.

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Images of the moment she met William, their first kiss, when he held her, and made love to her flickers like a movie before her closed eyes. She hates that she won't share the rest of this life with him, bear his children, and grow old together. She takes comfort in knowing she will see him again, hold him again, love him again, and no one will take it from her the way they are now. She clings to the hope she could wait for William until they are together again. Yes, she will wait.

Muffled sounds in the background fade into the dark. She's rolled and the rush of cold water hits her skin. She falls lower and deeper into the endless pit of dark water and a silent calm washes over the length of her as water seeps into her body, taking away her last speck of life.

Chapter 1

CHICAGO

50 Years Later

"This is it," Josie Fagan took a deep breath, "moment of truth."

She got out of her car, ran shaky fingers through her curly, black hair, and smiled when it tickle the back of her neck. The curls would return to their original state, but the gesture gave her comfort.

Her heartbeat escalated with each step she took to the chestnut brick house. She felt a connection the moment she opened the attachment on the email, advertising it for renovations. She'd dreamed about it and a man standing in the upstairs windows waving her inside. She looked up, but no one was there.

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Emotional connections, as her father used to call it, were old friends to her. She grinned and made her way along the sidewalk to the crimson front door. Her hand shook as she reached out and rang the doorbell.

When the door opened, she had to look up to meet cool emerald eyes and neatly combed ebony hair. If it not for his suit, she'd have guessed he was a construction worker with his strong square jaw line, and shoulders that couldn't be contained behind his expensive, navy suit. Neither could the icicles of recognition that jumped across her vertebrae.

She extended her hand. "Patrick Pullman?"

He took her hand. Memories sparkled in his daunting stare. He released her hand reluctantly, as though breaking his grasp would stop the wheels turning in his mind.

"Yes. Josie Fagan?"

She nodded, ignoring his inspection. Her interest was what lay behind his tall frame. She was about to see the inside of the house whose outside had taunted her the last two days. From childhood, she felt connections to people and things. Her father called it a gift. The intensity of the connection to this house surprised her. Other than jazz music, no connection was as strong.

He gestured her inside.

When she stepped into the entryway, warmth surrounded her like the favorite coverlet her mother gave on her eighteenth birthday. It started in the pit of her stomach and spread prickles over the surface of her skin. It was the thrill of waiting for the sun to set, then watching it explode into brilliant hues

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of red, yellow, and gold. It was being curled up with her favorite book by the warm glow of a fireplace and the faint sounds of jazz in the background. It was home.

“Thanks for coming on short notice.” He came to stand next to her in the entryway.

“My pleasure,” her voice creaked and her body trembled with the sensations awakened by the house.

He motioned her to the next room. “I’ve selected three restoration architects to bid for this job. I’m looking for someone to handle all aspects of the job from the restoration to providing design ideas. I will expect a design and estimate from you by the end of the week.”

His cut business tone was a dose of cold water, reminder her why she was here.

“I’ll check the structural integrity, the electrics and plumbing to see what can be salvaged or needs replacement. I’ll ask you about changes you have in mind, along with any ideas you have design wise.”

“Let’s get started.” He walked into the next room.

Thick mahogany moldings trimmed the middle and tops of each corner of the room, and brown water stain crept half way down one of the corner walls, peeling the faded wallpaper, a hint at plumbing problems. The imposing white mantel framed fireplace in the middle of the room, was a looming fire hazard. Built-in mahogany bookcases with glass shelves flanked the fireplace. She wanted to laugh when she saw the television from the seventies, along with the mocha recliner positioned carefully before it; she’d stepped back in time.

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She moved towards the chair and grazed one hand over the surface. The leather was soft and tingled her fingers as she caressed the top of the chair and then along one side to the arm. Her fingertips took in each crevice that had aged it. The urge to know the history of each one seized her, and the thought, *Shouldn't it be on the other side of the fireplace?* intruded her other thoughts.

“Ah-em,” pulled her from her trance.

“Shall we continue?” she said as nonchalantly as she could. *What was that?* She'd never had a connection like that before.

She placed her large black portfolio on the cushion and took out her camera. She started taking photos of the front door, and snapped her way back into the living room. “I recommend keeping the original cut of the crown molding. It will add value to the house if you decide to sell.”

“I don't intend to sell it.”

She paused in mid-click. The passion in his voice surprised her. She turned her attention back to the room.

In the kitchen, just off the living room, she took panoramic views of the room, the oak flooring, and beamed ceiling. “What would you like done here?” she turned to face him.

“Modern appliances are a must, but I'm open to suggestions on everything else.”

“Okay.” She followed him up the staircase.

“Did your family always own this house?” She knew the answer because she always researched potential clients, but she hoped for some detail she hadn't uncovered.

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“Yes, my uncle purchased it in the 1950s and was the only owner.”

“What happened?” She continued to take photos to give the impression of a casual conversation. The Pullmans valued their privacy, understandably; they were public figures.

“He died a couple weeks ago.”

Unexpected sadness gripped her, and her mind filled with questions about his uncle, but she ignored them. She didn’t ask personal questions, especially during the bidding stage. She followed him to the next room and said quietly, “I’m sorry.”

He gave her a half-smile.

“You stay at the house?” she asked, peeking inside the next room on his tour. It was the only dust-free and relatively clean room she’d seen so far.

“I moved in a couple days ago.”

Her eyes moved about the room with renewed curiosity. There was a nine-drawer mahogany dresser adjacent to the bed in the middle of the room, with two cologne bottles, the remaining surface bare. A blue polo shirt was laid across the chair in front of the small, dark mahogany desk at the end of the bed. On the nightstand, a modern digital clock flashed the time in flickering red and behind it was a silent cheap wooden one. Her gaze moved over the elegant welcoming ebony four-poster bed with a silver oval crest nestled in the middle of the headboard.

Heat rushed to her cheeks and spread to the rest of her body, making her painfully aware of the narrow doorway and Patrick who stood inches away. She stepped out of the room and intense green eyes met hers, and she wished she read minds.

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He stepped before the doorway, and one side his body brushed against hers. She took a quick step back.

“Sorry,” he stammered.

She smiled politely, afraid if she opened her mouth the words *bump into me anytime* might fall from her lips and embarrass her, him, and give a prospective client the wrong idea. “How many bedrooms and bathroom are there?” Focus, Josie! It was bad enough she was drooling over the house, she didn’t need to drool over the owner too.

“Three, and one bathroom.” He led her down the narrow corridor to the next room. “I didn’t have the other rooms cleaned, since I planned to renovate them right away.”

She nodded, despite the urge to lecture him on the dangers of dust. The other two bedrooms were sparsely furnished, and as dated as his. The pine flooring was one good thing going for them. The bathroom was dated but large with opal marble countertop. No other rooms evoked the same reaction his room did, thankfully.

“I’d like another bathroom. Is that possible?”

She nodded. “It’s a challenge given the age of the house, but possible.”

“Good.”

“It might mean giving up space in one of the bedrooms or losing one completely.”

“Good to know.”

The rest of the tour consisted of a basement with cracks in the foundation, rickety leaking plumbing, dents in the roof of the attic, and an electrical panel with wiring from the dark ages. The outside had

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given the illusion of a stable structure and possible mediocre electrical and plumbing, but it was worse than she thought.

“It’s a lot of work, but that’s why I advertised for a restoration architect and not just a designer,” he stated as they made their way back to the first floor.

She was grateful for his words to regain her attention; they had strayed to entertain the snug fit of his pants.

“What do you think?” he asked when they reached the kitchen.

Her head snapped up. Had he had read her thoughts? She cleared her throat, and realized she’d stopped taking pictures after seeing his bedroom. She hadn’t asked questions about his expectations for renovating the rest of the house. Nothing! Merely moved about each room in a daze as if it was her first renovation and nerves had paralyzed her silent. “It’s beautiful,” she choked.

“Beautiful?” he snorted. “That’s not a word I expected anyone to say. I was thinking in terms of renovations.”

“Forgive me, Mr. Pullman.” She pulled out her notebook. “It’s not often I come across a rarity like this house,” *and such a cute butt*, “the built-in mahogany bookcases, stainless glass trim above the pocket doors, and bay windows. However, the walls will need to be stripped, the electrical and plumbing redone to facilitate the upgrade to the kitchen and the new bathroom; it’s a crumbling mess . . .” she said with delight, before her voice trail off.

The last thing any owner wanted to hear was that their house was falling apart, besides, if she

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didn't stop now she would start rambling about architectural details she knew bored most people. She cringed when she imagined the words cute butt falling out during her ramble. His unchanged expression meant it hadn't escaped her mind. "Did you have other expectations, either with the renovations or the design?"

"I was going to gut the place, and completely renovate it to a modern style."

Her heart stopped as did the smile on her face.

"I changed my mind."

Her smile returned.

"Is there a way to incorporate modern elements without compromising the historical integrity?"

"There is," she assured him. "I can restore its original beauty while combining modern touches that won't change the charm and uniqueness of the house. I've done it with other houses, excuse me."

She went to retrieve her portfolio from the recliner. She placed it on the countertop and flipped through before and after photos of prior renovations. "These places were completely renovated inside and out in most cases, however a lot of the original architectural structure and accents that made the homes unique were restored to their original grandeur."

"These are fantastic!"

She gave him a half smile. "Thank you."

He closed the lid on her portfolio.

"How long will it take to finish?" his business tone returning.

"My first guess would be eight to twelve months, but I'd have to check a few things to be certain."

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“I need it finished in ten months,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“Why?” slipped before she could stop it. An invisible wall went up around him.

“Do you really need to know?” his tone that of a politician who’d just been caught in an awkward situation, but adamant he had good reason.

“Not unless it affects the job.” Josie shrugged. “There is always a possibility of delays, Mr. Pullman, especially with a restoration as extensive as this one, so I can’t make guarantees. I can promise you however, that I’ll do everything in my power to meet the final deadline,” she assured him.

She watched the tension that held him as straight as a rod soften. “Thanks for your honesty, and not telling me what you think I want to hear.”

“You’re welcome.”

Silence crackled between them.

It was now or never. She squared her shoulders for added courage. “Mr. Pullman.”

“Patrick,” he supplied.

“The truth is, Patrick, I came here to make you an offer.”

His eyes widened in surprise and a devilish grin took over his polite one.

She suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. His tabloid reputation with women was not exaggerated. “It’s purely professional.” She gave herself a mental high-five at the disappointed look on his face before continuing. “I could draw this out, but beating around the bush would be a waste of both of our time, so I’ll get to the point.”

When he didn’t respond or change his expres-

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sion she continued. “I want you to hire me.”

Surprise flickered in his green eyes before one eyebrow rose.

She bit her lip nervously. “My business is new and having a job with you on my resumé would help.” She left off failing miserably.

“What about the clients for these jobs and your employer?” he pointed to her portfolio.

“They’re outside of Chicago, but more importantly those jobs are affiliated with the company I used to work for, not my company.”

His laughter didn’t reach his eyes. “Let me get this straight. You want me to give you this job, knowing it’s the first your company has done?” He shifted from one foot to the other. “I like what I see, but as I mentioned, I’m on a tight schedule and I can’t take a chance; a proven company is my best choice.”

“Those other companies have other projects. You’ll be my only client, so you’ll have my full attention.” She knew it wouldn’t be easy, but this was her only chance to set herself apart from the other companies he was considering. It was a big risk, but she’d read a lot about the Pullman family and showing weakness or being overly humble would only serve to get her a quick shove out the door.

“Please call me, Josie.” She gave him the smile she used to persuade clients of her design ideas. “I’ve been in this business for fifteen years and my abilities as a restoration architect are evident from my previous jobs.” She pulled out work references from a pocket in her portfolio. “These are confirmation of satisfied clients and my reliability. My personal

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references verify my integrity and I've known my construction crew for years. They're the best."

His intense gaze didn't change.

She continued. "I can attempt to dazzle you with wit and charm to convince you I'm the best choice for this job, but I'd rather let my work speak for itself." She held her breath when he closed the gap between them.

Emerald eyes tried to read her mind to see if she was telling the truth, and not some nut job. She welcomed it; whatever it took for him make a decision.

"Accept my offer, Patrick. You won't regret it." She ignored her racing pulse she wasn't sure was nerves or his closeness. The smell of his cologne that had tickled her nose when she first inhaled it, now engulfed her senses, along with the faint scent of his skin. It was spicy, exotic, and masculine.

He leaned closer, and their faces almost touched. "Maybe you'll regret your offer."

His intimate tone made her toes tingle. "Not a chance."

"Two other companies are bidding for this job."

"You'll choose me." She squared her shoulder. "I'm the best at what I do. Neither have my experience or the diversity of everything you need."

He took a step back and her senses recovered.

His face remained expressionless as his eyes studied her further. She wondered what was left. He'd stood close enough to hear her heart race and to check her bra size. She dug into her handbag. "Here's my card." Giving him her card was redundant; he already had her contact information.

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Gone were his mischievous eyes. In their place were the professional ones that greeted her at the front door. "I'll call you when I make a decision."

"I have some final inspections to make. I need them for the estimate."

"Alright."

She smiled, and quickly shook his hand, ignored the pull to be close to him again, and left. There was nothing more to say.

Half an hour later, she resisted the urge to slam the car door and instead threw the clipboard with the home inspection on the seat. She took a deep breath. There was nothing she could do but wait. Her hands squeezed tightly around the steering wheel. She was close enough to taste it, and didn't like waiting.

A job for one of the Powerful Pullman's on her resumé would give her business the boost it needed and open the door to high-end clients. If he didn't choose her, it would mean renegotiating with the bank and waiting for another suitable client. "Damn!"

Perhaps another client was better. Working closely with him could prove awkward given the connection she felt and the unexpected attraction. It was unnerving. She had too much at stake for distractions like getting involved with clients . . . possible clients.

* * *

Patrick watched Josie's blue Honda pull away from the sidewalk and frowned. He knew her, al-

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though he couldn't put his finger on how or from where. He'd searched through the sea of women's faces he'd dated since Sharon, but none matched hers.

When he saw her in the doorway and shook her hand, something strange happened. Heat had spread over him and his senses were bombarded by her presence, and images of her inundated him; looking up at him smiling, and reaching out to touch his face.

He was stunned and struggled to find his voice to ask her inside. She walked passed him so calmly, she couldn't have seen or felt what he did. That alone was enough for him not to hire her. He didn't like complicated relationships.

Then there was the unwavering look in her eyes when he attempted to intimidate her. She hadn't backed down or had the decency to stammer the way most people did. She stood there and let him study her like an open book. The problem was he liked what he saw, and not just the sincerity and confidence in her eyes, but the soft curve of her face, delicate olive skin and sexy, kissable lips.

He sat in the recliner she had touched earlier and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. He'd flirted with her. Him! He didn't flirt with people he knew, much less people he had just met. It was . . . unexpected. *Decorum, always!* his mother's words reminded him.

Her offer surprised him. He knew all too well about people wanting to use him or his family's name. He swallowed the lump of bitterness rising in his throat. At least Josie had the decency to offer him something tangible in return. She had over fifteen years of experience, so that would make her

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well into her thirties, but she didn't look a day over thirty. He hadn't noticed a wedding ring on her finger, or that one had been there, not that it mattered.

Her passion for restoration was evident when she mentioned her recommendations for his house along with her pride of prior projects. He watched her smile and stroke pieces of furniture in a way that had unnerved, and excited him at the same time. His arousal was instant the moment sexual energy rushed between them in his room doorway. Another stroke against hiring her.

She'd been right. She was the best person for the job. With her diverse background, she could handle the restoration, the contractors, and the designing. He didn't want just anyone handling the restorations. He loved this old house as much as his uncle had. It was his playground as a child and a place of comfort as a teenager.

Sadness squeezed around him. With his uncle gone, the depressing air thickened in the house choking out the last ounce of happy memories that lingered. Sorrow had plagued his uncle for as long as he remembered. The cause was a dirty secret no one could speak out loud, or even behind closed doors.

The knot in his stomach, and each complication that raised its head made it obvious he needed to hire someone else. He hoped to God one of the other companies was just as qualified.

Chapter 2

"Mr. Pullman will see you now." Patrick's secretary hung up the phone and motioned her to his office.

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“Thank you.” Josie walked passed her and squeezed her hands to keep them from shaking before she grabbed the door handle. His secretary had contacted her for the meeting the same day she sent her estimate and proposed designs. Josie was certain she had the job. He wouldn’t meet just to tell her she didn’t get the job, would he?

Her breath stopped when she walked into his office.

At home, he’d been imposing with his broad shoulders, and confident, arrogant air. In the courtroom, he was known as Calculating Pullman for the way he won cases. Seated behind his large, dark mahogany desk, he was a frightening force.

“Please have a seat.” He pointed to a chair in front of his desk.

Her heart dropped. She hoped he wasn’t going to give her a long drawn out speech, like the ones his father gave. *Just give me a straight yes or no, don’t sugar coat it*, her mind screamed as she sat calmly in the black leather chair. She smiled through gritted teeth and for a moment regretted her blatant display of confidence when they met.

His fingers played with the onyx sphere paperweight on his desk. “Did you get new clients?”

She shook her head slowly.

“Good, I want you to do the restoration.” His eyes rose to meet hers.

There was a catch, and she wasn’t going to like it.

“I want you stay at the house during the renovations and not take on any other jobs until mine is done.”

“What?” He couldn’t be serious! She searched his face. He was. “Why do I need to stay at the house?”

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“I need this project finished in ten months and that will mean having you close to discuss designs and restoration changes. Your living at the house is the best option and also eliminates the risk of theft during construction.” He leaned back in his chair. “Room and board is free. You don’t want to waste money your business needs, do you?”

Damn, he knew about her finances and was going to play hardball. She had no intention of letting him use it against her or backing down. She was the best candidate and they both knew it. If she wasn’t he would have hired another company. “I want a flattering personal reference,” she countered.

A cocky grin curved his lips. “Then I want guarantees.”

She held his gaze.

“You will get your reference if you meet my ten-month deadline, if I’m satisfied with the quality of the work, and if the job comes within budget.” He moved his chair back into the upright position.

“That will not include changes you make to my original estimate or if you select inferior products,” she added quickly.

His grin broadened and his boyish dimple winked at her.

Was he enjoying this?

Damn him, he was!

She didn’t like it one bit. He was taking away the control she wanted, needed to have. The excitement she felt when he agreed to hire her vanished. The masculine atmosphere that had floated in the air like cheap cologne when she arrived squeezed around her to uncomfortable.

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“Do we have a deal?” His confident tone implied he knew the answer.

Behind his desk were matching dark mahogany bookcases that lined the back wall. Those bookcases were filled with perfectly aligned law books, and neatly labeled black binders she assumed contained client cases. Matching storage cabinets extended from the left side of his desk and was had no photos, like the rest of the room. The framed law degree hanging on the wall adjacent to the bookcases was the only clue they sat in his office. It was as clinical as a psych ward. His nickname Calculating Pullman was not exaggerated.

You could walk away flared unwelcomed in her mind, but it was not an option she would entertain. His offer was too good to pass up. She could settle with the bank and not lose her business loan.

She glanced at him behind his desk, his arrogant smile still mocking her and her resolve toughened for no other reason than to knock him off his self-applied pedestal. He would be just another client she won over with her talent, minus the wit and charm. He didn't need them.

She relaxed her stiff posture, shifted to the edge of her seat and her eyes met his with renewed conviction. “I'll agree, if you accept this is a business arrangement and being close doesn't mean you knocking on my door at inappropriate times of the night,” she chose carefully. “I'm a professional and will be treated that way, understand?”

His arrogant smile wavered. “Agreed, I don't mix business with pleasure.”

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She ignored the twinge of disappointment that gnawed at the back of her neck.

“The new contract with the changes will be emailed to you shortly. We’ll sign it tomorrow and transfer your deposit into your account.” He stood up. “I’ll expect you at my house this weekend, moved in and ready to start working first thing Monday,” he informed her.

Her head snapped up.

She opened her mouth to argue the timeframe, but his secretary came on the phone and informed him that his next appointment had arrived. She then found herself dismissed from his office. She stood up, quickly shook his hand, and gave him an icy smile before leaving.

Instead of elation that she could settle with the bank her legs grew heavy with each step towards her car. She didn’t mind the house; the occupant was going to be a problem. At least she had somewhere to stay, she thought dryly. It was one less thing to worry about moving her business from Detroit to Chicago.

This business was a dream since the seed of architecture was planted by her father at the age of twelve, and was her whole life after her mother died three months ago. Taking on this job meant leaving her home in Detroit for good. Signing the papers tomorrow was only a formality; there was no turning back.

* * *

“It’s done.” Patrick told Gary, the lawyer handling his uncle’s will. “I chose Ms. Fagan.” It was better to remember her as Ms. Fagan, his restoration

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architect, and not Josie with soft caramel eyes and inviting lips.

“Good, she was the best of all the companies.”

“How do you know that?” Patrick asked.

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“I see.” He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. Was there nothing in his life someone didn’t know before him? “If I chosen another company?”

“I know you want this to go as quickly and smoothly as possible, and that is going to happen with Ms. Fagan,” Gary replied, not answering his question.

He was right, as much as Patrick hated to admit it.

“Is she not likable in person?” Gary asked.

“No.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“No problem.” He didn’t elaborate. What could he say? He didn’t want to work with her because of the images he saw, or the strong attraction he felt? It was ridiculous when he thought it and would sound stupid out loud.

“Good, and the schedule?”

“If there are no delays it will be completed within the time frame,” Patrick assured him.

Gary didn’t respond.

Patrick didn’t like anyone in charge of any part of his life, had enough of that with his family. The sooner it was over, the sooner he would be rid of Gary, get his inheritance, and move on with his life.

“We’ll talk again soon,” Gary said quietly.

“Uh-huh.”

Patrick slammed the phone in its cradle. “Damn you, Uncle,” he cursed. He regretted the words the

For the Love of Jazz

minute he said them. His uncle didn't put him in this situation, he had the moment he signed the documents.

The other conditions of his uncle's will wouldn't matter soon. He would have a home; an empty one, but a home nonetheless. His apartment in Oak Park, although comfortable, never felt like home anymore than his parent's home did growing up. *Home, love, and family are all that's important.* Those had been his uncle's final words before he died; words that shouldn't have meaning for his uncle after what happened to him.

His uncle had been his source for those things, but now that he was gone, so were they. Pain traveled up his throat, threatening to choke him. He thought Sharon would be his source, but he was horribly wrong. He found out before they married, which should make him feel better, but it didn't.

His uncle's house had been his sanctuary growing up and would be again when the renovations were done. From the time he moved in after his uncle's death, even with its unpleasant history, the house had comforted him. Not even his recent strange dreams of Josie and people and places he didn't know, deterred its solace.

He smiled remembering their negotiation. She'd been irritated, but matched him with her own demands. Despite his reservations about Josie and the sparks that lingered between them, he was excited to return the house to the state he remembered as a child.

Restore my house, Patrick. She'll return. I'll wait for her. Strange words for a man on his deathbed, but it

For the Love of Jazz

didn't matter. He gave his word and nothing and no one would get in the way of the promise he'd made to his uncle.

Valeska Borden

A Dreamer's Dream Come True

I remember the day we met as if it happened just a moment ago. It started off as any other typical day in my life; but what happened that night would without a doubt change the rest of my life forever. I had begun my day by dragging myself out of bed to the wood plant where I would spend the next eight hours of my life. I was tired, worn out, and down right pissed at the very thought of even passing near that place where I worked. I guess it was the fact that I had been forced to work there since leaving high school two years ago and I was now at a point where I just wanted to set the place afire while sipping a cup of hot chocolate, laughing as it burnt to ashes. Yeah I know you might say I was cruel but, hey, if you had been through even half of what I had been through at that young age, you would have want to do more to that place.

Being a Mexican and having a dream in those days was the biggest crime anyone could ever commit and I was the proudest criminal to ever walk this planet; so believe me when I say I wasn't going to let anyone or anything hold me back from achieving my dream.

I was brought to America by my mom, who had left me when I was six under the care of my dear *abuelita* back in Mexico. It was hard to see my mom leave but I knew she had to go, in order to provide

A Dreamer's Dream Come True

a better life and future for the three of us; as it was only her left alive that would fend for us. Yes, I was ten when I took my first airplane ride but I haven't gone back on one ever since. I really don't mind to tell you the truth because if God intended us to be in the air, he would have given us wings, and I don't know about you, but I sure as hell don't see no wings attached to my back.

Everybody in my family had followed us to the airport to say their farewells. I had on a brand new set of clothes that my *abuelita* had bought me the day before; brand new shoes, brand new socks, a new shirt, pants that finally fit and, yes, for the first time ever I had on underwear that didn't have any holes in it. So there I stood in the middle of my relatives, feeling like the richest person alive as one by one they said their goodbyes, each having their own little advice to give me on how to behave and not give trouble. I couldn't help but laugh every time one of them said to behave, like I ever misbehaved growing up. I was the best-behaved boy in my entire school for crying out loud. This is one of those moments in my life that I will never forget, even if I died I would always remember it. Because you see, as I stood there listening to their goodbyes, it hadn't crossed my mind for not even one split-second that this would be the last time I ever saw any of them again, even my dear *abuelita*. I honestly would have stayed if I knew what my future held at the other side of this journey, but who was I to know at the time. I was only ten and all that matter was seeing my mom, who I hadn't seen in over three years now. She called every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday

A Dreamer's Dream Come True

to check in on us. She would talk to my *abuelita* for hours, asking the same questions each time “How was everything?”, “Was I behaving?”, “Did we eat?”, you know, the type of questions any caring mother would ask about their child. And every time we talked she always promised that one day she would send for me to join her in America, so that we could be together forever. She would tell me how much she missed just seeing me smile in the morning as she walked me to school every morning and how as soon as the after-school bell rang I would be the first one out the door running towards her just wanting to show her what I had done in school that day. She always cried as she said she loved me and, yes, I admit I cried to. I guess through this all what my mom was really trying to say was that she simply missed being “my” mom.

Poetry



Michael Marmesh

Not a Poet

Never tried my hand at poetry.
I tend more to verbosity,
What's said with one, I say with three.
Verse needs a creativity,
Words strong, concise, vivid imagery.
That kind of work's too hard for me.
And the corollary:
Or Am I ?
I rhyme
Therefore
Iamb.

(with apologies to Descartes, to Popeye "Iamb what
iamb," and to all real poets)

Jan Becker

Flame Tree

The Royal Poincianas are in bloom.
For the first time in your life, you feel
a tree is stealing your breath.
You want to climb into the vermillion canopy
and feel the crushing blush of a thousand
pouty blossoms touching your skin.
And you want to sleep in her shade,
collect her seed pods to make music.
You want to carry her back to Madagascar
where you are certain you would be greeted
by a line of ring-tailed lemurs
heralding the return of their empress
to an empty forest.

**Stephanie Woolley-
Larrea**

When I Dreamt, It Was Like This

Three kids in swimsuits, life-jacketed to their ears.

The boat skips along the surface.

On an island near the marina
sand feels like warm snow.

They wade, asking first about
sea monsters, sharks, whales.

A hermit crab escapes their examination.

Sailboats float along the harbor
among yachts and lobster boats.

I drink a cold beer in the hot sun
and for a minute remember what I love about
Florida.

On the ride back, Brennan sits near the bow,
eyes closed, chin up, anticipating splashes of salt
and spray. Tobie's tight brown ringlets are victims
of the wind,

pushed straight and airborne, an almost halo,
yellow-tinged.

Amelia sits on my lap. "It sounds like a vacuum,"
she yells over the motor, then laughs.

Stephanie Woolley- Larrea

Morning

Dawn slaps its feet into my room,
elbows and knees pushing
against the red and black
squares of its cartoon pajamas.

Dawn squeezes its eyes,
the bridge of its nose,
throwing itself fully
into awake.

Dawn's coarse brown hair
sticks straight up and all around
daring water and brushes
to tame it.

Dawn lifts its arms,
melts into me:
arms around my neck
In the sweet earthy
smell of breath on my shoulder,
I am six again,
and it is morning,
and the whole day will love me.

Cindy Steinmann

I Am Still Here

I have been many things in my life,
daughter, sister, mother, lover, and wife.
Before you left, I was the best by far
Without you, my tears number the stars.
I have become that pen lacking words to write
that gravest depth of feeling bound up tight.
I am the stop on a rollercoaster of memories
of shared dreams leaving my heart to freeze.
I live as a hollow ear waiting for your sound
to unclog my mind and freely move around.
With you gone, I am agony without relief
because in my soul, I have become grief.

Elaine O'Donovan

Almost Unbearable

As the wind assails your Body
And the cold assaults your Brain
As the rocks deliver trembling to
Your weary, aching Frame
Your Heart is stood there waiting
It's all the friend you'll need,
Since it's made of those who've loved you
And whose memory you still keep
You feel their fire and passion
Their devotion to your cause
As you face again your challenge
With fortitude and calm
And when you reach the summit
Take a moment to reflect,
On who you are, from whence you came
And where to journey next?

Elaine O'Donovan

Relationship Begins

I didn't want to get involved
Emotionally attached?
Instead you took me by the hand
And gently led me to your heart.
There, lies no confusion
No barrage of words or cries
Just you—my love
You and I
Some times I try to understand so much
And find my brain won't stretch that far
But in your presence—Quietness reigns
And many paths we traverse
Separate, we are strong
Together—dynamite
So much energy, so much love
Where does it all spring from?
This special “sharing”
That no jewel can buy
Where is it taking us?
This special jewel we have discovered
Is so very precious to my heart
That I would not exchange it
For all else that this world offers

Elaine O'Donovan

The Dance Will or Destiny?

You—take my breath away
Mind Silenced
Your Presence enough
Destiny pulls at me!
I—want to run, to dance, to sing
But You—you want to reel me in?
With you I want to play
To laugh, to love, to merge
You are my twin
Oh no—don't fence me in!
I must be free, to come, to go
Why try to seal me so?
A knowing wink, a searching kiss
My lips are eased apart
Heart wide open, I look for yours
For comfort, for love long longing to begin
How strange? For now it's you are gone
Behind the fence, just looking in?
A prisoner of me you try to make
But wait—it's you not I that is unfree
Boredom and emptiness you long to flee
That's why Destiny pulls you to me!
You—long to run, to dance, to sing
Relax, go easy, come out from within
Beneath it all we are the same,
Two souls desiring love

The Dance Will or Destiny?

Dropping control, loosing our roles
Our true selves will gently emerge
Trusting ourselves, trusting each other
There is no need to search any further.
The Dance has begun
Will and Destiny have fun
Will it be forever?

**NON-
FICTION**



Cindy Steinmann

Coming of Age in the '60s

“Going out so soon?” Katie Field burst into her mother’s bedroom.

“What, old enough to take care of yourself?” Vicky Field said.

“But you just got back from bridge. Aren’t moms supposed to stay home once in awhile?” Katie said. She crossed her arms. “I’m always here.”

“Don’t do this. You’re not a child any longer,” Vicky said. “Besides, Rory is a good dog. She’ll keep you company until I get back.” She gave her daughter an anxious look of disappointment. “Why don’t you act your age?”

“What time?” Katie asked, feeling a stab in her chest. “You’re always going out the door or with Paul.” Lately, Katie felt her mother was never happy with her. Katie can’t drive a car and escape at sixteen. The door bell rang.

“Right on time,” Katie mumbled following her mother downstairs.

“Stop it. I don’t know,” Vicky glimpsed in the hall mirror. Her short, dark hair had no grey yet and her body was fit from regular exercise. She breathed deeply then smiled and opened the door.

“Hi, Handsome,” Vicky said. With a sweeping motion she bid the grinning middle-aged Paul to enter.

“I’m greeted by two beauties!” Paul said. Katie

Coming of Age in the '60s

turned pale when Paul kissed Vickie. "Good evening, Darling," he said. He nodded at Katie.

"You are the mirror image of your mother, Katie," Paul said. He sounded upbeat.

Katie gave him a quarter of smile. She hated to think she was anything like her mother, especially her mirror image. After all she was taller and her hair longer.

"What do you hear from your sisters?" Paul asked.

"Brenda says Boulder is too far from New Jersey to visit at Thanksgiving," Katie said. "Sarah moved into an apartment in Maplewood. She has one bed, one chair, and 14 pairs of shoes. She's an operator at the Summit Phone Company. She says she is glad she left college."

"I could ring her neck for such foolishness!" Vicky Field huffed. "I hope you turn out to be more practical."

"Mom, please!" Katie scrunched up her eyes and nose in anger.

Katie wondered why her mother harped on her all the time. She was the reliable one. Katie filled out the house checks because her mother can't keep the checkbook straight. Katie took care of things at home while her mother was busy having fun. When Katie went to her mother with a problem, she would advise to quit whatever it was so the problem would go away. But that never solved it. Katie sighed aloud.

"Bye, we have to hurry or we'll be late," Paul said to Katie, shutting the door. Outside Katie heard them talking.

Coming of Age in the '60s

“Maybe we should stay with Katie,” Paul said opening the car door.

“No, she’s a big girl,” Vicky said. Katie was tall in second grade and people expected more from her.

“Rory, come here!!” Katie blasted. “What kind of a watchdog isn’t home? Have you deserted me too?”

Katie hated to be alone. She remembered that Dad used to stay home. Those were good days. He sat in his favorite chair drinking beer watching sports on television. Katie always knew where he was. Her parents argued it seemed every time they were together. She could see how Dad left Mom but she could not understand how he could leave her. They never argued.

The phone rang ending those thoughts. It was a high school friend.

“Katie? I’m glad you’re home,” Linda said. “Can you come to my house for the night?” Her voice held the cheeriness of a pep rally. “I’m sorry it has been a long time since you were over. I’ve been busy with homework and stuff.”

“Tonight?” Katie’s voice zoomed upward. Linda had an awesome pool table and a new TV.

“Yeah, right now.”

“I don’t have a ride,” Katie said. “My mom is out.”

“Not a problem!” Linda chimed in. “We’ll pick you up in ten minutes, okay?” The phone went dead.

“Alright, I guess,” Katie said finishing her reply as Rory scratched at the door.

“Come on in Rory,” Katie said. “I’m going out.” She patted the collie on the head. “You won’t miss me either, will you?”

Coming of Age in the '60s

She finished writing a note to her mother saying she was staying at Linda's for the night when a blaring noise outside rattled Katie.

"Gracious!" Katie remarked to the dog. "Who's making that noise? Linda's dad would never beep." Katie gets up to look. Rory jumps up on the couch.

"I know that red convertible," Katie said looking out the window. "It belongs to that senior guy, Phil." She looked at Rory as if they were having a conversation. The dog completed her three circles on the cushion and made herself comfortable.

"Did you know he stayed back when he was in 10th grade? That's why he was the first one in our class to drive." The dog closed her eyes. "Months ago when we were friends," Katie continued, "Linda mooned over Phil so much I wanted to throw up. He's kind of creepy."

Three noisy beeps outside pealed again like a machine gun. Katie worried if any of the neighbors took notice of the loud beeping, they would tell her mother. Vicky would be furious. Her mother would be so embarrassed, Katie worried she might walk out on her or move Katie out. It was like walking a tight rope living with her mother.

Katie ran outside and squeezed herself behind the front seat which Linda didn't move forward. Katie's tall, thin body landed like a tossed sack onto the backseat. To her surprise a guy was sitting there. It was Phil's younger brother, Ron, the nerd she avoids in her math class.

"Hi," she said. "Are you going to Linda's house too?"

Coming of Age in the '60s

Ron stared at the back of his brother's head as if she were invisible. The convertible top opened overhead and Linda turned around. Katie was shocked by her heavy eye make-up.

"No," Linda answered. "We're going to a beach party at Bay Head. A couple of the high school football and track members will be there." She flashed a red smile. Her confidence was as dramatic as her makeup. Katie crinkled the paper bag holding her toothbrush and short-shorts nightie wondering what to do.

"My parents wouldn't let me go," Linda explained. "I took care of that for us both. They think I'm spending the night at your house. So, we have each other for alibis."

Phil revved the car harshly. They zoomed off peeling rubber in front of Katie's house. With the top down her long hair whipped around her face and eyes. Katie tightly crossed her arms and fumed in the backseat sitting opposite Ron who was still staring at the back of his brother's head. Phil drove like there's no speed limit on the NJ Turnpike racing each car ahead of us, then the next. Katie felt numb by the time they arrived at the beach house directly on the New Jersey shore.

"Your hair looks like Phyllis Diller's," Linda laughed at her.

Suddenly, Katie felt like she didn't know Linda at all. Katie inhaled the fresh, salty air blowing off the Atlantic Ocean and tried to think. She knew she acted like a jerk and was in a mess. Her mother would be furious if she found out Katie was here and wasn't at Linda's like her note said.

Coming of Age in the '60s

“Climb out or you’ll bump the doors!” Phil ordered. The parked car was between a new 1962 Lincoln and a ’58 Pontiac. Phil pulled little Miss Twiggy past the steering wheel and swung her up in his arms before setting her down. Katie worked all of her 5 feet 10 inches over the other side crunching down into the pebble driveway. For a moment they all stared up at the three-story, yellow house.

“Who lives here?” Katie asked.

“Some Caldwell people who went to the theatre in New York City,” Linda said. “They know the cast and will party with them afterwards. They usually don’t return before noon the next day.”

“Do they know we’re using their beach house?” Katie asked. She thought her mother would have a cow if she knew the parents weren’t home.

Three sets of eyes glared at her. Katie did not feel comfortable and wished she were home. She let her thoughts be swept away by the thunder of the surf. After all, it all seemed harmless.

“Dump her!” Phil said. He grabbed Linda’s arm heading into the house.

“Don’t be silly, Katie,” Linda assured her with a backward glance. “It’s okay. Their own daughter is throwing the party.” Her shoulders shrugged and her eyes widened then she disappeared into the house.

“Follow me,” Ron said like talking to his little sister. The long legs of his six-foot-three, lightweight body marched faster than Katie could keep up.

“Are you his alibi, too?” she whispered.

“Yep! Dad doesn’t like Phil to drink and drive,” Ron said, “so this party is off-limits for him. Phil told Dad we were going to a movie.”

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“He drives like a maniac,” Katie said.

“He likes all fast things. We are opposites. I don’t like sports so he mocks me.”

“I learned more from you in class than I did from our math book,” Katie said.

“You’re nicer to look at than our teacher,” Ron said surprising them both.

“I should hope so,” Katie said clipping his arm. “He’s old.” Katie never guessed Ron noticed her in class.

They stepped like a couple of snoops over the threshold onto a blue Oriental rug. There was no one in the large living room but Katie heard voices in the house. The picture window at the other end drew them like a magnet. The luxury of the room left Katie imagining the lifestyle of the owner. As they walked pass overstuffed leather furniture, Katie was afraid to disturb or touch anything in this showplace of a home. She stared opposite out the gigantic window at the magnificent view of the beach and ocean not caring any longer that the parents were not home.

The outdoor patio and ocean waves on the sandy beach were lit by the house security lights. The tide pounding its waves stretched up on the beach only to ebb back into the ocean over and over again. It was hypnotic. A group of girls disturbed Katie’s trance as they came into view splashing each other.

“I’ll get some sodas,” Ron said. He lightly tapped the bridge of his glasses like a salute then disappeared into the next room. Katie followed him into a smoky room reeking of beer.

Coming of Age in the '60s

A dozen or more athletic seniors huddled around a long leather-topped bar in front of a decorated mirror with neon sport insignias. Their cigar-smoking, beer-drinking formation was broken when Ron slipped behind the bar.

“Hey, Ronny, what’re doing here?”

“Where’s big brother?”

“Hey, there’s the professor!”

“Hand me one of those brewskies.”

“Beers all around before our dates get back.”

Ron’s cheeks turned red as he fixed two sodas.

“Never mind him,” said a short jock looking at Katie. “Guys, look at the jailbait that just walked in!”

Katie stood there with her wild hair. She stopped breathing one heartbeat later. She felt an intense examination of her person. Katie stood there feeling like her t-shirt, short-shorts, and flat shoes were being stripped away. How that is possible, she didn’t understand. Katie was dumbfounded and stared wide-eyed at them. She had no idea what to do or say.

“She’s my date, guys,” Ron said. “We came with Phil. He’s around somewhere.” His eyes held a steady bead on the short jock.

Ron handed Katie a soda with a cherry and little umbrella.

“You’re my hero!” she whispered looking up into his eyes. She grinned as he turned a little red faced. Outside a gaggle of dates giggled in announcement the end of their walk on the beach. Many had been splashed wet.

“Where are Phil and Linda?” Katie whispered to Ron.

Coming of Age in the '60s

"I don't know," Ron said. "It's late and I haven't seen them anywhere. It is like they aren't even here."

The girls entered the beach house removing their wet shirts and bras. Ron's eyes bulged out.

"Hey, don't stare!" a thick-necked guy said, looking at Katie and Ron while rubbing his girl with a towel. "Why don't you catch up?" He grinned. "Come on! Take off your top!"

Katie jerked her drink up to her lips and gulped from the glass. She never expected this. Her sisters never said this stuff went on. She felt like she was in a strange land. Katie thought her mother would have apoplexy if she were here. She wished she was invisible.

"Come on!" Ron said, pulling her away. "Let's look for Phil."

The six-bedroom house sprawled on the beach. One room led to another in their search. The lights soon dimmed. Jackie Gleason's "Music for Lovers Only" began to play.

"I don't see Linda anywhere," Katie said. "Do you think we ought to look upstairs?"

"Definitely not," Ron snapped. "If he's up there, he would kill me if I knocked on the door." Ron looked annoyed. "Let's dance."

"Sure, I guess," Katie said her words trailing off.

"I'm not mad at you, Katie. My brother is a jerk."

"You are a good dancer," she said.

The music played on until just Katie and Ron were left dancing. Outside, the after midnight surf sounded louder when the music stopped.

"It must be time to go home," Ron said taking a look at his watch. "Shit, it is two thirty. My dad will have a fit."

Coming of Age in the '60s

“Where is everybody?”

“Upstairs.”

“Shall we find your brother and tell him I have to be home?” said Katie.

“No, we can’t do that.”

“What?” She stammered. “I want to go.” Katie knew she couldn’t call her mother because her mother thought she was at Linda’s. And Katie didn’t know where she was at the New Jersey shore anyway.

“I have an idea,” Katie said. “Let’s go to bed with our clothes on, in separate beds of course, and at least get some sleep.”

“Gee, I’ve never slept with a girl before!” He looked the happiest Katie had seen him all night.

“You’re not actually sleeping with me,” she snapped. Katie pulled up the covers of the twin bed nearest the door grateful to lay her head on the pillow.

It seemed moments later Katie was in a bad dream. Someone bombarded into their bedroom door. Katie felt the vibrations of the door against the forty-year-old wall and knew it was not a dream. When she looked up a crazed lady stood in the doorway pointing at her.

“Get out, NOW!” Her scream shot out like an electric wave.

Ron stood immediately like a puppet. Katie sat up as if someone pushed the button on a jack-in-the-box. The light was flicked on and Katie was eyeball to eyeball with the angry owner. The garlicky cigarette breath of the woman blew up Katie’s nose involuntarily. Katie thought the stale, hardy perfume fumes from her neck might be like this woman’s life.

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“All of you whores, get out of my house,” she screeched. “I see your faces and I’m calling each of your mothers.” She whirled out of the room like a tornado to open the next door.

“Let’s go,” Ron said. He took Katie’s hand and they evacuated the house. Phil’s car was nowhere in sight. Ron kept Katie’s hand in his.

“Phil probably left hours ago,” Ron said. “I’m sorry.”

“Hurry up!” someone said running by.

“She’s out of control.”

“Why the f---- did they show up?”

“Hurry up, you two!” a girl shouted from a station wagon. Ron and Katie scurried into the far back seat like rats running for their lives. Katie imagined a witch flying on her broom shouting those awful things chasing them down the road. They couldn’t get away fast enough as far as she was concerned.

“Ron,” Katie whispered, “do you know any of these kids?”

“Nope.”

“Thank you for the ride,” Katie said. “Why?”

“We couldn’t leave you to face that horrible woman,” an older girl chuckled. “Besides, I owe one of your sisters a favor.”

Katie didn’t ask which sister. Instead, her head toppled on Ron’s shoulder, fast asleep.

At the break of dawn, Katie was relieved when the station wagon stopped in front of her house. She was determined her mom would never find out about last night.

“Thanks for the ride,” she rasped. “Ron, I’ll see you in school.”

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Katie gently pressed the car door shut and they drove quietly away. She quietly closed the front door.

“What’s going on?” Vicky asked getting off the couch. “You left a note saying you were going to Linda’s house. What does all this mean?”

Katie was so surprised her mother was right there, she wished she knew how to faint to buy more time. Being so exhausted thoughts would not register how to deal with her mother. Katie always worried her mom would leave her or send her away like her dad.

Katie took a deep breath hoping oxygen to her brain would help create a good story. She knew Mom would go bonkers finding out the truth. Katie wanted a mother she could talk to and not have to tell her lies. At the moment Katie realized she was more frightened of losing her mother than she was of the woman at the beach house. She decided to take a chance and be honest for once.

“Mom, I have something to tell you but I’m afraid you’ll freak out.”

“What is it?”

“First, promise not to get mad right away.”

“I promise to give you the benefit of the doubt. Go on.”

“Really? You’ll listen to what I have to say until I’m finished? You won’t start yelling before I’m through?”

“Tell me.” She nods her head.

So, taking another deep breath, Katie told Vicky the entire story from Linda’s overnight alibi, the drinking, the nakedness, the kids in the bedrooms, the witchy woman, and the ride home. She spoke to

Coming of Age in the '60s

her mother for the first time like a girlfriend. When Katie finished her mother didn't say anything. Katie decided she expected her to say more.

"I take responsibility," she continued, "for saying yes to Linda when she hasn't been nice for a long time and for getting into a car when I really didn't think the driver was safe."

Silence.

"I was trying to make an adult decision on my own and that's mostly why I said yes to Linda." Katie held her again breath waiting for a response.

More silence.

"It's all true, really," she said for good measure. She held back tears threatening to spill out. Katie stared at her mother hoping she could love her as herself. She was tired of being seen as so-and-so's little sister. She did not want to fight anymore. She crossed her fingers hoping her mother would accept who she was.

"Katie, I believe you," her mom said. "I'm glad you told me the truth." She took a deep breath. "You haven't always done that in the past. You took a big chance trusting Linda when she didn't deserve it."

"I know I did."

"Mrs. Walters called me two hours ago. When Mr. and Mrs. Walters arrived home they got a shocking eye-full of their daughter in the master bed. She admits she went ballistic. I think she's worried about her own daughter."

"Thanks so much for believing me, Mom," Katie said wiping her eyes.

"Why didn't you call me when you wanted to come home?" she asked.

Coming of Age in the '60s

“I had no idea where I was and it was hours away. I thought you would get mad driving so far and losing your sleep.”

“Call me any time,” Mom said. “You can count on me. I’ll come get you wherever you are.”

Katie felt as if she had an ocean of love to give her mother. She wiped her eyes as her mother put her arm around her.

“Okay?” Mom asked.

“Okay,” Katie said. “I wish you would stay home with me sometimes.”

“I have a life to live, too. I’m very much in love with Paul. Can he join us at home?” she asked.

“Most definitely,” Katie said.

“Go to sleep, baby,” Mom said.

“You haven’t called me baby in years, but it feels good,” Katie said.

“Even when we don’t seem to get along, I still love you,” she said. “Will you be okay with Paul as a stepfather?”

“Having a stepfather will be okay,” Katie said. “Ron never makes me feel invisible.”

“Do I make you feel invisible?”

Katie nodded.

“I had no idea. I’m so sorry I made you feel that way.”

“Wow, this adult talk is really exhausting,” Katie said.

“Go to sleep,” her mother said. “Together you, Ron, and I will make a new start, okay?”

Katie fell into bed with many happy thoughts. Her mother was becoming her friend. She was getting a stepfather. Ron would make a nice friend

Coming of Age in the '60s

and, maybe, Ron will meet her at the Halloween dance.

Cindy Steinmann

A Room with Two Doors

Today I am to candle eggs. I'm not exactly sure what it is but all the big kids talk about doing it with the farmer. The farmer must trust me to be careful. I heard he is touchy about breaking perfectly good eggs. I feel older like one of the big kids. I've waited eight summers to be chosen for this.

The hot light of the sun blinds my vision as I rush up the two steps into the black shade of the old house porch. I bounce into the country kitchen and become engulfed in old pine wood. The little cupboards are made of old frames with screens like the back porch door. The wooden counters need a wiping. My shoeless feet shuffle bits of loose dirt and sand on the wooden floor with youthful confidence.

I hurriedly grab then twist the antique metal knob to the cellar door on the far side of the kitchen. It spins uselessly around and around. I stare at the rust-powdered debris left on my palm wondering if a nasty rash is starting. For a moment I'm curious if it will travel up my arm. I rattle the knob anyway to pull the door open. The warped door edge sticks like glue to its frame. A wild fear that I am inadequate for the whole task stops my heart. A fear suddenly shuffles my thoughts that bats and spiders surely live beyond the door. I believe I might hurry away.

From the other side, the door is shoved towards me. My heart hammers rapidly. My feet and legs

A Room with Two Doors

feel numb. The old hinges grinding open sound too loud to hold up for long. I step back to make way for the farmer. I hope. Air cool and moist stings my face like ice chips thrown up from the dirt cellar. I wonder what an underground crypt is like.

The tall farmer hunched over in the small doorway motions me to follow. Before he turns to go down the narrow steps, his wizened eyes under long, unruly black eyebrows look angrily at me. Where is everybody? Should I leave? My tongue is coated with fear tasting like wet cardboard. My right foot moves forward and I take my first step down.

I duck my head to avoid slamming it into the overhead low beam. I wish there was a railing but there's not enough room for one. My right shoulder scrapes against a cold rock and my expression droops like the farmer's. Hundreds of large, flat-sided rocks fortifying the hundred-year-old walls are coated with debris of time.

Here and there long dusty-grey webs dangle down like giant spider legs and I can't stop feeling them touch my hair. I think bats are hanging upside down from the dark beams and I am such a wimp. My eyes are as wide as dinner plates adjusting to this strange place.

In the middle of the small cellar I barely miss tumbling into a thin, brown bench while adjusting my eyes to the unusual room. A small electric box on the bench emitting light equal to one candle is the only light. Four wire baskets on the floor are barely illuminated. I see each basket is filled with fresh brown eggs. Some eggs have miniature downy chicken feathers stuck to the shells. Our arrival

A Room with Two Doors

disturbs the air and tiny feathers wave or float about effortlessly around me.

Using only two fingers to avoid a little chicken manure, I pick up an unwashed egg. The farmer tells me to hold it in front of the candle box light. The light makes the shell translucent. Inside I see a large round yellow mass. This egg goes into a basket on the floor.

From the wire basket I take another egg. Its shell accidentally rubs against the egg next to it sounding like fine sandpaper. Held in front of the light, this unfertilized egg shows two small yellow round masses or two yokes. All my fears of bats and spiders vanish. I feel like a scientist making important discoveries. I candle about five more eggs until one egg shows a dark red spot the size of a pinhead or a tiny heart. The farmer takes this fertilized egg away.

By the time I finish two baskets, my feet feel cold. My thoughts are outside the cellar and down the hill at the hot, sandy beach. I decide to leave. It's then I notice the sun outlines a door directly to the dirt driveway. This door is forbidden, isn't it? I'm sure it is. It is always locked on the outside with a wooden toggle too high for children to reach.

The farmer easily swings the door open. It doesn't squeak. I thank him for letting me candle the eggs. Yes, I agree, again some other time. His face doesn't seem so scary now even though he never smiles. He is gentle and his voice is kind. Next time I know which door to use.

Michael Marmesh

Hookin' on the Corner

It's Not What You Think

Amsterdam has its red light district. The island nation of Palau in the South Pacific has its Blue Corner. You'll find hookers at both. But in Palau they're underwater hooked to a reef watching the fish go by. For our 35th anniversary they included my wife Nancy and me.

The Blue Corner is an underwater pointed plateau about 50 feet deep. Its walls drop literally into the blue. Hence its name. Currents sweep back and forth over it depending on the tides. To dive here, without rapidly consuming your air supply fighting



Hookin' on the Corner



the ebb and flow, you need to attach yourself to the plateau. This is done with a reef hook—a large fishing hook with the barb removed attached to a line that is tethered to the diver's buoyancy vest.

You hook into the rock at the edge of the plateau, add air to your vest, and the fun begins. Floating in the swift current, for all the world like a human kite, you wait to see what comes by. The grey reef and whitetip sharks will come in fairly close to check you out. Though sometimes they suddenly turn tail and disappear, down into the blue. The mackerel and blue-fin tuna tend to move by more quickly and keep their distance. The Napoleon wrasses, some well over 100 lbs., swim in very close, both curious and obnoxious. One swallowed half my wife's gauge console then spit it out after realizing it wasn't food. We felt as though we were as much entertainment for the fish as they were for us.

There are other types of diving in Palau, including World War II wrecks. On our way to changing

Hookin' on the Corner

eleven time zones, we stopped in Oahu, Hawaii. We visited the sites commemorating the beginning and end of our country's involvement in World War II—the Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor built over the remains of the battleship sunk by the Japanese on Dec. 7, 1941, and the Battleship *Missouri*, moored a short distance away, where the Japanese signed their surrender on Sept. 2, 1945.

In Palau, we saw some of the results of the United States's effort in the battle for the Pacific. During Operations Desecrate One and Snapshot in 1944, forty-nine Japanese ships were sunk among the islands of Palau. We dove on two of these wrecks.

The first was the unnamed supply ship known as the Helmet Wreck. It was an overcast day and the visibility below was poor. Portions of the ship would, as you swam, appear out of the underwater gloom. What was striking was how mundane some of the cargo was. Sure the hold contained helmets that gave the wreck its name. But there was also an open box of boots and several cases of *sake*, one still completely full. Next to it, what I first took to be another case of wine bottles, on closer exam was a full case of artillery shells. Removal of artifacts from the wrecks is forbidden. Men died here and it would be akin to grave robbing.

The second wreck, the *Iro Maru*, was a tanker. The water was clearer and the tempering effects of the passage of sixty-seven years more apparent. The large fore and aft deck guns were still obvious, but as the sea reclaimed them, they were being encrusted with corals. The top of one of the cargo masts

Hookin' on the Corner



was now home to a large anemone inhabited by several clownfish. Yes, like Nemo from the movie.

Looking for larger fish life, I dove a site called German Channel, at 5:30 in the morning. Why would anyone in his or her right mind jump in the water before the sun's even up? To see the giant mantas come down the channel to feed. They didn't show. It was still the best dive of the trip.

Twenty minutes into the dive, we settled onto the sandy bottom at 45 feet to wait. The sun was now casting enough light over the horizon that we could turn our dive lights off. We were surrounded by a school of scad, a silvery half- to foot-long baitfish. At first they meandered lazily back and forth among us. At the periphery of visibility I could make out the shadow of a black-tip shark, cruising to peruse the situation. The scad started moving a little faster. Large Jack were zipping through the baitfish now. One passed close enough between the guide and me that I could feel his wake underwater. The scad were now agitated, moving quickly and changing directions frequently. In a blink the breakfast buffet was open. I couldn't swivel my head fast enough to see it all. A bunch of grouper 20-40 lbs. appeared from nowhere. The one shark became a pack of seven black tips moving together. They were all after the scad. A big grouper chomped down on, then swallowed one fish 3 feet in front of me.

Just as suddenly it was over. The baitfish and predators all disappeared. I surfaced facing east in

Hookin' on the Corner

time to see the sun breaking through a cloudbank. Sunrise from in the sea—breathtaking.

At a more serene pace, there is Jellyfish Lake, a body of saltwater enclosed in the interior of the island. Access is by a short hike through tropical forest, up and down over a rocky ridge. Cut off from the sea, the 7 to 13 million golden and moon jellyfish have lost most of their stinging capabilities. Snorkeling amongst them, watching their gentle rhythmic pulsations as they migrate across the lake with the movement of the sun, is an almost Zen experience. Inadvertent contact with sensitive areas of the skin, like the face, at most produces a mild tingling sensation.

Is it worth it to travel nearly half way around the world just to scuba dive? Obviously I think so. Don't even get me started on the staggering beauty, colors, and the formations of the corals in some places looking like they've been tossed into a hoarders storage closet. There are so many kinds piled atop one another, including the blue staghorn and the red whip soft coral. Even the giant clams and the mini sea slugs called nudibranchs come in an assortment of intense colors. And you get to meet and share these incredible experiences with divers from all over the world.



Maureen A. Donnelly

Tropical Magic

Bienvenidos desde Miami. I came to the FIU/Books & Books International Writer's Conference in Grand Cayman this year because I was curious. During high school I was interested in the humanities, but ended up becoming a biologist. The rich diversity of tropical life captivated me as a young student, and the tropics became my quest. I achieved my academic goals and have studied frogs, lizards, and snakes in a variety of tropical sites around the world. Aged eyes and diminished reflexes have forced me to pass the field-biology baton to my graduate students. I now live vicariously through them as they study the magic of tropical creatures.

I became the associate dean for graduate studies for the College of Arts and Sciences at FIU in the fall of 2008. My job duties include assuring quality control of theses and dissertations for my College. The QA/QC for documents means that I read them all. Reading documents is often agonizing, but every submission from Creative Writing delights me. The students are excellent across a variety of genres, their writing is rich, and the consistent high quality of their theses is a testament to the fact that they are well advised.

I have kept a file of writing ideas for years, and after my first two years as a dean I hatched a plan. "Upon completion of my term in the deanery, I will use my research leave to take one more lap around the tropics, and will apply to the MFA program at

Tropical Magic

FIU.” It would be an accomplishment to receive a MFA and retire from FIU in the same semester. I really don’t know if I have what it takes to be a creative writer. I can write scientific papers and books, but I am not sure if I could make the transition from scientific to creative writing. I know that if anyone could help with that transition and teach me to write creatively, it would be the FIU faculty.

Upon my return from Tanzania last August with an injured knee, I decided to attend the conference so I could explore what life as a writer might be like. I found a warm, nurturing community that welcomed me to their party. After three days of immersion in the writing world, I am inspired to explore a new path. Taking baby steps on a tropical island seems like the natural way to begin a new adventure. *Gracias a todos.*

Julie Hughes

A Static Death

If video killed the radio star then internet killed and buried the device itself. As a kid, everything newsworthy came from the radio. I did not care about what was in the newspaper as that was adult stuff—news, business, stock prices, and such—what does a child know of these things? I would sit in my room and listen to the radio for *The Friday Night Top 20* or the *Dr. Demento* show. It was a live show—did you know? If you are over thirty, and you close your eyes, you can almost hear it—“Shaving Cream”, or “Hello Mudduh, Hello Fadduh.”

As someone who could not afford to buy albums on a regular basis, I had to rely on the radio to hear my favourite tunes. Recording a song off the radio was an endeavour which involved the entire family and hours spent in proximity to the recording device. In order to record from the radio, you had to be there when the song was played. Since the recording was open, everyone had to stop moving about the house, lest any creaks or whispers be overheard on a playback of “Who Can it Be Now?”

I clearly remember the day my hero Simon Le Bon was presumed dead. It was the worst day of my twelve year life. At the time, his position of importance in my life was like this: Number 1 . . . Air—OK looking back, this should have been my number one, but I think at the time it was probably clothes; Number 2 . . . Duran Duran (who, let’s face it, was

A Static Death

nothing without Simon Le Bon); Number 3 . . . hairspray (it was the '80s after all).

My family was visiting Grandma and my rainy day choices were reading old copies of Reader's Digest, which dated back to the early sixties, or playing cards with my sister. While playing a game of War, the news came swiftly across the static-filled waves. Simon Le Bon was in a yachting accident and was presumed dead. Fear, shock, and tears filled my universe. I could no longer focus on the cards or food that day. I could not afford to miss a news update. Since the radio was a plug-in, and not battery-operated, my day was spent next to the radio. As if to mock me, I had to wait through half a dozen songs at a time before I could get a story update, rather than the other way around. It felt like it took days to clarify what had happened. The yacht had flipped, and he was trapped in the hull. The rescue happened twenty minutes later. He was alive and well.

The radio does not even rule my car anymore. As soon as we get in, the kids plug in the iPad and play their favourite songs through the car speakers.

As I typed out these notes my daughter read over my shoulder and asked, "Mommy, who is Dr. Demento?" I smiled at her, and opened up a web browser. "Come sit down, I'll show you."

Karen Soltero

Reclaiming Wendy

“If you have a sister and she dies, do you stop saying you have one? Or are you always a sister, even when the other half of the equation is gone?”

—Jodi Picoult, *My Sister’s Keeper*

Prologue

On a cold, January morning, my sister was born. I was exactly three months shy of my fourth birthday and though these memories are more like brightly colored elaborate drawings, etched out from a child’s mind, less sharp than the pictures of her exit, they are no less vibrant. I remember images of my mother, pregnant. I can see my tiny fingers stretched out on her belly with my palms pressed to her warm skin. She’s told me many times how I informed her repeatedly that the baby kicking back against my palm was a girl. Sometimes I also told her the baby was a princess. She says she didn’t argue with either assertion. Partly because despite not officially knowing the sex of the baby, she was inclined to agree, at least on that point. And partly I suspect, because it’s difficult to reason with a three-year old.

At the time, I had an imaginary friend. I suppose I could’ve considered myself a well-adjusted developmentally-sound three year old, because I was quite aware that my invisible friend was not the

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least bit real, a fact which I regularly announced, almost always prefaced her name with “my pretend friend.” Her name was Wendy.

“Would you like to meet my pretend friend Wendy?” I would ask of new visitors to our house.

“My pretend friend Wendy wants to play dolls with us,” I would tell my mother.

“My pretend friend Wendy is tired now. She needs to rest,” I would say as I crawled in my father’s lap and handed her to him.

This Wendy was small, about half the size of a Barbie doll. I kept her in my father’s shirt pocket, where she fit perfectly. She looked like Olivia Newton-John. I have no idea where I came up with the name or why I picked it, though I think it must have come from the story of *Peter Pan*. There was no one named Wendy in our family or circle of friends. I’m told that I generously offered it to my parents as a name for my unborn sister. They had always loved the name and they decided that it went just fine with our slightly complicated last name. Wondering why they hadn’t thought of it for when I was born, they happily agreed that should I, in fact, be right about the baby’s sex, then she would be named after my imaginary friend. My mother remembers that I was a teensy bit worried that there would be some confusion with two Wendys in the house, but it all worked out just fine.

Sister. I had a sister. I was now a sister. My brief sojourn as an only child was over for good, and while I would no longer garner sole attention from my parents, I now had a cohort, an ally, a partner in crime. Sometimes, an annoying pain in the ass who

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I couldn't send away. A copycat. A playmate. Someone to boss around. And later, a best friend. My history would now be a shared history, the relationship with my parents one that I shared with only her. I had no idea that it would only last for just over twenty-two years. That one night, just before Halloween, a moment, mere seconds would call a full stop on life as I knew it. That I would spend that holiday and nearly two years after it trying to wear my old life like an ill-fitting costume, playing dress-up long after the pumpkins rotted and the candy was stale. That in the end, I would unwillingly be thrust back into the world, bereft of my only sibling and fumbling towards a new identity and an uncertain future. My sister is gone. I don't have a sister. I don't feel like a sister anymore.

There is a startling and unexpected magic to profound loss. This was something I would eventually learn. There is also pain that slices into you so deep that it is sometimes nearly impossible to move. This I knew right away. And somewhere in between those two lies a great craggy chasm. With a labyrinth at the bottom. And a dragon. Seemingly impassible. Impossible. Until you begin to try. And then you discover the bridges, twisty pathways, rope swings. You see a friend hanging over a ledge with an outstretched hand. You find a map, a secret passageway, dragon treats.

This is my story about profound loss, discovery, and survival. About the pain, the mystery, and yes, also about the beauty. The magic. Most importantly, I think, this is my story about losing a sibling. My only sister. It's a loss with it's own unique proper-

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ties, characteristics, problems and joys. I aim to be as true and honest to those moments and emotions as possible. To share with you the grief and the shame. The fear and uncertainty. The humor and the joy. The truth as I know it about one particular brand of suffering. The truth about my own particular path through that chasm. The truth about that unexpected magic. The truth about what I knew, what I know now, and why I sometimes still don't have a clue.

Sister. I am a sister. I have a sister. Wendy is always here with me. In my heart, in my memories and on these pages. She is in the room with me when I type, her head thrown back in laughter in the large photograph on the wall. Her life was one less lived than it should have been because of what happened. I am less a sister because of what happened. Though not less of one, in spite of what happened, just a few short days before Halloween. All those years ago.

*Gone—flitted away,
Taken the stars from the night and the sun
From the day!
Gone, and a cloud in my heart.*

—Alfred Tennyson

Chapter One

October 28, 2000. The first call came in the late afternoon. I was in my new apartment, just a few miles away from the San Fernando Valley house I had shared with my younger sister, Wendy, during my two years of graduate school. The one she now shared with a classmate and old friend from high

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school. I was one week into my new post-grad corporate marketing job at Disney and halfway through a typical sunny Southern California Saturday. And I was ticked off at Wendy. She hadn't returned a single one of the four phone calls I made to her home and cell in the early part of the day. So much for getting out of bed and doing me that favor she promised, I thought, frustrated with her ability to shirk responsibility and burrow under the covers until the late afternoon if the mood suited her.

My phone finally rang, but the voice on the other line belonged to Nancy, a baby-sitter from my childhood whose parents still lived down the street from mine, though she had been in Los Angeles for many years.

"Will you be at home for awhile? Would it be alright if I came to see you?"

Weird, I thought. She lived across town, and though we kept in touch from time to time, this was definitely out of the ordinary.

"Sure, I guess so."

"Okay, I'll be there soon." Click.

As I hung up, I realized I had not asked why she wanted to come over, nor had she offered a reason. Feeling uncomfortable, I dialed my parents. First on the home line and then on each cell number. Repeatedly. I couldn't get through. The cell phones kept going straight to voicemail and the home line only rung with the sharp staccato of a busy signal. Discomfort gave way to distress. Something was wrong. I rotated my sister's cell and home phone numbers into the mix. Four or five rings every time

Reclaiming Wendy

on both phones and then her chipper voice asking for me to leave a message.

Oh God, oh no, what happened, just breathe, keep trying, everything's okay, something is wrong, for fuck's sake, somebody please just answer the phone! For about ten or fifteen minutes some iteration of this litany ran through my head as I dialed each number repeatedly in quick succession, using both my cell and home phones simultaneously to up my odds. Something had happened to at least one member of my family, but I didn't know which one, because I couldn't reach any of them.

I have no idea how many times I dialed those numbers, but one finally connected. My father's cell phone. His halting voice was on the other end of the line. He told me that their home phone line was out. The busy signal suddenly made sense. I breathed a small sigh, relieved for a simple explanation to at least one mystery. And then we had a conversation I will never forget, partly because the first time he tried to tell me what happened, he lied.

"What's going on?" I asked as I heard my mom's voice in the background, presumably talking to someone else on her cell phone. She was obviously okay. Silence from my dad and then one thought exploded like a giant bubble.

Wendy.

"What's going on?" Firmer, louder this time. I could hear the panic in my own voice.

"There was an accident. Wendy had an accident." My dad sounded robotic, fake.

"A car accident?"

Reclaiming Wendy

She'd been at my apartment the night before. I'd last spoken to her at about nine in the evening, when she had told me she was planning to stay in for the night. It was about two in the afternoon and I was trying to work out where she could have gone.

"Yes." For some reason, my father lied. I think because he could not find a way to say the words to me.

"Oh my God. When did it happen? Where?"

"Last night, in Hollywood." He continued to talk in stiff, emotionless tones. Probably doing his best just to choke the words out around the knot of pain in his throat.

"Is she okay?"

I had the phone tucked into the crick of my neck and was already putting on my shoes, ready to head to the hospital as soon as he told me which one she was at, trying work out where she had gone, what could have happened. I replayed her phone conversation from the night before in my head.

"Call me if you go out to the bar," I had said. "I'll go with you."

"Sure thing," she replied, "but I'm planning on staying home."

I realized my father hadn't answered me, he was saying something I couldn't understand to my mother. I repeated my question, asking if she was okay, my voice starting to crack.

"I don't know."

Another lie. I can't even imagine what he was going through in that moment, knowing what he had to tell me, and almost like a little kid, simply trying to avoid and delay the moment of truth as long as possible.

Reclaiming Wendy

“Which hospital is she at? I’m going right now! Where did the accident happen?”

I know I launched a litany of questions at him in that moment, but his reluctance to answer finally gave me pause. I waited, with dread filling my stomach and a thickness in my lungs that made it almost impossible to breathe. There was another brief moment of silence. I sank down into my chair.

Suddenly I knew why a family friend was racing to my apartment at that very moment. Why my father had lied. Why they hadn’t called me. They hadn’t wanted me to be alone when I found out. But I was. Sitting in the desk chair at my office phone, staring at the papers and pieces of my life that were now meaningless and unreadable. And then he finally said it out loud. The shortest sentence that has had the largest impact on my life.

“She’s dead.”

Wendy was dead. I slumped, reeling, head caught in my free hand. There would be no racing to the hospital. Not even to say goodbye. She was already gone. I still thought that she had died in a car accident.

“Are you sure?” I asked, hoping and hanging on to the thread that he might be mistaken. An inane question I know, but I was grasping for straws.

Silence. And then my father’s voice in a choking whisper.

“She was shot. It was a robbery. Yes, they know she’s dead.”

At twenty-two years old, my healthy, happy, wonderful sister had been murdered. Someone had robbed her. And then shot her. *Why?* The question

Reclaiming Wendy

glowed neon behind my eyeballs. Thundered in my ears. The rest of the conversation was a blur, my father's voice echoing distantly in my suddenly foggy brain. My face was wet, but I don't remember crying. I was still sitting at my desk when Nancy arrived and soon after, the shock kicked in. I became robotic, like my dad. Distant, emotionless, forcing words out around a boulder in my throat while periodically marveling at the fact that my heart was somehow still beating. Because I felt like I would die.

I got off the phone with my father so they could leave for the airport to fly from their home in Dallas out to LA, and began to methodically call everyone I could think of who should know. Friends of mine. Friends of Wendy's. Old roommates and even old boyfriends. It was compulsive, almost manic. The only thing I knew how to do in that moment, the assignment my addled brain had given to me, was to call and keep calling. Repeating over and over the little that I knew. That Wendy had been murdered. Shot in the head sometime the night before. Somewhere in Hollywood. That she had been with two of her friends from college and they were still alive, but no, I hadn't spoken to them yet. And that there was someone in custody with the police in conjunction with the crime, but that we didn't know any details.

My apartment slowly filled with people as the longest day marched on and I made my way through my phonebook. Friends, acquaintances and eventually, my parents arrived, fresh off a plane from Dallas. Someone else picked them up. By then I was in a stupor. Dazed. Blissful numbness alternated with the raw, searing pain of reality. Exhaustion

Reclaiming Wendy

overwhelmed me. *This must be what schizophrenia feels like*, I thought. *There are at least seven of me in here right now.* People brought food. I ate out of a sense of responsibility, and possibly because someone told me to. I couldn't really taste anything.

Two of Wendy's friends had been in the car with her. Sezin and Abra, both seniors with Wendy at Occidental. They were held in questioning until late Saturday afternoon. At some point that evening, Sezin came to the house. We didn't speak much and she didn't stay long.

"I'm so sorry." Words choked with tears, trembly. "I wanted to call you. In the middle of the night. I begged them to let me call you. But they wouldn't let me. I kept asking all day. Please let me call Karen. She needs to be here. She needs to know. I'm so sorry."

Her words tumbled out on top of each other. An unnecessary apology that she couldn't seem to get out fast enough. I wanted to know everything, but I didn't know how to form the words to ask. I'm not sure she would have been able to respond if I had.

Late that night, a phone call came. A Detective Pelletier was on the other end of the line. He was able to offer up a few more details. They registered as pieces through the fog. Wendy had been killed instantly. By a girl. Nineteen years old. Attempted robbery. Tomorrow we could come to the precinct and get her personal effects. He could tell us more then.

All three of us slept together in my room that night, if you could call it sleeping. Mom in bed with me and my little dog, Chloe, and Dad on an air mattress on the floor.

Reclaiming Wendy

* * *

So this is what murder in Hollywood is like, I wondered numbly as we sat in a room in the Hollywood precinct and the two detectives assigned to our case came in through the door, looking worn and grizzled and perfectly detective-like, as if they had just stepped out of Central Casting. I felt like I was in an episode of *Law and Order*. Somehow, that actually made things a little easier. As if any minute, a director would yell cut, and the actress playing my sister would stand up, wipe off her fake blood, and we'd all head to craft services for a lunch break.

Mike Pelletier and Jim Chevelack were both clearly exhausted. They'd been on my sister's case for close to thirty-six hours now, with little time for sleep and probably not much in the way of a decent meal.

"Araceli Pena." Pelletier said as he sat down with us in the cramped room. Even years later, he stands out more clearly to me than the other detective and I remember him doing most of the talking.

"She's nineteen," he reminded us. "Like I said on the phone last night, it looks like there are some additional robberies connected to her and her companion, Demetrio Cabrera."

Nineteen years old. That number kept turning over in my head. So young. So violent. And then the kicker.

"We're lucky. She almost walked out on bail. Her uncle was in the process of posting it when we got a call from Rampart division. They had two suspects booked on attempted robbery charges and they were looking for any connections to the items

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in the their car. One of them was Sezin's driver's license. We made the connection just in time. She's rebooked on murder charges. So's Demetrio."

My heart caught at the thought that Wendy's killer had nearly been free. Wendy's killer. Even that sounded like a line from a script. The detectives seemed certain that they had the right people behind bars.

"We're still collecting all the evidence, but it's pretty apparent we are looking at a series of robbery events involving the same two people on Friday night. We're already in touch with the DA's office, so you should have someone assigned to the case shortly."

Pelletier leaned back at looked at us somberly.

"I know it's no consolation, but we're gonna get them. We've already got them. And we'll do our best to make sure they go away for good."

At the end of the meeting, the detectives brought us a box with Wendy's personal effects. Everything that had been on her the night she died. We lifted out the dark jeans and patterned shirt, trying to ignore the blood stains. Her car keys and her purse sat underneath. *The purse she was trying to get*, I thought, unwillingly picturing the scene, *the purse she was more than happy to hand over to the crazy girl with the gun*. A small bag held her jewelry. A tiny diamond earring.

The diamond eternity band she always wore on her pinky. A family heirloom. I turned it in my hand and saw the trickle of dried blood snaking along one side. The tears started to fall fresh and my mother gently took it from me and slipped it on to her own

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finger. She would return it to me later, clean and shiny. *Where's her magic necklace?* I looked through the box again, not seeing it. A necklace I had given to Wendy a year or so before that she almost always wore. It was simple, a small garnet set in a silver diamond shape strung on a black cord. I had brought it back from a ski trip in Canada. But she had told me many times that it was her magic necklace and that good things always happened to her when she wore it. I had turned the box and bag inside out twice over. It wasn't there.

I found it later that day. I was helping my mom straighten up the mess that was my sister's room. World War III, I always called it, when we had lived together in that house. You could play a mean game of hot lava in that room. *Not touch the floor*, I thought, as I tiptoed carefully through the clothes, books and God know what else, *hell, I can't even see the floor. Game over.* We were looking for the pretty wrap dress I knew she loved. Wendy needed something to wear.

"And her disco bra." I was tossing piles of crumpled shirts and pants onto the bed.

"I'm sorry, her what?" My mother looked at me, confused.

"Her disco bra. She'd want to wear her disco bra. It has to be around here somewhere." My mother still had no idea what I was talking about until I pulled it triumphantly from a basket in the corner. The silver, reflective surfaces of the mirror-like fabric that was often wrapped around my sister's 40 DD's caught in the light and bounced off the walls.

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“Ah.” Mom finally understood. “Gotcha. Disco bra. It’s perfect.”

A minute or two later, still looking for the dress, something shiny on one of the few bare patches of floor by her bed caught my eye. I bent down and cradled my hand around Wendy’s magic necklace. It must have fallen off in the night sometime that week. She hadn’t been wearing it the night she was killed. I double-looped the cord and tied it in a tight knot around my wrist. I hoped against hope that there really was a twinkle of something special in that silly thing. That the fact that she hadn’t been wearing it was a sign that its powers were true. *It might have saved her*, I thought irrationally. *She should have had it on. She always had it on. Maybe it’ll save me. Please, God, let it have some magic in it. Cause I could really use some.*

* * *

The first week following my sister’s death often plays out in my head like a series of bizarre tableaux from someone else’s life, for surely it couldn’t actually be my own. I struggled with the terminology, something I still do, as I tried to come to grips with reality. Dead. Died. Killed. Murdered. That last one always catches in my throat and I often find myself wanting to use it, but not able to get the ugly word through my lips, for fear the residue of it will remain on my tongue like a bad aftertaste. Plus it makes people nervous. They are much more comfortable when I use the word “died.” It’s more polite, less jarring. But it’s also less true.

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On Monday, we went casket shopping. A nice lady in a blue suit spoke to us in hushed tones as we wondered through the showroom at Whispering Hills Funeral Home, perusing the merchandise.

Surreal, I thought, as I contemplated fabric options for the lining, listened to the explanations on pricing structure and the current special offers. *Bizarre*. The word ran through the back of my mind as I noted to our “saleslady” that Wendy’s favorite color was green and could she please show us something in a variation of that hue? *This is so fucked up*, I said over and over in my head, as I ran my hand down the shiny teal side of what would become my sister’s casket and tried to resist the overwhelming urge to climb in and slam the lid shut over my head.

On Halloween night, we flew back from Los Angeles to Dallas. We were scheduled to be on the same plane with the shiny new casket cradling my sister’s body. Traffic was bad, worse than usual on the often over-clogged 405 Freeway. We pulled up to the airport and raced inside, frantically asking the check-in clerk about the status of our flight. For some reason that I still don’t understand, this was in the year 2000, not the middle ages, they couldn’t tell us if the plane had closed boarding or not. So we again raced to security as fast as we could. My mom was only three weeks post-op from a major spine surgery and could only move so fast, in pain and in an awkward neck brace. I had my dog Chloe with me, a small Italian Greyhound who fit in a bag underneath my seat on plane flights.

My father, being the least encumbered, barreled through first, running towards the gate. I was close

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behind him at security, leaving my mom to pull up the rear, knowing if we could make it to the gate in time to plead our case, they would certainly wait for her. I carried Chloe through the scanner and though I would normally stop immediately past it to put her in her carry-bag, in deference to the airport rules, I was loathe to take the time and began to run, full-tilt, with her racing along beside me at the end of her leash. The security guard was not happy. And clearly didn't have more pressing security concerns than the hazards of wayward dog hair on unsuspecting and potentially allergic travelers.

"Miss!" He called out to me. "Miss, you need to put your dog in its bag!"

"I can't, I'm in a hurry," I called back as I began my sprint down the long hallway.

"Miss! You need to stop!" He gave chase after my eleven-pound dog, and me, calling out repeatedly along the way, demanding that I come to a halt. Which I completely ignored.

When I skidded to a stop at our gate and whirled around to find him still behind me, reprimanding me for my illicit airport behavior, I pulled that horrid word from my new lexicon, along with a choice few others I rarely utter, let alone that loudly in a public place. I really let him have it. And as I spewed phrases at the top of my lungs about my murdered sister and her fucking dead body lying in a fucking casket and how there was no fucking way I was going to miss my fucking plane, he slowly backed away, suddenly scared of the small girl with the small dog standing in front of him, screaming.

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I only slowed down when my father gripped me forcibly and interrupted my litany with the news that the plane had been delayed and was just arriving at the gate still full of passengers from its previous flight. He led me to seat where I sank down and let the anger slowly recede. In retrospect, the moment was so absurd it was almost comical. Who was this crazy person who had taken over my body? I didn't recognize myself. Or my life, for that matter. Just days before I had been starting a new job, beginning my corporate career, my new future. And now that was all on hold.

Oddly, we were the only three people in first class that night, something that's never happened to any of us in all the years we've been flying. Worried that her car had too been stuck in traffic, we verified with the captain that Wendy was indeed on board. As the plane took off over the city lights of Los Angeles and headed east, with me now quiet and safely ensconced in my seat, and no one around to yell at, I remember thinking continuously about the hold somewhere below me, in the belly of the Boeing Super 80 Jet, and the precious cargo that had been stowed inside.

In Dallas, the funeral and burial arrangements began to come together. I discovered that the busier I was, the better I coped with each day. I needed to be an integral part of the process every step of the way. I had helped to pick out her coffin at the funeral home in Los Angeles, I was already designing the layout and content of her headstone and I threw myself into the organization of her funeral with the zeal of an over-caffeinated professional event plan-

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ner. My parents and I worked quickly to put together a burial and memorial service that was as colorful and unique as Wendy's personality had been in life.

Though she was to be buried at the small old cemetery near our house, the visitation and arrangements were all being handled by Sparkman Hillcrest, the fancy mid-town funeral home and burial grounds. Wendy had been delivered to them and on Friday, November 3rd, I saw my sister for the first time since the night before she died. I approached the coffin at the end of the narrow room. The top half lay open, Wendy's head resting on a cream colored pillow. My hands clutched the edge of the coffin as I took everything in. I tried to imagine that she was just sleeping, but the curves of her face were rounded and bloated in a way that made it look like a mask, like someone else was wearing her face and very soon, I would find out that this was all an elaborate prank, or a hoax. Her hair was too curly, too tidy. The lipstick on her cold lips too pink, like someone had smeared them with a smushed piece of Double Bubble.

"This isn't okay. Can you fix this? You need to fix this!" I was suddenly desperate. The undertaker looked at me, confused.

"Her hair. It needs to be messy. It's too neat. You need to mess it up. And what's with this lipstick? This isn't 1987!" I dug around in Wendy's makeup bag. My mom had brought it. She somehow knew we might need it. I found one of Wendy's favorite colors and handed it to the women, who was trying for a kindly expression, though I think she was a little bewildered at my requests.

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“Use this one. And the hair. Don’t forget to mess up the hair.” She nodded at me and we stepped outside the room. I thought about Wendy. About the disheveled mop of short hair she had worn forever. A sharp contrast to my own preference for a style that could be described as either long, longer or longest, depending on the moment.

“I love it.” She would say to me. “The messier it is, the better it looks!” Then she would drag some pomade through it, tousle it around, brush a stray or two out of her eyes and head confidently out the door. Sometimes she’d even cut it herself. With classroom scissors.

Better. Hair more tousled, lipstick a familiar hue. Still, her face was like a swollen, frozen mask. I still didn’t recognize her. Not really, truly. Frustrated, and needing to connect to something that would ground me in reality, I reached for her hand. It was cold and felt nothing like the warm, plump fingers that I used to hold. They were tucked slightly below the lower half of the casket, which was closed as though only her top half was suitable for viewing. Undeterred by the funeral home’s personal preferences for a half-open display, I lifted the heavy lid of the lower half and pushed it back. There was plastic underneath her legs, confirming my thought that the funeral home had never intended for anyone to see that part. I ignored it, and focused in on her ankles and feet. Unlike her face and head, her lower body was not swollen. I traced my finger along the feet that looked exactly like they did when they would peek out from under the covers of her bed on a lazy morning, which was most mornings, come to think

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of it. I focused my gaze in on the two tattoos that decorated the inside of her ankles. I touched them gently, clinging to the memories as the sting of reality punctured the haze as surely and as sharply as if it was done with the repetitive and unrelenting staccato of a tattoo needle. This was her. This was Wendy. This was my sister. And she was really gone.

I woke up the morning of the funeral to the sound of rain tapping on the roof in a lively dance. *Good*, I thought, picturing the tattoo of three rain-drops on the inside of Wendy's ankle. *As it should be. Bad for the marching band though.* I dressed in my recently purchased funeral outfit. Defiant in head to toe fuchsia, challenging the funeral powers that be to mess with me. We'd hired a small brass marching band to play "When the Saints go Marching In" and lead a processional from our house to the cemetery. Some funeral guests helped out, holding umbrellas over the musicians and their instruments, and my parents and I fell in step behind them. A crowd of people exited our house and joined our ranks as we formed a processional and made our way down the residential street we grew up on towards the nearby lake. The police blocked the way for us to turn down the lakefront road briefly, before turning again to head up a small drive towards the old cemetery that was just blocks away from our family home.

We all crammed under the hastily erected tent at the gravesite, our feet muddy and wet, fancy heels sinking into the saturated earth. Wendy's youth pastors delivered the brief eulogy. I tried to listen, my little dog huddled and shivering in my lap. But I mostly just stared blankly at shiny coffin, dappled

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with raindrops and tried too keep from crying too loudly. At the end, hundreds of colorful balloons tied with tags bearing her name and the address of the memorial website my father had just set up were released into the air and we filed quietly away. Dark limousines carried us to the large Methodist church we had attended for the last several years. No one in my family was particularly religious, all of us subscribing more to a general sense of spirituality and an understanding of a variety of religions, but Wendy had spent some time as an active member of the youth program there and my parents still went to services on a semi-regular basis. Hundreds of people filled the large sanctuary.

Several people, friends, family members, and classmates, took their turn at the podium to speak about Wendy, two large pictures of her flanking the sides of the platform. Wendy's friend and roommate, Ashley, read an excerpt from Wendy's own writing. The words more poignant and aptly poetic.

Tomorrow morning I'm taking a little drive. I will be unreachable by phone, pager and email. I've sold the majority of my belongings, broken my lease and serviced my car. I'm gonna turn it on and drive. The only plan I've made at this point is to go somewhat east, since I don't have an amphibious automobile. But I may at some point sell my car and get a plane ticket somewhere. I have no idea, nor do I care. I just want to start moving and not stop. I might come back. To town, to reality, but I don't know. What I do know, is that I will see all of you again, be it in person, or in my dreams. And all will be well.

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Those final two sentences were already in the layout design for what would become her headstone.

When my cousin Jessica took the podium, she enlisted the crowd in a rousing round of audience participation. After every statement she made the echoing sounds of our collective voices would ring out.

“Heck yeah, buster!” and somehow, magically, she managed to pull the laughter out from behind the tears. It was finally my turn. I’d have to pull out the speech from an archive of computer files, because I have absolutely no idea what I said on that rainy afternoon.

Whereas the days from the moment I spoke to my father up until the afternoon of her memorial service are like clear, crisp photographic images, still and disjointed like a photo album, the days that followed are like a Monet watercolor painting, blurry and wet. Once my jobs as party planner, graphic designer, and general organizational director had been completed and I was left with little to do, I was suddenly lost. The only thing I really remember from the week or two that followed was that the only thing I wanted to eat were these rosemary roasted potatoes. They had been made by the chef who worked for a wealthy family whose daughter had been one of Wendy’s high school classmates. When my mother realized that they were also one of the very few things I would eat, she even called and requested another batch as well as the recipe. It’s weird to me that the one thing I remember about those first days of quiet reality is potatoes.